

Merry Old England? A Metahistorical Perspective of Ken Follett's A Column of Fire and Sir Walter Scott's Kenilworth

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ABSTRACT

The questions behind the authenticity of historical fictions remain unanswered even in an age of theories and their applications to history. Metahistory is one such theory that excavates the truth lying hidden in fiction and goes beyond ascertaining the truth; it hunts for what really happened and establishes that fictions are but facts. This paper is a research on the application of Metahistory to Ken Follett's A Column of Fire (2017) and Sir Walter Scott's Kenilworth (1821). Both these books are repositories of hidden data on Elizabethan England. These books reveal the tyranny, exploitation, plundering and injustice underwent by the common people during an era that appeared golden and merry. Religious, naval and civil wars shook Europe while the monarchs languished in their luxury obtained through tax and rent. The Virgin Queen was not exactly what the poets and painters made her – she is far more; a menacing authority who cared not a thing about her subjects and lusted after power.

Keywords: Ken Follett, New Historicism, Metahistory, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Scott

Historical fictions of the 21st century are social archaeologists of the past. Not mere romances and fantasies, they do more than just indulge the reader in an imaginary past. They reveal what lies hidden beneath magnificent castles and panoramic pleasure gardens. They go beyond history when they forge another dimension that excavates the truth and leaves the reader thinking about what could have happened instead of what did happen. Wilbur Smith's Ancient Egypt Series breaks the golden images of the reign of Pharaohs in Luxor. Philippa Gregory's feministic histories offer a peep into the lives of heroic but victimized queens and noblewomen. Ken Follett takes the readers right into the Medieval dark ages and the World Wars so they can judge history for themselves. Modern historical fiction offers readers freedom to perceive but teaches them that nothing is real when it comes to history and that history itself is a fiction.

Writers of historical fiction have been socially conscious for centuries. These novels or poems, or whatever form the writer chooses to tell the truth, have been sung and then written down for centuries before critics have recognized and sorted them into a separate genre. The birth of such historical pieces begins with *The Gilgamesh Epic* dating to 2000 BC narrating the tale of a tyrant, a monster and a goddess and extant in clay tablets. Epics like *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey* and *Beowulf* are cultural histories. Almost all writers have come up historical pieces

ever since. Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (1385), Shakespeare's historical plays in the 16th century, Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1682), Byron's *Don Juan* (1819) and Thackeray's *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842) are all historical pieces. This paper researches the representations of England and her neighbours during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in Ken Follett's *A Column of Fire* (2017) and Sir Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* (1821).

Kenneth Martin Follett or Ken Follett (1949 -) is a Welsh writer of historical fiction. However, he came into writing by publishing thrillers first. These thrillers had a hint of history in them; usually some lost war data or a group of government operatives changing history to suit their political leaders. *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989) is his first entirely historical novel on the reign of Stephen of Blois and the civil war between him and Matilda. *World Without End* (2007) on the tyranny of Edward III, the lost Fieschi Letter and the Black Death becomes the second book in the Kingsbridge series and the sequel to *Pillars*. The Century Trilogy of *Fall of Giants* (2010), *Winter of the World* (2012) and *Edge of Eternity* (2014) reveal the true darkness behind the World Wars, the Cold War, the Gestapo and the Manhattan Project.

Follett is the master of 21st century historical fiction. There lived a similar writer centuries past in England who imitated and borrowed from border ballads and Irish tales. Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), the pioneer of historical fiction, is considered a writer of romances and fantasies. However, his romances are pomp and show while the ugly truth lies hidden between the lines. He began with *Waverley* (1814) and produced 32 novels of the same genre; *Guy Mannering* (1815), *Old Mortality* (1816), *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818), *Rob Roy* (1818), *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819), *Ivanhoe* (1819), *Quentin Durward* (1823) and *The Talisman* (1825) to name a few. His fictions show melancholic heroes who brood on their past in some faraway fantastic landscape. But his historical characters are lifelike and the attack is ironical.

