

# THE MIDDLE AGES IN THE MODERN WORLD

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## 4 War, Church, Empire and the Medieval in British Histories for Children

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THE INTEREST OF CHILDREN'S HISTORIES for students of modern medievalism lies partly in their broad chronological sweep, typically reaching, in the case of English-language texts, from the ancient Britons to near the present day. In undertaking to overview such a long time-span, their authors are required in various ways to demarcate the 'medieval' from the periods (however constructed) which are seen to precede and succeed it, and to place it in relation to their depiction of the modern and contemporary. Like the writers of medievalist fiction for children, they build and characterise the Middle Ages out of a revealing repertoire of images, characters, events, anecdotes, and thematic preoccupations. But unlike the fiction writers, who can set their scene wholly in a medieval world, the historians for children also narrate a before and an after to the medieval past. Their genre overtly sets out to tell children what the medieval means in the broader stream of time that defines it, to describe changes and continuities, and to identify what is noteworthy, admirable or regrettable about it.

How the Middle Ages figure in such texts remains important to their modern reception, and to conceptions of modernity itself. Since the nineteenth century at least, the Middle Ages have commonly featured as both the 'birth' and the 'childhood' of England and numerous other European countries, and the bedrock of their 'heritage', in a way that makes understandings of the 'medieval' highly important to contemporary ideas of national and cultural identity. The same applies to 'negative views of the [medieval] period as the barbaric, superstitious, static and unenlightened "other" of modernity'.<sup>1</sup> Teaching children what to think and feel about the Middle Ages necessarily involves them in an intense and prolonged historiographical contest over issues in religion, art, ethnicity, class, gender, war and politics. In surveying that long-running history here, I examine some of its principal ideological features and narrative strategies in major examples from 1750

<sup>1</sup> See Louise D'Arcens (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medievalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 'Introduction: Medievalism: Scope and Complexity'.

to 1910, concluding with special attention to John Ruskin's *'Our Fathers Have Told Us'* (1880–2), a polemical work expressing his opposition to mainstream English children's histories and one which illuminates aspects of their medievalist agendas.<sup>2</sup>

To the present day, the socio-political power of the children's history is still strongly appreciated: Henrietta Elizabeth Marshall's classic *Our Island Story* (1905) was reprinted at its centenary in 2005 by the think tank *Civitas* 'with the aim of sending a free copy to each of the UK's primary schools'. The reprint was assisted by donations from readers of the *Daily Telegraph*. *Our Island Story* is cited as David Cameron's 'favourite childhood book', 'written in a way that really captured my imagination and which nurtured my interest in the history of our great nation'<sup>3</sup> (Tony Blair's favourite childhood book was *Ivanhoe*, an interesting contrast).<sup>4</sup> *Our Island Story* is also part of the American conservative *Yesterday's Classics* children's collection, 'Books for today's children and tomorrow's leaders'.<sup>5</sup> The title has an imperial provenance; it is an abridged refrain from Tennyson's 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington' (1852), 'Not once or twice in our rough island-story, / The path of duty was the way to glory',<sup>6</sup> and also redolent of works like Sir Edward Creasy's *History of England* (1869): 'our nation . . . [and] this its island home . . . will (we trust) long continue to be the fountain-head of British power, and the favourite domicile of freedom, empire and glory'.<sup>7</sup> The recent revival of Marshall's book and the rise of similar new work show how national history is still trusted to impart patriotism and a sense of belonging to children who can identify the story as their own.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, although the ranks of British historians for children include numerous major authors, including Oliver Goldsmith, Jane Austen, William Godwin, Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, books in this genre have been largely neglected by modern scholars. They have been seen as potboilers, hack work whose abundance was already an object of satire by 1803, when Austen referred to 'the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England . . . eulogized by a thousand

<sup>2</sup> John Ruskin, *'Our Fathers Have Told Us': Sketches of the History of Christendom for Boys and Girls Who Have Been Held at its Fountains* (Sunnyside: George Allen, 1880–2).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Hough, 'Revealed: David Cameron's favourite childhood book is *Our Island Story*', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 October 2010, [www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/8094333/Revealed-David-Camerons-favourite-childhood-book-is-Our-Island-Story](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/8094333/Revealed-David-Camerons-favourite-childhood-book-is-Our-Island-Story) (accessed 25 June 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Chris Jones, 'Romantic Vision', *Guardian*, 26 June 2007, [www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jun/26/politics](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/jun/26/politics) (accessed 11 October 2015).

<sup>5</sup> [www.yesterdaysclassics.com/](http://www.yesterdaysclassics.com/) (accessed 25 June 2015).

<sup>6</sup> *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longman, 1969), 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington', p. 1015, lines 201–2; see also lines 209–10, 223–4.

