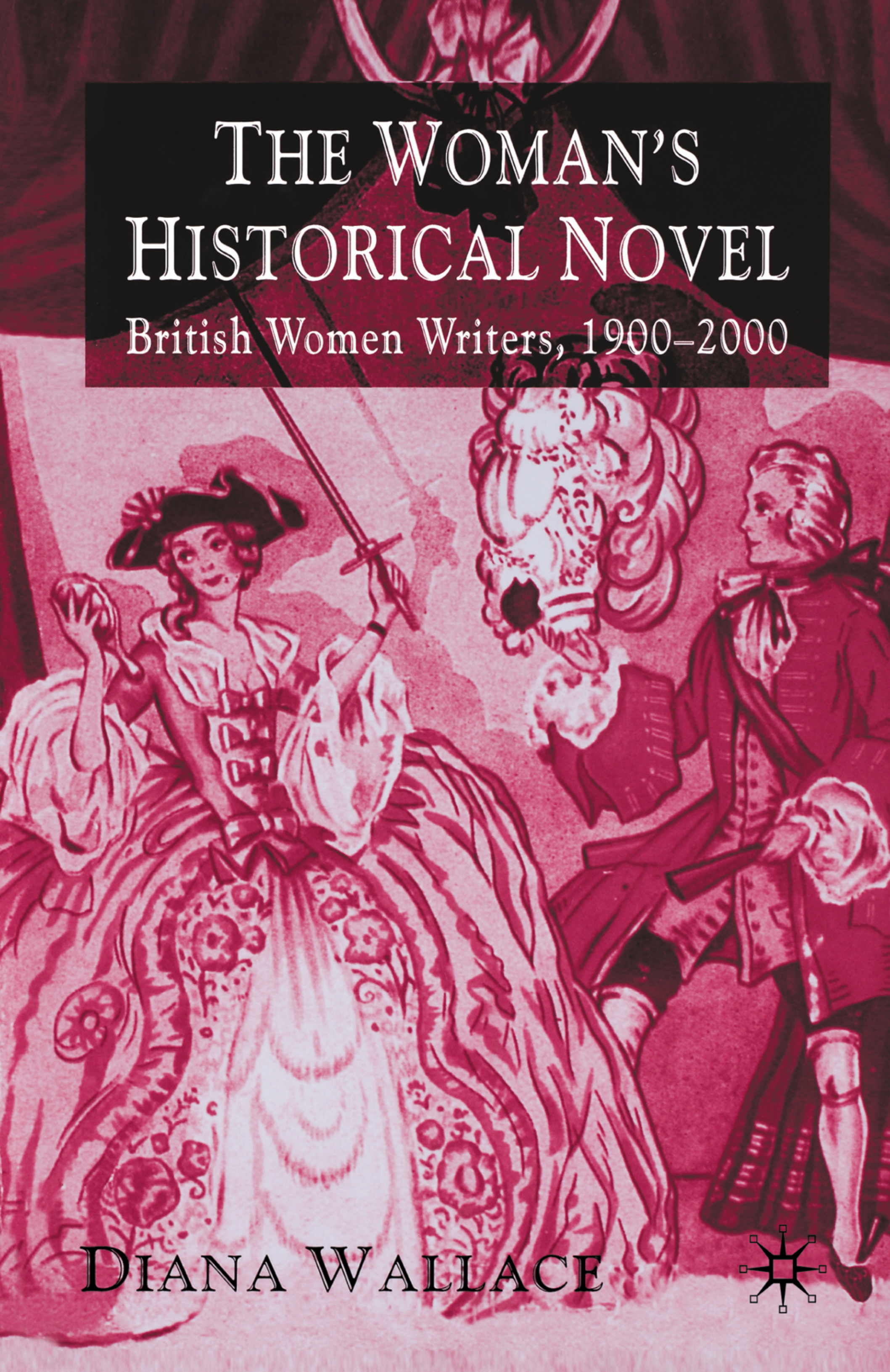
# THE WOMAN'S HISTORICAL NOVEL

## British Women Writers, 1900–2000

DIANA WALLACE



# The Woman's Historical Novel

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SISTERS AND RIVALS IN BRITISH WOMEN'S FICTION, 1914–39

# The Woman's Historical Novel

## British Women Writers, 1900–2000

Diana Wallace

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*For my parents,*
*Anne and Nigel Wallace*

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# Preface

Why a book on the *woman*'s historical novel? This study starts from my belief that the historical novel has been one of the most important forms of women's reading and writing during the twentieth century. From an early age I read women's historical novels avidly, as did my mother and sister. The same was true, I later discovered, of many of my female friends and colleagues, and of many of the literary critics, writers and theorists who have been central to the development of feminist literary criticism. This book, then, asks why it is that women readers and writers have been so drawn to the historical novel in the twentieth century. This leads to a second and related question: given that a visit to any public library will offer evidence of the huge number of historical novels written and read by women, why is it that, with a few notable exceptions, there has been so little critical attention given to the genre?

The tendency has been to associate women's historical novels with romance and thus to stigmatise it as escapist. We need to reassess both the assumption that historical novels are necessarily escapist because they are set in the past, and the assumption that escapism is *per se* a 'bad thing'. When my mother went into hospital to have her first child, she took with her a book which she had been saving especially to read during labour, in the hope that it would take her mind off things. The book was the latest by Georgette Heyer (probably, given the year, *False Colours*) and it did, she remembers, get her through the early stages. The child was myself so this story, retold to me, has become part of my own personal reading history. 'Escapism' tends to be a dirty word in literary criticism but it seems to me that any book which can hold a woman's attention during labour merits at least some serious consideration.

A second personal memory which is relevant here is of being asked to write an essay on my favourite author in school when I was around 12. I wrote my essay on Jean Plaidy and explained that up until recently Georgette Heyer had been my favourite author but I had now moved on (as I saw it) to more 'serious' books. Not long after that, it became clear to me (through a teacher's comments) that even Jean Plaidy was not 'serious' reading, not suitable for an academic essay. This realisation coincided (probably not coincidentally) with my own disillusionment with history as it was taught in school because it seemed to include almost no women at all.

