

ANCIENT HISTORY: RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Vol. 41–44 2011–2014

Transforming Sparta: New Approaches to the Study of Spartan Society

The Position of Attic Women in Democratic Athens

An Unforgotten Episode in the Life of Caesar

Women Historians of Ancient Greece and Rome

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Book Reviews

MACQUARIE ANCIENT HISTORY ASSOCIATION

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ANCIENT HISTORY: RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

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IMAGINATIONS OF ANCIENT ROME IN 19TH CENTURY HISTORICAL NOVELS[1]

Tom Stevenson
The University of Queensland

Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*, released in 2000, proved to be a critical and commercial success. It was widely lauded for its computer-generated special effects, especially its sweeping panoramas of ancient Rome, and its dramatic performances. It won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actor (Russell Crowe).[2] A new era in epic cinema set in the ancient world had begun. Various claims to historical accuracy were made on the film's behalf. Classical scholars studied these claims closely, with mixed reactions.[3] The film's historical advisor, Prof. Kathleen Coleman, emphasised the limited degree of input she had into the final product, given practical and artistic considerations weighing upon the director.[4] It is quite remarkable that a concern for historical fidelity is regularly advertised by those who create historical fiction—as though at some basic level of persuasion or impression, the fictional element is inferior to the historical, upon which it is ultimately dependent. Nevertheless, *Gladiator* owes much less to academic histories than it does to a series of imaginations of ancient Rome, which extend back to Hollywood films of, for example, Cecil B. DeMille and D.W. Griffith, to 'toga' plays of the early 20th and late 19th centuries, and finally to historical novels of the 19th century.[5] The imaginations of ancient Rome contained in

1 I owe great debts to Dr Nick Lowe of Royal Holloway College, University of London, who read and commented upon an early draft of this paper, and also to the journal's anonymous reader, who supplied numerous references and helped to improve the quality of the paper in many ways. Any remaining inadequacies are certainly my responsibility alone.

2 <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0172495>.

3 See the collected papers in M. Winkler (ed.), *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford 2004).

4 K. Coleman, 'The Pedant Goes to Hollywood: The Role of the Academic Consultant', in Winkler (ed.) (2004) (n.3) 45–52.

5 D. Mayer, *Playing out the Empire: Ben-Hur and Other Toga Plays and Films, 1883–1908: A Critical Anthology*, ed. with intro. and notes by D. Mayer; and an essay on the incidental music for 'toga' dramas by K. Preston (Oxford 1994) 1–20. For the influence on *Gladiator* of Samuel Bronston's 1964 film *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (last of the Hollywood epics of the golden era set in the ancient world), see T. Hillard, 'Ancient History and Contemporary Public Interest: The View from 2004', *Ancient History: Resources for Teachers* 33.2 (2003 [publ. 2005]) 107–34, at 119 n.40; M. Winkler (ed.), *Fall of the Roman Empire: Film and History* (Maldon, MA, Oxford and Chichester 2009) 22; M. Spink, 'Hollywood Does History: In Defence of the Filmmaker', *Ancient History: Resources for Teachers* 40.1 (2010 [publ. 2013]) 68–94, at 88. Winkler and Spink treat Bronston's film as a 'source', emphasising the importance of the cinematic tradition.

these novels, and elements of them which continued to exert influence into the 20th century, are the subject of this paper.[6]

Historical novels became extremely popular during the 19th century, and none more so than those set in ancient Rome. Their vivid recreations of famous settings, and the ongoing relevance of ancient Rome to contemporary issues, ensured a wide readership. While the imaginations of Rome in such novels tended to vary according to purpose and audience, a number of preliminary points can be made:

i) taken as a whole, the varied treatments of the novelists paint 'Rome' as a contradictory place of epic grandeur and imperial power mixed with vice, brutality, passion, romance, and high conflict;
ii) in spite of the academic backgrounds and interests of many of the novelists, the historical novels operate in a manner that owes little to the academic tradition established by such luminaries as Edward Gibbon and Theodor Mommsen; and
iii) Hollywood cinematic presentations of Rome still owe more to the tradition of 19th century historical novels than to academic treatments, in spite of efforts to advertise the employment of historical sources and advisors.

There are three fundamental aims in what follows: the first is to compare and contrast the imaginations of ancient Rome in some famous 19th century historical novels (section I below); the second is to outline the influence of these novels into the 20th century (II); and the third is to examine how historians of the 19th century met the challenges posed by imaginative fiction in order to ponder possible approaches for contemporary historians in the new age of imagination (III).

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[6] The phenomenon is essentially an Anglophone one, with Hollywood films looking back in insular fashion to earlier films, to plays, to novels, and to earlier novels in English. *Quo Vadis* (1896), which appears below, was originally written in Polish, but it was the English translation (1897) which made the impact on 'toga' plays and Hollywood films of the 20th century. Historical novels were certainly written in German and French in the 19th century. Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô* (1862) is probably the best known historical novel set in the ancient world (Carthage) from the French tradition, but there were numerous novels and an early film (*Cléopâtre* [1899], dir. Georges Méliès) dealing with Cleopatra too—understandably, given the French colonial experience in North Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries.

I

Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) played a fundamental role in establishing the historical novel as a popular and respected genre of literature. Aside from pure literary prowess, Scott was respectful of historical method, deferential to academic erudition, and interested in antiquarian detail. He employed footnotes and appendices to display the depth of his research and accuracy. Although Scott's novels are not set in ancient Rome—his heroes, such as Rob Roy, Ivanhoe, and Quentin Durward, are Scottish rather than Roman—he bequeathed to the many Roman novels that succeeded him the vehicle through which contemporary religious, social, and political concerns could be vigorously and authoritatively debated.[7]

The Victorians were interested in Rome for a range of imperial, political, and cultural reasons, but contemporary religious conflict provided a particular spur for imagining the kind of Rome under which Christianity was born and developed. Consequently, ancient Rome served as the setting for some of the most passionate and controversial novels of the century, all engaging strongly in current debates about the nature and role of the Christian faith. Around 200 novels set in ancient Rome were written between the 1820s and the First World War, and the vast majority of these concerned early Christianity.[8]

Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) was for many Victorians the most famous novel set in ancient Rome.[9] In a number of ways,

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7 On Scott, see A. Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Baltimore 1971); J.C. Simmons, *The Novelist as Historian: Essays on the Victorian Historical Novel* (The Hague 1973); D. Brown, *Walter Scott and the Historical Imagination* (London 1979); G.D. Klingopulos, 'The Novel', in B. Ford (ed.), *The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 6: *From Dickens to Hardy* (Harmondsworth 1982) 94–111; H. Orel, *The Historical Novel from Scott to Sabatini: Changing Attitudes toward a Literary Genre, 1814–1920* (London 1995); I. Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton 2007); D. Hewitt, 'Scott, Sir Walter (1771–1832)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) 22 (Scott is credited with inventing the historical novel), 28 (his books sold right through the 19th century). For Scott's conception of historical fiction and subsequent influence on the genre, see S. Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity* (Princeton and Oxford 2011) 158, 175–6, 178–81, 188, 200–1, 213.

8 R. Faries, *Ancient Rome in the English Novel: A Study in English Historical Fiction* (Philadelphia 1923).

9 On Lytton, see C. Dahl, 'History on the Hustings: Bulwer-Lytton's Historical Novels of Politics', in R.C. Rathburn and M. Steinmann (eds), *From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad: Essays Collected in Memory of James T. Hillhouse* (Minneapolis 1958) 60–71; G.L. Barnett (ed.), 'Sir Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton (1803–73)', in *Nineteenth-Century British Novelists on the Novel* (New York 1971) 82–108; A.C. Christensen (ed.), *The Subverting Vision of Bulwer-Lytton: Bicentenary Reflections* (Newark, DE 1976); E. Engel and M.F. King, 'Edward Bulwer-Lytton', in *The Victorian Novel before Victoria: British Fiction*

however, it stands apart from later novels concerned with Rome as the setting for early Christianity. For a start, its florid style tends to be pilloried today. San Jose State University has an annual Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest for bad writing. The prolific Lytton is responsible for such lines as "the great unwashed" (from *Paul Clifford*, 1830), "the pen is mightier than the sword" (from the play *Richelieu*, 1839), and "pursuit of the almighty dollar" (from *The Coming Race*, 1871). The opening line of *Paul Clifford* begins with seven words, "It was a dark and stormy night", which tend for many people nowadays to evoke the *Peanuts* cartoon strip and the words with which Snoopy's sessions at the typewriter normally begin. In its full glory, the opening sentence of *Paul Clifford* reads:

> It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents—except at occasional intervals, when it was checked by a violent gust of wind which swept up the streets (for it is in London that our scene lies), rattling along the housetops, and fiercely agitating the scanty flame of the lamps that struggled against the darkness.[10]

