

# ‘History as Literature or History as Science: a young discipline reaches out to a young audience’

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## History as literature or history as science: a young discipline reaches out to a young audience

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In the late nineteenth century, the market for popularising works of all varieties was growing rapidly. New printing technologies were making it possible to produce attractive illustrated books at competitive prices, and educational reforms generated a demand for manuals covering a wider range of more or less technical disciplines. The discipline of History was no exception. Indeed, in some ways civil history, along with natural history, might be thought of as the key subjects for late Victorian pedagogues. Where natural history was commonly used as the basis upon which children were encouraged to find in familiar landscapes and scenes the signs of underlying divine order, the task of the pedagogical historian was to demonstrate the nation's calling to imperial grandeur in the patterns of its past. Natural History taught the child about the underlying goodness of the cosmic order of things, while Civil History taught the child about the underlying goodness of the current political order of things. Britain's imperial influence was supposed to bring liberty, progress and civilisation to more primitive nations around the world and the historian might teach youthful readers how England's past suited it to this task.

The genre itself, however, goes back rather further in time; with precedents already well-established by the 1830s. Two prominent examples of successful titles from this epoch are *Mrs Markham's History of England* (1829) and *Little Arthur's History of England* (1835). They were anonymous productions, authored respectively by Elizabeth Penrose and Maria Walcott; and printed by the mainstream – even highbrow – London publisher, John Murray. Both used the traditional pedagogical format of the dialogue in the form of conversational exchanges between a mother and her children. In Penrose's work, chapters of historical narrative alternate with chapters of dialogue in which the juvenile audience is permitted to question the maternal narrator about the implications of the events she has just recounted; while Walcott's more conventional approach offers a sustained discursive exchange between the mother and her child, the Arthur of the book's title.

As in other fields, the transformation of disciplinary identity associated with the scientification of the study of natural and human phenomena prompted a shift in pedagogical styles deployed by popularising authors, away from the stylised dialogue forms derived from Classical models, and towards more naturalistic forms capable of creating a stronger sense of direct engagement in the subject matter itself. Where the older model taught through the distinctive and omnipresent authorial voice standing in as personal guide and mentor, the new 'scientific' disciplines prompted the need for a less manifestly 'guided' approach, and an attempt to create the illusion that the children were learning empirically, so to speak, from the source material itself.

It was in the intervening period, starting from the 1860s, that the modern discipline of History was formalised as an academic course of study at the ancient English universities. Although radically different views of the nature of the discipline continued to be present in both institutions, it was the scientifying outlook of figures such as Edward Freeman and William Stubbs which came to dominate by the end of the century (Hesketh). Their strategy was built on the claim that history was not simply a matter of repeating in various forms the existing accounts of the events of the past, but a highly demanding empirical enterprise requiring the practitioner to engage directly with the archives from which he should exhume the facts – and only the facts – about the past. It was the technicality of the task that made it distinct from the essentially literary approach that had been characteristic of historians up to and including Carlyle or Macaulay; and which gave it the depth and consistency required to constitute a credible course of study for the BA examinations at Oxbridge (Soffer, Slee).

Freeman himself was not only concerned to reform the academic discipline: he also recognised the importance of popularisation and pedagogy. The discipline as a whole needed reform, including its projection to the young. In 1869, Freeman thus produced *Old English History for Children*, effectively a manifesto in which he set out to demonstrate his core belief that, even where children were concerned, the best or the only way of teaching proper history was through ‘the facts alone’. He would also direct a wider project of historical manuals designed for school use, in which a variety of authors would apply his precepts to the teaching of the history of England, Scotland, France, the USA and other important countries. As Leslie Howsam has shown, Freeman was only partially successful in this programme since a variety of divergent concerns, coming from the publishers and indeed from the authors he recruited, meant that many of the titles were not nearly as austere in their narrative styles as the mentor would have liked. Be that as it may, the authoritative discourse coming out of the new history departments in the old universities by the end of the century was one which made ‘factuality’ the *sine qua non* of the discipline itself. ‘Proper history’ was to be produced by authors whose primary concern was with factual accuracy, not with narrative attractiveness; and Freeman had supposedly shown that this standard could be applied to popular as well as to technical historical writing.

