

***Wolf Hall* Revisited**

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Here are some ideas for those interested in both history and safe business ventures: *Wolf Hall: The Musical*, *Wolf Hall: The Opera*, *Wolf Hall: The Movie*, *Wolf Hall: The Experience*, the last a themed, interactive, educational infotainment tapping into the large schools' market. Best of all, profits are likely to be matched by critical success, both highbrow and middlebrow, judging by the literary awards garnered by Hilary Mantel's novel (as well as its successor, *Bring Up the Bodies*), the box-office records smashed by Mike Poulton's RSC stage adaptation, the glowing reviews received by both, and the anticipation surrounding the forthcoming BBC television version. With a promised third instalment of the novel cycle, prospects for the *Wolf Hall* industry look as rosy as the Tudor emblem that will doubtless be emblazoned on T-shirts, mugs and mouse mats.

Cynicism is an unattractive pose, so is it right to be cynical about *Wolf Hall*? There is no reason why historical drama should not be big business, and as an historian it's reassuring to know that the potential exists for making a living. But is it an honest living? Is *Wolf Hall*, novel and play, good or bad history? It might reasonably be objected that this misses the point: if we are to assess *Wolf Hall* then it needs to be as a novel and a play, not as history (and Mantel herself has emphasized that she is a novelist, not an historian). Yet the buzz surrounding *Wolf Hall* can only properly be understood in the context of the apparently limitless appeal of Tudor history, one of the few periods regularly taught in schools and recipient of a diverse quality of treatments, from *Blackadder* to the trashy *Elizabeth* films and even trashier *Tudors* television series. Mantel and Poulton are ploughing the fertile soil of serious, and popular, historical interest.

Above all, the history matters. The stories we tell about the past shape and package the way that past—our past—is understood and interpreted. More than most retellings, a best-selling novel and a sold-out play lay claim to setting the historical agenda, whether intended or not. Consider how the early Roman Empire is associated with Machiavellian

women, poison and incest, how images of bloodlust, severed heads and wild mobs are conjured up when thinking about the French Revolution, how Richard III seems doomed to be remembered as a murderous hunchback—historical distortions certainly, but engrained in the consciousness and helped along in each case by fictions. The painstaking effort of scholars to fix accurate historical accounts faces a formidable challenge against the hold over history extending from the imagination and vision of the likes of Graves, Dickens, and Shakespeare. Might Mantel be added to that list? The phenomenal success of *Wolf Hall*, its spin-offs and adaptations suggest it is highly possible—the way Henrician England is commonly understood would seem, for better or worse, to have a new guiding hand.

Taking *Wolf Hall* seriously as history, as I'm suggesting here, thrusts us into the centre of an often bitter theoretical conflict among historians about the very essence of their discipline—about the proper way to approach the past and then to render that past as history. A simple description of the spectrum of this debate is that at one end stand traditional historians, at the other postmodernists. The former maintain that there is a single past, accessed through the surviving evidence and facts, and able to be presented as an objective, incontrovertible truth; things happened, they happened one way and not any other, and the job of the historian is to reveal, as far as sources permit, what that way was. This traditionalist position, owing much to the nineteenth-century professionalization of history as a discipline and the claims for something akin to a scientific basis for understanding the past, has sustained considerable damage to its fortifications over the past century, but no assault has been quite as bold as that of the postmodernists. According to the latter, we are deluded to imagine that the past is recoverable in any objective way and to suppose that the historian can ever present the past as it really was. The past is gone and so does not exist in any real sense, so all we have are evidence and historical accounts existing in our present; historians are inevitably trapped, as we all are, in the present with all our present concerns and present ways of thinking, and when they think they are providing truthful accounts of the past, all they are really doing is telling one story about that past. Postmodernists do not argue that historians can make things up by falsifying or doing gross violence to the evidence, but they do claim that the inaccessibility of the past (short of time machines enabling us to experience it for ourselves) results in history amounting to numerous

different stories of more or less equal validity, all of which, whether consciously or not, geared towards present concerns.