As numerous feminist theorists have pointed out, women have been excluded from traditional historical narratives. This offers one particularly crucial reason why women writers have turned to the historical novel as a discourse within which women can be made central. Luce Irigary has argued that western culture is posited on the 'murder of the mother' (1991, 44), that is on the erasure of the maternal genealogy. Women's historical novels, most obviously in the form of the family saga, often imaginatively reconstruct such maternal genealogies.

In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes has suggested that our sense of history is intimately connected to our sense of separation from the mother's body.

> Is History not simply that time when we were not born? [. . .] History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History, I am what belies it, destroys it for the sake of my own history [. . .] That is what the time when my mother was alive *before me* is – History. (Barthes, 'History as Separation', 1993, 64–5)

'History' is that time when our mother existed but we did not. 'History', however, has a radically different meaning for those who have been excluded from traditional accounts. Women writers have had to reshape the form of the historical novel to encompass this understanding. Women's historical novels, read by mothers and daughters, can offer a feminised, indeed 'hysterical', history which imaginatively returns the girl-child to her place within a maternal genealogy, and thus to a re-union with the mother. But, through the acts of cross-reading and cross-writing, they have also allowed women writers and readers access to the male domains of history – politics, warfare and adventure.

This book is an attempt to trace the development of the woman's historical novel over the twentieth century and to start to explore how and why it has been written and read by women. One of the problems with any study of the historical novel is defining exactly what constitutes 'historical' in relation to fiction. As I will argue in Chapter 1, many of the usual definitions given work to exclude women's fiction on one ground or another. Taking Barthes at his word, I have worked with a very broad assumption that a novel is 'historical' if it deals with a period set before the birth of the author, that is, a period she has not experienced herself but must reconstruct through (usually textual) evidence.

The very term 'historical fiction' is a kind of oxymoron, joining 'history' (what is 'true'/'fact') with 'fiction' (what is 'untrue'/ 'invented', but may aim at a different kind of truth). This tension is foregrounded most obviously in the convention of the 'Author's Note' (or foreword, postscript, or footnotes) in which the author explains what is 'fact' and what is 'fiction', what is historically documented and what she has invented, in her text. Many of the debates around historical fiction revolve around this tension. On a more popular level, historical fictions are often judged on their perceived 'authenticity', not only whether they get their 'facts' right but also whether they are imaginatively 'true' to their period. The postmodern recognition that both history and fiction are constructed discourses which have a complex relation to what we call 'reality' has not only shown the problems with such an approach but led to some of the most interesting historical fictions in the twentieth century.

My own interest in this book has not necessarily been in whether any given novel is an 'accurate' depiction of the period in which it is set but more usually in what it says about the period in which it was written. Although we cannot always see it at the time, our representations of 'the past' tell us a great deal about the most powerful ideologies of the present.

There are many other writers and texts I would have liked to have included here but my choices have necessarily been confined by my own reading and by the constraints of space and deadlines. I have not been able to include either historical detective fiction or children's historical fiction, although women writers have made important contributions to both genres. It is worth noting that, for instance, Rosemary Sutcliff wrote both adult and children's historical fiction, and the distinction between the two is blurred in her work. My aim has been to trace some of the most important lines of connection and development, to identify key themes and trends in each decade, and to draw attention to lesser-known writers as well as exploring important novels in some detail. My title, *The Woman's Historical Novel*, echoes not only the titles of Georg Lukács' *The Historical Novel* (1937) and Avrom Fleishman's *The English Historical Novel* (1971), but also that of Nicola Beauman's ground-breaking study, *A Very Great Profession*: *The Woman's Novel 1914–39* (1983), which focuses mainly on the domestic novel. My own study of historical novels by women thus both contributes to the project of recovering neglected work by women writers, and offers reassessments of what a 'historical novel' and/or a 'woman's novel' might be. This is, I hope, a beginning.

## A note on nationalities

The use of the word 'British' in the subtitle of this book is a convenience rather than a definitive identity. I have used it broadly to indicate birth in Britain and a writing life spent mainly in this country. Nationality is a particularly complex issue for women, who do not usually define their identity through the easy shorthand of the football, cricket or rugby team they support. As a woman, Catholic, and northerner of Irish descent, Hilary Mantel, for instance, has written that she 'came to see that Englishness was white, male, southern, Protestant and middle class' (2002, 4). The birth of the historical novel as a genre, particularly as it has been associated with Sir Walter Scott, came out of shifts in national identity. While my primary concern has been with gender, I have tried to signal the continuing complexity of some of these issues in the twentieth century. Scottishness, for instance, was important to Naomi Mitchison and Dorothy Dunnett, while Ellen

Galford, who was born in New Jersey, USA, now defines herself as an adopted Scot. A concern with Welsh history is central to Mary Stewart's Merlin trilogy, although she herself was not Welsh. Wherever I have included brief references to Irish writers who come outside my remit, I have indicated their nationality. The American market for women's historical fiction was especially important in the 1960s and 1970s, so I have also indicated influential American texts where necessary.

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# 1
# Introduction

> History, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. [...] I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all. It is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes' mouths, their thoughts and designs the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.
>
> – Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* ([1818] 1985, 123)

> I had read every word of Georgette Heyer. I was a secret, illegal member of two circulating libraries to get more of her books. I had purloined exercise books to write two Regency romances and half a novel about the amours of Charles II. These were shockingly bad, and their badness led me to realise how difficult good escape literature is to write.
>
> – A.S. Byatt, *Passions of the Mind* (1993a, 258)

> History, accurate history, is an affair of poor women, in spring, in summer, in autumn, in winter, in a country which has been invaded and conquered, talking... It's not of much account, what they say.
>
> – Storm Jameson, *Then We Shall Hear Singing* (1942, 83)

