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'Sir William'

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Sir William - Situating Essay

“Everywhere, people are awaiting a messiah, and the air is laden with the promises of large and small prophets... we all share the same fate: we carry within us more love, and above all more longing than today’s society is able to satisfy. We have all ripened for something, and there is no-one to harvest the fruit...”

Karl Mannheim 1922¹

“The people of Britain are increasingly being distanced from the land they inhabit”

Brett Christophers ‘The New Enclosure’ 2019²

¹ Mannheim, Karl ([1922-24] 1980) *Structures of Thinking*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

² Christophers, Brett (2019) *The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neo-Liberal Britain*, London/New York: Verso Books

In 1999 I was working on *The Bill*, the long-running ITV police series³, when a gentlemanly and fragrant director, Albert Barber⁴, brought me an idea and a history book. He wanted me to produce a project for him to direct. I read the book, *Battle in Bossenden Wood* by Kent historian Philip G Rogers⁵. It told the story of fraud and ‘lunatic’, Sir William Courtenay, who led a people’s revolt in north Kent in 1838.

Like many stories from life it was fascinating raw material, a strange-but-true tale of how the son of a tapster and wine-merchant from Cornwall had presented himself in false aristocratic colours as the heir to various English estates, crossed the country West to East, stood for parliament, raised a following, been outed as a fraud, been incarcerated in the new Kent County Asylum (then the latest word in treatment of the mentally afflicted), been pardoned and released by Queen Victoria and had led his followers, a group of rural labourers, to their destruction, shot down by British army troops at the titular battle, dubbed by some the last battle ever fought on English soil.⁶

Sir William is a literary historical novel – like Benjamin Myers recently prize-winning evocation of the late 18th Century Yorkshire Coiners, *The Gallows Pole*⁷, Peter Moore’s *Damn His Blood*⁸, about murders in 1806 Worcestershire, or *Strandloper*⁹, Alan Garfield’s poetic depiction of Cheshire native, William Buckley’s, transportation to Australia. In common with *Sir William*, all these have at their centre some kind of regional or rural crime

³ Jamie Nuttgens at the Internet Database:

https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0638366/?ref=fn_al_nm_1

⁴ Albert Barber at the Internet Database: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm1274778/?ref=fn_al_nm_1
Albert used to top up his cologne before visiting the producer, me. This could have been a cloying habit but his choice of fragrance was always impeccable.

⁵ ‘Battle in Bossenden Wood’ by P G Rogers. The name is sometimes written as Bosenden with one ‘S’.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Myers, Benjamin (2019) *The Gallows Pole*, London: Bloomsbury

⁸ Moore, Peter (2012) *Damn His Blood*, London: Chatto and Windus

⁹ Garner, Alan (1996) *Strandloper*, London: The Harvill Press

which borders on civil disobedience and speaks of a desire in their protagonists to rise above the station life has given them. But reference to each of these examples can highlight some of the key choices I have made in the process of working on the novel.

Myers' *The Gallows Pole* is heavy on dialect, admirably creating the interior monologue of the gaoled Coiners' leader in a strong regional argot approximating that of the time. Whilst the principal voice of *Sir William*, that of ex-soldier, Adman Packman, is that of a substantially uneducated man and we are regularly privy to his thoughts in monologue I have in contrast tried to use quite plain language with the aim that (whilst hopefully avoiding any historical anachronisms) I have not affected anything too stylistically intrusive which might get between the reader and their ready understanding and identification with the characters and their situations. In this I've been helped by the OED's historical thesaurus. The 1830s hover between being part of the 'long 18th Century' and the 19th, in which progressive political ideas which would grow into Marxism by mid-century rubbed shoulders with a plethora of fundamentalist religious movements from (now) accepted non-conformists like Quakerism and Methodism to fringe sects like the Agapemonites¹⁰, the followers of Joanna Southcott¹¹ or John Wroe¹², creating the unruly mix of Christian and political ideals in which William Courtenay came to be. Sir William's followers were millenarians, who predicted, and longed for, the imminent end of the world – and the beginning of a new one, which would cancel out the corruption of their current governments, local and national, and the exploitation of the poor by the landed and wealthy. Many of their debates seem to be the same as ours today; talk of terrorism, fanaticism, socialism, or fundamentalism was not

¹⁰ The Agapemonites (translated as, 'The Abode of Love') were a sect advocating group marriage in Brighton led by Reverend Henry Prince.

¹¹ Southcott predicted the end of the world and was from Devon. John Thom (Courtenay) would have known of her.