Aside from questions of style, the religious polemic in *The Last Days of Pompeii* is straightforward, even shallow: paganism versus Christianity. The characters include a young Christian convert of Athenian heritage named Glaucus, a beautiful pagan girl called Ione, a blind flower girl, Nydia, who is devoted to Glaucus, and a villainous priest of Isis, whose name is Arbaces. When Arbaces falsely accuses Glaucus of a crime, in the hope that by doing so he can win Ione for himself, Nydia rescues Glaucus from the arena and then helps him to escape the eruption of Vesuvius in the company of Ione, at which point Nydia drowns herself. The novel closes not with the destruction of Pompeii but with the marriage of the young lovers, now both Christians,

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during the Reign of William IV, 1830–37 (London 1984) 39–60; L. Mitchell, *Bulwer-Lytton: The Rise and Fall of a Victorian Man of Letters* (London and New York 2003); A. Brown, 'Bulwer-Lytton, Edward George Earle, first Baron Lytton (1803–73)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004). On *The Last Days of Pompeii*, see M. Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History* (London 1997) 147–53 (novel), 153–82 (films); Brown (n.9) 5 (Lytton returned from Italy with the manuscript in February 1834; *Last Days of Pompeii* was a bestseller for the rest of the century); F.M. Turner, 'Christians and Pagans in Victorian Novels', in C. Edwards (ed.), *Roman Presences: Receptions of Rome in European Culture, 1789–1945* (Cambridge 1999) 173–87, at 174–5; Goldhill (n.7) 170, 195–6 (Greek vs. Roman opposition), 197–202. For the 1984 ABC-TV mini-series, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086746/>.

10 In fairness to Lytton, the journal's anonymous reader points out that fiercely dramatic depictions of weather were to the taste of the day—and the days which followed, it would seem. For example, *The Highwayman* (1906) by Alfred Noyes begins: "The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees. / The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas. / The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor, / And the highwayman came riding …".

and their establishment of a blissful home in democratic Athens, the antithesis of tyrannical Pompeii.[11] Lytton's Pompeii was inspired by a number of sources, including his own visit to the city, the Russian painter Karl Brullov's painting in Milan of the eruption of Vesuvius, and Sir William Gell's two-volume *Pompeiana*, which saw interest in Pompeii skyrocket in post-Napoleonic Britain.[12] On the back of Gell's publication of recent excavations, and the reports of homecoming tourists, Lytton takes his readers on a visual journey through the ancient city, along its streets and past its buildings, a journey poignantly underscored by hindsight knowledge of the city's impending fate. The prose has an archaeological quality.[13] The dramatic atmosphere approximates the kind of sublime moment sought by artists such as J.M.W. Turner, Joseph Wright, and John Martin, all of whom depicted the eruption of Vesuvius. Cecil B. DeMille was later inspired by the apocalyptic visions of these painters.[14]

In Lytton's conception, Rome of the 1st century AD is a place of cultural and moral decline, typified by the decadence of Arbaces, who is inferior to Christians, Greeks, and women of the calibre of Nydia. The novel's graphic depictions of feasting and sexual license have become its best known features. The witch of Vesuvius, though she lacks supernatural powers, shows Lytton's interest in the occult—an interest he shared with numerous members of the Victorian élite. Christianity is an unproblematic creed in *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the innocent antithesis of the evil and mysterious cult of Isis, which is the source of the novel's conflict. Roman paganism, especially that which is ancient and eastern (Isis deriving from Egypt), is corrupt. Christians are brave, faithful, and morally pure. In later novels,

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11 For a slightly expanded summary of the plot, see W. Leppmann, *Pompeii in Fact and Fiction* (London 1966) 129–31.

12 W. Gell, *Pompeiana: The Topography of Edifices and Ornaments of Pompeii*, 2 vols (London 1817–18). Further editions incorporating the results of later excavations were published in 1824, 1832, and 1852; A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Roman Topography and the Prism of Sir William Gell', in L. Haselberger and J. Humphrey (eds), *Imaging Ancient Rome: Documentation, Visualization, Imagination*, Journal of Roman Archaeology Supplementary Series no. 61 (Portsmouth, RI 2006) 285–96.

13 Wyke (n.9) 151; Goldhill (n.7) 183, 194, 202. Mary Beard, *The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found* (Cambridge, MA 2006) delights in undermining the impressions conveyed by Lytton in her account of unsavoury realities behind the impressive veneer of archaeological remains in Pompeii.

14 I am reminded by the journal's anonymous reader that this vision of apocalyptic spectacle as a reason for the eclipse of Roman civilisation embedded itself in the uninformed popular mind, most notably in Joan Collins' classic statement: "There's a moral laxity around ... It's like the Roman Empire. Wasn't everybody running around just covered in syphilis? And then it was destroyed by the volcano." For the quotation, see A. Pomeroy, *Then It Was Destroyed by the Volcano: The Ancient World in Film and Television* (London 2008) viii.

Christians would fight Christians, or a conflict between pagans and Christians would be resolved with the triumph of a particular brand of Christianity.

The reason for this absolutely fundamental change may be found in the intense theological debates of the time, especially those associated with the Tractarian (or Oxford) Movement.[15] At a time when several government measures gave support to the minority Catholic faith in Britain, a number of influential Anglican scholars, most associated with Oxford University, expressed their dissatisfaction with liberalism in theology, and with a perceived decline in emotional commitment to the Church resulting from the loss of older practices and rituals. These men were primarily responsible for a comprehensive series of translations of texts by early Christian theologians called *The Library of the Fathers*. From this foundation, it was argued that true Anglican doctrines may be traced back to the patristic age, especially to the first four centuries of the Christian Church under the Roman Empire. Among the Tractarians, so-called because of their series of *Tracts for the Times*, published between 1833 and 1841, were some impressive names: John Henry Newman, Edward Bouverie Pusey, John Keble, and Isaac Williams. By 1836 they were supporting certain features of Catholic worship in a way that made fellow Anglicans decidedly uncomfortable. Eventually, in 1845, Newman and a sizeable group of students converted to Catholicism. Newman was one of the most powerful minds of the century, a theologian who emphasised the role of priests, monasticism, asceticism, and celibacy in his Christian vision. By 1850, Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman had re-established the Roman Catholic hierarchy in England.[16]

In 1853, Charles Kingsley set out to engage the Tractarian vision of Christianity in a famous two-volume, 671-page novel called *Hypatia: New Foes with an Old Face*.[17] The novel's subtitle underlines the contemporary

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15 On the Tractarian Movement, see H.P. Liddon, *Life of E.B. Pusey*, 4 vols (London 1893); E.R. Norman, *Church and Society in England, 1770–1970: A Historical Study* (Oxford 1976); C.B. Faught, *The Oxford Movement: A Thematic History of the Tractarians and their Times* (University Park, PA 2003); Goldhill (n.7) 7, 154, 157, 169, 202–3, 212–14, 223–4. For the *Tracts* themselves, see <http://anglicanhistory.org/tracts/>. On *The Library of the Fathers*, see Liddon (n.15), vol. 1, 420–40, and <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/lfc_list.htm>.

16 R.W. Rhodes, *The Lion and the Cross: Early Christianity in Victorian Novels* (Columbus, OH 1995) argues in compelling detail that all these novels are essentially encodings of now-forgotten sectarian wars between the Victorian churches. I am grateful to Nick Lowe for this reference.

17 On *Hypatia*, see A. Sanders, 'The Argument from Tradition: *Hypatia*, *Fabiola* and *Callista*', in *The Victorian Historical Novel, 1840–1880* (London 1978) 120–48; Turner (n.9) 176–9; N. Vance, 'Kingsley, Charles (1819–75)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National*

intent behind this retelling of an ancient story. Hypatia, a woman famed for her learning and beauty, was a Neoplatonist philosopher, who lived and taught in Alexandria in the 4th and early 5th centuries—a time when, in Kingsley's words, the Roman Empire was "a dying idiot" (1853, I, xii). Her popularity incurred the jealous ire of Bishop Cyril of Alexandria, who eventually inspired a group of fanatical monks to tear her limb from limb in an act of mindless passion and violence. For Kingsley, Hypatia's gender rather than her philosophy was the underlying problem. As a woman, she proved a threat to the brand of Christianity marked by strong bishops, monks, and celibacy. Her challenge, as Kingsley saw it, was indeed about the true version of the faith, but the challenge was not intellectual. Instead, it was about suppression of natural passions and unhealthy attitudes towards women, such as those existing among the Tractarians and Catholics. Kingsley hated the ideal of celibacy because it stood opposed to family and national life, which in his eyes were the twin divine roots of the true Church.