Women's relationship with 'real solemn history' – that catalogue of kings and popes and battles lost and won – has often been ambivalent, but they have been reading and enjoying historical novels for well over two centuries. One of the ironies of Catherine's condemnation of traditional history in *Northanger Abbey* is that her preferred reading, Ann Radcliffe's Gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), is in fact a 'historical' novel, being set (however vaguely) in the sixteenth century. Radcliffe, in contrast to the writers of 'real history', uses her historical setting as a fantasy space in which she can centralise a female consciousness and explore female fears and desires. This female-centredness is partly why Catherine, bored and repelled by male-dominated 'real history', enjoys Radcliffe's books. Similarly Catherine's twentieth-century descendants have enjoyed the historical novels of Georgette Heyer, Margaret Irwin and Jean Plaidy in huge numbers. But these books have (like Radcliffe) been stigmatised as 'popular' or 'escapist' fiction. Just as Catherine felt her novel reading was something to be slightly ashamed of because 'gentlemen read better books' (Austen, 1985, 121), as a school-girl A.S. Byatt felt that her taste for Georgette Heyer had to be concealed and enjoyed secretly. Reading a popular historical novel led to an 'illegal' act, even if it was only joining a circulating library.

Yet exclusion from recorded history, whether as subject, reader or writer, is a serious business. Mussolini, Bryher records, forbade women to read history at universities (1963, 231). A knowledge of history, this suggests, has the potential to be dangerously subversive, particularly in a culture like that of pre-war Fascist Italy where women were being increasingly confined to domestic and maternal roles. It is not surprising that in women's hands the historical novel has often become a political tool. A historical setting has frequently been used by women writers (as by male writers) as a way of writing about subjects which would otherwise be taboo, or of offering a critique of the present through their treatment of the past. Perhaps even more important for women writers has been the way that the historical novel has allowed them to invent or 're-imagine' (to borrow Linda Anderson's term [1990, 129]), the unrecorded lives of marginalised and subordinated people, especially women, but also the working classes, Black people, slaves and colonised peoples, and to shape narratives which are more appropriate to their experiences than those of conventional history.

Indeed, it is the problems involved in writing traditional history which fully encompasses the experience of women – lack of records, the inappropriateness of standard periodisation and chronology, and the focus on public events – which has, Bonnie G. Smith suggests, led some women historians, including H.F.M. Prescott, to write novels instead (Smith, 1984, 720–1). Writers from Naomi Mitchison in the 1930s to the feminist writers of 'herstory' in the 1980s as well as, less obviously, popular writers like Catherine Cookson have concentrated on writing what Storm Jameson calls 'accurate history' – the lives of the conquered, the victimised and the marginalised, those left out of traditional histories written by the (male) victors.

These two uses of history – escape and political intervention – are more connected than they might at first seem. The need for escapism itself indicates a dissatisfaction with what is available: Catherine's bored inability to read 'real solemn history' is actually a form of resistance. Women's marginal and excluded position has meant that they have often understood that recorded 'history' is not straightforwardly 'what happened in the past' but has always been the result of selection, presentation, and even downright falsification based on particular ideologies and viewpoints.

Marginality or exclusion breeds a scepticism towards the grand narratives of history. Required to read history 'as men', women may well become (in Judith Fetterley's term) resisting readers of such narratives. But the understanding that much of history is 'invention' as Austen puts it, 'narrative' or 'fiction' as a postmodernist theorist such as Hayden White might argue, may also bring certain freedoms. 'History should be a hammock for swinging and a game for playing, the way cats play', writes Jeanette Winterson in *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. 'Claw it, chew it, rearrange it and at bedtime it's still a ball of string full of knots' (1985, 93). For postmodern writers in the late twentieth century, history becomes a game of cat's cradle as the thread of facts is patterned and repatterned. For women readers and writers, then, 'history' has a complex and varied range of meanings, both inclusive and exclusive. 'History' has traditionally excluded women, but paradoxically the 'historical novel' has offered women readers the imaginative space to create different, more inclusive versions of 'history', which are accessible or appealing to them in various ways.

My argument in this book is that despite the extraordinary critical neglect of this area, the historical novel has been one of the most important genres for women writers and readers in the twentieth century. For very specific historical reasons, as I will show, women writers turned to the historical novel at the beginning of the century, at a moment when male writers were moving away from the genre, with the result that it has come to be seen as a 'feminine' form, a view damagingly reinforced by its association with the 'popular'. This in part explains why it has, like any form associated with women readers and writers, been neglected in critical terms. In both 'history' and 'literature', the historical novel has always been regarded as a hybrid, even a 'bastard' form, as well as being vulgar because it is a 'popular' genre – 'vulgar fiction, impure history' in Dean Rehberger's phrase (1995). In the hands of women writers it has been further hybridised, cross-fertilising with romance, fantasy, the Gothic, the adventure story and the detective novel. The overlap with romance (in its original form characterised by its setting in the past, but today meaning a love story) has been especially complicated. This is in part because the woman's historical novel has one of its roots in the Gothic historical novel or 'romance', a mode that predates the tradition of the historical novel which critics have seen as beginning with Sir Walter Scott. The dominance of the model of what Georg Lukács (1962) called the 'classical historical novel' developed by Scott has actually worked to exclude many forms of the woman's historical novel from critical attention. My own study, in contrast, is an attempt to track the development of the woman's historical novel through the twentieth century and to trace the connections between the varying different forms it has taken.

The common perception is that the historical novel is a nostalgic, reactionary genre. Umberto Eco records his irritation with people who suggest that writing about the past is 'a way of eluding the present' (1984, 73). The truth is far more complex. Although readers are often attracted to historical novels because they believe they will learn about the past time recreated in the novel, any historical novel always has as much, or perhaps more, to say about the time in which it is written. A novelist like Naomi Mitchison consciously used historical fiction to comment in a coded way on the issues of the day. So-called 'popular' fiction, however, is equally closely connected to its moment of production, not least in its relationship to whatever it is offering an 'escape' from. As Claud Cockburn writes, 'The best sellers really are a mirror of "the mind and face" of an age' (1972, 7). One of my central concerns here, therefore, is to connect these novels to the historical context within which they were written, to explore how Heyer's concern with masquerade reflects the concerns of the 1920s or what Mary Renault's decision to write about Ancient Greece tells us about the 1950s. Any historical novel is 'historical' in at least four senses: in its use of a particular period for its fictional setting; in its engagement with the historical moment (social, cultural, political and national) of its writing; in its relation to the personal life history of the writer herself; and in its relation to literary history, most obvious in the intertextual use of earlier texts.

