

## Bring up the Bodies

*H.Mantel*

July 24-August 4, 2013

What is historical fiction? The classical one, as exemplified by Walter Scott, took history as an inspiration to weave its own yarn having its own axe to grind. Modern, serious one, is far more scholarly in its ambition. The facts have to be right, but between the hard facts there are interstices to be filled out, and the hard facts themselves may not be so hard after all, contradictory as they tend to be. There is so much that could have been and which one cannot rule out. Therein lies the degree of latitude allowed to the imagination of the modern writer of historical fiction. Does everything in the past leave a trace in the future, if so everything in the past is reconstructible. If not there are many alternate histories among which we have no way of choosing the right one.

Fiction has many advantages over mere documentation. The latter depends on what has happened to survive and many of the crucial events have to be recreated by the imagination, which is the beginning of fictionalization. A factual documentary account is by necessity a bit terse and dry. It provides both too little and too much detail. A historical process cast in fiction engages the imagination more powerfully and thus imprints it more deeply into memory. A personal point of view makes a lot of difference. Ideally reading a fictional account prepares the way for a later checking of historical accuracy.

In Mantel's book it is very clear that she has absorbed and puts on display every scrap of historical documentation that is to be found. In that she does not significantly differ from other serious writers of historical fiction. Sometimes this display can be seen as a bit contrived and putting a straightjacket on the imagination of the writer, constraints that a Scott no doubt would have scoffed at. But as noted, there is a lot to be filled in the interstices. The inner lives of historical characters are never documented, yet as Collingwood teaches us, fundamental to history as a humanistic science is the recreation of thought, the engine that drives human history. Only by putting ourselves into the shoes (and minds) of the historical actors can we make sense of their individual actions and the course of history at large. Thus the true historian must be something of an imaginative writer of fiction, with the difference that he needs to clearly separate his speculations from the fact, the former are mere aids for the asking of the fruitful questions. The fictional writer on the other hand can more freely indulge in his or her reveries. The result can be a tale that rivets the readers' imaginations and makes them remember the events described with far more vividness had they only resorted to factual text-books. The writer does in a sense the chewing for the readers, who willingly absorb masticated food.

The book turns out to be the second one in a planned trilogy on Thomas Cromwell, the first of which - *Wolf Hall*, I unfortunately have not read. I had of course heard of him before, but after a novel dedicated to him, I will have a hard time forgetting his existence.

Thomas Cromwell is a commoner who has risen to a position of power and influence out of proportion to his background. How is that? He is of course not unique in history, there are many examples of people from humble backgrounds who somehow manage to

make themselves indispensable to the mighty. Formal power tended to be hereditary, real power always have to be earned. The one who has it has achieved it by hard work acquiring expertise and extensive knowledge. The ignorant always have to bow before the expertise of the ones in the know, even if they are kings, especially when they are. Bismarck likened his relation to the king he served as the rider to the horse. The horse is much stronger and powerful than the rider, but he needs guidance. Henry VIII can order the head of Cromwell to be chopped off, but he cannot reign without the assistance of him. Just like Bismarck three hundred years later Cromwell needs to know how to ride, to cajole the beast between his legs to do his biddings. This takes a lot of ingenuity, tact and an instinctive sense of human psychology, especially of the psychology of the man to control, Henry VIII is vain and wants to be in charge, so let him live happily in that illusion. All initiatives you want to be taken should seem as if they issue out of the King. This requires a strange mixture of firmness and authority as well as obsequiousness, and thus a rather singular temperament. The demands on Cromwell were of course much stronger in this respect than that of Bismarck. His stead were more willful and capricious than the rather staid one Bismarck had to contend with. Besides the latter was of aristocratic stock and on his own, unlike poor Cromwell who must have continuously been made aware of his social inferiority.

The tale, although told in third person, is from the perspective of Cromwell. Good fiction means that we are led to sympathize with people we otherwise would have no need to do so with. Cromwell is objectively not a very sympathetic figure, literally meaning that it is hard to take his point of view, because the actions he is led to initiate and conclude are indeed dirty business, with which the king himself would not like to have his hands soiled. Nevertheless we follow his machinations to undo the queen Anne Boleyn with something akin to admiration for his consummate skills. We need to justify it, as no doubt Cromwell himself felt the need to do. The King by divine hereditary right (although the legitimacy of the Tudors is far from being above doubt) stands above the fray, but below him there is a ruthless jockeying for position. If Boleyn and her family do not go, Cromwell himself is liable to be thrown to the wolves and torn to pieces. What better excuse? To eat or to be eaten.

What is the nature of the Kings growing displeasure of the Queen, for which he went to such lengths to woe and secure? It seems clearly documented that Henry VIII actually felt an erotic passion for his love, the kind of which he had never before experienced and would never again feel. The king with his six wives, disposed of in a variety of ways, is often seen as a King Bluebird with a ferocious appetite and a powerful sexual quest. True, in his youth he was a fine figure of a man, tall hovering above his contemporaries in true regal fashion, with a fair skin, light reddish hair and beard, blue eyes and a well-trimmed physique, which eventually would go to pot<sup>1</sup>. But as an amour he seems to have been of a sensitive nature, maybe even shy, and compared to contemporary regents, rather inexperienced and with relatively few lovers to put on his CV. The assumption of this relative erotic innocence is point of departure for the fictional account. By assuming that the king is so sensitive to the suspicion of being cuckolded, as he is dimly aware that

---

<sup>1</sup> The author does not omit a mention of his festering ulcer on his leg which would cause him a lot of pain and trouble and accentuate the physical revulsion he was to more and more inspire.

the sexual experiences of his wife are far more extensive, there is something for Cromwell to work on. Whether this is true or not is a matter of speculation, but the main point is that it is fully compatible with the unfolding of the plot. Cromwell manages to get confessions, be it by torture, or rather by the threat of it, or by playing on the vanities of vulnerable characters, from which trumped up charges can be manufactured. The end result is fixed, it is just a matter of justifying it, and as is commonly known, there is no limit to the amount of justification that can be brought to support any contention, it is only in the failure to be falsified an assumption shows its true mettle. What follows is a sham of course in which the victims play the roles assigned them in a charade very similar to the sham trials of a Stalin. Few things are new under the sun. What it means really is that the Boleyn family is removed from influence and the beheaded victims provide opportunities for rich spoils. In short redistribution. The sensitive king is left out of it, he wants to remain unsullied and thus to know nothing of the means only to be assured of the desired ends. Jane Seymore who replaces Anne Boleyn in his affections is painted as a plain innocent woman, a girl almost, with no wit nor any accomplishments to her credit, thus providing no threat to the brittle masculinity of the aging monarch, her accessibility to the king greatly enhanced by her ambitious relatives.

August 6, 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden ulfp@chalmers.se*