<sup>7</sup> Edward S. Creasy, *History of England from the Earliest to the Present Times*, 5 vols (London: Walton, 1869), I, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Adrian Sykes, *Made in Britain: The Men and Women Who Shaped the Modern World* (London: Adelphi, 2011).

pens'.<sup>9</sup> Godwin's impulse to write history for school children was at least as much commercial as educational. Scott wrote to clear his debts. Dickens, who dominates a database search in this field, composed *A Child's History of England* (1851–3) as a filler for *Household Words*, cribbing the facts from a previous publication,<sup>10</sup> and breezily dictating copy to his sister-in-law as he 'walked about the room'.<sup>11</sup> He was bored by the time the project ended, as its sudden ending shows.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps in consequence, history for children is often treated as a comic or satiric genre, in contributions such as Austen's *The History of England from the Reign of Henry The 4th to the Death of Charles the 1st* (1790s), Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 and All That* (1930), and works like Terry Deary's highly popular *Horrible Histories* (1993–). As a literary tradition in English, it holds rather an uncertain status, sometimes acknowledged as vital to the making of good adult citizenship, yet also open to critique as a second-hand and second-rate record of Good Things and Bad Kings, or a lifeless list of facts: 'the chronological order of the kings of England, with the dates of their accession, and most of the principal events of their reigns!'<sup>13</sup> How to make children's history more than that – something enjoyable, memorable, and morally and imaginatively valuable for its young readers – has been a long-term preoccupation of the tradition from the mid-eighteenth century onward. Its justification, as Matthew Grenby has noted, was 'that books ought to be a part of every child's life and that reading is an unalloyed benefit'.<sup>14</sup> Children's histories reflect their origin in a context where 'all children's literature, to a greater or lesser extent, was functioning as propaganda for itself', and they have adapted their methods in line with that continuing aim.<sup>15</sup>

The most common and long-lived form of children's histories by British writers uses monarchical reigns as narrative building blocks and as a mnemonic device. That feature ensured that the Middle Ages, at least from 1066 on, would receive considerable space and evaluative commentary. An early example, John Newbery's seminal and much reprinted *A New History of England* (1759), 'humbly inscribed' 'to the Young Gentlemen and Ladies of Great-Britain and Ireland',<sup>16</sup> begins with a 'Description of Great Britain; with Some Account of its Constitution and Government',<sup>17</sup> but as soon as possible the names of ancient British leaders

<sup>9</sup> Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Marilyn Gaull (London: Pearson Longman, 2005), p. 30.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Keightley, *The History of England* (London, 1839). See Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 323.

<sup>11</sup> See Slater, *Charles Dickens*, p. 346.

<sup>12</sup> Slater, *Charles Dickens*, pp. 360–1.

<sup>13</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Grenby, *The Child Reader 1700–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> Grenby, *The Child Reader*, p. 257.

<sup>16</sup> John Newbery, *A New History of England* (London, 1763), sig.A.4r.

<sup>17</sup> Newbery, *A New History of England*, p. 1

become prominent, then those of the Saxon and Danish kings, in capitals. From the accession of William I, the reign of each English monarch is successively numbered, and receives a separate chapter, with a facing-page illustration, followed by a quatrain noting what is most to be remembered. Examples are:

VII. JOHN, *from 1199 to 1216.*

John's reign was full of troubles and turmoils,  
From his bad conduct, and from priestly wiles;  
England's great Charter, by the Barons won,  
He gave; but to the Pope resign'd his crown.<sup>18</sup>

and

IX. EDWARD I, *from 1272 to 1307.*

Far distant, when acknowledg'd, Edward came,  
Assum'd the crown, and ruled with matchless fame.  
*Welsh, Scots*, he conquer'd, made and unmade Kings,  
Reform'd the law, and clip'd the clergy's wings.<sup>19</sup>

Most children's histories proceed similarly by successive reigns, though not all are so segmented and summary in form. Newbery's publication is also seminal in its highlighting of military, ecclesiastical and legal successes or failures as the standard of judgement for a reign. These three elements of history— 'turmoils' and war, church–state relations, and law – are united by Newbery in a retrospective endorsement of the eighteenth-century English constitution<sup>20</sup> and religious settlement, the 'Great Britain' achieved by union with Scotland in 1707, and the strong state control of the church that prevailed in his own times. The Middle Ages of *A New History*, as in many later instances, are largely by-products of this modernity, ideologically produced to support a political configuration to which the narrative emphasis on war, law and religion is a natural concomitant.

Although writers of history for children have regarded war and religion in different lights, as I shall go on to show, those elements remained their chief signifiers of the Middle Ages, and dominated their subject matter, well into the early twentieth century. Medieval war in these texts has no single significance: it can be depicted as a sign of a pre-modern barbarism which has been left behind, but also as an instance of a brave continuing racial or national spirit. Accounts of wars involving English, Scots, Welsh and Irish are employed to articulate racial and religious differences, but are also sometimes used to explain and justify a modern idea of inclusive Britishness centred on an expanded England, and to play down the divisive effects of more recent insular conflicts, such as Scottish and Irish

<sup>18</sup> Newbery, *A New History of England*, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Newbery, *A New History of England*, p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> Newbery, *A New History of England*, pp. 6–7: 'The Government of England is a compound of Monarchy, Aristocracy and Democracy'.

