

# The Ironic Vision in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Ken Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth*: A Metahistorical Perspective

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## Abstract:

Contemporary and classical historical narratives are storehouses of facts that are embedded deep into fantasy. Metahistory excavates these truths by analyzing the fantasy itself; the myth may actually not be a myth at all. Sir Walter Scott and Ken Follett have produced similar historical metanarratives that abound in irony but expose the truth. Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Follett's *The Pillars of the Earth* are tales on medieval England and they reveal feudal tyranny, anti-Semitism and superstition behind the glorious code of chivalry and nobility. Hayden White, the pioneer of Metahistory, assesses reality by deconstructing these romantic barriers and divulges what really happened. Surprisingly, these have been clouded by the annals of history for centuries. With Metahistory, fiction goes beyond fact.

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Historical narratives, being tales of the past, teach lessons through legends. They have been interpreted by different cultures as myths – magical sagas that are ready to entertain children today. These myths have been in existence ever since 2000 BC when *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was wrought in tablets and incorporated into almost all of the dragon-hunting tales in every culture. Every ancient tale and epic, including those of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, the anonymous *Beowulf*, *The Mabinogion* and others, are all bits and pieces of fiction wrapped around a solid core of history that readers are unaware of. These readers are so entranced with all the adventure that they hardly realize they have been reading a tale of history all along.

Time and place have changed the form of historical fiction. From Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* to the novels of Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens and the poetry of Tennyson, history has been turned and twisted to suit

the moulds of fantasy and fiction. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Ibuse Masuji's *Black Rain* are all histories of different countries at different times. Realism strikes the anvil of the plot more and more with the passage of time. Fantasy has little or no place at all. All the medieval castles and dragons gradually become extinct when war, bloodshed and tyranny enter the pages. Reality, horrible and cold, begins entertaining readers more than far and distant fantasy.

Tales of the past have made a comeback with the contemporary and upgraded historical fiction. Re-readers and new readers have changed the dimensions of the genre. Historical writers take up their pen after thorough research and often expose conspiracies that have lain hidden under the dusts of history. Modern historical fictions go beyond reality – they excavate and come out with the truths hidden by what readers have known as history. Dame Hilary Mantel's *Bring up the Bodies* (2012), Philippa Gregory's *The King's Curse* (2014), Wilbur Smith's *Desert God* (2014) and Paolo Coelho's *The Spy* (2016) are all fine specimens of these hidden truths. These are metanarratives that revolve around a new historical approach to what was already known.

Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832), the master and pioneer of historical fiction, and Ken Follett (1949 - ), the contemporary giant of metanarratives, have a lot in common though they lived centuries apart. Scott's romanticism and Follett's realism are quite similar because of the ironic vision and their contextualist approach towards legends and myths. The *Waverley* series of the nineteenth century and the *Kingsbridge* series of the twenty-first century narrow down upon tyranny during the middle ages, feudalism, corruption behind the Crusades and the drawbacks of chivalry, fantastical though it may be. *Ivanhoe* (1819) and *The Pillars of the Earth* (1989) speak volumes on the conflict between the Anglo-Saxons and the Normans, the clash of the native spirit and the French culture, a monarchy depending upon the clergy, slavery in the name of feudalism, the peasants tortured with taxes and tithes, civil wars and unrest, and the mysterious murder of a saint.

With the advent of new historical metanarratives, the theory of new historicism takes a new turn especially when Hayden White (1928 - ) formulates Metahistory in his revolutionary *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe* (2014). History as a diachronic process is the underlying source of all the events in the plotline of a historical fiction and it is this history that Metahistory deconstructs to arrive at the truth hidden by all the adventure, romance and fantasy. Heinrich Schliemann's excavation of the legendary city of Troy in what is today known as Hissarlik in Turkey is a fine example of the practical application of Metahistory. White borrows the ideology of the Ironic Vision in historical fiction from Jacob Burckhardt (1818 – 1897), Swiss historian of art and culture. Burckhardt's historical fields are mostly dominated by religious fanatics, idealistic heroes who succumb to the fanatics and a ruling tyrant who towers over all.