On another level, Hypatia's story becomes an explanation for the superiority of the western Church over the eastern. Whereas the former was led by extraordinarily masculine, even 'muscular' leaders, and grew stronger with the infusion of new blood from northern and western Europe, the eastern Church became lost in metaphysical debate, mysticism, monasticism, and an effeminacy which was the result of over-civilisation, centuries without an infusion of fresh blood, and an enervated preoccupation with religious thought rather than godly action. The ultimate result of this enervation and repression of libido—and for Kingsley total abstinence from sex was seen as being an easier option than temperance—was conquest by Islam.[18]

The graphic character of the novel should be understood in light of this religious debate about abstinence and temperance, though of course many readers would have reacted to portrayals of sensual indulgence, passion, and

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Biography (Oxford 2004) 3–4; Goldhill (n.7) 32–3, 170, 174, 203–7, 221, 244, 254, 256, 257, 259, 262, 275 n.21. On Kingsley's life and writings, see S. Chitty, *The Beast and the Monk: A Life of Charles Kingsley* (London 1974); J. Hartley, *The Novels of Charles Kingsley: A Christian Social Interpretation* (Folkestone 1977); Vance (n.17).

18 Kingsley and Thomas Hughes are today seen as leading lights of the movement which came to be known as 'Muscular Christianity' during Victorian times. Adherents of the movement stressed the need for energetic evangelism and vigorous masculinity. They promoted physical strength and health as key ingredients in the active pursuit of Christian ideals in private and public life. The term 'Muscular Christianity', which had existed in a pejorative sense beforehand, was made famous by the clergyman T.C. Sandars in a review of Kingsley's novel *Two Years Ago* in the *Saturday Review* of 21 February 1857. Kingsley found the term offensive at first, but later embraced it: D. Rosen, 'The Volcano and the Cathedral: Muscular Christianity and the Origins of Primal Manliness', in D.E. Hall (ed.), *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge 1994) 17–44, at 17.

violence without recourse to religious thought. Indeed, these historical novels formed a significant outlet for Victorian prurience and sadistic tendencies. This in turn becomes another reason for their popularity and a distinctive feature of their narratives. The same points might be made with equal force about cinematic portrayals of Roman life which trade on bare chests, beautiful stars, and vivid depictions of torture, death, and dying. Kingsley's account of Hypatia's death deserves to be repeated, though in selection and with the knowledge that some contemporaries, among them Lord Tennyson, found it too graphic.[19] Philammon is the male lead in the story. A former monk, he has fallen in love with Hypatia (1853, II, 289):

> She shook herself free from her tormentors, and springing back, rose for one moment to her full height naked, snow-white against the dusky mass around—shame and indignation in those wide clear eyes, but not a stain of fear. With one hand she clasped her golden locks around her; the other long white arm was stretched upward toward the great still Christ appealing—and who dare say, in vain?—from man to God. Her lips were opened to speak; but the words that should have come from them reached God's ear alone; for in an instant Peter [leader of the monks] struck her down, the dark mass closed over her again ... and then wail on wail, long, wild, ear-piercing, rang along the vaulted roofs, and thrilled like the trumpet of avenging angels through Philammon's ears.
>
> Crushed against a pillar, unable to move in the dense mass, he pressed his hands over his ears. He could not shut out those shrieks! When would they end? What in the name of the God of mercy were they doing? Tearing her piecemeal? Yes, and worse than that ...

Hypatia provoked an almost instantaneous response from the Tractarians, and in the same genre. First to reply was Cardinal Wiseman, whose *Fabiola* (or, *The Church of the Catacombs*) appeared in 1854, the year immediately following the publication of *Hypatia*.[20] Intended originally for embattled Catholics in England, it proved immensely popular elsewhere and was translated into ten languages. Set in 4th century Rome, during the persecutions under Diocletian, the heroine of Wiseman's novel is Fabiola, a Roman girl of noble family (not the martyred saint of a later period). She has access to the finest philosophical education that money and privilege can buy but remains deeply unhappy with her life. Her slave Syra is secretly a

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19 For Charles William Mitchell's famous painting *Hypatia* (1885), which is heavily influenced by Kingsley's account of Hypatia's death, see further below.

20 On *Fabiola*, see Sanders (n.17); Turner (n.9) 179–80; M. Wheeler, *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Cambridge 2006) 70–1; R.J. Schiefen, 'Wiseman, Nicholas Patrick Stephen (1802–65)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) 4; Goldhill (n.7) 207–9.

Christian. One day, the frustrated Fabiola strikes Syra and is amazed at the love and devotion she continues to receive in return. Her journey on the path to Christianity begins, guided by Syra and her own cousin Agnes. Meanwhile, a young boy named Pancratius, a pious Christian and the son of a martyr, is being bullied at school by a classmate named Corvinus, whose hatred of Christians reaches its apex when he organises the lynching of their former teacher Cassianus. Once again, Christian forgiveness is extended to Corvinus by Pancratius, who saves his life shortly afterwards. Finally, a mysterious character named Fulvius turns out to be a bounty-hunter from the East, intent on discovering the identity of Christians and turning them over to the authorities for reward. He falls in love with Fabiola, and aims initially to marry her. Finally, however, he rejects his evil ways, converts to Christianity, and becomes a hermit, living a life free from sin.

The story is told in heroic language which emphasises the solidarity of early Christians, their love for one another in the face of persecution, their readiness to forgive, the power of forgiveness, and the certainty of their ultimate triumph. Wiseman, who was educated and lived for considerable periods in Rome, attempted to enhance the authority of his novel, in keeping with the practice of Scott and others, by incorporating several chapters of historical information about worship and burial in the catacombs. It seems clear that theological works such as the *Tracts* were aimed at clergy and academics, whereas the novels were intended for a wider audience—especially the young and impressionable, it would seem, given the number of troubled, uncertain youths who are assigned leading roles in the various stories.

Newman, who became a cardinal after converting to Catholicism, likewise answered Kingsley with a historical novel of his own. Entitled *Callista*, it was published in 1855 as a sort of 'prequel' to Wiseman's *Fabiola*.[21] Set in the mid-3rd century in the city of Sicca Veneria in the Roman province of Africa, *Callista* deals with the persecution of Christians under the emperor Decius. The title character is a beautiful, young and gifted Greek girl. She has just arrived in North Africa from Greece with her brother Aristo. Like Fabiola, in spite of all her fine qualities, Callista is fundamentally unhappy with her life. She meets a troubled Christian youth named Agellius, who predictably falls in love with the newcomer and wants to marry her. Members of Agellius' family, however, seek to pry him away from his faith. They

[21] On *Callista*, see Sanders (n.17); Turner (n.9) 180–1; I. Ker, 'Newman, John Henry (1801–90)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) 11–12; Goldhill (n.7) 207, 208–9, 214. For an online text, see <http://www.newmanreader.org/Works/callista/index.html>.

include his brother Juba, his uncle Jucundus, and his mother Gurta, a pagan witch. Their influence is countered when Agellius meets a charismatic Christian priest named Caecilius, later identified as St. Cyprian of Carthage, who becomes a father-figure to the troubled youth. After a terrible plague of locusts, Christians are targeted by enraged pagans and persecution commences. Agellius flees Sicca Veneria while Callista feels herself drawn to the persecuted faith. The Roman authorities compel everyone to offer incense to the pagan gods as a sign of loyalty. Callista is made to face her identification with Christianity and the inevitable result is martyrdom.

Newman's *Callista* draws from the author's personal experiences as a convert to Roman Catholicism and clearly compares the imperial persecutions of Roman times with contemporary attitudes to Catholicism. Questions of faith, integrity, and truth unto death are prominent, and it is notable that his characters tend to be ambiguous and troubled, all at some point required to accept or reject Christianity in the face of persecution. Newman's language is far stronger than that of Wiseman. He is clear, for instance, that the cities of the Roman Empire were places of evil and pollution. On occasion, he even indulges the prurient and sadistic imaginations of his readers, most notably in describing the aftermath to Callista's death. After being martyred on the rack, her body is exposed to the elements and the vultures. When Agellius her Christian lover comes to reclaim her remains, Newman describes how he bends down and scoops up pathetic bits, including lumps of bloodied sand, and places them in a small bag. Her remains are taken to a cave where they become holy relics that give rise to miracles. Newman thought that ecclesiastical miracles should be taken seriously, though the devotion to relics was in the eyes of many Anglican theologians among the worst practices of the continental Roman Catholic Church.[22]

Many 19th century novels imagine the Roman Empire as a precursor to the British Empire, with Rome as a model either to emulate for its rise or avoid for its fall. In adventure stories aimed at teenage boys Rome often stood for power, success, and exotic opportunity. The plots are built on intrigue, a strong moral code, and celebration of military prowess. These were novels for boys who would inherit and administer the British Empire. One of the most influential was *The Gladiators: A Tale of Rome and Judaea* (1863) by George John Whyte-Melville, who had the benefit of a classical education at Eton and a military career in the Coldstream Guards, as well as irregular

22 On Newman's narrative as a riposte to Kingsley, see C. Edwards, 'Roads to Rome', in M. Liversidge and C. Edwards (eds), *Imagining Rome: British Artists and Rome in the Nineteenth Century* (London 1996) 8–19, at 15.

service in the Crimean War.[23] Whyte-Melville produced a translation of Horace in 1850 but *The Gladiators* owes relatively little to ancient sources and is not marked by painstaking historical accuracy or attention to detail. Instead, Whyte-Melville is concerned with vivid characterisation and the propagation of a wholesome moral code for the privileged youth of his day.