¹² Wroe, like Henry Prince, took multiple wives in his Christian Israelite movement and interestingly, moved from Lancashire to Kent in 1831.

unusual¹³. Similarly Melissa Mohr's book on the history of swearing¹⁴ has been a great help in establishing so many present-day expressions were already in currency.

Peter Moore's scholarly and thoroughly well researched *Damn His Blood* has been compared to Kate Summerskill's highly lauded *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher*, each of them being 'a fascinating piece of criminal social history'¹⁵. It raises the question of how much we can rely on existing fact and how much we, as writers, invent or make up. Can any of us can really claim we know and are representing people, behaviour and being as it was in another time? Or is our work, even if set in the past, more obviously a book written for now by a now writer?

James Wood in the New Yorker writing about Hilary Mantel's Cromwell novels says historical fiction is a genre 'not exactly jammed with greatness'¹⁶. According to Richard Lee of the Historical Novel Society, which administrates the annual Walter Scott Prize (incidentally won by Myers for *Gallows Pole* in 2020), Wood has it wrong, 'historical novels are not a genre'¹⁷, but he says 'the defining characteristic of historical fiction is merely that it is set in the past'¹⁸. John Mullan in The Guardian¹⁹ echoes Wood in seeming to feel the gold standard for fiction based on real events has been set by Mantel, who 'has done something singular. She gives us not just circumstantial accuracy... but fastidious narrative exactitude', making her 'an impossible act to follow.' In simple terms, they are all commenting on an active debate about whether the historical novel satisfies both the fiction reader and the historian, managing to convince that the novelist's invention is true to historical events whilst also delivering a thumping good story. Wood's conclusion that Mantel's 'maddeningly

¹³ Socialism was in use from at least 1801, fanatic from the 16th C, terrorist since 1790s, and fundamentalism pre 1840s - OED

¹⁴ Mohr, Melissa (2013) *Holy Sh*t, A Brief History of Swearing* Oxford University Press

¹⁵ Rosemary Goring The Herald 7th July 2012

¹⁶ 'Invitation to a Beheading', James Wood The New Yorker April 30th 2012

¹⁷ Article, 'Walter Scott Prize – What Is Literary Historical Fiction?'

<https://historicalnovelsociety.org/walter-scott-prize-what-is-literary-historical-fiction/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ 'Beyond Mantel: the Historical Novels Everyone must read', The Guardian 29th February 2020

unteachable gift of being interesting’ is what sets her apart, speaks of his prejudice against the form and its many writers and readers. Mantel herself says, ‘the pursuit of the past makes you aware whether you are novelist or historian, of the dangers of your own fallibility and inbuilt bias’²⁰.

In the case of *Sir William*, the available published material for reference is very little, and arguably should be treated with caution. As Churchill is reputed to have said, “history is written by the victors”²¹ and no-one appears to have been very interested in the aftermath of the ‘Battle’ of 1838 in representing the point of view of this dead loser who it was thought caused so much upset. In newspaper accounts Sir William Courtenay is widely described simply as insane, a madman or a lunatic²² and the specifics of his attitudes or words often go unrepresented – in a series reporting Courtenay’s trial for perjury in 1833²³, the (anonymous) writer describes Courtenay’s speeches in court as a ‘most incoherent, unconnected harangue’. This despite Courtenay’s political ideas being identifiably progressive, as Beverley Robinson points out in his essay *The Red Lion*²⁴, Courtenay’s manifesto when he stood for election in 1832 proposed universal suffrage, voting by ballot, payment of MPs and equal sized electoral districts, pre-dating the points of the Chartists’ Charter by five years. He advocated common-ownership of land and abolition of the House of Lords. When, in his self-published newspaper, *The Lion*, he proposed that the poor should have roast beef he was tapping into a popular feeling that the people of England had not shared in the country’s Napoleonic war-victories, very like the US candidate Walter Mondale borrowing the advertising slogan, ‘where’s the beef?’ in his 1984 campaign.

²⁰ BBC Reith Lecture 1 – The Day is for the Living: 13/06/2017

²¹ Churchill is widely credited but may have been pre-dated by Hermann Göring (or others).

²² For example, the *Liverpool Mercury* 8th June 1838, the *Morning Post* 9th June 1838, *The Examiner* 10th June 1838 all describe SW as a ‘madman’ in their first mention.

²³ Anon (1833) *An Essay on the Character of Sir William Courtenay*, Truro: Henry Ward

²⁴ Beverley Thompson, ‘The Red Lion’ pp19-21

The fullest contemporary source, an account of Courtenay's life known by the pen-name of its anonymous author, *Canterburiensis*, was published only months or weeks after the battle in 1838, and therefore had the possibility of accessing information that later writers did not. But the work is hideously slanted, it is essentially a character assassination piece, not concerned so much with proving John Thom's madness, but his moral turpitude.