By the turn of the century, then, the question of narrativity in history-writing was potentially a divisive one. The dominant official position, particularly in the universities, was one that frowned on the use of narrative frills that focused the reader’s attention on the narrator’s personality and temperament rather than the empirical ‘facts themselves’. On the other hand, the growth of the publishing industry, coupled with the rapidly increasing demand for new pedagogical material, meant that opportunities were wide open for other, non- or semi-official approaches to the new disciplines. The maternal voices of women authors that had dominated popular history writing in a prior age were not likely to disappear overnight. Instead, many would attempt to produce books more or less openly conceived as alternatives or even rivals to the dominant model, in which the dialogue form was dropped as too directly didactic, but which nevertheless offered a more intimate and more literary relationship between author and reader.

The titles studied in this article were selected to exemplify these rival approaches. H.E. Marshall’s *Our Island Story* (1905) and CLR Fletcher’s *A School History of England* (1911)<sup>1</sup> have much in common: only a few years separates their publication, their audiences were similar (though perhaps younger children were targeted by Marshall), and both were attractive large books with generous type-faces and margins and copiously decorated with illustrations, some in colour. Both were enormously successful and remained in print until the 1950s. But there is also much that separates them, especially in their methodological and pedagogical outlooks. Each author came at their task from radically different starting points. Fletcher was an Oxford-trained man who had taught history at Eton and who held a fellowship at Magdalen College, Oxford. His publications were relatively few – they included the five-volume *Introductory History of England* (1904–23), a biography of Gustavus Adolphus (1890), and an approving pamphlet on German imperialism (1914) – and they situated him as a writer of professional rather than popular or educational history. They were all published by serious generalists such as John Murray and G. P. Putnam, and even the *School History* was put out by the Clarendon Press at Oxford. By contrast, Henrietta Marshall belonged in an altogether less exalted world. Unmarried and without a university education, she was a professional writer of Scottish origin who worked mainly with T.C. & E.C. Jack, a specialist publisher of books for children. Since writing was her main source of income, she produced an enormous number of titles, ranging

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<sup>1</sup> Also published as *A History of England*. The first-mentioned title will be used here since it has the advantage of making explicit the author’s target audience.

from histories of specific countries to collections of tales based on historical or literary characters. *Our Island Story*, her first and most durable success, was thus soon followed by other similar titles such as *Scotland's Story* (1906), *Our Empire Story* (1908), *This Country of Ours: the Story of the United States* (1919), *English Literature for Boys and Girls* (1909), while the 'tales' series featuring such titles as *Stories of Robin Hood* (1906), *Stories of Guy of Warwick* (1906) or *Stories of Beowulf* (1908).

Given their difference in background, then, it is perhaps not surprising to find that our two authors stand in very different positions relative to the official university-derived stance on the nature of history as a discipline and the methods that should be applied to its writing. Broadly speaking, Fletcher was a product of the system and sought to promote something close to the official conception of the discipline's identity; but Marshall was an outsider at all levels, institutionally, professionally and economically, and was therefore able to choose not only to ignore those stipulations but even to run explicitly against them. It will therefore be interesting to look in more detail at each of these texts, and to explore the rival strategies by which the authors – coming from their widely differing starting points and with their distinct needs and goals – were able to construct convincing and attractive histories on their own terms. We will also see that the authors had distinct political agendas, with Fletcher offering a fairly transparently Tory reading of English history, while Marshall's text has Whig affinities of a more implicit nature. Focusing mainly on the early stages of their histories, where the theme of 'origins' is inevitably central, we will look at the interaction of factual and narrative-based content in each text and think about how each mix interacted with the author's ideological programme. We will thus see how the decades following the formalisation of History as an academic discipline were productive not of a univocal 'factual' history but of a range of writerly strategies for bridging the apparent gap between austere factuality and narrative readability.

