

EUROPE IN AMERICAN  
HISTORICAL ROMANCES,

1890-1910

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In the United States between 1890 and 1910 the historical romance reached perhaps its highest point of popularity.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 916 such books were published in this country during these years;<sup>2</sup> at least 118 of them by American writers used the material of European history for their subject matter, well over 10 per cent of the total.

This total of 118 represents a marked increase in the use of the matter of Europe. From the times of Cooper and Simms almost all historical fiction in this country had devoted itself to American history. For example, as late as the decade of the 1880's only eight American-authored historical romances used European settings. But during the nineties some twenty-four such books were published; this increased to 94 between 1900 and 1910. This increase of over 1000 per cent within two decades strongly suggests that the growing American reading public was interested in European history, even if in a watered down form.

What it was in these romances that interested the American reading public can best be seen if we look at the following aspects of the stories: the popularity of various countries as settings, the most popular periods of history, the use of historical personages, the images of various nationalities and the prejudices about these nationalities. This approach may suggest the role of history in these historical romances, and perhaps more important for the student of popular thought, it will indicate what may be the significance of this wave of increased interest in romances dealing with European history.

Most of these historical romances are set in either the British Isles (41) or France (38). Italy provided the background for eighteen of these romances. Russia was the setting for six romances; the Scandinavian countries and the Mediterranean areas each figured in five, Germany three and Spain only one.

The last two figures are somewhat surprising. Germany's influence upon American culture in the last half of the nineteenth century is well known. It may be that the mass audience which read most of this romantic fiction was less directly and consciously influenced by Germanic culture than was the smaller group of more highly educated readers. Although Spain had a long history in the New World, its history apparently had little attraction

for the popular audience of America. The hostility generated by the Cuban troubles and the Spanish-American War may have prevented Spain's being a popular source for writers.

In terms of historical periods, in the three most popular countries, Great Britain, France and Italy, apparently the periods before the Renaissance in each of these countries were the "dark ages" for this fiction because only about 15 per cent of the stories are set in these earlier times. This lack of interest in the earlier periods was noted as early as 1902:

The fifteenth century, with fifty-two novels to its credit, and many excellent ones, is the middle ground between the period where the novel is more or less a waif and a stray, and that in which it asserts a kind of proprietorship; and before entering the very lair of this genre, it should be said that the comparative neglect of the earlier periods by novelists disposes, once for all, of the kindly theory that the historical novel is a passable substitute for history. In every case history is the least of it, and the story is the thing.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the Renaissance in each country was one of the most popular eras for this literature, with about one third of romances set in this period. In each country the period since 1800 offered little attractive history to the romancer. Attractive material for the popular historical tale begins to disappear as the cloak and sword go out of fashion.

A few generalizations may be made about the relative popularity of the various historical periods in each country. The struggle and triumph of the Protestant middle class in England between 1642 and 1714 seems to have been a source of major interest, with one-fourth of the stories set in those years. This interest is emphasized by the contrasting neglect of the preceding Stuart period, which provided material for only about two per cent of the stories.<sup>4</sup>

In reference to the stories set in France, the monarchy under Louis XV and Louis XVI was a fruitful period for the romances. The short period from 1789 to 1815 covering the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars was also a main source, for writers used this period for some 16 per cent of their romances set in France.

The question of which noted historical figures were most popular cannot be answered easily. No particular personages appeared significantly more than others. In general, if they appeared at all in the story, they played a relatively minor role. They are usually persons historically famous for political or military reasons. Their appearances outnumber those of persons famous for artistic or religious reasons approximately five to one. In general, it may be said that these romances display a tendency to subordinate noted historical figures even more than Sir Walter Scott had done, sometimes to the point of not utilizing such figures at all.

This diminishing of outstanding personages may result from other causes than literary precedent. Dixon Wecter has argued persuasively that Americans tend to worship only those heroes who conform to particular patterns. These heroes have usually been "men of good will" who were unselfish in their service to the people. As "the people's choice," they have usually displayed an air of informality and good humor; while heroic, they have been "better than the average but in ways agreeable to the average."<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to see how these authors could have used a Medici, Henry VIII, Luther or Napoleon as the heroes of their popular romances.

