

“The Novel and History”

A lecture to a symposium during the annual Grand Cultural Festival, March 23-24, 2005

Doha, Qatar

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I began my literary life as a novelist. That first novel was inspired in a classic way. I was in the American Army, indeed in the Intelligence Corps, during the years 1965-68, when the Vietnam War was reaching its height of ferocity. Like so many members of that so-called Vietnam Generation in America, I was torn emotionally by the war. Was it just and moral? Or was it pointless and immoral? Where did I stand? Did I feel so deeply that the War was wrong that I was prepared to be a conscientious objector, since in those days all American young men were subject to conscription? To go into exile or go to jail or go into the military in a misguided national adventure? That is a decision no young generation in America or anywhere else ought to have to face. In the end, I concluded that my moral objections were not so absolute that I must, out of conscience, resist service to my country. But that did not alleviate my discontent with the course of the war, my grieving over the American losses, my identification with my protesting friends.

It is often out of such tugs of conscience that literature is born.

And so as I was stationed at the American naval base of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and ordered to think about how American agents could be slipped into China or North Vietnam, I went off to the outer islands of Hawaii to work secretly on my first novel. To write fiction was my only option, since to write factually about my classified work would

have gotten me into very hot water. Then about 27 years old, I really didn't know much about writing fiction. Indeed, I had read very little of it at the time. But I was able over time to make up for my inexperience by the sheer passion of my emotional distress.

When that first novel was published in 1971, I became a lecturer in creative writing at the University of North Carolina. Over the next ten years, I taught fiction writing to very bright and eager students. We focused on the key elements of fiction: character, plot, dialogue, and scene. As those years went by, an interesting thing happened. Through the mid 1970s the memory of the Vietnam War began to recede, as did the ferment of the Civil Rights era of the 1960s (in which I had also been quite involved when I was educated in the American south, the section of the worst racism) A consequence was that I could connect less and less with my students about the passions of the racial justice and illegitimate warfare. My classes became less about the social justice and just war, and more about the dry elements of style and language. Together both the teacher and the students became less interested---my classroom experience had become a performance and an entertainment---and I gave up teaching in 1981.

In those ten years as a lecturer in creative writing, I published five books. My second novel in 1975 was set in the Civil Rights turmoil of 1968 when many American cities exploded in violence after the death of Martin Luther King. I have not reread that book for many years, but I suppose it to be rather ordinary. And perhaps appreciating that I would never be a great novelist, I turned to non-fiction or factual writing. But the important thing is that through those struggles to write novels and those endless hours of teaching fiction writing, I never lost the instincts of a novelist. I believe to this day that

my body of work, now 14 books and three plays and countless articles for international magazines, is distinctive because I possess that novelist's sensibility.

Warriors of God, my treatment of the Third Crusade of Richard the Lion Heart and Saladin in the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the Christian calendar, represents the full flowering, the culmination of my approach to writing factual history **creatively**. When people now call me a historian, I cringe a bit---and I suppose the so-called professional historians cringe even more. Where are my credentials? Where is my PhD? Am I part of the club? To be a historian in today's world seems to suggest a writer concerned with myriad of facts---often very obscure ones---with historical movements, and with economic and social influences on the flow of history. In short, an emphasis of the "professional historian" is generally on events rather than on character or dialogue or scene or dramatic plot. I remain a storyteller of history, an aspirant to what I call historical literature. That does mean that I am any less concerned with the accuracy of my facts, or that I am cavalier about the essence of any given historical situation. On the contrary. It only means that I choose very carefully.

The first and important choice is what to write about, the subject. When your avocation is exclusively that of a writer, you will spend, at least in my case, about three years in writing a book. And so the subject you choose must excite you. You must feel excited and positive about your characters. The place of the action must intrigue you, and the action itself must excite. You are going to be with this material for a long time, and if it bores and repels you, you will be a masochist. The second question is how to write about that subject. And the third is the long and often tedious process of sifting important

facts from unimportant facts---and compelling characters from forgettable characters---in the telling of a story.

In these fourteen books, I have chosen to write about epic figures: Galileo, General William Tecumseh Sherman, the brutal warrior of the American Civil War, John Connally, the Texas governor who was in the same car as John F. Kennedy when the president was assassinated in Dallas in 1963, the Reverend Jim Jones, the villain of the American mass suicide in Guyana in 1978, Christopher Columbus, Torquemada, the terror of the Spanish Inquisition, even Pete Rose, the flawed icon of American baseball.... and Richard the Lionheart and the great Saladin. These were all extraordinary human beings, for better or for worse. To me there is little point in writing about ordinary people. I leave that to others, and others have done that very well. But I am interested in the exceptional.

I did not choose to write about them only because they were exceptional. I have consistently chosen figures of history that had some relevance to the current world. This is an important point to me: I'm not interested in history for history's sake, but rather history that teaches us something about the world we now live in. When I chose to write my biography of Galileo, it was because of three things: in 1978 the Roman Catholic church had decided to reconsider Galileo's trial in 1632 and ultimately, as the book was just coming out thirteen years later, that so called divine institution apologized for its mistreatment of the great scientist 350 years before. Secondly, there was a NASA space mission called Galileo, headed for the planet Jupiter. Lastly, the world was having a kind of Galilean experience with the astonishing discoveries of the Hubble Space which had so expanded our aweness of our universe. That telescope made Galileo all the more

relevant. I had, in Galileo, a story with an extraordinary individual at its center, who was responsible for astronomical discoveries that changed the world forever, and who also was a victim of that eternal clash between science and faith. It is no wonder that this figure of history has generated plays, novels, and operas.