### 1. Narrative strategies

The general tendency of Marshall's publications are plainly announced in her titles. She rarely claimed to be writing the "history" of a country, but rather to be telling its "story". A glance at the list of contents of *Our Island Story* (hereafter *OIS*) confirms this tendency: rather than structuring her account around a chronological series of eras, her chapter titles sound more like a sequence of episodes from an adventure story. For example, the section on the Roman occupation of Britain closes with a sequence of chapters entitled "The Story of a Warrior Queen", "The Last of the Romans" and "The Story of St. Alban". The same can be said of the captions accompanying the book's illustrations: "The little boy knelt before the King and stammered out the story" (*OIS*, facing 134); "Bruce lifted his battle-axe high in the air, then brought it crashing down upon the helmet of Bohun" (*OIS*, facing 208). In the preface, indeed, Marshall set out an explicit defence of this approach and its underlying logic, clearly stating that her work was "not a history lesson but a story book", and inviting readers not to keep it with their school books "but quite at the other end of the shelf, beside *Robinson Crusoe*..." (*OIS*, vi). She also warned her readers that they would find in her book "some stories which wise people say are only fairy tales and not history", but whose inclusion she defended as constituting "part of *Our Island Story*", a status which meant that they "ought not to be forgotten, any more than those stories about which there is no doubt". Of course the apprenticeship should not stop there, and Marshall did not fail to express the hope that "when you grow up you will want to read for yourselves the beautiful big histories which have helped me to write this little book for little people" (*OIS*, vi). Nevertheless, the deliberately-defended claim that history encompassed mythology, and that it was best taught by the techniques of story-telling put Marshall at the far end of the spectrum in terms of the norms expected by the recently formalised academic discipline.

When we go to the text itself, we see that Marshall meant what she said in her preface. Many chapters, especially in the much-favoured early part of the story, present mythological material on the same footing as more reliably historical material. For example, the opening chapters identify the first human inhabitant of the British Isles as Alba, the favourite son of Neptune and Amphitrite; and Brutus, the exile from Troy, as the founder of 'Britannia' (chapter 1). Further on, King Arthur is integrated into the historical mainstream as a British king with a specific place in the succession (chapters 12 & 13), while the help of the magician Merlin is invoked to account for the origin of Stonehenge, moved by his spells from its original location in Ireland in order to mark a famous victory over the invading Anglo-Saxons (chapter 11). This material, borrowed directly from the 12<sup>th</sup> century chronicles of Geoffrey of Monmouth, is not only plainly fanciful but also radically misleading as to chronology, suggesting as it does that a monument clearly identified as prehistoric by Marshall's time was built in the early medieval period. Marshall did recognise the unorthodox nature of her account, and closed the episode with the remark that "most people say this is a fairy tale and ought not to be put in a history book", but defended her inclusion on the ground that "fairy tales are very interesting, and this fairy tale (if it is one) is to be found among the first histories of Britain that were ever written. So certainly at one time people must have believed it to be true" (*OIS*, 49). Apart from the entertaining quality of the episode, there is a distinct sense here that Marshall was taking a deliberate stand against the 'facts only' school of academic History, and seeking to suggest that a people's mythologies were as useful a route to their sense of nationhood as were their registers of laws or of official acts. It does not seem to matter much whether King Arthur really existed or not, nor whether he was a Welsh, a British or a Saxon king: what engages Marshall's interest is not so much who the man really was, but what he can be taken to represent. The mythological figure can take the place of a standard human actor in Marshall's history because fundamentally this is not *factual* but *moral* history.

Recognised historical figures are also given the literary treatment, as can be seen for example in Marshall's account of the British queen Boadicea. Chapter five, "The Story of a Warrior Queen" tells the story of greedy invading Romans avid to acquire the land and the wealth of the Britons; they initially accept an offer of half the land but are still not satisfied and try to gain more. At this point, Queen Boadicea decides that enough is enough and fights against the Roman invaders – successfully at first, but inexplicably losing in the end. In a moment of tragic motherly compassion, she kills her daughters and then herself in order not to fall into the hands of the Roman soldiers. She can thus become a role-model at all sorts of levels, unusually marrying the masculine qualities of courage and leadership to the feminine qualities of moral sensibility. This conjunction of discontinuities is strikingly conveyed in the romanticised portrait of the heroine as she prepares for battle.

Then Boadicea, leaning with one hand upon her spear, and lifting the other to heaven – prayed. She prayed to the goddess of war, and her prayer was as fierce as her speech, for she had never heard of a God who taught men to forgive their enemies.

As she stood there praying, Boadicea looked more beautiful than ever. Her proud head was thrown back and the sun shone on her lovely hair and upon the golden band which bound her forehead. Her dark cloak, slipping from her shoulders, showed the splendid robe she wore beneath, and the thick and heavy chain of gold around her neck. At her feet knelt her daughters, sobbing with hope and fear.