Approximately two thirds of the book cover his childhood and young adulthood (incidentally the most distant and least verifiable parts of the story even at the time of writing), and the rising, rebellion and battle are dealt with very summarily at the end. Instead much time is devoted to a story of Thom corrupting an innocent young woman like the villain of a melodrama, and dubious tales of his time in the Middle East (which as far as we know he never visited). It's as if, so long as the reader grasps what a bad boy John was, his murder of the constable, Mears, and his leading a rebellion will have been adequately explained.

Though the next account of the affair, *A Canterbury Tale* (incidentally the only version of the story to claim eye-witness testimony), came fifty years later, it was a full one hundred and thirty years after the event that PG Rogers history was published in 1962, giving the first reputable account - Rogers tells the story end to end and does a good job, but to him it is the story of a colourful lunatic, an English eccentric, the conventional view of Sir William, as occasionally revived and recounted in local papers as a local whimsy²⁵ and Rogers makes a convincing narrative without ever questioning that prevalent view.

The most reliable information about the rebellion comes not from an account but from the 1838 Report of the Society for Education, written by barrister, Frederick Liardet (of whom more later), and it is unsurprising that this is a major source for what is, in my view, the best work on the disturbances, New Zealand professor, Barry Reay's book, 'The Last

²⁵ Eg 'The "Battle" of Bosenden' Chambers Journal 20th October 1888, a revival of the story fifty years later.

Rising of the Agricultural Labourers'²⁶. Reay focusses less on the central figure of Sir William but on the land, society and people around him, the political and religious context, the employment, education, homes, possessions and frustrations of those who took part in the uprising, as evidenced from statistics and records, particularly those collected by Liardet for his Report – if there is an ‘historical truth’, it’s hard not to feel Reay gets closest to it. He shows us how the changes in land-use and government following ‘Enclosure’ contributed to a ‘lost generation’ in the rural regions who felt bypassed and cheated of their expectations and lifestyle. Interestingly, a recent book by political economist Brett Christophers about the state sell-off of public land during and post Thatcher called it the new Enclosure and pointed to a similar dissatisfied generation in our time – the Brexiteers of regional backwaters.

Throughout working on *Sir William*, despite the limited nature of the available information to work from and the wide variety of work covered by the ‘literary historical’ label, I have been conscious of the pressure to achieve historical accuracy as a benchmark for whether my vision might be acceptable to others or received with debate. While I am very happy to own up to any traps I might have fallen into or faux pas I might have committed, I am more comfortable thinking of the book as a work of fiction, and Alan Garner’s *Strandloper* offers a model in its mytho-poetic exploration of his lead character Buckley’s ‘lost years’ in tribal Australia. Garner is unapologetic about fictionalising, mythologising his subject in a ‘mythopoetic Bunyanesque prose-poem of continuity and rupture, environment and myth’.²⁷ My attempt has been to capture some emotional sense of the followers of Sir William and what might have been their feelings about their world and options. But I am thoroughly aware that these are my own thoughts, these are made up. As an influence, the reinvention of 70s/80s West Yorkshire by David Peace in his *Red Riding Quartet* (which I

²⁶ Reay, Barry (1990) *The Last Rising of the Agricultural Labourers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

²⁷ Jenny Turner, *The Guardian* 24th May 1996

optioned and developed into films for Channel 4 TV) are very much about creating a mythic landscape which accurately captures not the history but the feeling and horror of growing up in those places in those years as I did.

Though the narrative is strung around the key tent-pole events of Courtenay's known doings, the two main point-of-view characters in the book are complete inventions. Main witness, Adman Packman²⁸, is a doubter, the ex-soldier who returns from Waterloo with what we might recognise these days as PTSD. For Adman he simply can't make sense of his own attitudes and the sense of separation from others he experiences. He recognises an absence in himself and sees it as a failing on his part. He sees Sir William for the fraud he is but he follows him none the less, because he is the most exciting thing to happen in Adman's world, he's tangible, he's there, and, though Adman knows he might be mad, he offers otherness, an alternative to the indifference of the universe.

This relationship between the flamboyant leader and the reluctant follower is the core relationship of the book. On a personal level this might reflect a key relationship from my own teenage years in which I was the hanger-on, or, put more kindly, a lieutenant, to a more charismatic if flawed friend, whose actions, often seemingly driven by an idea of principle larger than our then view²⁹, seemed to inexorably lead towards self-sabotage. I admired him terribly and followed wherever he led.