The works chosen for research – *A Column of Fire* and *Kenilworth* – are explicit and visual in their representations of Elizabethan England and the social conditions that prevailed because of the Queen's actions, though written centuries apart. Metahistory, though coined by Northrop Frye, was perfected into a research application by American historian Hayden White in his *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19th Century Europe* (2014). It is a set of parameters for analyzing a historical work and recognizing the underlying facts in it. Furthermore, White believes that history and narrative are the same and that historical narratives contain more facts than they have been given credit for.

Metahistory has been applied by researchers to analyse the French Revolution and why similar revolutions never recurred in any other country, the decline of the great Greek and Roman civilizations and the disillusionment of democracy. Historian Michael Wood has used the parameters in his dissertation *In Search of the Trojan War* (1985) based on the practical application of Metahistory in Heinrich Schliemann's discovery of the ruins of Troy in modern-day Hissarlik, Turkey. Kathryn Warner's *Edward II: The Unconditional King* (2014) is a similar treatise on the conspiracies behind the faked death of Edward II. However, Metahistory has not been applied to literary works before. This revolutionary approach uses the multidisciplinary tools of history, philosophy, archaeology and semiotics to expose the miserable lives of the people as depicted by Follett and Scott in the books mentioned.

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A Column of Fire, the third installment in the Kingsbridge Series, begins with young Ned Willard returning to England from France to propose marriage to Margery just before war breaks out. Mary I rules over a land brimming with internal strife and strained foreign relationships. In the words of the common people: “It was all her fault, for marrying the King of Spain. Were it not for him, Calais would still be English, England would not be at war with France, and there would be no need for city walls and waterfront cannons” (Follett 109; ch. 5[1]). Protestantism had just been born but Mary dealt the new faith with an iron hand. Burning to death was a common punishment reserved for them because the Queen found them objecting to “bawdy songs, bosom-revealing gowns and drunk priests” (Follett 20; ch.1[1]) of her Roman Catholic faith. Earl Swithin, Ned’s rival’s father, is against Sir William Cecil’s support to Elizabeth who was under house arrest in Hatfield. Rollo, Margery’s brother, voices the opinions of Roman Catholics when he says “Elizabeth is illegitimate! Henry was never truly married to her mother. His divorce from his previous wife was disallowed by the Pope” (Follett 24; ch.1[1]). It is amidst these ripples that Willard reaches what he believes to be his home but in the long run, loses his home and love to war and ruin.

Conditions are not good in France either as the Guise family plan to marry the fifteen year-old Mary, Queen of Scots to the terrified Francis, the fourteen-year old Dauphin and the son of King Henri II and Queen Caterina de Guise in 1558 to turn once and for all against a weakening England. Duke François de Guise, also known as Scarface and his brother Cardinal Charles de Guise arrange the wedding but Mary accepts because of the lust for power: “. . . I will be the Queen of France – the real thing. That’s what I want” (Follett 59; ch. 2[1]). Meanwhile, the Inquisition hunts Muslims, Jews, African slaves and traders from Netherland in the name of heresy and witchcraft. Ned’s brother Barney is a metal worker who invents a new furnace with the help of Ebrima, his African slave. Since the work is done on a Sunday, Inquisitor Alonso smashes the device and puts the poor slaves and their master, Barney to water torture.

As the English crown eventually falls to the hands of Elizabeth, Ned has no choice but to join what is now the Secret Service – spying and reporting to Sir William Cecil. He leaves to France and accidentally spots Sylvie Palot who secretly prints and sells Protestant literature and French translations of the Bible. Her father had been racked and burned to death for the same profession but Sylvie bravely continues what she believes to be spreading the word of God. She had back up from the great Calvin himself. The English are frustrated at the loss of Calais. Ned is shocked to see the Queen flirting with everyone but refusing to marry anyone. Francis becomes King once his father dies in a jousting accident with a splinter in his eye. Poor little Francis, dominated by Scarface and the Cardinal, whimpers when they force him to give the assassination order for Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre. Mary understands he is not exactly king material when “he lay in bed, moaning incomprehensibly, rocking in a lunatic rhythm and had to be restrained from banging his head against the wall” (Follett 219; ch. 9[1]). He dies, leaving his ambitious wife who marries Henry Stewart, Lord Darnley; later David Rizzio and James Hepburn – all of them ending in unfortunate disasters. Escaping from the prison of Loch Leven in 1568 after defeat in the Battle of Langside, she is once again incarcerated by Elizabeth in Carlisle for fear of losing the crown.