*Ivanhoe* opens in the woodland realm between Sheffield and Doncaster; the woods haunted by outlaws and notorious villains who are all Saxons. Twelfth century England is torn apart between Normans and Saxons, the land usurped by King John when the rightful ruler is off fighting in the Crusades and is kidnapped for ransom. Norman nobles have made everyone their bond slaves while the Saxon thanes resist Norman culture and rule as best as they can. Cedric of Rotherwood, thane and father of the protagonist Wilfred, laments the loss of his ancestral culture and

disinherits his own son for supporting Richard I in the Crusades. Scott remarks the death of native customs through his ironic hint of thralls Wamba and Gurth talking about French victuals prepared by slaughtering English cattle:

. . . there is old Alderman Ox continues to hold his Saxon epithet, while he is under the charge of serfs and bondsmen such as thou, but becomes Beef, a fiery French gallant, when he arrives before the worshipful jaws that are destined to consume him. (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 16; ch. 1 [1])

Wamba and Gurth, though of Saxon birth, themselves are born-thralls – bond slaves who wear a soldered collar around their necks indicating their slavery. Hence, Normans and Saxons had peasant slaves and extricated taxes from them to run their estates and provide knights to fight for their King's cause.

Cedric would not walk more than three steps to welcome a Norman into his home. The much-revered Templar Brian de Bois Guilbert is furious to see a Saxon thane commanding him when he needs “the hospitality which we have a right to command” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 26; ch. 2 [1]). The Templars and Hospitallers are exposed as corrupted libertines and womanizers. King John runs the kingdom by plundering Jews and peasants. He conducts a magnificent tournament at Ashby de la Zouche with money collected by robbing Jews and ransoming them. Isaac of York has “to pay the fine which the Exchequer of the Jews have imposed upon me” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 64; ch. 5 [1]).

Scott once again uses irony in the tournament scenes. Most of the spectators are women who love to see splintered bones and bloodshed. John conducts the whole programme to collect largesse and select a paramour for himself. England is a land of misery and her people are impoverished but he does not care:

The condition of the English nation was at this time sufficiently miserable. King Richard was absent a prisoner, and in the power of the perfidious and cruel Duke of Austria. Even the very place of his captivity was uncertain, and his fate but very imperfectly known to the generality of his subjects, who were, in the meantime, a prey to every species of subaltern oppression. (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 82; ch. 7 [1])

The usurper John plans mischief and decides to occupy all the ancestral lands of the Saxon princess Rowena by forcibly marrying her off to Maurice, one of his cronies but his plan fails. John could collect more tax if the land belonged to his Norman vassal.

Isaac and the heroic Rebecca are historical objects used by Scott to excavate into the foundations of chivalry. Isaac helps the hero get a horse and armour and Rebecca talks to the wounded Ivanhoe when they are all kidnapped by Brian and Maurice and held in the Castle of Torquilstone. She is shocked to see a man entertaining himself through combat and despises the code of chivalry. Scott reveals Ivanhoe as a weakling. He is wounded and sick through most of the plot. He quickly recites verses from the Bible in Latin and French when Athelstane enters in his grave clothes. Ivanhoe shudders when Isaac touches him and gets rid of his feelings for the beautiful and intelligent Rebecca when he learns that she is Jew. Chivalry, according to Ivanhoe, is “. . . the nurse of pure and high affection – the stay of the oppressed, the redresser of grievances, the curb of the power of the tyrant” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 364; ch.