It was an awful and grand moment, and deep silence fell upon the warriors as they listened to the solemn words. (*OIS*, 19)

In this climactic scene, Boadicea ostensibly carries the symbols of (masculine) power and authority – the golden band and chain, and the rich robe – while the emotion of the daughters carries the feminine sensibility. Furthermore her striking beauty as she prays encapsulates the mixing of varied principles: masculine and feminine strengths, aristocratic and popular authority, and pagan mysteries

presaging Christian piety. Boadicea will be one in a long line of heroes whose presentation makes of them exemplars of the supposed moral qualities of 'the English' as a people. Our readerly sympathy for the warrior queen and caring mother easily transmutes into a sense of shared national identity. We are moved because this is the start of "our island story"; little does it matter if the hero himself or herself was not 'English' or if the cause was ultimately lost or even whether the scene recounted ever 'really happened'. All that matters is the sense of identification with an ideal. The reader instinctively recognises the 'Englishness' of the character-portrait offered, even in the most distant ancestor-figures, and it is in that recognition that the promise of an intuitive form of objectiveness is carried. A feeling of sympathetic identification produced by literary effect suffices to create the illusion of an objective national identification that traverses the ages unaltered.

As for Fletcher, his strategy was of course quite different. From the outset, his *School History of England* (hereafter *SHE*) adopts a more distanced feeling. His chapter-titles give no hint of a particular authorial voice, but merely set out the chronological sequence of the periods covered by each. The preface is a one-sentence dedication of his book to "all boys and girls who are interested in the story of Great Britain and her Empire", a far cry from Marshall's direct apostrophising of the reader. The illustrations are given strictly descriptive captions: "William I at Hastings", 'Prince Rupert at Oxford, going into battle", and the table of contents features a "List of maps", of which there are seven. In contrast, *OIS* had no maps at all. But Fletcher's big selling point – also prominently noticed in the table of contents – was the series of poems by Rudyard Kipling, twenty-three in all, that larded the narrative. Clearly the place of these verse interjections would be highly significant in the book's narrative scheme, and we will have more to say on this theme in due course.

Fletcher's account of the early stages of the history of the British Isles was markedly different from Marshall's in content and tone. Rather than starting from mythological sources, he of course preferred to attempt a more factual account. He therefore briefly sketches the lives of the stone-age "Cave men" who are depicted as semi-bestial beings obliged by circumstances to work hard to survive and who therefore make remarkable progress, soon acquiring the first trappings of civilisation, notably in the form of animal husbandry, agriculture, artistic expression and the first development of fixed settlements and trade. The building of Stonehenge is speculatively attributed to them (*SHE*, 10). If their beliefs are foolishly superstitious, they are nevertheless admired for their physical strength and courage; and when they ultimately lose out to the invading Celtic peoples, their defeat is attributed to the superiority of the new group's bronze weapons. The theme of military might will be central to Fletcher's narrative throughout, and he will constantly stress his view that a strong state is the state militarily capable of expansion. In this very first instalment of his imperialistic tale, however, he strikingly chooses to place the collective narrative voice on the side of the primitive, vanquished people rather than with the new overlords.

They were armed, too, with this new-fangled bronze, which made short work of our poor little bows and flint-tipped arrows and spears. Those of us who were not killed or made slaves at once fled to the forests, fled ever northward or westward, or hid in our caves again. But many of us were made slaves, especially the women, some of whom afterward married their conquerors. (*SHE*, 12)

But Fletcher's "us" in this passage is not designed to create a sense of identification. Unlike Marshall and her heroic depiction of Boadicea, the point here is not to make us side with the Cave Men against the Celts; on the contrary, the intention is to confront the reader as materially as possible with a sense of the danger that awaits under-armed or militarily backward peoples. We are put briefly into the position of the vanquished in order to demonstrate the desirability of avoiding this condition in the future. It is best for these sorts of lessons to be learned in the early stages when the

primitive naïveté of a nation's ancestors is most easily pardoned. Indeed, the "us" of the cited passage is easily deflected to refer to any primitive group rather than to the English, and was perhaps more likely to be read as the "us" of others; of marginal groups as they fell increasingly under the sway of an ever-expanding British Empire.

