

PARALLEL LIVES: ARE WE CLOSER TO THE PAST THAN WE

THINK?

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Many people today consider the past to be an irrelevance. To a large proportion of the population history is something confined to theme parks, costume dramas, museums and what is known nowadays as the heritage industry. We marvel and scoff at our ancestors' savagery and ignorance and we sometimes find their unsavoury personal habits highly amusing – like the old story of Queen Elizabeth I having a bath every year whether she needed it or not. We contemplate their grisly public executions and witch burnings with horrified fascination. After all they hanged people for stealing a loaf of bread, didn't they? And any lonely old woman who happened to look the wrong way at her neighbours around the same time as one of the local cows went lame was highly likely to be accused of witchcraft. Let's face it, our forebears' bigotry, superstition and their low opinions of women and minorities make us feel very superior and maybe even a little smug.

On the other hand, we often tend to romanticise history and see life in times gone by as one long fancy dress pageant. We enjoy the spectacle of jousting knights and imagine ourselves sitting on the dais of some great hall - above the salt with the gentry, of course - warmed by a cheerful log fire at a lavish medieval feast where the oak table groans under the weight of boars' heads and roasted swans. For some reason nobody ever imagines themselves in the role of the greasy scullion who turns the spit in the kitchens but the poorer classes, just like today, would have been the majority. If we take

this view of history we always see ourselves clad in velvet and brocade when we ride out with our imaginary falcon on our arm or, in the case of ladies, tie our favour onto the lance of a good looking knight.

But if history is either an irrelevance or a fantasy, why did Nikita Khrushchev tell a French delegation in 1956 that ‘Historians are dangerous people. They are capable of upsetting everything. They must be directed?’ There must surely be more to history than dressing up in pretty costumes or holding our noses as we trundle round some heritage attraction featuring the authentic smells of the period. We see history as horrible, romantic or merely fascinating – or possibly a combination of all three. And it isn’t until we take a deep and serious look at the lives of our ancestors that we realise how much we can learn about ourselves from their experiences.

L P Hartley famously said in the prologue to his novel *‘The Go Between’* that ‘The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.’ But is this statement altogether true?’

I am not going to argue that the past wasn’t a very different place to the present – although I often wonder what the past would have looked like had the Romans with their sophisticated hypocausts and aqueducts, actually got round to discovering electricity. The past was a time of limits, especially for the lower social classes. The life of a medieval peasant has been described as nasty brutish and short and I’m sure that in most cases this phrase summed the situation up nicely.

But medieval man also had his imaginative side. He often saw the world as a place of mystery and enchantment, full of strange marvels and rumours of the supernatural. In Suffolk there were sightings of creatures, half man half fish, caught by

fishermen on the coast. In the reign of Henry II a young servant was said to have met three young men who carried him off to a green underground world. And then there were tales of ghostly sailors who climbed down an anchor rope thrown down from the clouds into a churchyard, dying as soon as they breathed the earthly air. I suspect these peculiar tales always occurred in 'the village over the other side of the hill' or were told by some traveller who arrived in a village or town with his stories and then went on his way. Perhaps they were just medieval versions of our own famous urban myths – something that always happened to a cousin of a colleague's brother in law or something overheard in the public bar of the local pub. Human beings have always liked a good story.

We tend to think of the medieval world as an unscientific place, bounded by superstition, but this isn't entirely true. Contrary to popular belief it was known that the world was round rather than flat and paintings of the time which show God holding the world in His hands depict that world as a sphere. During the thirteenth century the monk and scientific pioneer, Roger Bacon, conducted experiments and pushed back the frontiers of knowledge in favour of a more evidence-based analysis of the world. It was educated monks who were at the forefront of this quest for scientific knowledge. In fact in the year 1010 a monk called Brother Elmer tried an early experiment in aviation, donning a pair of wings and leaping from the tower of Malmsbury Abbey. Remarkably, he survived with two broken legs but his flying days were over and, in spite of Leonardo da Vinci's remarkable plans of flying machines in the late fifteenth century, it wasn't until the twentieth century that air travel became a reality. However it shows us that the spirit of enquiry was alive and well back then in the days of Brother Elmer.