29 [1]) but he fails to see what Rebecca can: “. . . and what is it, valiant knight, save an offering of sacrifice to a demon of vain glory, and a passing through the fire to Moloch?” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 363; ch. 29 [1])

Scott reveals Robin Hood as a bold and dashing outlaw who dares to walk freely and win the archery contest while Richard I keeps his disguise all the time. Scott hints at an outlaw who has nothing to hide while the rightful ruler needs a disguise to stay alive. Richard I also lodges with Friar Tuck, sings ballads and forgives John at the end of the tale. The King does not make any changes in the feudal law. Thralls, bond-slaves and outlaws throng the land. The last jest at Templestowe is yet another subtle ironical statement that is typical of Scott's romanticism. Rebecca is condemned to be burnt at the stake for alleged witchcraft by Lucas Beaumanoir, the chief of the Templars. She prefers death to the life of a paramour, especially that of Brian. When Ivanhoe fights Brian for her, the latter dies of a broken heart and not of any mortal wound. Ivanhoe cannot defeat Brian because he has the similar chivalrous attitude of Brian and all of his faults too.

Wamba and Gurth are Scott's instruments of the Ironic vision in *Ivanhoe*. Wamba teaches “pax vobiscum” to his master as a getaway code. The very phrase was used at the time by all priests who knew little Latin. As Wamba says, “It is useful to a friar as a broomstick to a witch, or a wand to conjurer” (Scott, *Ivanhoe* 309; ch. 26 [1]). The superstitious Cedric kills Fang, Gurth's dog because the animal howls at the time of their departure. Wamba remarks that Richard could have stayed at home and avoided the Crusades as it had brought much misery and exhausted all his resources. Further, the Crusaders had not gained a single piece of holy land and there was no sign of the true cross.

Follett's similar but more realistic *Pillars* begins with the sabotage of “The White Ship” that carries William Adelin, heir and son of King Henry I. Jongleur Jack Cherbourg overhears a group of barons planning the sabotage and so he is framed for stealing a jeweled chalice from the monastery. His feet twitch while Ellen, his pregnant lady love curses the barons, the priest and the sheriff involved in the coup. Years later, their son, also named Jack, travels to the city with one ambition – to become a master builder and construct a cathedral that attracts pilgrims to Kingsbridge from all over England. Ellen has no place among the commons because she fell in love with a Norman Frenchman. She is a witch in the eyes of the Kingsbridge folk. A son of a witch can never become a master builder, much less lay his hands on a cathedral.

The aspiring Jack comes to town when King Henry I dies and names Maud, his daughter, as the next heir. Monk Philip and his brother Prior Francis are not happy with a woman on the throne. “A bastard can't inherit the throne but, a woman is almost as bad” (Follett, *Pillars* 106; ch. 2 [2]) observes Francis. Maud's husband, Geoffrey of Anjou hated the Normans. They recall the slaughter brought about by the Anglo-Saxons – their parents were killed and that was the only reason why they ended up in the monastery in the first place. Francis' plans to place Stephen of Blois on the throne is successful – since all the kings depended upon the clergy and required the funds of the monasteries. However, Bartholomew, Earl of Shiring and Robert, Earl of Gloucester plan a coup. Aliena, Bartholomew's daughter, is left homeless and destitute on the streets of Kingsbridge once the Hamleighs - barons

who planned the sabotage – seize her castle. She makes a living as a fleece seller with her brother Richard and vows to get the earldom back.

Bishop Waleran Bigod is a powerful antagonist who uses the opportune moment to get what he wants. While the whole country prepares for civil war between Maud and Stephen, Waleran plans in using the Hamleighs against Aliena, Jack and the new cathedral just because he wants to remain bishop. As a result, there is no stone to be cut for Jack's cathedral. When Maud becomes queen, she snatches away all the resources and starts collecting taxes for them. She pays no heed even when the monks sing eerily in the quarry. Follett's description of the song is ambiguous indeed:

Philip dropped his hand. Somewhere behind him, the cantor hit a note, and immediately all the monks began to sing. The quarry was flooded with eerie harmonies. The effect on Harold was devastating. His head jerked up as if it had been pulled by a string. His eyes widened and his jaw dropped as he saw the spectral choir that had appeared, as if by magic, in his quarry. (Follett, *Pillars* 444; ch. 7 [2])