The Gladiators revolves around a young Briton named Esca, who at the start of the story has been transported as a slave to Rome, where he leaves British primitivism behind and learns qualities such as self-discipline, bravery, and a brand of masculinity that is ideally suited to imperialism.[24] His physical characteristics are impressive, especially his musculature and towering height. His experience of Rome as a paternal, masculine, and ultimately just place commences with his purchase by the general Licinius, a kindly figure whom neither yet knows is Esca's real father, following a love affair in Britain with Guenebra, a British princess. In the central episode of the novel Esca fights as a gladiator in the arena against the evil Placidus. Whyte-Melville emphasises how the crowd gazes admiringly at his near-naked body. Although Esca is defeated, he survives unscathed and continues on the path to Roman identity, freedom and success: he speaks Latin, taught to him originally by his mother, and attempts at one point to prevent the assassination of Vitellius. Mariamne, a Jewish girl who has converted to Christianity, loves him. At the end of the novel, Esca and Mariamne are delivered into the protection of Licinius before they can be killed by Flavian soldiers who are pouring into the conquered city of Jerusalem. Licinius learns of his paternity and embraces the lovers as his children. Esca is not told the truth, though it is hardly necessary, for the literal relationship would bring no advantage over the symbolic one which ensues. His identity as an ideal son of Rome is complete.

The forces for evil and disorder in Whyte-Melville's Rome owe much to earlier novels. A character named Valeria, for instance, resembles Bulwer-Lytton's Julia in her Roman haughtiness, arrogance, and immodesty. Again recalling *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Whyte-Melville paints Valeria as a devotee of Isis, a cult dominated by women and easterners, especially eunuchs such as Spado, who is fat, slothful, weak, and effeminate. Valeria tries to seduce Esca, kissing him while he is chained in prison. She has an affair with a gladiator and even disguises herself as a man in order to enlist in

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23 On Whyte-Melville's life, see J. Hinings, 'Whyte-Melville, George John (1821–78)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004).

24 R. Hoberman, 'Ancient Rome, Gender and British Imperialism', ch. 8 in *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (New York 1997) 103–17, esp. 105.

the Roman army which is besieging Jerusalem. Ultimately, her transgressive behaviour brings about her doom: broken and full of self-loathing, she dies at Esca's feet.[25] She is the antithesis of the male imperial ideal personified by Esca.

A glance at contemporary painting confirms the profound influence of these novels on the popular imagination.[26] Edward John Poynter's famous *Faithful unto Death* (exhibited in the Royal Academy, London, 1865), depicts a 'worried' but stolid sentinel at his post while Pompeii burns behind him. It became one of the most famous images in Victorian painting, familiar to schoolchildren well into the twentieth century through reproductions in textbooks. The painting is rich in themes which appear in historical fiction of the period. It has, for instance, been seen as a glorification of British imperialism in Roman disguise, and as carrying a subversive message (the 'hero' is not a general or a statesman, like most subjects of historical painting sanctioned by the academy, but a subordinate let down by bastard superiors who have not seen fit to release him). He is one of the ordinary people, who generally pass unrecorded in classical literary texts—the evidence of his existence is archaeological. Poynter took pains in the notes to the exhibition to point out that his depiction was based on the discovery of a skeleton found in full armour near the Herculaneum gate of Pompeii. Although Poynter did not cite Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* as his source, the subject has been linked convincingly to an incident towards the end of the novel, in which Bulwer-Lytton describes a sentry's determination to stay at his post in terms of deplorable submission to an autocratic régime.[27]

Poynter's concern for *hoi polloi* turns up once again in his *Israel in Egypt* (1867), where the grandeur of Egypt is shown as the work of beaten and whipped slaves, and his painting entitled *The Catapult* (1868) concentrates on the strenuous activity of those who man a catapult at (apparently) the

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25 Hoberman (n.24) 109.

26 Edwards (n.22) 15 discusses the "preoccupation with early Christianity ... common to many nineteenth-century historical novels set in the ancient Roman world", focusing particularly on Kingsley and Newman, implicitly illustrating along the way the impact of their two novels on public thinking—and the ways in which novels were seen as, or were, "a vehicle for the propagation of different theological views".

27 The excellent commentary of E. Prettejohn, 'Recreating Rome', in M. Liversidge and C. Edwards (eds), *Imagining Rome: British Artists and Rome in the Nineteenth Century* (London 1996) 125–70, at 126–8, on this painting is illuminating. Mitchell (n.9) has a black-and-white (lithograph?) version of Poynter's painting inserted opposite page 112. It is labelled 'Illustration to *Last Days of Pompeii*'. For Poynton's preparedness to court controversy, see Goldhill (n.7) 33–6.

siege of Carthage. This was another painting which became famous through its reproduction in later textbooks.[28]

Simeon Solomon's *Habet!* (Royal Academy, London, 1865) portrays well-to-do Roman ladies gazing intently at gladiatorial combat. It was exhibited at the same time as Poynter's *Faithful unto Death*. Elizabeth Prettejohn notes that some commentators have viewed Solomon's painting as an 'illustration' to Whyte-Melville's *The Gladiators* (1863).[29] Once more this painting seems to condemn Roman decadence, while simultaneously providing sensuous titillation.

Charles William Mitchell's controversial painting *Hypatia* (1885), now exhibited in the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, gave rise to a heated debate when it was first exhibited at the Grosvenor Gallery in London. Hypatia is presented nude, her clothes torn off by the mob, stretching her left arm towards an image of Christ as she leans back over an altar in a vain appeal to God. Although there is ancient evidence for her nude martyrdom, the inspiration is plainly Kingsley's account of Hypatia's gruesome murder (see above).[30]

The most influential historical novel of the century was Lewis (Lew) Wallace's masterpiece, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1880). As an American, the formative influences on Wallace were somewhat different from those which helped to shape the British novels considered so far. Born in Indiana in 1827, Wallace served with distinction in both the Mexican War and the Civil War, rising to the rank of Major-General in the Union Army. He is credited with saving Washington D.C. from the Confederate advance. After the Civil War (1861–5), Wallace served as the governor of New Mexico, and in 1881 was appointed to serve as the United States Minister to Turkey. *Ben-Hur*, published in 1880, sold over two million copies during his lifetime and became the most widely read novel in history until overtaken by sales of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.[31]

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28 Prettejohn (n.27) 130–2.

29 Prettejohn (n.27) 128–30.

30 Mitchell quoted from Kingsley's 29th chapter in the Grosvenor Gallery catalogue; cf. Prettejohn (n.27) 154–5; Goldhill (n.7) 32–3, pl. 3. I want to credit the journal's anonymous reader for providing most of the references, and many of the ideas, for this short discussion of the impact of the novels on contemporary paintings.

31 See Mayer's introduction to L. Wallace, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, ed. with intro. and notes by D. Mayer, Oxford's World Classics (Oxford and New York 1998) vii–xxiii. On the novel's popularity, see Goldhill (n.7) 215, 218, 243, 304 n.124.

Once more, the Roman Empire stands for dark contemporary forces which threaten a Christian way of life—imperial forces of repression, racism, and exploitation. The popularity of the novel suggests that this interpretation was readily accepted at the time. Wallace's message may be applied to the Confederate states, but the novel was written during his time in New Mexico, which tends to imply that he was conscious of his own responsibilities as representative of the Union government. The novel's unique feel for multiculturalism probably owes more to New Mexico than to Washington. In exciting and memorable scenes, *Ben-Hur* dramatises the interaction of Romans, Jews, and Christians during the lifetime of Christ. The hero, Judah Ben-Hur, is a Jewish nobleman wrongly condemned to the galleys on a charge of attempting to murder a Roman official. His life as a galley-slave, his escape during a naval battle, his adoption by the kindly Quintus Arrius, a Roman general, the healing of his mother and sister from leprosy, and above all the famous chariot-race against his Roman foe and former friend, Messala, are among the most vivid recreations of the ancient world ever published.[32]

Wallace employed a relatively limited range of sources, including Tacitus, the New Testament, Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, William Smith's *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* and *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Geography*, and elements inherited from previous Roman novels. Whyte-Melville seems to have been a particular inspiration for the circus scenes and for ideas like the felicitous adoption.[33]

The work of Walter Pater operates on a more intellectual and cerebral plain. Pater's great novel, published in 1885, is the philosophically deep and erudite *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, an exploration of human intellectualism in relation to the divine.[34] The author was one of the leading

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32 Gore Vidal (*Palimpsest: A Memoir* [New York 1995]), the screenwriter, and Charlton Heston (*In the Arena: An Autobiography* [New York 1995]), the lead actor, differ over the unspoken suggestion of a boyhood homosexual relationship between Ben-Hur and Messala in the 1959 film; cf. Mayer (n.31) xxii–xxiii. Vidal's version may also be heard in the 1995 documentary, *The Celluloid Closet*: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112651/>.