The sheer number of historical novels published by women writers over the twentieth century is a testament to the importance of the form. The sales and public library borrowing figures indicate the wide readership for many of the popular historical novelists. Contrary to the usual dismissal of the 'popular', I believe this is a good reason for taking it seriously. The 'bestsellers' of the twentieth century included Baroness Orczy, Daphne du Maurier, Georgette Heyer, Mary Renault (Mary Challans), Victoria Holt/Jean Plaidy (Eleanor Burford Hibbert), Norah Lofts, Barbara Cartland and Catherine Cookson (Bloom, 2002) all of whom wrote historical novels. With the exception of Renault (and possibly Orczy), these are writers who, as even the most cursory glance at the covers of their novels indicates, are marketed to a female audience. Many public libraries have a 'Historical Novels' section, just as they have a section for detective fiction. Catherine Cookson, many of whose novels have historical settings, dominated the 'most borrowed' lists compiled by the Public Lending Right Scheme for over two decades, showing signs of being toppled only in 2003 (*The Guardian*, 11 April 2003). In 1988 her novels accounted for *a third* of all books borrowed from public libraries (Bloom, 2002, 196). Despite this evidence of the appeal of these books, they have on the whole been ignored by critics until recently. (The detective novel, in contrast, has been taken much more seriously.) On the other hand, several of the most influential 'serious' women's novels of the late twentieth century which have attained cross-over 'bestseller' status, often through being Booker prize winners, have been historical, most notably A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) and Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy (1991–1995).

The 'woman's historical novel', then, encompasses both the 'popular' and the 'serious' or 'literary' ends of the spectrum, but one of my arguments here is that the two are intimately linked. The term as I use it here covers the whole range of women's writing within this mode from the historical romances of Heyer, the Gothic historical novels of Daphne du Maurier or the family sagas of Catherine Cookson to Naomi Mitchison's recreation of Caesar's Gallic War or Sylvia Townsend Warner's socialist realist-influenced texts. We need to read both 'serious' and 'popular' historical novels together and against each other if we want fully to understand the range of meanings that history and the historical novel have held for women readers in the twentieth century. Jean Plaidy's novels trace their literary lineage back to Ann Radcliffe and beyond, for instance, while Byatt's *Possession* is a tribute to Georgette Heyer's historical romances. What links together these often very disparate novels is their use of a historical setting in order to explore issues of gender, and a desire to rewrite history from a point of view that centralises women's concerns.

Equally important in terms of literary history and canon formation is the fact that the general critical disdain for women's popular historical novels appears to have led to the neglect of a body of historical novels by writers such as Naomi Mitchison, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Bryher, H.F.M. Prescott and Mary Renault. This in turn has contributed to the perception of the mid-century (1945–1960) as an 'empty' period for women's writing. Tracing the development of the woman's historical novel across the century shows that women were producing important fiction during these ostensibly fallow years. These connections across the decades are important to the history of women's writing in a wider sense as well as demonstrating the enduring importance of the genre.

A surprising number of women writers and critics have attested to the importance of women's popular historical novels in their emotional, intellectual and literary development, as well as to their sense that this was a slightly disreputable literary taste. This is perhaps especially true of the generation of women writers who grew up in the 1950s, and who became the influential writers and critics of the feminist era. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to argue that the roots of second-wave feminism itself can be found, ironically, in the popular historical fiction read by these women. A.S. Byatt's account of being relieved of her position on the Library Committee at her boarding school when she vetoed the purchase of Heyer's novels in an attempt to keep her own reading habits secret is especially evocative (1993a, 258). But she is not the only writer or critic to pay tribute (however ambivalent) to Heyer. Carmen Callil, the founder of Virago, suggests that her own avid reading of Heyer as a young woman actually had a 'subversive' effect on her (1996, 8). Heyer gave out mixed messages, Callil points out, suggesting that marriage was the great goal but also stressing that 'a *real* heroine should only marry on her own terms' (1996, 7). Heyer is important not only because her career as a bestseller spans such a large part of the twentieth century, but because of her influence on other writers.

In contrast, Alison Light, who has produced some of the most perceptive pieces on women's historical novels, argues that her adolescent reading of historical novels by Margaret Irwin, Jean Plaidy and Anya Seton ultimately 'fed a conservative vision' (1989, 58). Nevertheless, Light shows that novels like Irwin's 'Young Bess' trilogy offered an important fantasy of female power for women readers like herself. Anya Seton's popular historical novels concentrate on the romantic and sexual life of lesser-known women in history but even they assert the historical importance of such women in a way which echoes Austen's critique of traditional phallocentric history. Seton's 'Author's Note' to *Katherine* (1954), the story of Katherine Swynford – mistress to John O'Gaunt and thus founding ancestress of what became the Tudor dynasty – argues:

> Of [Katherine] little was known, except when her life touched the Duke's and there are few details of that [...] in the great historians Katherine apparently excited scant interest, perhaps because they gave little space to the women of the period anyway.
>
> And yet Katherine was important to English history. (1961, 9)

In 2003, interestingly, *Katherine* was included in the BBC's 'Big Read' 'Top 100' list of books. The popular novel, then, can offer influential models of female agency within history despite its domination by the romance plot.