'rebellions' in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Wars have often formed part of a long-range view of the political development of Britain towards its present condition, building the medieval into a progressivist story of nation, culture and empire, as indicated below in my discussion of Newbery, Godwin and Dickens.

The depiction of the Middle Ages in children's histories is also closely related to their authors' attitude to the medieval church – whether negative, as in Newbery's 'Pope' and the 'Clergy' with their 'priestly wiles', or (more rarely) positive, as in an Anglo-Catholic writer like Charlotte M. Yonge, unusually sympathetic to monastic traditions.<sup>21</sup> Newbery can be considered typical of most in writing the Middle Ages as an anticipation and endorsement of the Reformation and the growth of national autonomy and liberty, first through greater monarchical control of the church, then through the assertion of parliamentary power and Protestant succession in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Yet here too there are different interpretative possibilities. The frequent critique of medieval religion, and especially of monasticism and prelacy, in these texts sometimes supports a providentialist view of history, in which national progress accompanies the religious change secured by success in war against Catholic enemies and internal opponents (the Spanish Armada and the Battle of the Boyne). Yet such anti-clericalism can also be read as advancing the claims of a modern secularism, in which the monarch, the military leader, the 'people' or the 'race' are the real heroes, while the role of religion (and of God) is restricted. In either version managing the narrative of war and religion is a main concern.

Austen's teenage choice to write as a 'partial, prejudiced . . . Historian' was both descriptive and prophetic. The typical tone of histories addressed to children is an uninhibited opinionation, something which applies independently of their take on the medieval past, but which is strongly emphasised in that context. With some exceptions – Walter Scott's *Tales of a Grandfather* (1828–31), a long and subtle view of Scotland's history, is one – they leave little room for narrative doubt, complex evaluation or mixed feelings. Possessing those qualities, Scott's *Tales* are very unlike most histories aimed at the age range (6–10) of his overt audience, little Johnny Lockhart. Children's historians are also characteristically aggressive towards each other. A sense of what is appropriate for youth goes along with ill will towards other influences, and a self-staging as more friendly and beneficial than other writers. In Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, the young heroine wonders at historians 'labouring only for the torment of little boys and girls'.<sup>22</sup> Almost a century later, John Ruskin explains that a governess needs his help because 'the fruits of historical documents placed by modern educational systems at her

<sup>21</sup> Charlotte M. Yonge, *Young Folks' History of England* (Cincinnati, OH: Hitchcock and Walden, 1879).

<sup>22</sup> Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 89.

disposal . . . [are] to them [children] labour only, and sorrow'.<sup>23</sup> Dickens rides roughshod over predecessors:

We now come to King Henry the Eighth, whom it has been too much the fashion to call 'Bluff King Hal,' and 'Burlly King Harry,' and other fine names; but whom I shall take the liberty to call, plainly, one of the most detestable villains that ever drew breath.<sup>24</sup>

H. E. Marshall enticingly introduces her work as 'not a history lesson, but a story-book', like *Robinson Crusoe*, 'a little book for little people'.<sup>25</sup> In our own time, the 'mission statement' of *Horrible Histories* is said to be 'making history look less crap'.<sup>26</sup> Its creator, Terry Deary, is an outspoken opponent of schools, other historians and public libraries.<sup>27</sup>

Deary's books are extremely popular with children, but nevertheless like nearly all children's histories are written by an adult, founded on a version of what Peter Hollindale calls 'childness': 'the varied behaviour associated with being a child, and the sense of what is appropriate behaviour for a given age, of behavioural standards',<sup>28</sup> while keeping in mind the right-thinking future adult that the adult historian seeks to form. The nature of the 'child' addressed varies widely from writer to writer: a young nobleman just up at Oxford (Goldsmith); Godwin's children, as a sample survey group – 'How easy this is!', they exclaim;<sup>29</sup> Dickens's children, addressed as a normative Protestant 'you'; 'an intelligent Eton boy or two, or thoughtful English girl' (Ruskin);<sup>30</sup> 'young folks' (Yonge); 'little people' (Marshall). In all cases, addressing a work to a child implies not only the advice of age to youth, but the right to speak with the authority of a father (in Ruskin's case a godfather), the care of a mother, or at least of one *in loco parentis*. As part of that tutelage, the inculcation of correct approaches to the Middle Ages assumed both a moral and a political importance.

How best to engage the child's attention was also a major concern. Godwin, who wrote numerous school histories under the name Edward Baldwin, emphasised in his history of Rome what would become a commonplace, the need for children

<sup>23</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Child's History of England* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1898), p. 281.

<sup>25</sup> H. E. Marshall, *Our Island Story: A History of England for Boys and Girls* (London: T. C. and E. C. Jack, 1905), p. vi.