When it comes to the confrontation between the Britons and the Romans, Fletcher adopts a more distanced voice and avoids any collective identification with either the Romans or the Britons. There is none of the emotive story-telling that we saw Marshall constructing around heroic indigenous figures of resistance to foreign invasion. Boadicea herself is mentioned only in passing, as an example of spirited resistance, but she is not allowed any impact upon the essential dynamic of Fletcher's narrative whose focus lies elsewhere (*SHE*, 15). Far from racking up an emotional attachment to the vanquished Celts in the person of a heroic leader, Fletcher acknowledges the sufferings of the indigenous peoples, but foregrounds the advances in civilisation brought to Britain by the Romans. Under the side-heading of "The Peace that Rome gave", we rapidly move on from the invasion itself to the advantages of Roman rule.

The Romans introduced into all their provinces a system of law so fair and so strong that almost all the best laws of modern Europe have been founded on it. Everywhere the weak were protected against the strong; castles were built on the coast, with powerful garrisons in them; fleets patrolled the Channel and the North Sea. Great roads crossed the island from east to west and from north to south. Great cities, full of the luxuries of the south, grew up. (*SHE*, 18-19)

However, the underlying point about the nature of progress was important enough that it had to be made not only in material but also in human terms. And this is where the poetic voice of Kipling was called upon. Typically, the poems have the role of particularising the general point that Fletcher has been making by presenting the situation of some exemplary individual, typically an imaginary figure. In this way, the text has a dual structure alternating between two distinct voices: the objective and distanced voice of the historian who gives the facts of the historical past, alternating with the poetic and fictionalising voice which becomes responsible for giving the historian's lessons a more distinctly human form and meaning. The poet brings the historian's facts to life emotively. It is a strategy that is meant to offer the best of both worlds.

In practice, however, the distinction between the 'two voices' of Fletcher's *History* is not always strictly maintained. In some cases, the prose narrative veers towards the fictional to prepare the arrival of the poem and its imaginary human actors. Immediately after the passage just cited, for example, Fletcher imagines Roman functionaries stationed in Britain complaining about the climate but also developing a sense of attachment so that "into them too the spirit of the motherland entered and became a passion" (*SHE*, 19). This abstract claim is then given specific material expression in the poem that immediately follows, entitled "The Roman Centurion Speaks". This poem recounts in the first person the tale of the imaginary centurion of the title who is called back to Rome and finds himself torn between his allegiance to his original and to his adopted homelands.

I've served in Britain forty years, from Vectis to the Wall  
I have none other home than this, nor any life at all.  
Last night I did not understand, but, now the hour draws near  
That calls me to my native land, I feel that land is here! (*SHE*, 19)

As the agent of progressive change, then, the Roman is no alien. His investment in the territory provokes a return reaction, and he finds that the hold of the land has transformed his person. Nationality, for Fletcher, is not ultimately about race, nor is the nation's identity to be sought in racially determined character. Instead, it is built by rational choice leading towards improved levels

of civilisation, the whole made possible by strong leadership. The particularity of the nation derives from the land itself, from which a mystique seems to emanate, capable of transforming each wave of new leaders into Englishmen.

Accordingly, the Romans' main fault lay in their failure to complete the conquest of the British Isles. Rather than push forward into the highlands of Scotland, they contented themselves with the building of walls in order to keep the savage Picts at a safe distance. Worse, they failed to make any incursion at all into Ireland, an omission which left a damaging legacy right up to Fletcher's day: "Ireland," he regretfully informs his readers, "never went to school, and has been a spoil child ever since" (*SHE*, 21). If only the Romans had established their power-base uniformly throughout the whole of the British Isles, the Celts could have been civilised and become a progressive people indistinguishable in all substantial terms from the English. Nationhood, for Fletcher, is constructed by the rational use of power. A viable nation is made by a state that has securely dominated a territory and successfully transformed it to make the land productive and the inhabitants docile. This nationhood looks to the future and to imperial hegemony for its identity, in contrast to Marshall's nostalgic and racial orientation. The one envisages progress as the rational expansion of the empire of order; the other envisages it as the working out of a moral destiny.