As a genre, the historical novel has allowed women writers a license which they have not been allowed in other forms. This is most obviously true of sexuality where it has allowed coverage of normally taboo subjects, not just active female sexuality but also contraception, abortion, childbirth and homosexuality. As Naomi Mitchison, smarting from censorship imposed by her publishers when she wrote about sexuality in a contemporary setting, commented bitterly, 'apparently it's alright when people wear wolfskins and togas' (1979, 179). During and after the war, particularly in the rather repressive 1950s, historical novels provided an especially important space for erotic or sexualised fantasy. For Lorna Sage, as for many other women, it was the American author Kathleen Winsor's bestselling restoration romance *Forever Amber* (1944), one of her uncle's 'dirty books', which opened up 'another future [...] out of the past' (2001, 203). An active and unrepentant sexuality is the defining characteristic of the courtesan heroine, Amber, again an unexpected model of female agency. As Sage puts it, 'Her first sexual experience does it all, turns [Amber] into her own woman in one swooning paragraph' (2001, 203). Alison Light, who also read *Forever Amber* 'for its erotic content, guiltily sneaking it from my mother's shelf', argues that the popular historical novels of this period provide 'a far more plural and perverse model of desire' than one would associate with these years (1989, 64). This license has been even more important to writers such as Mary Renault and Sylvia Townsend Warner who used the genre to explore non-heterosexual desire, chiefly through the depiction of male homosexual characters.

As attitudes to sexuality shift across the period, with the sexual liberation of the 1960s marking an important turning point, so the concerns and themes of the historical novel change. Barbara Cartland famously turned to historical settings because 'it's very difficult to have virgins and all the excitement in the present day' (Philips, 1986, 28). In the 1980s the lesbian historical novel became a sub-genre in itself, while other women writers used the historical novel to write the heterosexual happy ending which became taboo in the 'serious' literary novel.

Less immediately obvious is the fact that the historical novel has also given women the freedom to adopt male narrators and protagonists, and to write about the 'male' world of public and political affairs. A number of women writers from the earlier generation, such as Naomi Mitchison, Bryher and Rosemary Sutcliff, trace their interest in the genre to the impact of the *male* writers of historical fiction they read as children, including Rudyard Kipling, G.A. Henty and J.G. Whyte-Melville, as well as Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome*. For these writers, the historical novel becomes a liberating space not for erotic fantasy but for the 'boy's-own' style adventures on land and sea which they felt denied because of their gender. 'I was convinced', Bryher wrote, 'that if I wanted to be happy when I grew up I had to become a cabin boy and run away from the inexplicable taboos of Victorian life' (1963, 21). That fantasy of being a cabin boy (or a highwayman, a pirate, a Jacobite rebel or an actor on the Elizabethan stage) is one which women writers and readers have acted out in the historical novel in ways which suggest it is particularly powerful.

The pleasures offered by women's historical novels can be considerable, and in unexpected ways. The poet Patricia Beer, for instance, has written about the rapturous ecstasy she experienced as a 13-year-old reading D.K. Broster's *The Flight of the Heron* (1925) about the 1745 Jacobite rising. Beer's 'love' for the male protagonist, Ewen Cameron, was intensified by her recognition that his most important relationships were his homo-erotic friendships with men. 'Looking back', Beer writes, 'I feel sad. The feelings it roused in me were not about anything real, yet I have experienced nothing stronger since' (Beer, 1968, 118). The emotional importance of women's reactions to historical novels should not be under-estimated.

Neither should the political importance of the form. The furore in America over the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1967, the fictional depiction (by a white writer) of a historically documented Black slave revolutionary, is a testament to the power of historical fiction to stir controversy (see, for instance, Woodward, 1969). The debate over whether

Styron's novel misrepresented Turner, and by implication his race, or whether a novelist is entitled to what Styron calls 'freedom of movement and choice' in writing historical fiction (Woodward, 1969, 65), raises a complex series of questions about the autonomy of art and its relationship to 'truth' and politics. Above all, it demonstrates the potential emotional and political power of the historical novel.

When I began this study I thought that I would be concerned mainly with gender in relation to femininity in women's historical novels. In fact, it quickly became obvious that the historical novel has been one of the sites where women writers have had most freedom to examine *masculinity* as a social and cultural construction. The act of reading and writing *across* gender has been central to the woman's historical novel right through the twentieth century, from Marjorie Bowen's *The Viper of Milan* in 1906 to Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy in 1991–1995. One of the central reasons women writers have turned to the historical novel, I would suggest, is that a temporal viewpoint allows us to see that gender itself is historically contingent rather than essential. If gender roles are subject to change over time then they are clearly socially and culturally constructed and open to the possibility of further change.

## The historical novel: history and criticism

Despite the feminist-inspired interest in women's history and what amounts to an explosion of historical novels by women in the latter decades of the twentieth century, there has been oddly little sustained critical attention paid to the woman's historical novel as a genre in its own right (especially in comparison to the body of work on romance or the detective novel). This initially surprising fact has much to do with the critical history of the genre itself and the way in which it has been treated as a male tradition.

Critical surveys of the historical novel traditionally start with Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814). As one anonymous critic put it in 1845, 'Sir Walter Scott, as all the world knows, was the inventor of the historical romance' (Clery and Miles, 2000, 274). They then trace the form through its heyday in the nineteenth century and suggest that it dies a death in its traditional form at the beginning of the twentieth century, although some critics suggest a revival of the form in the 1920s or 1930s. This is the story told, with some variations, in the major studies of the form from the seminal study by Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (written 1936/1937 and published in English translation in 1962), up until the 1990s.[1]

Lukács mentions no women writers at all, other than to note dismissively that in previous criticism of Scott, 'it was the fashion to quote a long list of second and third-rate writers (Radcliffe, etc.) who were supposed to be important literary forerunners of his' (1983, 30). Some historical novels by women are mentioned in subsequent accounts, including Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*

(1849), George Eliot's *Romola* (1863) and *Felix Holt* (1866), Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and *Between the Acts* (1941), clearly indicating that the major women writers were active in this genre. However, what is especially interesting here is the variation in which novels by women are included in each account.[2] *Romola* is the only text which rates consistent inclusion. This suggests a revealing uncertainty about women's historical novels and whether they are properly 'historical'.