If the postmodernists are right, then we can say this about Thomas Cromwell: he existed but does not exist now, and so we cannot really know him or understand him; all we can hope to do is tell one among various plausible stories about him that makes sense to us in the twenty-first century. Cromwell the consummate civil servant; Cromwell the skilful political fixer; Cromwell the dutiful servant; Cromwell the visionary modernizer; Cromwell the Tudor equivalent of Lavrenti Beria; Starkey's Cromwell as Alistair Campbell with an axe. All are plausible stories, none fly in the face of the evidence; agonizing over which of them is true or not is pointless, since they are all true if truth is thought of as aligning with the ideological concerns of the present. (Replace Cromwell here with, say, a great-grandmother about whom various memories and accounts survive, some sympathetic, others not, and consider whether it is possible to arrive at a single, definitive view. What we might then say about this ancestor stems not from who she was in the past, but from the meaning we want to make of her in the present—for example, where she fits into our own sense of family and roots.)

Most professional historians are, unsurprisingly, not happy with this radical implication that they are (merely) story tellers. After all, if this is conceded, why privilege scholarly treatments of the past when any version, so long as it demonstrates an agreement with the evidence and a firm grasp of its own ideological concerns, can be admitted as a valid historical contribution? Why not admit all kinds of story, including the novelistic and cinematic? Most postmodernists would answer: why not indeed! Hayden White, for example, has argued for the importance of the graphic novel/memoir *Maus* as a history of the Holocaust, a good example of his wider point that the multiple viewpoints of history allow for multiple different ways of representing it. In White's view, so long as basic historical standards have been met (e.g. there is no violation of the evidence) then our grounds for favouring one version of the past over another are purely moral or aesthetic.

Wolf Hall would seem to be an ideal test case for these arguments. As a work of fiction it does not qualify as history as traditionally understood, and can be filed away as an historical novel and play, safely removed from actual works of history. A postmodernist

might contend, however, that it is meticulously researched, is faithful to the historical record, hence meets at least some of the standards of historical construction, and so might be considered a valid version of history—its status as history is not to be questioned, only its moral and aesthetic presentation. The traditional historian is likely to reply that, true to the facts though *Wolf Hall* may be, it is a work that imaginatively reconstructs a subject for which the evidence is largely scanty, and that (to paraphrase Wittgenstein) whereof the historical record is lacking, thereof one must be silent.

Mantel does several things in *Wolf Hall*, one of which is to put flesh on the skeleton of evidence. The novel confronts one of the typical frustrations of the historian: we see the surface and the structure, but are unable to anatomize and get to the world beneath. No doubt such things as love, hate, ambition, vanity, jealousy, idleness and energy coursed through the veins of Tudor England, but so far are we from being able to trace these inner workings that the safest approach is to portray the period as akin to a magnificent chess game with its calculated moves, blunders, tactics and strategy. Although we may suspect that there is more to Henry's tortuous marital affairs than the dynastic demands of securing an heir, the historical record says little on the bubbling life under the surface of the great marriage game. What animated the factions, plots, planning and scheming? Since it is hard to tell we end up with an account that leaves it at factions, plots, plans and schemes—if Cromwell, the Boleyns, the duke of Norfolk, the king himself often look like cold and ruthless political operators, then we have the limitations of the historical record to thank.

These limitations are especially acute in the case of Cromwell: we know plenty about him as a political animal, little as a man. One response is to shrug and say that's the way it is, and it matters little anyway, for the significance of Cromwell resides in his political life. Another is to suggest that it matters quite a lot: the common notion that Cromwell was a dead-eyed, heartless fixer and spin-doctor is not a neutral assessment based on the record, but a story with no more claim to the truth than various alternative stories. *Wolf Hall* presents just such an alternative. It attempts a coherent, plausible construction of Cromwell's inner life—and Mantel does it superbly. The balance is precise and spot on. The temptation to get creative with the extremely obscure youth and early manhood of Cromwell is sensibly eschewed; instead Mantel skips over this period, playing with the legends and mysteries of Cromwell's background in a way that

likely captures some of the contemporary bemusement at the opaque origins and comet-like trajectory of this commoner and upstart. Where it really matters, in the thick of the politics of Wolsey and the Boleyns, there is real craft to the way the life is delicately weaved in and around the established historical facts; the plot is not made to fit the invention, rather the invention fills out the pre-existing plot.