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Dempster, 'Horrible Histories Is Back and It's as Brilliant as Ever', *Guardian*, 25 May, 2013, [www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2013/may/25/horrible-histories-is-back](http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/2013/may/25/horrible-histories-is-back).

<sup>27</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry\\_Deary](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terry_Deary); 'Writing History', Interview with Terry Deary, *Guardian*, 12 August 2003; 'Libraries "Have Had Their Day", Says Horrible Histories Author', *Guardian*, 13 February 2013; 'Horrible Historians! They Are Seedy and Devious, Claims Children's Author Terry Deary', *Daily Mail*, 1 June 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Hollindale, *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (Stroud: Thimble Press, 1997), p. 49.

<sup>29</sup> Edward Baldwin (pseud.), *The History of England for the Use of Schools and Young Persons* (London: M. J. Godwin, 1812), p. vi.

<sup>30</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 6.

to encounter 'instructive and animating examples' that offered 'encouragement to noble sentiments and actions' and began 'the love of ancient virtue'. He therefore disapproved of Goldsmith's decision to 'lower and qualify' his picture of ancient heroes to avoid 'becoming incredible', while implying that traditional adult accounts – 'ponderous quartos' – were boring. Godwin's claim to know what was interesting to children – striking narrative vignettes – merged with a claim to know what was essential to their moral and emotional development:

not to load the memories of youth with insignificant and trivial particulars; . . . by paring away dry and repulsive details, I have found room to tell some of those stories which best unfold and most strongly interest the human heart.<sup>31</sup>

This attempt to awaken children's imagination by memorable anecdotes might be expected to have allowed more sympathetic treatment of English medieval subjects, such as occurred in fictional appropriations and retellings of medieval material from the early nineteenth century onwards. Yet the combined mnemonic and moral impulse in the child's history form was restrictive in other ways. For all that he chooses a 'mode of playful and familiar writing', the matter of Godwin's English history is already fixed, its course charted by 'the great landmarks of history which can never be forgotten, and the strong impressions which, once received, can never be obliterated'.<sup>32</sup> As part of this process, the Middle Ages are employed to reinforce, not to question, a familiar story of constitutional progress in the 'contention between power and liberty',<sup>33</sup> and there is much interpretative direction to that end. In this respect, the author's address to a young audience makes little difference except that the narrative method changes to employ a discourse of 'character' already familiar to children from other moral genres.

'Characters of the Kings of England' prefaces Godwin's whole book, which is often critical of medieval monarchs, both for tyranny and for a lack of firm control. Even those who reign well are flawed: Edward I 'was knowing and wise; but he loved war, and conducted it barbarously';<sup>34</sup> Henry VII 'was politic and grave; but he tarnished his reign by extortion and avarice'.<sup>35</sup> Yet the kings have an excuse, a medieval church portrayed as an alien and inimical force:

Henry [II] . . . saw how much the church in these dark ages was disposed to domineer over the state, and how the popes made and unmade kings; and he set his heart upon remedying so disgraceful an evil.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Edward Baldwin (pseud.), *History of Rome, from the Building of the City to the Ruin of the Republic*, 6th edn (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1835), pp. iii–v.

<sup>32</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, pp. v–vi.

<sup>33</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 125. See David Hume, *The History of England*, vol. 6 (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1983), ch. 71. 'Thus have we seen, through the course of four reigns, a continual struggle maintained between the crown and the people: Privilege and prerogative were ever at variance.'

<sup>34</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 4.

<sup>36</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 36.

National success in war abroad (beyond the boundaries of 'Great Britain') is generally praiseworthy to Godwin, and either attracts approval – Richard I 'performed feats of personal valour that are almost miraculous' – or at least no negative comment: the complete 'character' of Edward III is that he 'was the conqueror of France'.<sup>37</sup> By contrast, the medieval church is closely linked with foreignness, through reference to the papacy and France as hostile encroachers on English power. Much as in Newbery's earlier work, the effect of telling history by memorable tags and anecdotes is to restrict variety in interpretation and to protect, rather than avoid, basic ideological associations. In each case, an ideal medieval king is both successful against the French and superior to 'priestly wiles'. John, who unmanly cedes France and defers to the Pope's legate, is the ideal loser. Nevertheless, Godwin's continued interest in the growth and patronage of 'learning' modifies these tendencies, earning moments of praise for both Archbishop Thomas Becket and Henry II, and for the 'commencement of literature and science in modern times' under Henry III.<sup>38</sup> And though 'reformation and improvement' go together,<sup>39</sup> the monasteries are merely said to have been 'demolished by Henry VIII in his rage against the pope'.<sup>40</sup> An admirer of David Hume's *The History of England* (1778), but without much interest left in religion *per se* – he says little about the post-Reformation church – Godwin largely lacks the sectarian invective commonly found elsewhere. For instance, a later work (1856) claiming to be a mere abridgement of his *History* states that '[t]he obsequious Becket . . . showed as much pride as Pharaoh', 'under . . . [a] show of humility hiding a boundless ambition', and 'led his benefactor [Henry II] a weary and uncomfortable life'.<sup>41</sup> None of this is actually in Godwin's book.