It also indicates the extent to which Scott, regarded as the inventor of the genre, was seen as having established a model for his (male) successors to follow. Part of the problem here is to do with how the historical novel is defined, especially if Scott is used as a yardstick. Introducing Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), seen as the first 'regional novel', George Watson comments, 'if we hesitate to call it an "historical novel" it is only because, unlike *Waverley*, it celebrates no great public event like the Forty Five. It is about a way of life, not an event' (Edgeworth, 1980, xvii). Women, of course, have been excluded from participation in the 'great public events' (think of Scott's Rose Bradwardine waiting at home while Waverley adventures in the highlands), but they may have detailed knowledge of a particular 'way of life'.

However, more recent work in the 1990s has recovered a body of work, much of it by women writers, preceding and influencing Scott (see, for instance, Ferris, 1989; Garside, 1991; Trumpener, 1993). Scott, this work shows, explicitly distanced himself from these female forerunners, most obviously in the preface to *Waverley*, and masked or played down the extent to which he was indebted to them, a move which positioned him as the father of the historical novel and ultimately of the nineteenth-century realist novel. It was therefore Scott himself who set the line followed by subsequent critics, who either saw him as being without a maternal genealogy or lauded him for rejecting it. Leslie Fiedler's argument in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) that the historical novel is 'a development – more masculine, more "scientific", and more genteel' of the Radcliffean novel (1984, 162), for instance, repeats this gendering of the genre's origins in very value-laden terms. For Fiedler, Scott's achievement in introducing '*real* history' (164) to the novel redeems the genre from the dirty depths to which it had sunk in female hands:

> The historical romance is the 'cleanest' of all the subgenres of the novel thus far, the creation of a self-conscious attempt to redeem fiction at once for respectability and masculinity. (170)

Obviously, only '*real* history', associated with 'scientific' research, is 'masculine' enough to save literature from the clutches of female scribblers.

Scott himself, of course, has suffered from critical neglect as a result of his exclusion from what F.R. Leavis defined as the 'great tradition' of English literature. This has contributed to the wider neglect of historical fiction and especially women's historical fiction. In *The Great Tradition* (1948) Leavis condemned Scott for his lack of interest in form:

> Scott was primarily a kind of inspired folk-lorist [...] not having the creative writer's interest in literature, he made no serious attempt to work out his own form and break away from the bad tradition of the eighteenth-century romance. [...] Out of Scott a bad tradition came. (Leavis, 1962, 14, n. 1)

This amounts to a dismissal of the historical novel itself as a 'bad tradition', reinforced by his judgement of *Romola* as an artistic failure: 'Few will want to read *Romola* a second time and few can ever have got through it once without some groans' (1962, 63). For Leavis, the artist's responsibility lay in their attention to the moral possibilities of 'Life', but most importantly to the 'Life' of the contemporary moment. His deployment of the word 'serious' here is important because it implicitly aligns the historical novel with the opposite of 'serious' art – for which we can read 'popular' fiction. This Leavisite division is perpetuated by, for instance, Avrom Fleishman whose study by implication ignores 'popular' historical novels as mere escapism.[3] Associated with the 'popular', women writers have thus been doubly excluded from the established canon.

In contrast to Leavis, the most influential study of the genre, Lukács' classic work of Marxist criticism, *The Historical Novel*, uses dialectical materialism to make a strong argument for the centrality of the historical novel in the development of the realist novel. Indeed, he maintains that it is not a separate genre or sub-genre (1983, 127). What is lacking in the 'so-called historical novel' before Scott, Lukács argues, is 'precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age' (19). The historical novel emerged as a new form, he goes on to argue, out of the new consciousness of history which was the result of the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars, and the rise and fall of Napoleon. The widespread nature of these events on a European scale, including the creation of mass armies, 'for the first time made history a *mass experience*' (23, original emphasis) for the huge numbers of people touched by these changes:

> Hence the concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them. (24)

History is experienced as an awakening of national sensibility, even outside France where it is evoked by resistance to Napoleon's conquests (25), as in

Britain's fear of invasion, for example. The new concept of history which developed from this understanding and found expression in the work of Hegel conceptualised human life as a historical process wherein progress is the product of dialectical conflict between social forces. 'History itself', Lukács argued, 'is the bearer and realiser of human progress' (27).

For Lukács, Scott's greatness lies in his invention of the 'classical historical novel' as a new literary form which expressed this emergent historical consciousness, and in his 'capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types' (35). For Scott, he argues, historical progress is a dialectical process and his novels depict the great crises or transitional moments of history as conflicts wherein two opposing forces collide and are resolved into 'a glorious "middle way"' (32). Thus in great historical art, as produced by Scott, the past is brought to life as 'the prehistory of the present', portraying those 'historical, social, and human forces' which transform popular and everyday life and produce our present (53). The clearest evidence of Scott's understanding of historical progress as a tendency towards the middle way, however, is in the construction of his novels around a hero who is not what Hegel called a 'world-historical individual' (such as Napoleon) but what Lukács terms the 'middle-of-the-road hero' (37): 'a more or less mediocre, average English gentleman' (33), typified by Waverley himself. (Here Lukács misses the complexity of Scott's negotiations with Scottish, English and British national identity.) In his 'wavering' towards each of the extremes this hero allows Scott to depict both sides of the conflict and finally represents the middle course.

The period of the 'classical historical novel' initiated by Scott lasted until the revolutions of 1848, after which Lukács argues that writers 'no longer have any immediate social sense of continuity with the prehistory of their own society' (244). For post-1848 writers, the historical novel (exemplified by Flaubert's *Salammbô*) degenerates as history becomes merely decorative background for private and subjective fantasies. However, in the 1930s, Lukács hails the arrival of the anti-Fascist historical novel of democratic humanism. This he sees as opening up new possibilities for the form, driven by the political urgencies of the period, although he deplores the tendency of these novels to 'turn the past into a *parable of the present*' (338). That is, he sees them as polemical allegories rather than engagements with the past as the 'prehistory' of the present.