What are the images of Europe and the European that emerge from this popular fiction? The treatment of the English is, in general, very favorable. There is much use of the stereotyped image of the bluff, blustering, hard-drinking, but honest and good-at-heart "Squire Western" character in these romances. A typical example of this type can be seen in Charles Major's characterization of Sir George Vernon in Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall (1902), who is a blustering comic figure, adamant that he will rule his children or destroy them, but they usually have their way. This stereotyped figure is utilized by a number of the writers. Amelia Barr named him Squire John Athelings.<sup>6</sup> Frances Burnett called him Sir Geoffrey Wildaire.<sup>7</sup>

It is in the group of romances set in England during the period from 1642 to 1660 that another stereotyped image emerges, that of the dissolute, honor-obsessed, haughty and very undemocratic Cavalier. Of the ten romances set in this period six portray the Cavaliers in this way while depicting the Puritan characters as the virtuous heroes.<sup>8</sup> The common characteristic of all of them is that the Cavalier figure obviously both attracted and repelled the authors. When the Cavalier figure is attractive it is because he is brave and loyal, even to a bad cause. When he is unattractive it is primarily because he is undemocratic.

It is worth noting that Scotland and Ireland were almost completely ignored by the writers. In only one story is Scotland the main or only setting and are Scotsmen the major characters.<sup>9</sup> Likewise there is only one romance built primarily around Ireland and the Irish.<sup>10</sup> In the rest of these romances Irish and Scotch characters appear only as minor figures, usually as comic servants.

Aside from the instances mentioned, the historical romances set in the British Isles reveal no particular images of or attitudes toward the British. Yet even less can be said in this connection about those romances set in France. One might guess that these would strongly reflect some of the popular myths about the French, but such is not the case. It is true that Robert W. Chambers reveals a strong pro-French bias in his quartet of historical romances about the Franco-Prussian War; in his stories the French are gay, brave defenders of freedom against the stern, efficient Germanic war machine.<sup>11</sup> However, in most of the romances with French

settings the characters, even the villains, have no particularly marked stereotyped nationalistic traits. Oddly enough, in all the historical romances studied here the only use of the timeworn cliché of the Frenchman as sexually promiscuous and immoral occurs in When Knighthood Was In Flower. There it is hinted that the French king has a venereal disease, and he is described as "an old Frenchman at that; full of French notions of morality and immorality."<sup>12</sup>

Only in the historical romances set in Italy does there appear to be a definite and fairly persistent bias against a particular nationality. The image of the Italians which emerges from a majority of those romances is that of a treacherous, cowardly, conniving people who are continually involved in intrigue; murder and assassinations. Nathan Gallizier is the most lurid chronicler of this image. Typical examples of Gallizier's depiction of the Italian can be seen in The Court of Lucifer (1901), Castel Del Monte (1905) and The Sorceress of Rome (1907). In each of his ten stories of Italy the hero is German or of German ancestry. He struggles, always honorably, against the wicked Italians, who continually use such means as poisons, black magic, assassins, secret doors, ex-nuns and villanous priests to achieve their ends.

A more explicit illustration of the tendency to denigrate the Italian can be seen in Treadwell Cleveland's book. The hero, a Frenchman, has been sent by Emperor Charles V to spy upon Alessandro d'Medici. Caught and about to be tortured, he says:

Strozzi might do his worst; might maim me, brand me, what he would. He should not find me falter at my choice. I had told the truth in a word; I was no Italian, no craven that held his skin dearer than his honor.<sup>13</sup>

Graphic and violent examples of cruelty and evil occur most frequently in the Italian stories. Consider Clinton Scollard's romance of sixteenth-century Italy. The villain, Ugolino Neri, and his son have assassinated all the other male members of the hero's family. But Ugolino and his son are captured and brought onto a balcony where the following grim event occurs:

Both men were bleeding from many wounds. Their arms were tightly pinioned and their legs partially secured. There was an aching hush of apprehension, then someone not visible screamed a word of command, whereat the two prisoners were seized by the powerful men guarding them, lifted in air, and hurled head foremost downward. An instant later, their bodies lay, masses of crushed flesh and bone, on the uneven pavement of the piazza.