How then to tell the Galileo story yet again, in some fresh and modern way. For the Galileo story had been told a hundred different times over the centuries. It is often the case that icons of history become less human, less accessible the more they are written about, and this was the case with Galileo. It is perfectly legitimate for every generation to revisit and reinterpret the experience of the great figures of history, in the light of its own experience. The need was for a brisk modern retelling that rehumanized the man and reinterpreted him for the modern audience. Or to put it differently, to knock all the barnacles off the figure, instill the wooden man with flesh and blood, and to bring him to with his negative as well as his positive qualities, his trivialities as well as his genius. That gets to the sifting process: what to include and what to discard when there is a veritable boatload of facts about the subject.

From my earliest days of writing non-fiction, I have adopted a novelist's principle. It comes from the great English writer, Virginia Woolf. She once wrote an essay called "the Art of Biography," and in it, she argues that the path to great biography is not to include all the facts about a biographical subject, but only the "creative facts." By creative facts, Woolf means the facts which elucidate character. This is not a principle that would easily flow from the club of academic historians, the historians centered on event rather than character and scene. But it is a critical principle if one aspires not merely to solid, accurate (and often prosaic) history, but to a work of historical literature.

When a novelist-turned-historian approaches a subject, he is not concerned merely with the simple flow of historical fact and event, but rather he writes his history, as a novelist writes his novels, by stitching together scenes. This is different than stitching together narrative facts. A good scene in a work of historical literature is no different from a good scene in a work of fiction: it must draw a picture, and it must put the reader into the picture. It must put real characters into that picture, and draw their portraits as real human beings. They must talk to one another, and something of consequence must happen in their interaction. And if it is a dramatic scene, there must be conflict, for conflict is the essence of drama.

That brings me to the clash of Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade. I decided to write that story in 1997 for all these fundamental principles. The characters were Olympian. They had been written about often, but they had become marble men, lifeless as statues. Richard the Lionheart was ossified like petrified wood in the European lore of medieval chivalry. He had gone off on a “noble” crusade to wrest the Holy Land from the hand of the “infidel.” That was the European perspective. Saladin in turn was a veritable demi-God in Arabic literature. He could do no wrong. He was gentle and sentimental and wise, always effective, always right in his decisions. Really? Has any human being ever lived who was so perfect? And so you had two icons, each written about in their own tradition in a way that deprived them of human life and human foible. Such mythology deprived their clash of its essential drama and humanity.

The story of the Third Crusade, therefore, was a great opportunity for the novelist-turned-historian. Besides its characters---add Eleanor of Aquitaine to the mix---its story line, and its setting in the Holy Land of three religions, it had the relevance. In



1997, I thought only that the story would be relevant to the Arab-Israeli conflict. I could scarcely imagine how relevant the story would become. Three months after the book's publication in May 2001, we had September 11. Five days after that we had President George Bush declare a "Crusade" against the terrorists, which of course in the Arab world was translated into a crusade against Islam and the Arab World. Now we have the war in Iraq and its aftermath. And so indeed, we are back in the 12<sup>th</sup> century with a clash of East and West, Holy War vs. Jihad, Americans. Vs. Arabs. How sad, how regrettable, how avoidable. And yet from the writer's viewpoint---no matter what one's view of the Iraq situation---how rich in its opportunity: for drama, for education, for vibrant, passionate writing. (If only the players were as grand and wise as the 12<sup>th</sup> century!)

Warriors of God is not only a history, but a dual biography. It is not my first dual biography, nor of course, am I the only one who has taken this approach. I am drawn to that literary form magnetically: to put two great figures and two great civilizations on a collision course when the collision has great consequences for history and for current affairs. Two great figures who have totally different personalities, totally different values and beliefs, totally different goals, totally different styles of governance. Out of such clash fine literature can emerge.

I have used other novelistic forms to tell factual stories. In the 1970s, I wrote about an African American girl who was in the jail of a small town in the American South when a gross white jailer came in to rape her, brandishing an ice pick. In a wrestle, she got the pick away from him, killed him, and escaped. That became the celebrated Joan Little case of 1975. It combined civil rights, prisoners rights, women's rights, and because she was charged ultimately with first degree murder, it also involved the issue of

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capital punishment, for if convicted, she could have been sentenced to death. It also had great drama, in its events and in its characters. It was a novel in reality. To write that story, I used the form of a 19<sup>th</sup> century mystery story called the Moonstone by Wilkie Collins. The Moonstone is about a fabulous jewel that is stolen, and the mystery is told through a series of narratives of various people who see the jewel as it is passed from hand to hand. I, in turn, told the Joan Little story through a series of narratives beginning with the white sheriff who comes in to find his jailer dead on the floor and his prisoner escaped. Later, I was drawn to the story of Jim Jones and the Guyana massacre because it was a real-life realization of Joseph Conrad's famous novel, Heart of Darkness. It too was a novel in reality, for it realized in true life the vision of Conrad's novelistic imagination. I was drawn to the stories of president Nixon and later to John Connally because their stories asked the Shakespearean and Aristotelian question: is this really a tragic figure?

And so the point, at least in my case, is that a deep and wide awareness of fiction and fictional technique can serve the process of writing history and raise that non-fiction to the level of literature.

I have mentioned my approach of writing history by focusing on characters and by stitching together scenes rather than endless facts. Let me give you a few examples from the first 105 pages of Warriors of God. Before the demise of the Crusader kingdom, the Christian king was Baldwin IV. To the historian of facts and dates, he might deserve only a line or two, but to the novelist-turned-historian, he is worth more, because he was a leper, and he passed on his leprosy to his successor son, who died as a youth. This led to the reign of the upstart king Guy of Lusignan, and his wife, Sibylla; that was a dysfunctional marriage---to use the modern parlance---and dysfunctional marriages are