The Cromwell who emerges is undoubtedly sympathetic, but *Wolf Hall* is not hagiography; he is a man, with feeling, charm, humour and rich emotions to be sure, with edges, doubts and darkness too. The view that Cromwell was a soulless, villainous, clinical agent of a despot has its own issues of plausibility—the rise and pre-eminence of a commoner lacking in human qualities and depth would seem unlikely. Nor is there anything new about a positive portrayal of Cromwell (despite some reviewers thinking so); over half a century ago Geoffrey Elton was casting Cromwell as the genius architect of a Tudor revolution that ushered in modern England. Elton was the quintessential traditionalist, and would almost certainly have had little sympathy as an historian for the imagination of Mantel's novel, but *Wolf Hall* can be considered as a brilliant complement to the Eltonian view, texturing the interpretative outlines of the revolution thesis. Indeed, Mantel may have breathed life not only into Cromwell, but also into Elton's arguments, the one-time orthodoxy of which having been the target of significant assault over the years.

A definitive account of Cromwell the man is impossible, especially it might be supposed in a fictional treatment lacking historical authority. But *Wolf Hall* deserves to be taken seriously by historians. It asks us to think about what we do when we lack evidence for so much that is important about the past, and it suggests how we might envision both the lost fabric and the animating spirits of an earlier age. To question the authority of the reconstruction is to miss its real value—and, as postmodernists convincingly suggest, we should be sceptical about the whole notion of authoritative accounts. It is not likely that any new historical evidence is going to be found that will upset what we already know about Cromwell, so what's left to us are the different interpretations and stories we tell about what we do know. *Wolf Hall* tells such a story, skilfully, intelligently and coherently—and it is full of stimulating readings on the past, such as its subtle exploration of the relationship between gender and power (the way power variously flows through and around women, or sometimes meets them as an obstacle, but almost

never resides in women) and the fecundity of its search for meanings in the detail of history (in his literary and imaginative history of the French Revolution, Thomas Carlyle wrote that 'in every object there is inexhaustible meaning; the eye sees in it what the eye brings means of seeing', and Mantel's eye sees deeply). Above all, taking *Wolf Hall* seriously means looking beyond the narrow world of scholarly citations and critical apparatus and seeing it for what it is—a novel that is good for historians to think with.

Mantel's novel is a tremendous achievement, both as fiction and as history. I had never expected to come to this conclusion, since I largely avoid the historical novel and its tendency towards melodrama and sensation. Professional duty compelled me to read it, but my modest hopes extended only to entertainment and good writing; my fear was a wearying irritation at historical shortcomings. The hopes were satisfied, but its enlargement of the possibilities of history, were a revelation.

But what about Mike Poulton's stage adaptation? Amid my now elevated expectations for this, two questions intrigued me: why adapt it? and how would a staging capture the essence of the novel?

The answer to the second question is that it never really tries. The complexities of Cromwell and other central characters, and the interrelationships between them, have been smoothed out; caricature has replaced depth; intelligence and darkness have largely been bled out of the story, a large dose of comedy injected in their place. There is nothing wrong with jokes or the idea of a humorous version of the life and times of Cromwell, but there is little courage in the convictions of this play. The humour, particularly in the first half, is nervous, betraying the absence of a discernible centre to the play; prodding variously at comedy, tragedy, darkness and poignancy, it never seems sure what it is doing. The second half more clearly settles on laughs, and often it resembles a sketch show. When the ridiculous Harry Percy is persuaded by Cromwell to retract his claim of carnal knowledge of Anne Boleyn, a gratuitous waterboarding is added to the scene (it is not in the novel) and played for laughs. The very next scene is full of potential drama and tension: before king and council Percy has to put his soul on the line by swearing on the Bible to his lack of intimacy with Anne; the play avoids the difficulty of capturing the power of such a moment by resorting to the slapstick of the frail, hunched, nearly-dead Archbishop of Canterbury staggering and almost toppling

over under the weight of the holy book. The search for cheap laughs is dotted throughout the play. A jokey aside from Cranmer about Geoffrey of Monmouth having unfortunately been an 'Oxford man' punctuates the presentation of Cranmer and Cromwell's survey of scholarly opinion on the king's marriage to Katherine. The gags are invariably obvious—subjects include the French, the aristocracy, Ipswich, religion, flat chests, and the awkwardness and high spirits of boys and male youth—and rarely rise above the level of a sitcom like *Mrs Brown's Boys*.