But it's also a classic pairing of literature which we can see in Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, in Holmes and Watson, in Frodo and Sam, of the strange wayward genius, the extraordinary character with a heightened sense of self, whose foil is the more stolid or fearful son-of-the soil representing the plain thinker, representing us. Adman is aware that

²⁸ The character's name is taken from the real Adman Packman, one of two Kentish brothers who were hanged on Christmas Eve 1830 for their part in the earlier Swing disturbances.

²⁹ I once saw him walk into a fight in which seven lads were beating up one, rescue the boy, and walk out unscathed like Christ at Nazareth, leaving the beaters shamed and impotent.

Sir William offers entry to another world, or another way of being, something ‘other’ that nothing else in his life can equal.

In modern terms the form might be seen as a buddy movie, like *Lethal Weapon* or *48 Hrs.* Often those stories are educative, both characters rub off on each other and learn something about life from their interaction. However, in *Sir William* the progression is not so much educative but it’s about Adman’s struggle with a need to believe, which grows stronger ironically as Courtenay descends into madness in the book’s latter stages.

The second point-of-view voice, Ellie Parish, a rootless parish orphan who grows from age nine to fourteen during the years the story covers is in contrast the ‘true believer’, who believes, as many of his followers did, that Sir William is Jesus come amongst us once more to bring about either a better world, or the end of this despoiled one. She finds Adman’s nihilism galling and unimpressive, and in turn provides a foil to Adman’s inability to submit to faith. Locking into a debate with these two characters has allowed me to talk about some of the issues without having to produce a definitive judgement.

The third point-of-view character is the only ‘real’ one from an historical perspective. As previously mentioned, Barrister Frederick Liardet was sent to Kent in May 1838, in the aftermath of the Battle, to produce a Report on the ‘Disturbances in Kent’ for the Society for Education, a cross-party initiative pushing for the introduction of some level of state education for all. The Society was hoping to reveal through analysis of the labourers’ physical circumstances a connection between their rebellion and their deprivation, evidence of the growing 19th Century idea that the different layers of society fed off each other in co-dependency, the kind of consciousness we can see in the works of Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens. Liardet’s report was one of the first (may have been the first) of the kind of Reports

that habitually follow social disturbance today.³⁰ With my version of Liardet I have taken more licence than with any other character, and some might feel I have been unfair to him, he is an important part of the debate. In the novel he represents the Londoner, the ‘townie’, an educated liberal (or Whig) perspective, sympathetic in principle to the ideal of the common man but struggling to really understand the feelings and frustrations of the labourers, and in particular their negativity and distrust of authority. As he concludes, it is possible to pity them but difficult to actually like them.

The Report’s findings, whilst well-intentioned, recommended the building of a church as well as a school, thereby strengthening the presence of established authority in the area, despite the labourers’ mistrust of the clergy, whose tithes they saw as unfair taxes, and who often sat as magistrates in the local courts.³¹

The titular character, Sir William himself, is not one of the point-of-view characters of the book. He’s not Godot, an off-stage character referred to but never appearing, because he’s generally at the centre of the action whenever he’s present, but maybe more comparable to Lermontov’s *Hero of Our Time*, Pechorin, who is often defined by others³², or Daniel Kellmann’s *Tyll*, who crops up from time to time in the narrative of others in his own book. Some might feel that following Courtney/Thom’s story from his perspective would be a fascinating ride, and I wouldn’t necessarily disagree. However, it would be a story of a man who struggles from his teenage years with his psychological problems and ultimately, as readers, we’d be on a descent into madness, and that isn’t the area I wanted to explore. David Abrahamson’s analysis of Thom from a psychiatric perspective³³ is that he suffered from

³⁰ Such as the Scarman Report in the wake of the 1981 Brixton Riots, or the 1990 Taylor Report on the Hillsborough disaster.

³¹ Dr Poore, the vicar of Sittingbourne, was the magistrate who issued the arrest warrant for Sir William, and who read the Riot Act when the troops arrived to tackle the ‘rebels’.

³² Though Courtenay doesn’t wholly fit the ‘Byronic’ model of the ‘superfluous man’, lacking the necessary cynicism, he seems to embody the arrogance and melancholy of the role.

³³ Essay, ‘Courtenay’s Mental State’ September 2011, posted on site SirWilliamCourtenay.org, now defunct, accessed Jan 2019

manic-depressive psychosis or, in current terms, was bi-polar. Hopefully the occasional dark parables Sir William indulges in capture some sense of a mind not thinking along standard tracks. And perhaps the other reason is that the character of Sir William is ultimately an act, a character created by the man who invented and inhabited him, John Nichols Thom.