Elizabeth's position as Queen is on the razor's edge because most of her subjects support the imprisoned Roman Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots who is legitimate and the rightful heir. Numerous assassination attempts are stopped by Ned and his team. In 1570, Pope Pius V excommunicates Elizabeth describing her as "the pretended queen of England and the servant of crime" (Follett 425; ch. 16[1]). English trade drops because the merchants are forced to swear to the Thirty-Nine Articles, the doctrines of the Anglican Church. No Roman Catholic would swear by such a thing. Amidst turmoil, Margery is forced by her parents to marry Bart, the son of Earl Swithin and Bart pays the large sum of a pound per week for not going to the Anglican Church. Her brother Rollo hides Roman Catholic priests in her castle and trains them to fight against the Protestants. The Pope himself sends Roberto Ridolfi to kill Elizabeth and put Mary on the throne but this is uncovered by Ned and his team. Sir Francis Walsingham and Ned are sent to St. Germain to sign the treaty that allowed limited freedom to the Huguenots or the French Protestants. Sylvie understands that nothing is going to get better and the treaty was a flimsy decision.

After the death of Francis, Caterina takes back the throne. She plots with the Guises and arranges to kill Gaspard de Coligny, the Huguenot leader. On August 24, 1572, Paris became a bloody ocean with thousands slaughtered in what history remembers as the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Queen Elizabeth does not help her Protestant supporters in France. Follett visualizes the scene like Dante standing on the borders of Inferno:

At the edge of the river, the militia were getting rid of the bodies. The dead, and some of the helpless wounded, were being thrown into the Seine with no more ceremony than would have been used for poisoned rats. Some floated off, but others hardly moved, and the shallow edge of the water was already clogged with corpses. (516; ch. 20[1])

Ned and Sylvie get married amidst bloodshed and ruin. Her brother's trained priests call themselves the Jesuits and plan to overthrow Elizabeth. Ned is disgusted with his monarch who prefers watching plays and is partial to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. Things remain the same as they were before. Only Protestants were tortured during the reign of Mary I but both Catholics and Protestants lose are now tortured in the Tower of London. Ned is to torture innocent men and women, strip them naked, rack them, tie them down and crush them to get secrets of assassinating the Queen. Finally, he receives proof of Mary, Queen of Scots plotting with Anthony Babington to kill Elizabeth. Restless for four months, the queen finally signs it "with a flourish" (Follett 613; ch. 24[1]). Drunk with power, Elizabeth does the same things Mary I did to her and if Mary had lived longer, then Elizabeth would have met the same fate as Mary, Queen of Scots.

Elizabeth is recognized as an able monarch only after the Spanish Armada is defeated in 1588. Addressing the troops at Tilbury before the battle, she says, "I know I have the body of a weak, feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a King – and of a King of England too . . ." ("Elizabeth I to the Troops at Tilbury"[2]). England does not quiet down even after the ascension of James VI of Scotland. Follett ends the fiction with the execution of Guy Fawkes for his failed attempt to bomb the parliament with thirty-six barrels of gunpowder. Ned retires after Fawkes' execution as he understands that every monarch is the same and that none of them seem to bother about the people.

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Kenilworth appears to be a romantic tragedy surrounding the mysterious death of Amy Robsart who is clandestinely married to Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester. The whole plot revolves around poor Edmund Tressilian's efforts to rescue her but Scott lets the readers peep into the court of Elizabeth I every now and then. Scott sighs with sorrow on the very first page when he says his tale begins in "the old days of merry England" (Scott 1; vol. 1, ch.1[3]) which is quite ironical. Elizabeth is introduced to the readers for the first time when Tressilian goes to London to file a petition regarding Amy's captivity. He is utterly disgusted with her flirting with Sir Walter Raleigh and paying no heed to the petition. As she is partial towards Dudley, the petition falls on deaf ears. All she cares about are the upcoming revels at Kenilworth. When Orson Pinnit brings another petition regarding bear baiting, she throws the scroll into the Thames in preference to Shakespeare's poetry recited by the love-sick Raleigh. She misjudges Richard Varney and knights him when he should be thrown in prison. When the Privy Council is called for, Elizabeth listens only to Dudley and orders to keep Mary, Queen of Scots under house arrest.