Then, to add to the grisly horror of the scene, men with long glistening knives leaped out of the throng. Upon

the breathless corpses they flung themselves, gashed their hearts out, and pinned them, reeking with blood, high upon one of the doors of the Palazzo Publice.<sup>14</sup>

Actually, vivid portrayals of violence are less frequent in these historical romances than one might expect. Much of the killing and violence occurs "offstage" and is reported second hand or glossed over by summarizing. This minimizing of violence probably results from the fact that women made up such a large part of the reading public.<sup>15</sup>

Even Mrs. Lawrence Turnbull, who can hardly be considered anti-Italian or anti-Catholic, seems to have been fascinated by the less admirable traits of her Italian characters.<sup>16</sup> In her romance set in Venice in 1600 there are a number of plots and counterplots by the forces of Venice and the Vatican. Skulking priests twice attempt to assassinate a pro-Venetian priest. Another priest nearly drives the heroine insane by his influence on her. There are repeated references to the bodies being found floating in canals.<sup>17</sup> The total image of the Italians is highly reminiscent of the stereotyped Machiavellian Italian so common to the later Elizabethan stage.

Perhaps the violence of Italian history is sufficient explanation of the picture of Italy and the Italians that emerges from these romances. Yet similar machinations were far from unknown in English and French history, but the stories using the histories of these two countries apparently do not dwell on them. The facts of history are not a sufficient explanation for the consistently evil image of the Italian. On the other hand, the explanation that this fiction is merely continuing the literary tradition of the Machiavellian figure hardly seems adequate for a literary genre whose popular audience was probably no longer intimate with the traditions of English literature.

Instead of a simple continuation of the old Anglo-Saxon bias against Italians in America, one is tempted to see a repetition of the whole story: as the Americans became aware of the importation of different people and different ideas into their midst, they reacted much as the Elizabethan Englishmen had reacted nearly four centuries before, by creating in their literature an image of the Italian as a spawn of the devil.

This fiction reveals remarkably few overt American prejudices for or against Europe, and it contains relatively few stereotypes of nationalities. Aside from the Squire Western and Machiavelli clichés, one finds in these stories only the most general stereotyped images, such as the Englishman as a doughty fighter for freedom and democracy, and the Frenchman as a lighthearted gallant. Only in the case of the Italian is there any evidence of a consistent and significant anti-foreign feeling.

The subordination of famous historical figures, and the reliance upon the best known periods of history (precluding the necessity of supplying any but a minimum of historical knowledge), also suggest that the popular audience was not primarily interested in the people and history of Europe.

Thus, one cannot say that these books represent any deep yearning for the past or any ancestral worship. As Max Lerner says, "The American sense of the past is not a fumbling for ancestors or a nostalgia for ruins."<sup>18</sup>

But even though amusement may be the primary reason for the existence of this literature, it is profitable to consider some of the other possible reasons for its popularity. For instance, this general survey suggests a possible cause and effect relation between the knowledge of history held by the mass reading public and their tastes in historical fiction. As an example, the two foreign countries of which the American readers were most apt to have a reasonable amount of knowledge, Great Britain and France, were the two countries most often used as settings for these stories.

While it is impossible to verify the exact knowledge of and interest in Europe possessed by most Americans in the last century, it is possible to obtain a general idea by looking at the history taught in the public schools in America during the last half of the nineteenth century. Aside from "General History" (mostly biographical), Greek history, Roman history and American history, the only other history courses apt to be found in the curriculums of the American high schools between 1850 and 1890 were British and French.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the periods of history most popular with the romancers appear to be those periods most fully dealt with in the average school history textook: the Renaissance, the period of the rise of the democratic middle class in England, and the last age of the French monarchy and the revolution in France.<sup>20</sup>

Even more interesting, however, is the possibility that the popularity of these romances with foreign settings reflects a shift of vision in the United States. From the time of the American Revolution our vision had been turned westward and within. As a new and uncertain nation, we had ignored and scorned the old world. In general, Europe was viewed as a place to come from perhaps, but certainly not to turn back to, for either amusement or instruction. In The American Scholar Emerson's clarion call for the inward vision was only the logical culmination of the forces working for a century before him. The result throughout most of the nineteenth century was an aggressively hostile chauvinism that resulted in an appalling ignorance of the rest of the world. Huck Finn's ignorance and confusion about historical events and persons is, after all, a comic version of a sad condition wisepread in this country. This isolation, however, was dramatically destroyed by the Spanish-American War. The emergence of the United States as a major military and economic power made it necessary that we turn our vision outward and abroad.