## **2. Rival ideologies and the forms of historical continuity**

Patterns similar to those outlined above were maintained by the two authors throughout their respective treatments of the rest of British history. The Norman conquest, like the Roman, is treated by Fletcher as a further stage in the march of civilisation, with the Norman overlords lifting the Saxons out of their torpid state; while Marshall makes Harold a tragic hero who, like Boadicea, may have lost the battle but nevertheless represents that spirit which somehow persisted in the face of all foreign incursions and all attempts by incoming potentates to subvert the inherently and spontaneously liberty-loving ways of all true Englishmen.

Although Marshall does not explicitly theorise the basis of English power or its continuity, the sequence of stories, with their heroes and their villains, suggests a fairly clear pattern. Even the apparent exceptions are telling. With Boadicea and Harold the early heroes of the story (resisting unsuccessfully against Romans or against Normans), the pattern is set for an account that unites national destiny to moral qualities, or character. The suggestion is that the story of England (or, later, of Britain) is the story not of material progress alone, nor even of moral worth alone; but rather one in which a constant moral fibre directs the course of the great ship of state. The vessel advances or falls back according to the moral qualities of those who find themselves at its helm. Those who are judged to have lacked the necessary fibre are generally accorded little impact, while the approved figures leave a more lasting mark even when their careers are cut short. Thus Henry VIII is castigated for his egotism and vanity, and the advances of the reformation attributed to the popular resistance against his daughter Mary rather than to any of the more deliberate policies of the Protestant Tudor monarchs. The godly Oliver Cromwell is allowed a good showing, despite the regicide and despite the failure of his regime to leave any lasting marks on the polity. More surprisingly, perhaps, the Jacobite rebels are given extensive and mainly positive coverage. Of course the treatment focuses mainly on the romantic liaison between Bonny Prince Charlie and Flora MacDonald, but it also includes the texts of a number of rebel songs openly hostile to the Hanoverian succession. Although the Stuart monarchs were hardly made of the requisite moral stuff to be recommendable to Marshall's readers, the less profligate among them could nevertheless be made representative of a certain pre-modern Englishness. Like Boadicea and Harold before them, Charles I and Bonnie Prince Charlie are failed

leaders who remain significant for the spirit with which they defended the world as they knew it and as they wanted it. Marshall's prurience as well as her whiggishness would not allow her to make outright heroes of the Stuarts, but – with her Scottish ancestry perhaps playing a part – this did not prevent her from treating their period with a certain nostalgia, seeing in it a world redundant politically speaking but still charged with significant human or moral values.

Marshall's outlook was basically that of what we might call the Romantic Whig. Her history tended to show the moral characters winning out, or at least being the most attractive figures. The royal heroes are not heroes in virtue of their regal status so much as their moral status; and this imperative is so strong as to prevail even in those cases where the performance may be considered compromised on other fronts. In a sense, Marshall's heroes are the expression, from the start, of an emergent middle class who claim to lead by example rather than by right. It is in this fundamental sense that Marshall's story is Whiggish – even when she chooses a hero such as Bonnie Prince Charlie who does not feature in the traditional Whig pantheon.

For his part, Fletcher's Tory position on the proper form and functioning of the state is more explicitly stated. The Norman Conquest, for example, is not treated as a heroic tragedy as it had been by Marshall, but as the continuation of the process started and left incomplete by the Romans by which a united and strong state was constructed. William's authority, imposed on the whole of the English nation, allowed the land "once more to enjoy a peace it had never known since the Roman legions left" (*SHE*, 45). Indeed, Fletcher goes so far as to suggest that it was the Conquest that allowed the English nation to emerge, Englishness being carried not by Saxon ethnicity or Saxon values but by Norman statecraft. "The Norman Conquest of 1066 was the beginning of the English race as one people, and of England as a great power in Europe" (*SHE*, 45). Actually, the starting point is allowed to be a mix: a combination of the moral qualities of the Saxons – "the great, slow, dogged, English race" – with the progressive qualities of the Normans – "a small number of the cleverest, strongest, most adventurous race then alive" (*SHE*, 43). But it is clearly the Normans who are in control, and they who drive forward the much-needed reform of the ponderous natives; a dynamic that is given resounding expression in Kipling's chapter-closing poem built around the image of a blacksmith working up pieces of metal into a finished tool.