33 Mayer (n.31) xv–xviii.

34 On *Marius*, see U.C. Knoepflmacher, 'V: Walter Pater: The Search for a Religious Atmosphere', 149–88, and 'VI: The "Atmospheres" of *Marius the Epicurean*', 189–223, in *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater and Samuel Butler* (Princeton 1965); C. Dahl, 'Pater's *Marius* and Historical Novels on Early Christian Times', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28 (1973) 1–24; Levey's introduction to W.H. Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, ed. with intro. and notes by M. Levey (Harmondsworth 1985); Turner (n.9) 181–3; L. Brake, 'Pater, Walter Horatio (1839–1894)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004); B.A. Inman, '*Marius the Epicurean*', in *The Literary Encyclopedia* (published 12 July 2006):

members of an(other) Oxford group, whose preoccupation was with the concept of aesthetic beauty, seen as being the antithesis of the bare asceticism espoused by the Tractarians and evangelicals. Oscar Wilde was profoundly influenced by Pater, who taught him at Oxford.[35] For Pater, aesthetic beauty required appreciation as the outstanding ideal, as the pure essence of divinity, and as an end in itself rather than for purposes of moral improvement.[36]

Marius, the title character, is another youth beset by uncertainty and doubt. The novel recreates his spiritual journey from the ancient paganism of Numa, through immersion in various ancient philosophies, including Epicureanism, Platonism, and Stoicism, to life among Christians, though at the end of the story his adherence to the Christian faith remains less-than-complete. He is about to become a Christian when he is arrested (at a Christian meeting), and dies for the faith to which he does not yet belong. The kindly people who are with him as he lies dying assume he is a Christian martyr and so administer the last rites. Like Vergil, indeed like many noble non-Christians, he has become a soul worthy of Christ. Pater sees Christianity under the tolerant and enlightened Marcus Aurelius, with whom Marius manages an audience, as an ongoing social construct, much like a rational academic debate, rather than a divine construct based on incontrovertible doctrines and irrational faith. Hence it becomes permissible for Marius to remain equivocal in his attitudes, in spite of the close identification with Christians that comes through living with them.

Heavily influenced by Gibbon's appreciation of the Antonine Age, and indeed by Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Pater describes the empire ruled by Marcus Aurelius as an environment in which the ideal of Culture has triumphed over the ideal of Asceticism, the former promoting the harmonious development of all the parts of human nature, determined with respect to justice and good taste.[37] The Church of Rome was supposedly committed to

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<http://www.litencyc.com/php/sworks.php?rec=true&UID=9863> (accessed 6 March 2014); Goldhill (n.7) 157, 191, 218–21, 223, 231, 244, 248–9.

35 Wilde's debt to Pater is well demonstrated by R. Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (London 1987) 41–50, 80–2, 95, who stresses that Wilde nonetheless disparaged Pater in later life (50, 272–3). I am indebted to the journal's anonymous reader for this reference.

36 For Pater's treatment of the ancient world as a window through which to analyse the contemporary modern world, see M. Winkler, 'Fact, Fiction, and the Feeling of History', in Winkler (ed.) (2009) (n.5) 174–224, at 201 and n.55. The journal's anonymous reader points out that Pater's novel is cited as authoritative on the two remaining occasions it is cited in Winkler (ed.) (2009) (n.5): at 100 (by D. Clay, 'Marcus Aurelius: The Empire over Himself', 89–101) and at 150 n.14 (by M. Winkler, 'Edward Gibbon and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*', 145–73). A triumph of the novel indeed!

37 For the influence of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, see J.A.K. Thomson, *Classical Influences on English Prose* (New York 1956) 117: "it is certain that [Marcus'] charm has

this order of ideas, and so embraced the ideal of spiritual *development*. Among other features, its sponsorship of the image of the Madonna was inspiring a new respect for women. Pater's vision obviously stands opposed to contemporary ascetic views and to evangelical emphasis on morality, authoritarian preaching, masculinity, and the second coming of Christ. For Pater, the early Christian Church was committed to intellectualism, justice, and beauty.

An evangelical riposte may be read in two novels by Frederic William Farrar, *Darkness and Dawn: Scenes in the Days of Nero* (1891) and *Gathering Clouds: A Tale of the Days of St. Chrysostom* (1895).[38] In *Darkness and Dawn*, Rome represents sin, especially sins of the flesh, and the triumph of Christianity is due to the providence and will of God. It seems that Farrar, who was Archdeacon and Canon of Westminster, understood Pater and his circle in terms of such a Rome. Nero's court emerges as an entirely evil place, in which wives murder husbands, brothers kill one another, sons murder their mothers, and in which adultery, political betrayal, banquets, orgies, and torture take place regularly. Most despicable of all its characters are its women, who possess no morals, no concern for family, and no ability to love their men or children. The undercurrent of misogyny is heavily powerful. In stark contrast (1891, 293):

> ... for the poor Christians of Rome, though the days were so evil, life had neither tumult nor terror. They had found that which more than compensated them for the trials of the world. Their life was a spiritual life. To them, to live was Christ.

Farrar's descriptions of martyrdoms hark back to the graphic detail of Newman and others, itself based on the translated work of early Christian writers, but this was the moment of triumph for the innocent and pure Christian faith. Centuries of decline and corruption followed, until the Protestant Reformation reclaimed the earlier purity as the Christian ideal.

Gathering Clouds, the follow-up novel to *Darkness and Dawn*, describes a Church that has become strengthened by official recognition but weakened by moral decline. Priests and laymen alike have been corrupted by power, money and (above all) sex. The moral goodness of St. Chrysostom marks him

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been deeply felt by persons so different as Matthew Arnold and Walter Pater", though Thomson offers no particular examples.

38 Turner (n.9) 183–7; N. Vance, 'Farrar, Frederic William (1831–1903)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) 3; Goldhill (n.7) 156, 182, 226–7, 259–61, 263 (*Darkness and Dawn*); 156, 230, 259–60 (*Gathering Clouds*).

out from nominal Christians, hypocrisy, superstition, and clerical corruption. One clergyman is described thus (1895, 228):

> He was notoriously one of the *auriscalpii*, who abused their priestly position to lead captive silly women laden with lust ... He was one of those who, sanctioned by the abuse of custom, had lived with a young and beautiful *agapet*, whom he called 'his spiritual sister', and for whose richly dressed loveliness he always secured a prominent place in St. Sophia.

The themes of sex and misogyny in the novel eventually bring Chrysostom undone, when he offends the empress. Christians fight one another in the streets of Constantinople and commit horrific acts of torture against their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Nominal Christianity has overtaken the original, pure brand of the faith.[39]

Quo Vadis? (taken from St. Peter's cry, *Quo vadis, Domine*? ["Where are you going, Lord?"]), by the eminent Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz, was first published in Polish in 1896 and translated into English the very next year, 1897. It won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1905, an award for "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency". The story is a painstaking account of the coming of Christianity to Rome during the reign of Nero. It describes excesses at the court of Nero, the ministries of St. Peter and St. Paul, and the transformation of a Roman general named Marcus Vinicius, who converts to the new religion after falling in love with a Christian slave named Lygia. The novel ends with an account of the Neronian persecutions which entails bloodcurdling horrors in the arena as Christians become martyrs by dreadful means. In this part of the book especially, Sienkiewicz's hatred for the German and Russian persecutors of Poland is obvious. Although the author proclaimed his dependence on Tacitus and Suetonius, the interpretation of early Christianity is plainly his own, and many elements are standard fare for the genre. The story is really a patriotic manifesto in which, in spite of dreadful torments, the small community of Christians vindicates itself against the oppressions of a vast and powerful empire. It expresses the hope which Sienkiewicz felt for his native Poland. The correspondence between ancient and modern is hardly left to the imagination because the heroine Lygia is a Christian princess from the area of northern Europe which later became Poland. There are acute character sketches of St. Peter, Nero, and Petronius,

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39 In *Androcles and the Lion* (1913) George Bernard Shaw was able to satirise the evangelical efforts to appropriate early Christianity merely by reducing early Christian figures to caricatures. So much for the earnest efforts of men like Farrar, and so much for taking historical novels as seriously as Farrar and others had done.

though Sienkiewicz takes Petronius too literally.[40] Ultimately, the novel trades on the sensational—it culminates with Lygia being tied naked to the horns of a huge German aurochs in the arena, only to be rescued by the bear-man Ursus, her personal slave, who manages to kill the aurochs with his bare hands.[41]

By the latter decades of the Victorian era, large numbers of novels set in various historical periods were written for the patriotic instruction of adolescent boys and for light reading. Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Henry Rider Haggard stand out among writers of the new style of historical romance, but they were by no means the only prominent exponents of the genre.[42] An especially prodigious writer was George Alfred Henty (1832–1902), a "Victorian master of schoolboy thrillers", who wrote 122 historical novels from 1867 until his death, at the rate of about four a year.[43] Henty's *Beric the Briton: A Story of the Roman Invasion* (1893) bears a close resemblance to Whyte-Melville's *The Gladiators* in elements such as the age and bearing of its main character, conquest by Rome, transport to Rome as a gladiator, romance with a Christian girl, performance in the arena (Beric kills a lion with his bare hands), and disgust at the decadent life of Nero's court.[44] In comparative terms, much of the new output is slight and derivative work. The great age of 19th century historical novels set in ancient Rome was passing, even as *Quo Vadis?* took the Nobel Prize.