Lukács' recognition that formal and compositional problems involve ideological and political choices is extremely useful but his study is restricted not only by its obvious gender-blindness but by its narrow understanding and valuation of literature itself. His valorisation of realism as a form which reflects the life of the people leads first to his rejection of the potential of any other modes of writing (whether Gothic historical novel, Modernist experimentalism or fantasy) to express a relationship to history. But, secondly, as numerous poststructuralist critiques have pointed out, realism itself despite its ostensible 'transparency' is an ideologically loaded form. Moreover, because he sees fiction only as a response to and reflection of historical and social conditions, he fails to consider its intertextual relationship with other texts. In her critique of his work, Janet Montefiore has usefully suggested that, 'A satisfying interpretation of realist historical novels needs to work with both the feminist critique of narrative as ideology, and to acknowledge with Lukács the dialectic between the present and the past which is implied in historical fictions' (1996, 153).

The concept of history (as dialectically evolving progress) and the ideal of the 'classical historical novel' which Lukács develops from Scott's work have both worked to exclude women's texts from the accepted canon. This is the case even in studies, like that of Avrom Fleishman, which actively modify or critique Lukács, to include, for instance, modernist texts. Fleishman acerbically comments that, 'Everyone knows what a historical novel is; perhaps that is why few have volunteered to define it in print' (1971, 3). In fact, the spirit of taxonomy seems to have been particularly strong in this area, as writers and critics struggle to define not only what constitutes a historical novel but also the kinds or forms within that category (see, for instance, Shaw, 1983, or Turner, 1979).

Like Lukács, Fleishman bases his understanding of the form on the relationship between the text and its concept of history: 'What makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force' (1971, 15). This concept of history is, as with Lukács, expressed through the figure of the representative, rather than world-historical, individual. The problem here is that Fleishman, again like Lukács, consistently conceives of this representative individual as male:

> The typical man of an age is one whose life is shaped by world historical figures and other influences in a way that epitomises the processes of change going forward in society as a whole [...] the relationship of the representative hero to the society is not one of statistically determinable typicality but that of symbolic universality. (1971, 11)

As feminist critics have repeatedly pointed out, the appeal to universality has consistently been used to erase or marginalise women's experience. The 'typical' woman is one who (like Scott's Rose Bradwardine) rarely, if ever, comes into contact with world-historical figures.

Fleishman works with three other key elements in his definition which on the surface seem less gendered: that the novel is set in the past 'beyond an arbitrary number of years, say 40–60 (two generations)'; that the plot includes 'a number of "historical" events, particularly those in the public sphere (war, politics, economic change, etc.), mingled with and affecting the personal fortunes of the characters'; and that it includes at least one '"real" personage' (3). While this seems straightforward, it actually excludes novels (such as Conrad's *Nostromo*) which Fleishman considers 'more solidly historical' (226) than other novels which do fit his definitions.

Even more so do these definitions work to exclude novels by women. The first point, for instance, excludes the family saga which has been a very important historical form for women writers. (Thus, Fleishman excludes Woolf's *The Years* because it 'did little to move beyond the form of the family chronicle novel' [245].) Given women's marginality to the 'historical' events of the public sphere ('war, politics...etc.'), the second point is even more problematic. Indeed, the whole question of periodisation itself is fraught with complications for women in a way which makes Lukács' assumption that the novel should deal with great historical crises extremely problematic. Gerda Lerner has pointed out that

> Traditional history is periodised according to wars, conquests, revolutions, and/or vast cultural and religious shifts. All of these categories are appropriate to the major activities of men [...] What historians of women's history have learned is that such periodisation distorts our understanding of the history of women. (Lerner, 1979, 175)

While Eliot's *Romola* with its account of the Italian Renaissance at the time of Savonarola is clearly a 'historical novel' under any of these definitions, Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent*, as we have seen, does not qualify. Neither does Fleishman give more than a tiny mention to Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*, a novel which is actually about the way in which the lives of those on the margins, especially women and the working class, can be tragically affected by the large historical events over which they have no control. Indeed, in dealing with the forcible impressment of men during the Napoleonic wars Gaskell would appear to be exploring precisely the ways in which the advent of mass armies made ordinary people (specifically women) aware of 'history as something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them' (Lukács, 1983, 24).

Finally, given the fact that historical records document far fewer female than male '"real" personages', this is a further limiting definition for women writers since it tends to confine them either to writing about men, or to always seeing women in relation to men, as the mother/wife/lover/daughter of a '"real" personage'. Admittedly, Fleishman does go beyond Lukács in extending the tradition to include Woolf's *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*. But he argues that Woolf reduces history to the personal and the individual, and he sees these texts as bringing 'the tradition of the English historical novel to a self-conscious close' (233).

Pre-1990 critical studies of the historical novel, then, have tended to work with a conception of 'history' which excludes women's novels, thus constructing this as a masculine tradition. In some ways more useful to a study of women's historical novels is Eco's much broader definition which argues that there are three ways of 'narrating the past'; the romance where the past is 'scenery, pretext, fairy-tale construction, to allow the imagination to rove freely' (1984, 74); the swashbuckling novel which 'chooses a "real" and recognisable past' and peoples it with both 'characters already found in the encyclopaedia' and invented characters (74); and, finally, the historical novel which uses made-up events and characters, yet tells us things about a period which history books do not (75). This lends itself to a gendered interpretation since the romance is associated with female readers and writers, while the swashbuckler is a 'male' form.