England's on the anvil! Heavy are the blows!  
(But the work will be a marvel when it's done)  
Little bits of kingdoms cannot stand against their foes.  
England's being hammered, hammered, hammered into one! (*SHE*, 46)

In the opening paragraphs of the following chapter, on 'The Norman Kings', Fletcher spelt out the nature of the state that he believed the Normans to have created, and explicitly places the moment of its creation on the highroad to modernity. "So at last there was going to be a real government in this country," he begins, "and it was going to do its duty" (*SHE*, 47). Medieval kings, he explains, had treated the country like an estate, which was managed for their own benefit only. With the Normans, kings would become more like the better Roman emperors and rule according to the law which was itself designed to protect the interests of Roman citizens. The "duty" of such good governance was thus a duty towards *the people*. The state as established by the Normans was one characterised by a sort of holy union of interests between the monarch and the people, with the strength of the state guaranteed by the strength of that shared interest. "A king could only grow very rich and powerful when his country was at peace at home and well armed against foreign foes; his people could only grow rich under the same conditions." The fly in the ointment is the aristocracy, whose interests were factional, for "each of them could most easily increase his riches at the expense of some other great baron or of the king" (*SHE*, 47). William's authority was such, Fletcher continues, that he was

able to maintain discipline among his barons in England, and the more ambitious among them soon understood that they would have a better chance of furthering their private interests in a less structured state such as France. By virtue of this strong regal authority, then, was the foundation of the English polity set. The lesson is a fundamentally Tory one: the desirable state of affairs is one in which the traditional hierarchical relation between monarch and subjects is maintained in the spirit of mutual respect of shared interests. In this way the state's stability is guaranteed, and from stability flows peace, wealth and power.

But if the English state owes its origins to the Normans, the state that arises is nevertheless characteristically English. As we saw with Fletcher's treatment of the Roman period, the essence of Englishness is not due to any survival of native racial characters, but to the transformation of the elites as a result of their contact with the territory that they governed. "These clever Normans," we are told, "all but a few of the greatest barons, soon made common cause with their tenants, soon became English at heart. Over them, too, the good land threw its dear familiar spell, and made them love it beyond all things" (*SHE*, 51). Englishness derives from the wise management of the state, in the name of security, stability and progress, and in the interests of all its inhabitants. Even a foreign overlord quickly becomes English if he governs in this spirit.

The figure of Oliver Cromwell posed as many problems to Fletcher as he had done for Marshall – though not for the same reasons. Where Marshall had seen a fundamentally good man who fell into the ways of a tyrant once in power, Fletcher depicted him as a capable opportunist who achieved great practical results but whose constitutional novelties were disastrous for the nation. Cromwell fitted perfectly Fletcher's maxim that strong government by enlightened leaders is the right way for Englishmen, but he could not abide the republican ideals this leader represented. Fletcher therefore had to attack the Commonwealth regime not for its results but for its legality. "In reality," Fletcher informs his readers, "they had abolished Law, Order, and the old *natural* constitution; and all their efforts for the next eleven years to put anything *artificial* in its place were hopeless failures" (*SHE*, 159: stress in the original). The special relationship between king and people that respected hierarchy but also rights was by now the "natural" constitution of the English: to put the Army at the head of the nation – that is, to give military and political power to the common man – was to create "the worst of all conceivable tyrannies, however good the men that wield the sword" (*SHE*, 159).

As for the replacement of James II by William and Mary, this great upheaval is of course not presented in the familiar Whiggish terms as a "Glorious Revolution" instigated to safeguard the English constitution. Instead, Fletcher insists on William's personal strategic goals in his on-going wars as Dutch prince against the French. William himself is presented as the "Whig deliverer", not the nation's deliverer, and the reader is reminded that he "was a foreigner and a foreigner he remained until his death" (*SHE*, 175-6). The post-Stuart settlement is thus seen for the moment as a dividing rather than a uniting moment, and not allowed significant purchase on the story of the development of nationhood.