II

The reasons for change are not hard to find. Society changed as the Victorian era gave way to the Edwardian, and so too did religious debate, notions of recreation, and attitudes to empire.[45] Yet the momentum which powered the

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40 M. Johnston, 'Sienkiewicz and Petronius', *Classical Weekly* 25 (1932) 79; G. Highet, 'Petronius the Moralist', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 72 (1941) 176–94, at 178–9.

41 Wyke (n.9) 110–18, 139–40 (for both the novel and the 1951 MGM film), 112–13 (Sienkiewicz's reliance on Tacitus and Suetonius), 139 (claims that the film rested on the authority of Ovid, Petronius, Juvenal, Tacitus, and Suetonius); Goldhill (n.7) 221–3, 228.

42 E. Mehew, 'Stevenson, Robert Louis (1850–94)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004); M.N. Cohen, 'Rider Haggard, Henry (1856–1925)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004).

43 M. Hastings, 'When Boys were Boys', *The Spectator*, 29 March 2003, 1–3, at 1; P. Newbolt, 'Henty, George Alfred (1832–1902)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004).

44 Goldhill (n.7) 158, 159, 224–5.

45 On the Victorian notion of 'rational' recreation, which was improving and edifying, see D. Mayer, *Playing out the Empire: Ben-Hur and Other Toga Plays and Films, 1883–1908: A Critical Anthology*, ed. with intro. and notes by D. Mayer; and an essay on the incidental

most famous historical novels was not lost. Sunday Schools, for instance, continued to generate children's tales set in ancient Rome for religious and moral instruction. Such stories had been dovetailing with the main series of Roman novels for several decades, and their authors, many of whom were women, sometimes wrote for more mature audiences. Among the better known novels in this category may be mentioned *The Martyrs of Carthage* (1849) by Mrs J.B. Webb (Annie Peploe).[46] The most direct and significant influence, of course, extended into 'toga' plays and motion pictures. This indicates, among other things, the importance of vivid description—or the visual element—for understanding the great popularity of the historical novels. When 'toga' plays promised visual extravaganzas and pyrotechnics (for example, productions of *The Last Days of Pompeii*), and when films subsequently managed to go beyond this, the technology of the novel was obviously surpassed.[47]

David Mayer's study of the era of 'toga' plays (1880s to 1920s) is keen to dispel any lingering derision and, instead, to describe a new genre, which was energetic, broadly popular, literally explosive on occasion, and well suited to the times.[48] The advent of the genre owes much to the extraordinary impact

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music for 'toga' dramas by K. Preston (Oxford 1994) 17. The social composition of the mass reading public is examined by R.D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago 1957). For late 19th and early 20th century British attitudes to Roman imperialism, see R.F. Betts, 'The Allusion to Rome in British Imperialist Thought of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Victorian Studies* (Dec. 1971) 149–59, esp. 149–53 (approval), 153–9 (concern that Britain might fall like Rome); C. Wood, *Olympian Dreamers: Victorian Classical Painters, 1860–1914* (London 1983) (note in particular Lawrence Alma-Tadema's 'Victorians in Togas').

46 The story, set in the Roman province of Africa in the early 3rd century, is based on the *Passion of St. Perpetua, St. Felicity, and their Companions*. On the *Passion*, see H. Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford 1972); J. Amat (ed.), *Passion de Perpétue et de Félicité; suivi des Actes*, Sources chrétiennes no. 417 (Paris 1996); J. Salisbury, *Perpetua's Passion* (New York 1997); R. Butler, *The New Prophecy and 'New Visions': Evidence of Montanism in the Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas* (Washington, D.C. 2006).

47 Of course, the power of the written word to inspire imaginative visions was less constrained by technological change. The point is really that the evolving visual technology produced results that constantly amazed and delighted. In regard to the power of the new visual technology, it seems relevant to point out that the Salvation Army produced a film entitled *Soldiers of the Cross* in 1899–1900. Conceived and developed by Commandant Herbert Henry Booth, son of Salvation Army founder William Booth, *Soldiers of the Cross* was in fact an illustrated lecture, combining 200 photographic glass slides with 15 short dramatised film segments and orchestral or choir music to relate the stories of Christ and the early Christian martyrs. It is thought by many to have been Australia's first feature-length film. The presentation took slightly over two hours. See Hillard (n.5) 112 n.16.

48 Mayer (n.45) x–xii, 1–20; Mayer (n.31) ix–x. The term 'toga play' was probably coined by the British theatre critic, Henry Chance Newton (Mayer [n.45] 2).

of Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur* (1880), which was translated quickly to the stage and inspired a stream of 'toga' novels and plays in its wake, many closely repeating the themes and basic situations of *Ben-Hur*.[49] The lavish plays were spectacles, sure enough, but in imitating Wallace they passed on his deft handling of important elements of the historical novels which dealt with contemporary concerns. Mayer thinks that the new genre's appeal crossed social and educational barriers.[50] In religious terms, the plays were both inspirational and non-divisive. They were normally set in periods of persecution by Rome and employed a brand of early Christianity which was vaguely evangelical but ultimately non-sectarian, so that it could be supported by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and evangelical Christians. Clergy forgot earlier warnings against attendance at the theatre and encouraged their congregations to see these plays.[51] The faithful thronged theatres in London and New York, ignoring critical disdain. The experience was undoubtedly a pious one. Wallace was reluctant to have Christ portrayed on the stage but eventually permitted a shaft of limelight to suggest the Saviour's presence.

The plays articulated a simplistic, wholesome morality through melodrama, involving evil villains, innocent victims, and lurid scenes. The Roman Empire could supply backdrops either menacing or awe-inspiring, in accordance with differing views of the time. On one hand, Rome was a world of pleasure, sensual gratification, and omnipresent vice. On the other, it was a world of imperial power and success. For British and American audiences, Rome was almost a parallel culture; it was both similar and different; it simultaneously attracted and repelled.[52] Imperial comparisons were a source of both pride and concern for audiences of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Mayer argues that each 'toga' play became an arena for reconciling conflicting views of the relevant modern and ancient empires. Accordingly, theatre-going was not harmless escapism, for the audience was actively choosing to confront and assent to the world portrayed on the stage.[53] This world was patriarchal—lovers are normally virtuous Roman males and innocent Christian females—but women are capable of opposing imperialism

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49 Spink (n.5) 81–3.

50 Mayer (n.45) 17.

51 Note, however, Mayer (n.45) 16 (on suitable fare for a Salvationist congregation), and the reservations of Salvation Army Commander William Booth, cited in Hillard (n.5) 112 n.16.

52 Mayer (n.45) 7–8. For Rome as *us*, and Rome as 'home', see C. Edwards, *Writing Rome* (Cambridge 1996) 113.

53 Mayer (n.45) 6–11.

and producing change. As such, the plays also acted as testing grounds for acceptable female behaviour in contemporary society.[54]

Early films tried to replicate the experience of 'toga' theatre on the big screen. In the 1920s, however, films set out to present stories in a manner that was more true-to-life, and a profound change in taste was thereby generated. The 'toga' plays went out of fashion,[55] though their stories were still translated to the big screen, where there was greater scope for a convincing and visually stunning presentation of the historical settings and standard themes. The epics of directors like D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. De Mille followed, and more recently a new era has dawned. *Gladiator* does not foreground Christianity as its predecessors did, but it certainly employs other 19th century elements, such as imperialism, military prowess, masculinity, an evil emperor, intrigue, brutality, the arena, glistening flesh, passion, and high drama.[56] Its success implies that such themes remain relevant and that the Roman Empire remains an appropriate vehicle for calling them to mind. Rome, in other words, in all its complications and contrasts, is still about *us*, whether we identify with the strong or the weak, the males or the females, the Romans or their subjects.