The castle of Kenilworth was once the stronghold of Cynewulf, King of the West Saxons and it had been defending the neighbourhood during the Norman Conquest of 1066. But Queen Elizabeth uses it for celebrations and her flirtatious adventures. Dudley spends half a million pounds to prepare seven acres of battle-defending fortress and its yards for the vain Elizabeth, hoping she might marry him which she doesn't. The people of Warwickshire are forced to entertain the queen. Pots and pans are forcibly taken from them to prepare gigantic feasts for the queen. The roads leading to Kenilworth are blocked and women are kidnapped by nobles. Tons of liquor is imported from France and Spain, even when England is at war with those countries:

... large quantities of provisions and delicacies of all kinds, with game in huge quantities, and whole tons of the best liquors, foreign and domestic. Thus the high roads were filled with droves of bullocks, sheep, and calves and hogs, and chokes with loaded wains, whose axle-trees cracked under their burdens of wine-casks and hogsheads of ale, and huge hampers of grocery goods, and slaughtered game, and salted provisions, and sacks of flour. (Scott 251; vol. 2, ch. 13[3])

Dudley meets a furious Elizabeth when he confesses his marriage to her. She does nothing for the safety of Amy Robsart. She believes all the lies told by Varney. Amy's father, Sir Hugh, had defended the country but he dies in poverty with a broken heart and Elizabeth does nothing for him. Tressilian is a learned scholar and he embarks on the Virginia Expedition because he is disgusted with his country and queen.

Follett and Scott have shown that Good Queen Bess was not exactly Spencer's Gloriana though she ruled England like a man and developed the navy into something the neighbours feared. Taxes increased and she introduced a new currency that broke most of the merchants. Workhouses were constructed for the poor but most of the inmates died of starvation and exploitation. Colonial expansion was another of her hobbies and she sent every able-bodied man to America and Asia to establish trading posts. Follett shows the West Indians tortured by English bosses for their rum trade. Scott introduces Michael Lambourne who has allegedly returned from El-Dorado making a lot of money. Tony Forster and Lambourne were caught in the Ridolfi Plot but they were spared because they converted to Protestantism and undertook favourable expeditions for the Queen.

Monasteries and fortresses were converted into the Queen's country estates while the people resorted to thievery and prostitution to feed themselves:

Many turned to small crime, such as begging, picking pockets, and prostitution, simply to avoid starvation. There was little help for the sick, elderly and orphans. The life expectancy, or average life span, of an Elizabethan was only 42 years, but it was much lower among the urban poor. English people of all classes feared the arrival of gangs of beggars and drifters in their towns and villages . . . (Benson[4])

Hayden White draws upon the theories of historian Benedetto Croce who suggests that history is not just the story of the past but also the present. Follett and Scott have sketched the present through the past. Each century has its own tyrants and rebels with the laymen suffering below. The rebels – like Ned and Tressilian – hope to establish something new through their adventures but every ruler turns about to be the same once they have drunk on absolute power. White also borrows from Karl Marx's Base-Superstructure to reveal political secrets through a country's economy. Follett shows the merchants of England losing their profits and paying more taxes for their monarch to fight foreign wars. Scott's Superstructure forces the Base to entertain and provide for the Queen in Kenilworth castle. The Great Inflation turned most of the people into vagrants and highwaymen. Croce is of the opinion, "history still remains severed, fragmented, internally wounded" (White 378[5]). So is human nature.

The Superstructure relies upon the Base for production but the Base hardly gain anything. As historical fictions go, this has been the problem till date. Every historical writer comments on his own Age through tyrants of the past. This is the ultimate aim of historical fiction – to reach out to the readers and warn them of what is happening from what has already happened.

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