

The History Writers

‘The first law of history is to tell the truth,’ said Cicero in the first century BC. Yet the histories written in Greek and Latin, Aramaic and the languages of ancient Asia in the thousand years before Cicero do not conform to a fixed truth. The Christian gospels, supposedly synonymous with truth, do not agree with each other by a wide margin, and were not written by, or in the lifetime of, those whose names they take but are thought to have been composed between eighty and two hundred years after the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

Ancient writers of histories, like modern writers of history, made choices about how to present material gathered from records, artefacts and memories. They told stories. Broadly speaking, they based their narratives on actual events, but it remains that what we think of today as history and, almost by definition, truth, could be more truthfully described as partiality.

Spin forward one thousand years or so, as storytellers are inclined to do, to the scribes who wrote down the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the annals of English history from the 9th to the 12th centuries. The chroniclers were as deeply concerned with telling a good story as with recording a version of the truth. Certain details are omitted, reports from different scribes contradict each other and stories are, most importantly, one-sided. Prior to the twelfth century, according to William of Malmesbury, one of Britain’s earliest historians: *in many places in England, that knowledge of the deeds of the saints has been wiped out, in my opinion, by the violence of enemies.* William’s enemies were the Vikings whose raids on England took place between the seventh and tenth centuries and who were responsible for the destruction of historical records.

So the deeds of the saints, and the deeds of the sinners, needed some imagination and a little creativity.

The writing of historical fiction, and to a lesser degree biography and non-fiction, could be seen as an evolution of this kind of creative chronicling, and one that continues the long tradition of taking liberties. Like the scribes of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, twenty-first century scribes of the historical are charged with telling a good tale, or at least one that is judged by publishers to be what readers want. We omit certain details and

interpret and embellish others and, due to the limitations of narration and the sympathies we have with *our* characters, feel justified in doing so. We raid the bygone, and, from our perch on the accumulated past, we see patterns, draw parallels and, in effect, rewrite history. Writing is rewriting after all.

There is a strand of historiography and storytelling that not only traces the rise of the most enduring mythology of the western world, but also deals with the shadowy territory between history, myth and imagination that writers of the historical find themselves negotiating. It has, over hundreds of years, formed a weave so tight that it is no longer possible to separate its strands into history and story.

It begins in the twelfth century with the work of another early historian, Geoffrey of Monmouth. Geoffrey is perhaps best known for his *Historia Regum Britanniae*; the History of the Kings of Britain. In Geoffrey of Monmouth's lifetime, from the early to mid-twelfth century, historical writing was flourishing in the British Isles. Geoffrey himself was Welsh, yet he was single-handedly responsible for attributing Norman characteristics to the greatest hero of his people, King Arthur. He cannot be blamed, as Simon Armitage recently pointed out in a BBC documentary about the historical Arthur, since the Normans were Britain's new ruling elite and it would have been in his interests to flatter his patrons and superiors. Geoffrey of Monmouth was also responsible for elevating Arthur from mythical to historical hero by listing him in his chronology of Britain's kings. Whatever Geoffrey's motives, it remains that his *Historia* had lasting impact. The elevation of Guenevere from a Welsh goddess to Arthur's queen was the work of a twelfth century writer of courtly romance, but that is another story. There are many. Arthur and Guenevere and their associates have now peopled our imaginations and our stories for the better part of a thousand years.

Perhaps latter-day writers of the historical have Geoffrey of Monmouth to thank for laying these foundations. His Arthur is not the only the monarch and hero whose reputation and accomplishments have been improved by the hand of a scribe. Every biography, historical work and novel whose characters are drawn from history tightens the weave.

And what of Cicero's truth? Perhaps Cicero should have said that the first law of history is to tell a good tale, since this is what readers want, and of what use is a scribe without readers?