III

Why did historians not become more involved in the important debates surveyed above, and how did they respond to the claims of the novelists when at last momentum began to build in the latter half of the 19th century? History, it should be stressed, was a developing discipline, but part of the reason for its ponderous development was the fact that historical fiction was seen as a vivid and compelling representation of the past. The historical novel was a medium of considerable authority in the eyes of many people. A survey of relevant attitudes seems to indicate that imaginative reconstructions were received as persuasive depictions of actual conditions in the past. Mayer, for

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54 Mayer (n.45) 14–15; cf. J.A. Kestner, *Mythology and Misogyny: The Social Discourse of Nineteenth-Century British Classical-Subject Painting* (London 1989) 16.

55 Mayer (n.45) x–xi.

56 J. Solomon, '*Gladiator* from Screenplay to Screen', in Winkler (ed.) (2004) (n.3) 1–15, at 12, observes that a scene was actually filmed in which the hero Maximus glimpses Christian prisoners awaiting their fate in the Colosseum. If the scene had been retained, it would have implied that the Christian experience was something of a parallel universe to that of Maximus in the High Roman Empire. P.W. Rose, 'The Politics of Gladiator', in Winkler (ed.) (2004) (n.3) 150–72, at 164, sees this singular hint of Christianity in *Gladiator* as a strong hint "at a new alternative to the Roman way of life" (and thus of the film's closer, if quiet, debt to previous epics than most viewers would have thought). I am once more indebted to the journal's anonymous reader for pointing this out to me.

instance, emphasises that those who saw 'toga' plays in the late 19th and early 20th centuries thought they were witnessing an enactment of history. Claims for the archaeological exactness of settings and costumes tended to confirm this impression.[57] The situation was apparently similar for historical novels set in ancient Rome throughout the 19th century. The novelists regularly made extravagant statements about the historical accuracy of their accounts, their dependence upon ancient sources and their painstaking research. F.W. Farrar, in the preface to *Gathering Clouds*, made strident claims that are clearly intended to bolster the authority of his interpretation (1895, vii–viii):

> So far as the historic outline was concerned the picture was not an imaginative landscape, but an absolute photograph. Every circumstance, every particular, even of costume and custom, was derived directly from the history, poetry, satires, and romances of classic writers, or from the literature and remains of the early days of Christianity. If I had not followed this method I should not have been faithful to the main object which I set before me.

Farrar distinguishes between "an imaginative landscape" and "an absolute photograph" in a way which observes that imagination falls short of reality in persuasive influence. The underlying distinction is surely a conventional one between fiction and history. Although outwardly respectful of historical methodology, Farrar's procedure nonetheless embodies a threat and a challenge to the authority of history. He wants to establish his personal standard of source criticism and use of imagination as authoritative. He wants to enhance the message of his novel by enhancing the impression of its historical accuracy—as though its basis is objective rather than subjective and the level of imagination is appropriate. His readers are assured that they are not being led astray. It seems clear that such claims were taken seriously. The novels frequently derive less from archaeology and ancient writers than they do from imagination and earlier novels in the series, but they were vivid and compelling as recreations of the past.

Like the novelists, historians were trying to establish claims to authority over the past. A number of factors inhibited them, and perhaps the reaction against imagination, though understandable in the circumstances, might now be seen as a strategy with distinct limits. The development of Roman history in particular had problems to overcome in the 19th century, especially in

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[57] Mayer (n.45) 17. Cf. Prettejohn (n.27) 155 on Mitchell's nude portrait of Hypatia: "Critics admired the archaeological specificity of the altar and the surrounding architecture … [which was] the archaeological specificity expected of a Roman picture in the later Victorian period." Even if the focus of the critics was slightly distorted by the confronting nudity of Hypatia in this particular instance, the general point remains valid.

English-speaking societies. There was, for instance, considerable bias against Roman culture as being inferior to, and derivative from, Greek culture. Johann Joachim Winckelmann's denial of creative genius to the Romans greatly inhibited studies of Roman art until fairly recent times.[58] Frank M. Turner has noticed that the Victorians turned out numerous, multi-volume histories of Greece, but they were not able to do the same for Rome.[59] Even a historical novelist as prolific as Bulwer-Lytton managed a Greek history, entitled *Athens: Its Rise and Fall*.[60] Turner's explanation relates to Victorian society and politics: whereas there was a disjuncture between the Greeks and the Victorians, the Romans had conquered Britain, there were physical reminders of the Roman past over all the country, the inheritance was more direct and more keenly felt, and contemporary Britain was also an imperial power. Was it too fated to decline and fall? Would academic studies of the decline and fall of Rome necessarily underline uncomfortable truths about contemporary British conditions?[61]

There must be more to it. Britain's relative proximity to Rome might have acted as a spur rather than an obstacle. Moreover, Edward Gibbon (1737–94) had already provided a grand model, which set an excellent standard for historical narrative, and demonstrated that history had a role to play in studying both imperialism and the character of the early Christian Church.[62] His example sharpens questions about why Anglophone historians of the 19th century did not become more involved in religious conflict and why scholars such as Kingsley, Newman, and Pater chose to write novels rather than history. Gibbon, the gentleman historian, had not founded the primary vehicle for persuasive discourse about the past. Of course, few could match his command of the sources, and even fewer his qualities as a stylist. Yet it seems that the writing of influential Roman history in his wake was inhibited less by Gibbon's brilliance than by a number of intellectual, religious, and historiographical factors, which themselves help to explain the prevalence of

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58 On the attitude of Winckelmann (1717–68), see M. Beard and J. Henderson, *Classical Art: From Greece to Rome*, Oxford History of Art (Oxford 2001) 65–74.

59 Turner (n.9) 173. For the reverential Victorian attitude to ancient Greece, see R. Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford 1980); F.M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT 1981); G.W. Clarke (ed.), *Rediscovering Hellenism: The Hellenic Inheritance and the English Imagination* (Cambridge and New York 1989).

60 E.G. Bulwer-Lytton, *Athens: Its Rise and Fall, with Views of the Literature, Philosophy and Social Life of the Athenian People* (London and New York 1837; ed. O. Murray 2004).

61 Turner (n.9) 173.

62 E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 6 vols with a new intro. by D. Womersley, repr. of the 1777–88 editions (London 1998); D. Womersley, 'Gibbon, Edward (1737–94)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) esp. 13–14 on religious objections to Volume 1 of Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

historical novels set in ancient Rome. For a start, the study of language and literature ranked above the study of history in the intellectual hierarchy, and Greek generally trumped Latin. Religious interpretation of ancient texts by highly learned clergy posed a problem for scholars who favoured an alternative interpretation based on historical narrative. Gradually, help came from German historiography, especially the conception of history as a science. It came in particular from scholars such as Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) and Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903), who held that history should be based on thorough empirical analysis of ancient sources. For von Ranke, empirical analysis would "tell how it really was", and history would thus become an objective and scientific process; subjectivity would be excised, imagination would be limited.[63] Mommsen's three-volume *History of Rome*, published between 1854 and 1856, was soon translated into English. A work of passionate narrative, it received special mention when Mommsen won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1902.[64] The work of such men sought to establish history as the foremost vehicle for dealing with the past.

Contemporary histories of Rome written in English were hardly of similar quality. Thomas Arnold (1795–1842) and Charles Merivale (1808–93) wrote for educational and moral purposes. Arnold, who was profoundly influenced by the work of Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831) on early Roman history, wrote a *History of Rome* in three volumes (1838–43) which covered the period from the foundation of the city to the end of the Second Punic War. His aim was to produce a history that "by its high morals and its general tone [would] be of use to the cause [viz. Christianity]".[65] It was essentially a school text.[66] Merivale, who served from 1869 until his death as the Dean of Ely, is perhaps best known for his seven-volume *History of the Romans under the Empire* (1850–64). The work is formidable for its time as coherent narrative, but no match for Gibbon in terms of style, and it avoids

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63 On von Ranke, see G. Iggers and J.M. Powell (eds), *Leopold von Ranke and the Shaping of the Historical Discipline* (Syracuse, NY 2000); R. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London; rev. ed. 2000). A. Curthoys and J. Docker, *Is History Fiction?* (Sydney 2006) ch. 3, believe that von Ranke was dragged by his followers further down the path of scientific objectivity than he would otherwise have ventured.

64 T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 3 vols (Leipzig: 1854–6). On Mommsen, see W. Warde Fowler, *Theodor Mommsen: His Life and Work* (Edinburgh 1909); S. Rebenich, *Theodor Mommsen: Eine Biographie* (München 2002). According to the Nobel presentation speech (10 Dec. 1902): "The educated public knows him chiefly through his *Römische Geschichte*, and it is this monumental work in particular that induced the Swedish Academy to award the Nobel Prize to him": <http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1902/press.html>.