Post-1990 discussions of historical novels written in the twentieth century, not surprisingly, include more women writers, but these have tended to be concerned with specific areas rather than with an overview of the form. Margaret Scanlan's *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (1990) includes texts by Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch, Isabel Colegate and Doris Lessing. Scanlan's interest is in that '"other historical novel": sceptical, ironic and "discontinuous", seeking to exploit rather than cover up the boundaries between history and fiction' (1990, 3). The novels she discusses, however, are concerned with the history of the twentieth century itself (which would not qualify, for instance, under Fleishman's definition of a historical novel), and especially with the issues of de-colonisation raised by the early part of the century. Very much a writer's meditation on the genre, A.S. Byatt's *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (2000) focuses on writers from the latter half of the century and is perceptive on Hilary Mantel, Penelope Fitzgerald, Pat Barker and, not surprisingly, Byatt's own work. Helen Hughes' *The Historical Romance* (1993) usefully analyses the shift from the male-centred historical romance (usually a swashbuckler) of writers such as Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle, Rafael Sabatini, Stanley Weyman and Jeffery Farnol, to the female-centred popular historical romance of Heyer and Cartland which dominates after the 1930s. With this shift the term 'historical romance' moves from being synonymous with an adventure story to meaning a love story. Julie Abraham's *Are Girls Necessary? Lesbian Writing and Modern Histories* (1996) discusses the ways in which lesbian writers have turned to history to provide narrative alternatives to heterosexual plots. Ruth Hoberman's important study *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (1997) is the most sustained and illuminating discussion of women's historical fiction and has been especially helpful to my own thinking, but it is concerned only with novels set in ancient Greece or Rome.

What has been missing is a survey of twentieth-century women's historical novels which would trace continuities in terms of development over the century and look at the connections between the different types of novel, including the sceptical historical novel, the popular romance and the novel of the classical world. Rather than an attempt to define the 'historical novel' by excluding the allegedly unhistorical, my own approach here has been inclusive, tracing connections between the different uses to which women have put history.

While radically modifying Lukács' account, it is important that we retain his recognition that formal and compositional choices involve ideological and political implications. The choices women writers make – in terms of narrative and plot structure (romance, quest, family saga, etc.), the historical period in which they set their novel, the deployment of point of view, the side they take in the conflicts they explore (Elizabeth I or Mary Queen of Scots? Cavaliers or Roundheads? Romans or Britons?), the decision as to whether to use period or twentieth-century language and so on – all have ideological and political implications. But they need to be seen in relation to *women*'s engagement with history and not dismissed as 'unhistorical', 'factually inaccurate' or merely 'irrelevant' according to a male-defined model.

## A maternal genealogy: Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783)

> It is also necessary, if we are not to be accomplices in the murder of the mother, for us to assert that there is a genealogy of women. [...] Let us try to situate ourselves within this female genealogy so as to conquer and keep our identity. Nor let us forget that we already have a history, that certain women have, even if it was culturally difficult, left their mark on history and that all too often we do not know them. (Irigaray, 1991, 44)

Given the way that adherence to Scott's novels as a model for the 'classical historical novel' works to exclude women's novels from accounts of the genre, it is more useful to trace what Luce Irigaray would call a 'female genealogy' of the twentieth-century woman's historical novel, by going back beyond Scott to the women writers whose influence Lukács so summarily dismissed. The work of Peter Garside, Ina Ferris and Katie Trumpener has, as I mentioned, uncovered a body of work, much of it by Irish and women writers, which preceded and influenced Scott. Trumpener shows how the historical novel emerged out of the national tale developed by these writers. Both the national tale and the historical novel can be seen as concerned with cultural or social difference and development but the national tale maps this in terms of geography (contrasting different areas and 'national' characters) while the historical novel traces temporal movement. The term 'historical novel' itself may, Trumpener notes, have first appeared in the subtitle of Jane West's *The Loyalists: An Historical Novel* (1812), which features a 'Sir William Waverley' who trims between opposing sides in the English Civil War (Trumpener, 1993, 694, 719). Moreover, Trumpener argues, Scott's adaptations reverse the politics of some of these novels, offering a Tory rather than Jacobin, and conservative rather than dissenting view of progress (695).

An even earlier novel, Sophia Lee's *The Recess, or A Tale of Other Times* (1783), according to its editor April Alliston, has strong claims to be considered 'the first important and fully developed text for both the "female" Gothic and the historical Gothic strains in English fiction' (Lee, 2000, xiv). A novel which influenced both Scott (most obviously *Kenilworth* [1821]) and Ann Radcliffe, it nevertheless establishes an alternative model for the woman's historical novel from that offered by Scott, one which theorises *women*'s relationship to history in a very different way. As a Gothic historical novel, it highlights the continuities between the Gothic and the historical novels, rather than the discontinuities emphasised by accounts which stress Scott as the single-handed progenitor of a new form. Both models, I would suggest, have been important for women, but the domination of the *Waverley* model in standard criticism has obscured the other possibilities, and partly explains the exclusion of so many women's novels from the accepted canon. *The Recess* both exemplifies and sets precedents for the ways in which women have handled several key issues in the writing of historical novels: the choice of historical period, deployment of point of view, 'taking sides' on a historical conflict, and the question of language.

Set during the reign of Elizabeth I, *The Recess* is the story of the supposed twin daughters of Mary Queen of Scots and the Duke of Norfolk. For fear of reprisals from Elizabeth who has executed their father and imprisoned their mother, Matilda and Ellinor are brought up hidden in the eponymous 'recess', an underground structure with rooms and passages. Lee inserts these two invented characters into 'history' through their secret romantic involvements with two of Elizabeth's favourites, both of which lead to extraordinary hardships for the two endlessly victimised heroines. Matilda marries the Earl of Leicester, bears his daughter and among other vicissitudes is shipwrecked and spends several years imprisoned in a Spanish colony. Ellinor falls in love with the Earl of Essex and, disguised in masculine clothing, follows him to Ireland. There his mishandling of the campaign against the Irish is attributed to his desperation when Ellinor is captured by Tyrone, who attempts to make her his mistress.

By using invented characters in a factual historical setting,[4] Lee draws attention to the way in which she is enacting an imaginary recovery or recreation of women's lost and unrecorded history. The story is allegedly 'extracted' from a manuscript and updated into contemporary language (Lee, 2000, 5). The recess itself (once part of a convent) is an almost over-determined symbol for the way in which women have been, in Sheila Rowbotham's term, 'hidden from history' (1973). Both prison and refuge, womb and tomb, it figures the way in which the heroines are confined by their biological gender as well as their repetition of their matrilineal heritage, as they, like their mother, are imprisoned and 'murdered'. The novel dramatises what becomes one of the central concerns of the female Gothic, the erasure of women's 'maternal genealogy' within patriarchal culture and history.