The nobility are free to plunder and take away all the spoils. William Hamleigh sets fire to Aliena's fleece flair and Jack is thrown into the dungeon just for being the son of a witch and a Frenchman. All the ruffians and thugs are granted freedom when they agree to fight in the civil war. There is not much fighting but England becomes a cesspool of evil:

William and his men had followed Stephen all over south-west England. His strategy was energetic but erratic. He would attack one of Maud's strongholds with tremendous enthusiasm; but if he did not win an early victory, he swiftly tired of the siege, and would move on. . . It was an indecisive war, with much movement and little actual fighting; and so the men were restless. (Follett, *Pillars* 484; ch. 8 [2])

Stephen finally becomes King after the battle at Oxford. Jack is chased out of the country for being a half-breed son of a witch. He learns about his father in France. When he finally returns to Kingsbridge, he realizes that he should have built a city wall around Kingsbridge instead of a cathedral. The cathedral stands incomplete while Jack's wall protects the citizens from the siege of William. When the cathedral is finally complete, William becomes the next Earl and consecrates in the name of his mother, Regan. He confesses for the sins he is about to do; "and was forgiven in advance for the killing he would do that day" (Follett, *Pillars* 536; ch. 9 [2]). He raises the cost of everything and beats the peasants with chain mail gloves for not paying tithes to use the mill. He rapes girls in public because their parents had not paid the bride price for their wedding. Meanwhile, Francis comes to England on a mission sent by Duke Henry. The people are devastated when Henry I and the Duke become friends and Henry II ascends the throne only after the death of Stephen of Blois. The tyranny continues. As Follett observes, "Battles were unpredictable, and so were kings" (Follett, *Pillars* 541; ch. 9 [2]).

Henry II reinstates all the old barons and Aliena gets her earldom back. But Henry II is furious with Thomas á Becket who had opposed the Constitution of Clarendon. The King is against separate trials for ecclesiastical personnel. Becket is exiled to France from where he plans to teach a lesson to the King. “Could the King do as he pleased, or was he constrained?” (Follett, *Pillars* 1003; ch. 17 [2]) is what Becket is concerned. Four knights overhear the King muttering over in anger and take things on their own. They murder Becket in cold blood in his cathedral. William is one of the four and he is hanged. Afraid that the monarchy would gain supremacy over the clergy, Prior Philip spreads a rumour that the blood of Becket heals. Pilgrims flock to his shrine in Canterbury and Becket is canonized. Henry II is whipped by the monks for his sin.

Isolating the idea of myth from history, as theorized by Burckhardt and White, the plot remains a purely contemplative but ironical one. The world of Ironic Vision is bleak and hopeless like Follett’s *Kingsbridge* and Scott’s *Yorkshire*: “a world in which virtue was usually betrayed, talent perverted, and power turned to the service of the baser cause” (White 234 [3]). Burckhardt provides as an example the irony of Constantine limiting the vast culture of the ancients to the bonds of the then modern Christianity. White’s description of an Ironic field is as follows:

. . . an aggregate of atomic individuals, each imprisoned within his own desires, individuals bumping against one another in random movement, each appearing *merely* as a possible means of egoistic gratification for the other. (White 238 [3])

Wilfred of *Ivanhoe* and Jack Cherboung are mere spots in a vast canvas of power-play and intrigues woven by masterminds. Both of them move about randomly – *Ivanhoe* is carried about as he is wounded and merely observes most of the action from a far off place while Jack leaves *Kingsbridge* to Spain after giving up on his ambition. The tyrants remain themselves and nothing changes at the end of the narrative. Richard forgives his brother John and Henry II accepts to rule after the death of Stephen of Blois. The poor subjects are taxed to pay for civil wars, the Crusades and pay ransom for their kings. Scott and Follett reveal that history will continue as it was and no man, mythical or realistic, can change its course.

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