There is ample evidence that many Americans were aware of this necessity before the conflict with Spain dramatized it. In 1899 the report of the Committee of Seven of The American Historical Association began by saying of the secondary schools in this country:

According to the statistics of the Bureau of Education, the number of pupils studying history (other than United States history) has increased one hundred and fifty-two per cent in the last ten years, a rate of increase below that of only one subject in the curriculum.<sup>21</sup>

This report urged that the teaching of foreign history be extended even more. However, the later Committee of Five stressed that an even greater emphasis ought to be placed upon the study of European history since the Middle Ages.<sup>22</sup> These views help to support the contention of Bessie L. Pierce that after 1890 there was an appreciable broadening of outlook in this country, which made it possible for public schools to shift from an almost complete emphasis upon the teaching of only colonial and American history to a more balanced view that made possible the widespread teaching of European history in the public schools.<sup>23</sup>

This shift of vision, therefore, that is seen in our military activities, our economic growth and our educational efforts, perhaps is also seen in this mass of popular literature. Like many fads and fashions, these historical romances have little inherent value. Their authors may very well have been conscious of nothing other than making money. The readers probably were aware only of a desire for amusement or escape. Yet underlying all these admittedly inferior literary works, and reflected in their greatly increased popularity, is the gradual awakening of Americans to the awareness of a world once spurned.

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Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Frank Luther Mott has shown that more than half the best sellers from 1894 to 1902 were historical romances. Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States (New York, 1947), 207.

<sup>2</sup> George L. White, Jr., Scandinavian Themes in American Fiction (Philadelphia, 1937), 20. His figures were obtained from the Bulletin of the Bureau of Education, IV (1917), 1-5.

<sup>3</sup> The Nation, LXXV (July 31, 1902), 86. Review of Jonathan Neld's A Guide to the Best Historical Novels and Tales.

<sup>4</sup> Note, however, that evidence is presented later in this study which suggests that these romances reveal an ambivalent attitude toward the Cavalier figure. For although the Cavaliers were undemocratic and pro-Catholic, they also were underdogs characterized by a great deal of dash and daring.

<sup>5</sup> The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero Worship (New York, 1941), 8-14.

<sup>6</sup> I, Thou, and the Other One (New York, 1894).

<sup>7</sup> A Lady of Quality (New York, 1896).

<sup>8</sup> Emilia E. Barr, Friend Olivia (New York, 1890); Beulah M. Dix, The Fair Maid of Graystones (New York, 1905); Dora G. McChesney, Coronet Strong of Ireton's Horse (London, 1903); Dora G. McChesney, Yesterday's Tomorrow (London, 1905); Caroline A. Mason, The Binding of the Strong (New York, 1908); Lydia C. Wood, For a Free Conscience (New York, 1905).

<sup>9</sup> Elinor Macartney Lane, Nancy Stair (New York, 1904).

<sup>10</sup> Mary Imlay Taylor, My Lady Clancarty (Boston, 1905).

<sup>11</sup> The Red Republic (New York, 1895); Lorraine (New York, 1898); Ashes of Empire (New York, 1899); The Maids of Paradise (New York, 1902).

<sup>12</sup> Charles Major (Indianapolis, 1898), 183.

<sup>13</sup> A Night with Alessandro (New York, 1904), 122.

<sup>14</sup> The Cloistering of Ursula (Boston, 1902), 265.

<sup>15</sup> The only contemporary critic of the historical romance to object to the violence in these stories was William Dean Howells, who voiced his fear that their violence and bloodshed would debauch the minds and morals of the readers. "The New Historical Romances," North American Review, CLXXI (December, 1900), 941.

<sup>16</sup> She wrote three historical romances, and several articles favorable to Italy and Catholicism.

<sup>17</sup> The Golden Book of Venice (New York, 1900).

<sup>18</sup> America as a Civilization (New York, 1957), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Johnson, Teaching of History, rev. ed. (New York, 1940), 50-52.

<sup>20</sup> If this correlation between the academic instruction in history and the popularity of historical romances is sound, it would reinforce the opinion of the reviewer in The Nation that historical romances do not either promote an interest in history or provide historical knowledge that many people would not otherwise obtain. The paucity of romances involving the lesser known countries and periods of European history certainly seems to discredit the view that the historical romance is either a substitute for or a means of arousing interest in history.

<sup>21</sup> The Committee of Seven, The Study of History in Schools, Report to the American Historical Association (New York, 1899), 1.

<sup>22</sup> A Committee of Five, The Study of History in Secondary Schools, Report to the American Historical Association (New York, 1911), 53-57.

<sup>23</sup> Public Opinion and the Teaching of History in the United States (New York, 1926), 44.