War, or warlikeness, is an issue that divides earlier children's historians from later ones on the nature of continuing Englishness and of medieval difference. When treated as a matter of interest, it at least gave the Middle Ages some live relation to the modern. Otherwise, as in Goldsmith, for example, writing in 1764, '[t]here is scarce any other passion, but that of curiosity, excited by a knowledge of the early part of our history . . . as the customs of our British ancestors have no connexion with our own'.<sup>42</sup> 'Savage man, is an animal in almost every country the same.'<sup>43</sup> To Dickens, by contrast, a century later, the relevant virtue of the ancient Britons was that they were 'hardy, brave and strong' in war,<sup>44</sup> just like their English descendants:

<sup>37</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, pp. 43–4.

<sup>38</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 55.

<sup>39</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, pp. 94–5.

<sup>40</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 95.

<sup>41</sup> Anon., *Outlines of English History* (London: Longman, Brown, 1856), pp. 20–1.

<sup>42</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *An History of England in a Series of Letters from a Nobleman to his Son*, 2 vols (London, 1772), I, letter 2, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, I, letter 3, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 2.



[Caesar] made the same complaint as Napoleon Bonaparte the great French General did, eighteen hundred years afterwards, when he said they were such unreasonable fellows that they never knew when they were beaten. They never *did* know, I believe, and never will.<sup>45</sup>

The idea of national warlikeness produces conflicted accounts. To Goldsmith, it is a disability: '[the Britons] had nothing but fear to keep them from war with each other, and . . . could build no longer on a lasting peace, than while they avoided giving an opportunity of plunder to their enemies'.<sup>46</sup> They are therefore indebted to the Romans for their invasion, though in other ways rendered 'effeminate' by it.<sup>47</sup> For Goldsmith, 'English' history begins with Alfred, but not for his wars, except in so far as these had achieved a peace which led to the rise of the 'constitution'.<sup>48</sup> The victory of 'politeness', learning and 'civility' over superstition and barbarism<sup>49</sup> (which he sees as vestigial in Ireland)<sup>50</sup> is what justifies dominion. By contrast, success in war is a main reason Dickens makes Alfred virtually the only English monarch he admires.

The difference between Goldsmith and Dickens is not only to be accounted for by what Jackie Horne calls the nineteenth-century 'transition from moral exemplarity to emotional evocation'<sup>51</sup> in children's literature, but mainly because Englishness – a core idea of 'the people' – is the primary organising narrative principle for Dickens, rather than civility, as in Goldsmith, or virtue, as it would later be in Ruskin. To Goldsmith, Alfred is praiseworthy as a man 'raised up . . . to improve the age in which he lived', a time in which war alternates only with 'pilgrimages, penances, cloisters and superstitions'.<sup>52</sup> To Godwin, sounding like Gibbon and anticipating Charles Kingsley in *Hereward the Wake* (1866), there is little to celebrate in the Saxons' defeat of the Danes: 'The Danes were a braver race of men than the Saxons', who 'grew effeminate; when they became Christians, it was but a poor shadow of religion that the tyrannical popes and ignorant monks taught them'.<sup>53</sup> To Dickens, contrasting both earlier writers, Alfred's significance lies not in manners and institutions, but in superior racial character: 'under the Great Alfred, all the best points of the English-Saxon character were first encouraged, and in him first shown. It has been the greatest character among the nations of the earth.'<sup>54</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 37.

<sup>46</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, 1, letter 4, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, 1, letter 5, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, 1, letter 7, p. 46.

<sup>49</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, 1, letter 7, pp. 45–6.

<sup>50</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, 1, letter 3, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> Jackie C. Horne (ed.), *History and the Construction of the Child in Early British Children's Literature* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, vol. 1, letter 7, p. 42.

<sup>53</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 19.

<sup>54</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 23.

In his *History* as a whole, Dickens shows his feeling for racial character by aggravating his diatribes against most of the medieval English monarchs and church leaders with stories highlighting the innocence and sufferings of their victims. These are sometimes representative individuals, like Elgiva, branded in the face then 'hacked and hewn with swords, and . . . barbarously maimed and lamed, and left to die' at the instigation of St Dunstan, 'the real king', 'a clever priest, a little mad, and not a little proud and cruel'.<sup>55</sup> Even more often, reference is made to the 'English people' at large who are duped, swindled and put down at every turn by rulers and clerics from Druidic times onwards – 'the unhappy common people (who always suffered, whatsoever was the matter)<sup>56</sup> – yet whose spirit rises above corrupt rule: 'the English people, however bitterly they hated the King [John], were not a people to suffer invasion quietly. They flocked to Dover where the English standard was.'<sup>57</sup> From Newbery to Godwin to Dickens, the story of English greatness becomes one of 'the people' slowly freed from cruelly oppressive regal and clerical regimes (which characterise the medieval especially) to follow their natural good instincts. A 'middle set of men', 'neither lords nor slaves', as Godwin says,<sup>58</sup> rise in prominence and power to bring about the modern scene.