### **3. Concluding remarks: old Tories and new**

This brief survey of some of the material covered by Marshall and by Fletcher has allowed us to remark on the radical difference of narrative approach that characterises each text. It is important to notice that these differences correspond not only to individual stylistic preferences, but also to differences of a conceptual and ideological nature. Marshall's pointedly romanticised history was a deliberate act of insubordination to the contemporary norms of the discipline of history, and one that was probably only envisageable because the author was a woman and not looking for academic

recognition. With a history whose form is essentially that of a series of character portraits, Marshall demonstrated her conception of the moral foundation of national character, and the particular moral qualities that had enabled England to become a great and progressive nation capable of building and sustaining an Empire. The ship of state is held together by the bonds of mutual affection rather than those of authority, so that 'our island story' becomes the story of a family and its ancestry. By celebrating the contributions of the forebears, the author asserts a family identity; by responding emotively to their tragic or glorious ends, the reader participates in that identity. A vicarious sense of nationhood can emerge from the very act of reading.

Fletcher's chosen narrative forms also reflect his broader political and conceptual preoccupations; but his tendency is diametrically opposed to Marshall's. His more distanced tone and his eschewal of personal drama is primarily intended to cast upon his text something of the aura of objectivity and professionalism to be expected of an Oxford fellow publishing at the Clarendon Press. But this does not mean to say that his text has no human or moral impact. Rather, the sense of engagement available to the reader is simply situated elsewhere: not in the glorious deeds of a pantheon of personal heroes from the past, but in an expectation that the nation, tried and tested in the forge of time, will continue to be productive of stability, order and progress. Fletcher repeatedly talks down the contribution of individuals, whose motivations are almost always personal or even selfish. His story is not one of moral choices rewarded; it is the story of wise strength triumphing. It is the present that provides him with his narrative focus, and the foreseeable future his emotive hook. Although this outlook clearly lends itself to Fletcher's preferred expository style, the intensely personalised moments offered up as interjections in verse form clearly play a significant part in the design of the narrative as a whole. It was important to show that even if moral considerations were not to be taken as the well-springs of historical process, still the outlook that resulted was not incapable of inspiring in the reader an intensely human sense of shared national identity, as well as foregrounding pragmatic attributes for emulation. Where the reader of Marshall might feel England can continue to be England for as long as it remains true to its moral character, the reader of Fletcher will feel a more urgent need to participate actively in the shoring up of its strength and influence, without which the continued harmony and progressiveness of the world would be called into doubt. In this discrete way, Fletcher's story-telling is perhaps just as potent as Marshall's.

The writings of Marshall and Fletcher seem to belong to a past long left behind. We no longer feel such a strong need to affirm a sense of unique national identity or destiny. However, there are schools of political thought in modern Britain for whom this sort of history still has something to offer. In 2005, indeed, a centenary edition of *Our Island Story* was produced by an influential right-wing think tank, Civitas, who circulated the book in UK schools with the explicit purpose of promoting a return to a chronology-centred approach for the teaching of history. The initiative may have had an impact in the highest circles since no less a figure than David Cameron was reported in the *Daily Telegraph* of 29 October 2010 as having selected *Our Island Story* as his preferred example of "children's literature". In the article he is quoted as having said of the book that "it was written in a way that really captured my imagination and which nurtured my interest in the history of our great nation." It is striking that modern conservatism is drawn towards the Whig history of the Edwardian period rather than to its Tory equivalent. This preference has little to do with the *factual* quality of the texts – Marshall's treatment of Stonehenge hardly stands out as an example on this front – or indeed with their *literary* quality – which we have shown to be as strong in Fletcher's interactions with Kipling's verse as it was in Marshall's romanticised tales. Instead, counter-intuitively, the preference is ideological in nature.

Now that the memory of Empire has become an embarrassment to a multicultural and post-industrial Britain, and that present signs seem if anything to augur further fragmentation of the UK itself, the modern Tory seeking a unifying national narrative can no longer trust in stirring visions of present constructions. A revival of Fletcher in the early twenty-first century would serve only to underline the hubris of the early twentieth and its aspirations for Empire, and so to bring ridicule on this version of the nation's attempts to believe in itself. In the name of modernity, therefore, the modern Tory has preferred to drop the old theme of national strength and authority, and to replace it with their former rivals' moralising nostalgia. In periods of declining influence, it is always safest to fall back on the romanticisation of the past. However, the gesture is one of particularly desperate conservatism when it is not even the past itself that is revived, but past historiography. As a nation we seem to have run out of ideas even about how to construct new mythologies.

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