That this is not the occasional dusting of comedy over an otherwise probing exploration of power and politics is clear from the tiresome resort to caricature throughout. Wolsey is the stereotypical unspiritual man of the Church, full of worldly bluster; Stephen Gardiner, a complex major player and survivor in the treacherous paths of Tudor politics, is reduced to an absurdly oily, self-satisfied, puffed-up buffoon; Cranmer, one of the great architects of the Anglican Church, becomes a caricature of the ineffective ivory-tower scholar, weak, nervous and halting; the nobility are consistently one-dimensional stock satirizations of egregious aristocratic failings, from the bigotry and irascibility of Norfolk, the dashing superficiality of Suffolk, the spinelessness and profligacy of Percy, to the grasping ambitions of the Boleyns; the king is affable, a little slow on the uptake, and, even when shouting, hardly an awe-inspiring figure; the musician, Mark Smeaton, destined to be trapped, framed and beheaded in the plot to bring down the Boleyns, becomes merely a soft, charmless figure of fun.

The effect of this commitment to caricature is quite deliberate: Cromwell, the extraordinarily gifted fixer and operator, finds himself in a world populated almost entirely by idiots. Some are benign, such as his son Gregory or his servant Christophe, others, when they have social status, present a potential threat, but in various ways they all drink from a common pool of stupidity and incompetence. Exceptions are few: the minor character, Rafe Sadler, whose blandness alleviates the otherwise clownish atmosphere of Cromwell's entourage, is one; another, more significant, is Thomas More, who emerges more sympathetically than in the novel as the difficult, principled man overtaken by events and is not reduced to mere stupidity.

All of that goes for the men in the story. The play's treatment of the women is notable for how unreconstructed it is. For the most part it overlooks them by removing them or

cutting them down to as small a role as possible: Cromwell's wife is barely on stage, and gone are Cromwell's complex personal relations; Cranmer's German bride is not so much hidden as excised entirely; More's wife and daughters have vanished; Elizabeth Barton, the Holy Maid of Kent, whose prophetic career proved dangerous to the king, does not figure. Those women who are left are generally past, present or future royalty, and the play reduces them to two types: the shrill and shrewish on the one hand, the meek and mousey on the other. Exemplifying the latter are Jane Seymour and Princess Mary; exemplifying the former are Anne Boleyn and Katherine of Aragon. Neither Anne nor Katherine are stupid, but they are presented as monotonously irritating, demanding, proud and querulous. It is, again, a joke: look, we are being directed, what a world Cromwell has to deal with, such idiotic men getting entangled with such monstrous, unattractive, difficult women. Whereas Mantel treats women within an intelligent perspective on gender and power, the play hardly bothers to treat them seriously at all.

At the last a claim to profundity is made: Cromwell's final (Eltonian) speech suggests that what we have witnessed is his attempt to make a modern England. But it bears little relation to what has come before. Whereas the novel expertly brings out the context of the emerging religious faultlines and zealotry stemming from the Reformation, and the impact of those on traditional conceptions of dynasticism and chivalry, the play turns Tudor England into little more than pantomime. It is hard not to see the spirit of *Horrible Histories* wafting through it—the attention to personalities and caricature rather than context, the conviction that the past is more than anything else a source of amusement. The stage version of *Wolf Hall* frequently looks like a misguided attempt to provide an adult version of *Horrible Histories*. But adults already know where to go if they need a fix of *Horrible Histories*—to children's bookshelves and television. In a theatrical production that carries the stamp of Mantel's fine novel, one might have expected a better attempt to transfer the richness, darkness, complexity and penetrating insight to the stage; instead, we've been given dumbed-down entertainment.

Travesty though it is, both of history and of Mantel's novel, the play might nevertheless merit consideration as just another version of the past, as valid as another. After all, there is no serious violation of the historical record, even if so much context is removed

(More's enthusiastic burning of Protestants being an obvious example) that legitimate questions can be asked about whether it really meets the standards of historical construction. But let's wave it through the test of historical accuracy—which leaves us assessing it on aesthetic and moral grounds. Aesthetically it is poor history, turning a key period of English history into a ridiculous source of easy laughs, while pretending throughout that this is in fact weighty and thoughtful drama. Morally, we have our answer to the question of why adapt it for the stage in the first place. *Wolf Hall* the novel is a major literary and historical achievement, stylish and thoughtful, and a basis for an intelligent engagement with history; *Wolf Hall* the play is meretricious drama, of little cultural or intellectual value, and has all the appearance of a shameless cashing in.

London, September 2014