For those children's historians who treat the warlikeness of the Britons and Saxons as a benign inheritance, the later medieval period presents a middle position between the safe praise of national character for courage, and the need to justify national policy in more recent times. England can only have an *island* story if it somehow includes Wales and Scotland. Medieval wars involving Wales, Scotland and Ireland become important for establishing 'British' history as that of an extended England. Goldsmith speaks summarily of Henry I's 'project' to 'subdue Ireland', 'no hard matter to conquer a country which was at that time barbarous, and divided under different chiefs'.<sup>59</sup> Marshall explains it more blandly: 'it would be too difficult to tell all the stories in one book, so I shall tell only the story of each country after it has been joined to England'.<sup>60</sup> 'England and Ireland were the first to be joined together. This happened in the reign of Henry II, in 1172 AD.'<sup>61</sup> (To Godwin, this 'conquest' had been 'rather nominal, than real').<sup>62</sup> In Marshall it is Edward I who first 'joined Wales to England',<sup>63</sup> whilst 'since 1603 A.D., England and Scotland have formed one kingdom with Wales and Ireland. So

<sup>55</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 29.

<sup>56</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 78.

<sup>57</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 129.

<sup>58</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 51.

<sup>59</sup> Goldsmith, *An History of England*, I, letter 12, p. 84.

<sup>60</sup> Marshall, *Our Island Story*, p. 153.

<sup>61</sup> Marshall, *Our Island Story*, p. 153.

<sup>62</sup> Baldwin, *The History*, p. 43.

<sup>63</sup> Marshall, *Our Island Story*, p. 200.

now we will talk no longer of England but of Britain, for long ago the old hatred has been forgotten, and we are all Britons.<sup>64</sup>

Marshall was Scottish, but even her later *Scotland's Story* (1906) concludes with the visit of George IV in 1822: 'here I think I must end, for Scotland has no more a story of her own – her story is Britain's story'.<sup>65</sup> The usefulness to Marshall of treating insular conflicts as resolved in the Middle Ages or shortly after is that it lets later wars be treated both with more sympathy and more summarily because in this context they have been made politically irrelevant. They remain good for anecdotes, but the modern political shape of the islands has already long been established as natural.

Dickens's history achieves the same end by a different means, again emphasising racial and monarchical character: the Jacobite cause has inspired 'charming stories and delightful songs' but '[t]he Highlanders of Scotland' were 'an extremely troublesome and wrong-headed race on the subject of the Stuarts', who 'were a public nuisance altogether'.<sup>66</sup> Dickens also explains that '[t]he Union of Great Britain with Ireland . . . took place in the reign of George the Third' because Ireland 'had been getting on very ill by itself'.<sup>67</sup> He has prepared the grounds for such a statement right back in the twelfth century:

The Irish were, at that time, as barbarous a people as you can well imagine. They were continually quarrelling and fighting, cutting one another's throats, slicing one another's noses, burning one another's houses, carrying away one another's wives, and committing all sorts of violence. . . .

The trained English followers of these knights were so superior in all discipline of battle to the Irish, that they beat them against immense superiority of numbers.<sup>68</sup>

Jack Cade, the rebel of 1450, is said, probably wrongly, by Dickens to be 'an Irishman', who acted 'in imitation of Wat Tyler, though he was a very different and inferior sort of man' and 'perhaps had drunk a little too much'.<sup>69</sup> Irish supporters of the fifteenth-century pretender Lambert Simnel are described as 'generous enough, but exceedingly irrational'.<sup>70</sup> Despite Dickens's contempt for Strongbow and for the role of the papacy in promoting the original English invasion of Ireland, a clear suggestion emerging from his medieval history is that the Irish cannot rule themselves personally or collectively, and so will 'get . . . on very ill' if left alone. The continuing narrative association of Ireland with pretenders, plots, wars and

<sup>64</sup> Marshall, *Our Island Story*, p. 353.

<sup>65</sup> H. E. Marshall, *Scotland's Story* (London and Edinburgh: T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1906), p. 417.

<sup>66</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 472.

<sup>67</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 472.

<sup>68</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 103.

<sup>69</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, pp. 240–1. See I. M. W. Harvey, 'Cade, John (d. 1450)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), [www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4292](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/4292) (accessed 20 June 2015).

<sup>70</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 270; see also pp. 271–2.

atrocities, even when they are committed against its people, is enough to harden that original impression.