To return to the question of genre, I would say *Sir William* is predominantly a political story. Hilary Mantel has said, ‘fiction, if well written, doesn’t betray history, it opens it up to inspection’³⁴, and I would hope that is what I am doing, whether we see the novel as being about the past, or about today. My interest was, and is, ultimately, the followers, the ordinary people caught up in the rebellion. When Albert Barber initially brought Rogers’ book to me I turned it down. I liked him, we’d done several episodes of *The Bill* together, but I felt I couldn’t relate to it. It wasn’t the social-justice aspects of the story that didn’t make sense to me – battles against corrupt authority and resultant martyrdom are right up my street – although the whole enterprise Courtenay led his followers in was such a pointless failure, that may have contributed to my doubts – it was the strange mix of Christianity and right-wing patriotism of the rebels and their leader that I found off-putting despite the progressive nature of many of his ideas.

The decision of these dissatisfied rural people to see Jesus-like qualities in Sir William Courtenay, and then to identify him as their Messiah, was not something I could initially go along with without huge discomfort. Why would anyone believe in such a ridiculous figure? In hindsight I can see that like Adman I wanted to believe whole-heartedly in Courtenay or not at all and was offended that I couldn’t, that he wasn’t perfect.

But then along came the growth of Populism, of Brexit and Donald Trump. Was there so much difference between the flamboyant piratical theatricality of the richly bearded Sir William and the tangerine-skinned comb-over ludricosity of the (then) presidential

³⁴ Reith Lecture no5 – Adaptation 11th July 2017

hopeful? As the tide of populist politics gained strength in the US and UK, combining old fashioned (reactionary) patriotism and tub-thumping Christianity³⁵, and after right-wing success in the Brexit referendum, it seemed the same need, for a saviour, for a ‘strong leader’, and the same anger from those who felt they had been ignored, were still hard at work in our world. In the ‘Brexiters’ of Boston, Lincs, and Blackpool, Lancs, the same desperate dog-in-the-manger appetite for disaster was evident. And Sir William’s story seemed like a story for now.

In an unfair world, where decent treatment is beyond expectation, where those who claim they are looking out for the ordinary people repeatedly show how little they care, the act of simply putting a spoke in the wheel is a protest. Like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*³⁶ who asked what he is rebelling against, says ‘whaddya got?’, these people are saying there is so much wrong with this life, their lives, that like a suicide bomber, self-sabotage is a positive, or at least achievable, objective. These millenarians believe the world should be destroyed and rebooted, because nothing better is coming for them.

My interest is not to ridicule or mock the followers but to try to capture their need. I recognise how meaningful belief is for those who believe. That faith can be more than mere comfort, but satisfies something essential for humankind – the idea that tomorrow is worth living for (and possibly dying for). To lean into personal areas again, having been brought up in a large Roman Catholic family in which core tenets were not able to be questioned, it is interesting to me that out of the nine of us children, not one of us has stayed within the Church (the only identifiably religious sibling is a sister who has converted to Judaism). However, although the proponent of the doctrine (and consequently the fiercest opponent of any alternative lines of thought) was my mother, I also recognise how important her faith has

³⁵ witness Trump’s show with a bible after the BLM protests

³⁶ *The Wild One*, written by John Paxton & Ben Maddow Columbia Pictures 1953

been in her life, providing not only a solace, but more importantly an intellectual frame of reference for exploring abstract ideas and her relationship to the world. Whatever I think of it, she has a need for her faith to express feelings and ideas she values.

We may feel that the rebels' faith in Sir William is nonsensical, but his exploitation of their 'simple' needs is matched by their exploitation of him, their symbiotic need to use him to express a need that goes beyond simple hero-worship or even leadership, not simply a flag to rally behind, but a profound need to believe in something, in anything, that might give their life meaning, no matter how ridiculous the object of belief might be.

In 2019 speaking at the Hay Festival about the difference between history and fiction, Pat Barker said: 'History is then, myth is now; myth is about what we do now.'³⁷ Like Hilary Mantel she is calling on something more powerful than verifiable fact. It is the same strength James Warner Bellah & Willis Goldbeck wrote in the script of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: 'when the legend becomes fact, print the legend.'³⁸

Hopefully, this is what the book is about.

4198 words

³⁷ Guardian books Podcast Interview with Claire Armistead 040619

³⁸ *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, Paramount Pictures 1962