65 A.P. Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* (Boston; 6th ed. 1846) 162.

66 On Arnold's *History*, see A.J.H. Reeve, 'Arnold, Thomas (1795–1842)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) 2–3, 6–7.

documentary sources in favour of literary evidence, which it then treats rather uncritically, so that outrageous stories about the emperors are regularly treated as fact. Source criticism was not Merivale's strong suit.[67] In universities the academic study of history had to negotiate difficult relationships with literature and theology. Appropriate appointments were, of course, crucial. In one highly relevant instance, Prince Albert the prince consort, an admirer of Charles Kingsley's 'muscular' and 'Germanic' brand of Christianity, recommended Kingsley in 1860 for the post of Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge. He was a controversial choice, though he had published respectable historical lectures on *Alexandria and her Schools* (1854) as an offshoot of his research for *Hypatia*. His inaugural lecture, 'The Limits of Exact Science Applied to History', was a success, but his imaginative rather than critical use of sources in *The Roman and the Teuton* (1864) and *Hereward the Wake* (1866), his last novel, was roundly attacked by E.A. Freeman. A leading historian of Anglo-Saxon and Norman England, Freeman was keen to establish historical research on a more rigorous footing. Kingsley resigned his chair in 1869, soon to become canon at Chester, and ultimately canon at Westminster Abbey.[68] Merivale was offered the Regius professorship at Kingsley's resignation, but declined in favour of his post at Ely. John Bagnell Bury, who assumed the Regius chair in 1902, employed a very different brand of comprehensive and penetrating source analysis in comparison to these predecessors, and he held very different attitudes to literature and theology. His inaugural lecture argued that history was an independent scientific discipline; it was not the servant of literature, a source of background information to enhance the study of great works; it deserved to be studied because of its human value, for the present could only be understood with reference to the past. Bury was a believer in the power of rational thought and in progress through knowledge. Via such means the institutionalised power of centuries of religious restraint could be overcome. The literary approach to historical evidence should be abandoned; historical analysis should be conducted with reference to scientific rigour. In this way history could aspire to the precision and objective truth normally associated with the sciences.[69]

Bury's reasoned optimism was not unusual in the decades preceding the First World War. His strong views rest upon confidence engendered by the era of

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67 Rigg, J.M. (revised J.D. Pickles), 'Merivale, Charles (1808–93)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) esp. 2.

68 Vance (n.17) 4.

69 M. Whitby, 'Bury, John Bagnell (1861–1927)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford 2004) 3.

rapid technological progress in which he lived (the era of the *Titanic*).[70] It remains somewhat ironic that a profound humanist should try to align the methodology and results of history so closely with those of science. The strategy is, however, understandable in light of the technological wonders of his day, and also in view of his desire to combat the success of imaginative writing during the 19th century. Few historical theorists would agree with Bury today. This means that history has an opportunity to construct a new relationship with works of imagination. There may be a lesson for contemporary historians in the 19th century experience. Hayden White, for instance, envisages both history and fiction as branches of rhetoric, and argues that imagination is a vital part of the historical process, for without it the historian is confined to the small circle of events and ideas for which evidence actually survives. Moreover, "the techniques or strategies that [historians and imaginative writers] use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level".[71] Among historians of the ancient world, recent books by Peter Wiseman and Neville Morley emphasise that "historical imagination", normally associated with the work of novelists, is in essence quite akin to the "historical inference" or "rational conjecture" seen as vital to the historian's craft by such luminaries as Sir Ronald Syme.[72] In response to Ridley Scott's declared aim in *Gladiator* "to stay true to the spirit of the period, but not necessarily … [to the] facts",[73] Martin Winkler argued that ancient historians were no different in their approach to writing history—the speeches of Thucydides and the anecdotes of Herodotus are likewise "inventions".[74]

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70 For Bury's views on progress, see J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (London 1920).

71 H. White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore 1978) 121; cf. H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore 1973), arguing that history is determined by rhetorical tropes and that general styles of discourse underlie every historian's writing of history.

72 T.P. Wiseman, *Historiography and Imagination: Eight Essays on Roman Culture* (Exeter 1994); T.P. Wiseman, *Roman Drama and Roman History* (Exeter 1998) 147 ("Syme was never afraid of speculation"), 148 ("Syme's rational conjecture"), 151 (in the absence of adequate evidence, Syme's real message was that historians should "aspire to the coherence of fiction while eschewing most of its methods"); N. Morley, *Writing Ancient History* (London 1999). Wiseman sampled a number of Syme's books, but gave special attention to R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford 1986).

73 Winkler (n.3) 23.

74 Winkler (n.3) 18. For history-as-fiction, see J.L. Moles, 'Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides', in C. Gill and T.P. Wiseman (eds), *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (Exeter 1993) 88–121; T.P. Wiseman, 'Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity', in Gill and Wiseman (eds) (1993) (n. 74) 122–46. For fiction-as-history, see G.W. Bowersock, *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1994); J.R. Morgan, 'History, Romance, and Realism in the Aithiopika of Heliodorus', *Classical Antiquity* 1 (1981) 221–65.

A range of historians, then, are becoming more open to the role of imagination in their work. In general, the old distinction between history and fiction seems less sharp, though it remains important to examine ancient source material in depth and to keep imagination within acceptable limits.[75] Certainly, if history is to maintain itself as a discipline worthy of public support, it needs to uphold the general impression that it can highlight and check excessive flights of fancy or imagination. Yet it seems right to consider history and historical fiction either as types of rhetoric or as related genres, which can profitably borrow from one another for purposes of persuasion or appeal.[76] In this case, the distinction between the genres would not be *absolute*—as between "an imaginative landscape" and "an absolute photograph"—but *relative* in terms of methodological approach, familiarity with ancient source material in all its variety, and the degree of imagination employed. The real lesson of the 19th century is probably that history and fiction need to operate together: history for its regulatory power, imaginative fiction for its widespread appeal.

Tensions and challenges will undoubtedly remain in the coming generation. Hollywood movies, television mini-series, computer games, virtual reality products, satellite mapping technology, and other technological advances provide an authority for reconstructions of the ancient world that must be taken into account by professional historians, given the lasting impressions of accuracy and realism they tend to leave, along with the sheer 'wow!' factor that accompanies them. Furthermore, a new series of excellent historical novels set in ancient Rome has been published during the past two decades or so. Their authors include writers of the stature of Colleen McCullough (*The First Man in Rome* series)[77] and Robert Harris.[78] In the work of, for example, Colleen McCullough, whose appendices are huge, erudite, and strongly worded, one senses a novelist who is keen to assert authority over the ancient sources comparable to that of the academic historian. The same might be said

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75 I am grateful to the journal's anonymous reader, who urges me to stress the examination of 'ancient' source material in a way that encompasses both 'primary' and 'secondary' ancient sources. On the importance of this approach, see M.I. Finley, *Ancient History. Evidence and Models* (London 1985) 7 ff.

76 The subject is far too complex to expand upon here, but an excellent starting-point may be found in Curthoys and Docker (n.63), especially Chapters 1 and 2 on (respectively) Herodotus and Thucydides, and Chapter 3 on Leopold von Ranke's development as a historian to the point where he accepted the connection between historical novels and their readers' interest in the past. For a review, see J. McIntyre, 'Review of A. Curthoys and J. Docker' (n.63), *Labour History* 90 (2006) 234–6.

77 *The First Man in Rome* (1990); *The Grass Crown* (1991); *Fortune's Favourites* (1993); *Caesar's Women* (1997); *Caesar* (1998); *The October Horse* (2002); *Antony and Cleopatra* (2007).

78 *Pompeii: A Novel* (2003); *Imperium: A Novel of Ancient Rome* (2006); *Lustrum* (2009).

of film-makers such as Oliver Stone, who quizzed Professor Robin Lane Fox in robust fashion during the making of *Alexander* (2004). Sometimes the view of the 'expert' proved persuasive, and sometimes not.[79] The point is that such productions, both literary and visual, have the capacity to provide a concerted challenge to the primacy of history as first authority on the past. As the fortunes of history in relation to the historical novel in the 19th century illustrate, such a challenge should not be taken lightly.

Conclusion

This survey of historical novels of the 19th century set in ancient Rome finds that they are still a major influence on the way many people conceive of ancient Rome. From the point of view of influence, then, they have outstripped history, partly for religious reasons, partly for their attitude to ancient sources, but mostly due to vivid imagination. The discipline of history would do well to note the popular appeal and lasting influence of such imagination. As recent theorists seem to recognise, history can embrace and regulate imagination rather than reject it for its problematic potential.

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79 Cf. R. Lane Fox, *The Making of 'Alexander': The Official Guide to the Epic Alexander Film* (London 2004) 19–32, and the story on page 39 about Roxane, whom Lane Fox envisaged dressed in furs and hunting-robes, galloping out from a castle, shooting arrows at wild animals as Alexander glimpsed her for the first time. Stone asked: "Do we know she was pro-hunting, or is this only propaganda for blood sports?" Lane Fox won out on another occasion, when he was permitted to participate in the cavalry charge at 'Gaugamela': R. Lane Fox, 'Riding with Alexander', *Archaeology* (14 September 2004): <http://archive.archaeology.org/online/interviews/fox.html> (accessed 6 March 2014).

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