A major question for the children's historian is what to exclude and what to emphasise. Dickens, as if anticipating *Horrible Histories*, repeatedly includes details of torture and violence to delineate the medieval, such as Henry I's ordering a 'poet's eyes to be torn from his head, because he had laughed at him in his verses; . . . the poet, in the pain of that torture, dashed out his own brains against his prison wall'.<sup>71</sup> Such horrific detail in a work for Victorian children was rare, and unexampled in Dickens's usual sources: he seems imaginatively compelled to literalise the 'blind' superstition of the Middle Ages, a major theme in Hume. Ruskin attacks this kind of history as 'about as profitable reading for young persons (so far as regards the general colour and purity of their thoughts) as the Newgate Calendar would be'.<sup>72</sup> Although both writers have a moral agenda, there is a basic difference between them in outlook and educational purpose. Dickens's narrative method is sensational and emotional, and often resembles aversion therapy; his episodes arouse revulsion, anger, contempt and pity in order to turn the minds of the young against tyranny and prejudice, and to support a vaguely defined presentist programme of common sense, plain dealing and human decency. The Middle Ages are his chief store of examples to make children have a correctly negative view of the pre-modern past, and to be relatively glad that they live when they do. His medieval world is benign only when it prophesies later progress, as when 'the people's' resistance to papal interdict prefigures the Reformation and his own anti-clerical form of religion: 'It occurred to them . . . that they could keep their churches open, and ring their bells, without the Pope's permission as well as with it. So, they tried the experiment – and found that it succeeded perfectly.'<sup>73</sup>

Ruskin, by contrast, wants to inculcate his idea of 'virtue' in the young, and has no need to privilege the present. Since his agenda, like Godwin's, is moral exemplarity, he is highly selective and sometimes frankly uninterested in the literal truth of the past,<sup>74</sup> whereas the author of *Hard Times* habitually undercuts what he sees as mistaken sympathies for the pre-modern with statements made 'in fact'. Ruskin presents the medieval cathedral and monastery positively as a way of insisting on the relation between virtuous action and sincere religious feeling: 'the Providence of Heaven, and the virtue of men . . . are the only powers of which history has ever to tell any profitable truth'.<sup>75</sup> For the same reason, he attacks scientific, secularist, nationalist and anti-Catholic versions of British history because they either deny the relation between human and divine, or reduce it to a matter of

<sup>71</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, pp. 82–3.

<sup>72</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 19.

<sup>73</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, p. 134.

<sup>74</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', pp. 25–31.

<sup>75</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 20.

institutional and inherently secular externals: 'the victory of usury over ecclesiastical prejudice . . . or . . . the extinction of the benighted superstitions of the Papacy by the glorious light of Reformation'.<sup>76</sup> Continually darting angry glances from the medieval past to the British present, Ruskin uses European instances to create an irritant English historical commentary that radically challenges presentist suppositions and proposes 'a range of tolerances, a pattern of different forms of open-mindedness and acceptance'.<sup>77</sup>

Accordingly, both medieval and modern medievalist emblems of virtue suit Ruskin's educational purpose in several ways; his main theme is the moral potential opened up by making imaginative connections between past and present. In 'The Bible of Amiens' the historical view is overtly extra-national and supra-temporal, putting modern and medieval in the same plane of reference to highlight difference: he takes young English readers to France to walk from a modern railway station to a medieval cathedral, under a title that daringly gives scriptural authority to an aesthetic structure. Denying the split between appearance and reality basic to a view of history like Newbery's or Dickens's, or Gibbon's, Ruskin upholds the truth of artistic form: 'only Truth *can* be polished'.<sup>78</sup> He asks the young to read not only for exemplarity but for symbolism, and with an allowance for generic variation: a legend of Saint Martin's generosity, which Ruskin knows will appear 'a fable of monkish folly'<sup>79</sup> – Dickens's comments on St Dunstan's 'extraordinary lies' come to mind<sup>80</sup> – 'if understood with the heart, would have been the chastisement and check of every form of the church's pride and sensuality'.<sup>81</sup> Still working selectively with fables, Ruskin transforms St Martin's role as a general into one of 'serenity' and 'gentleness', matching his praise of the contemporary Christian soldier-hero, Sir Herbert Edwardes, in *A Knight's Faith* (1884).<sup>82</sup> Although Martin was 'a Christian anti-hero'<sup>83</sup> in earlier medieval tradition, Anglo-Saxon writers treated him more as a warrior, and with the Crusades he became a great military victor.<sup>84</sup> Ruskin's choice of the earlier Martin legend is therefore crucial in denying war a significant place in children's history, or any history: 'The wandering armies are, in the heart of them, only living hail, and thunder, and fire along the ground.'<sup>85</sup> The medieval real for Ruskin is something necessarily beyond the

<sup>76</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', pp. 19–20.

<sup>77</sup> Francis O'Gorman, *Late Ruskin: New Contexts* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2001), pp. 120–3.

<sup>78</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 52.

<sup>79</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 27.

<sup>80</sup> Dickens, *A Child's History of England*, pp. 27–8.

<sup>81</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 27.

<sup>82</sup> See O'Gorman, *Late Ruskin*, pp. 120–3.

<sup>83</sup> John Edward Damon, *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors: Warfare and Sanctity in the Literature of Early England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>84</sup> See Damon, *Soldier Saints*, ch. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 50.

purview of war writing and of historiography itself: 'innocent and invisible peasant life', 'low-nestling, speechless, harmless', of which 'no Historian ever takes the smallest notice, except when it is robbed or slain'.<sup>86</sup>

In contesting imperialist Victorian narratives of the medieval, Ruskin pushes to extremes the approach to children's historiography in which a desire to make it truly beneficial to the young sanctions a limited recourse to historical data, the inclusion of doubtful stories if they are uplifting, avoidance of sordid material, and an escape from the dull form of a sequential survey. Of course, the notion that history is the continuing record of fulfilled human ambitions is precisely what Ruskin wants to avoid and to attack, as his transgressive decision to linger in the medieval emphasises. Going even further, he largely subordinates history to geography – much of the text concerns the false nature of flat maps – through his conviction that eternal and invariable truths are inherent in the earth. Geography makes national character and boundaries, for instance, inviolable and coterminous concepts, beyond positive law:

No matter who rules a country . . . eternal bars and doors are set to it by the mountains and seas, eternal laws enforced over it by the clouds and stars . . . nothing is permanently helpful to any race or condition of men but the spirit that is in their own hearts, kindled by the love of their native land.<sup>87</sup>

Ruskin returns readers here, obliquely, to a topical referent with which he has begun the work, questioning the rightness of sending the Queen's Guards to Ireland to crush dissent.<sup>88</sup> The link he makes between an anti-imperialist contemporary political analysis and a tolerant portrayal of the medieval is that true historical understanding must be independent of human political, institutional and confessional arrangements. These are inessential and external matters, and therefore misleading bases for historical judgement; the climate, soil and physical features of a country make itself and its people what they are, not the colour which it is painted on the map. The same logic is applied to intellectual and emotional climates in time: just as England cannot know what is best for Ireland, modernity cannot accurately read the medieval by its own standards. Instead it must listen.

In this version of medievalism, Ruskin's chief target is Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, as his footnotes reveal. Gibbon, treating monastic life and medieval religious practices as evils in themselves, writes that '[a] cruel unfeeling temper has characterised the monks of every age and country'.<sup>89</sup> Ruskin responds in three characteristic ways: by citing his own contrary experiences of modern monks, playing the empiricist to Gibbon's dogmatist; by reference to a

<sup>86</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', p. 51.

<sup>87</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', pp. 98–9.

<sup>88</sup> Ruskin, 'Our Fathers Have Told Us', pp. iii–iv.

<sup>89</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols (London: Dent, 1910), vol. IV, p. 18.

portrait from artistic imagination, the impressive Benedictine in the introduction to Scott's *The Monastery* (1820), who recovers a medieval monk's remains, 'the heart of an upright man';<sup>90</sup> and, finally, by pleading the limits of human historical understanding: 'We know, in any available clearness, neither what they suffered, nor what they learned . . . only God knows.'<sup>91</sup> Ruskin's child's history – to the extent that his reader can really be a child – transforms an educational distaste, like Godwin's, for 'dry and repulsive facts' and a preference for what 'most strongly interest[s] the human heart' into a radical view of the past as alterity; the laws of 'climates', 'races' and 'times' make it impossible for the Middle Ages to be like the present, and therefore absurd for it to be judged against contemporary ambitions. He therefore scorns Creasy's imperialist mode: 'the brilliant crimson with which all our landed property is coloured cannot but impress the innocent reader with the idea of a universal flush of freedom and glory'.<sup>92</sup> Rather, the medieval past must be 'judged . . . by our humility, finally and always'.<sup>93</sup> 'Humility', a main virtue held up to the Victorian child, and the key virtue Ruskin finds in the Middle Ages,<sup>94</sup> is made a necessary condition of proper historical practice and understanding: 'truthful maps of the world to begin with, and truthful maps of our own hearts to end with'.<sup>95</sup>

From the time of Newbery and Goldsmith to Marshall's early twentieth century, although the forms of British children's history changed, the idea of writing to children accompanied an idea of history as sequential, fully knowable and non-negotiable, a matter already concluded by adults, however much they might differ in particular opinions and on the best ways of imparting history to the young. Ruskin's exceptionality is that he uses the idea of a young readership to value ignorance of the conventional children's history reduced from adult versions. He remains the opponent of such teleological histories which relate England's continuing 'story' or which emphasise how British progress 'shaped the modern world'. By removing the Middle Ages from the overarching national narrative in which it has usually figured – the succession of kings, wars, political changes and institutional improvements which has defined it for other writers – he asserts for a 'child' reader the potential interest of a medieval that contemporary adult modernity cannot not see by its own lights.

<sup>90</sup> Ruskin, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, p. 112, n.

<sup>91</sup> Ruskin, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, p. 113.

<sup>92</sup> Ruskin, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, p. 92.

<sup>93</sup> Ruskin, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, p. 111.

<sup>94</sup> John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1853), p. 198.

<sup>95</sup> Ruskin, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, p. 91.