There was very little everyday technology in Medieval England. However, what rudimentary technology was available was used to great effect. It is remarkable to contemplate how the builders of our magnificent cathedrals and indeed these beautiful colleges here in Oxford, managed to create such wonders with their basic tools, their wooden scaffolding and their simple pulleys.

So if we were to travel back in time, what would we find? Well that would depend on when we arrived. If we landed in Roman Britain we would find a fairly well ordered society. Many native Britons aspired to live the same lives as their Roman conquerors, content to take advantage of all Roman civilisation had to offer. Native chiefs would sometimes even send their sons to Rome, rather as Indian Maharajahs sent their sons to be educated at Eton in the days of the British Empire.

Then in the fifth century the Romans left, abandoning Britannia to her fate and an era of confusion followed; an era we refer to as the Dark Ages. Some archaeological theories suggest that after the departure of the Romans old rivalries re-emerged and the British tribes began fighting amongst themselves, rather like the different factions in the former Yugoslavia and Iraq did once their powerful central governments were removed. Perhaps this was why the Angles, Saxons and Jutes found it so easy to overrun the former Roman colony, bringing their own pagan Germanic culture with them.

The Anglo Saxons were eventually converted to Christianity by St Augustine but then they were in turn invaded by the Vikings from Scandinavia, some peaceful farmers in search of fertile land and some raiders in search of slaves and booty. However in 1066 a far more well organised and oppressive invader arrived on these shores. The brutal Normans turned everything upside down, pushing out the old nobility, establishing their

castles to control the land and the people and introducing the feudal system. Life for the average Anglo Saxon peasant had been tough, but it was to get a whole lot worse when the Normans arrived.

The Normans were true experts at oppressing the peasant classes. A peasant belonged to his lord and could be bought and sold like cattle and there were dire punishments for any who tried to escape. However, the year 1348 saw a catastrophe that was to improve the lives of common men – those that survived that is. Within a year of its arrival the Black Death killed almost half the population and according to letters written by the then Chancellor of Oxford University, Richard Fitzralph around 1348, of the thirty thousand scholars in Oxford, only ten thousand remained (I can't vouch for the accuracy of these figures but they do reflect the scale of the catastrophe). With this dramatic drop in population labour became scarce and the balance of power shifted away from the ruling classes to the workers in the fields. During the Peasant's Revolt in 1381 they chanted 'when Adam delved and Eva span, who was then the gentleman?' The common people were starting to ask awkward questions just as they do today. Things were changing rapidly and at last a man could leave the estate of his lord in search of a better deal. I'm no economist but I suspect that even today the supply of labour has a massive effect on the way workers are treated and the rights they enjoy.

In the medieval period human beings were at the mercy of capricious nature and people had to rely on God's favour to survive storms, bad harvests and the Black Death. Consequently, monks and clergy, as agents of God in the pre-Reformation mind, held a great deal of influence. Religion and the parish church were central to people's lives and belief was almost universal.

There were some, of course, who abused their positions of power and monasteries, like many large and powerful institutions today, weren't immune to corruption. The great Cistercian monasteries of North Yorkshire, for instance, began as communities of prayer and simple poverty but developed into commercial corporations, rich on the profits of sheep farming and even mining. Archaeologists excavating monastic sites often find that the skeletons of monks show signs of DISH, a skeletal deformity caused by overeating. Perhaps these were the forerunners of the fat cats of today's business world.

However, in spite of this the church provided education, social welfare and sometimes even hospital care. It was there for people at the great events of their lives, birth, marriage and death and the parish priest was one of the main forces in the community.

Let's move on rapidly through the ages. In the sixteenth century, during the reign of Henry VIII, the Reformation arrived and the old medieval certainties and social structures were dismantled ruthlessly. The monasteries and the church that had comforted the people throughout the middle ages were swept away and religion was co-opted to support the position of the ruling monarch who was now the head of the Church of England.

The seventeenth century saw more upheaval as the Civil War robbed the monarch of his last vestiges of medieval mystique and tipped the scales of power in favour of parliament. The following century saw the Enlightenment and many scientific advances as well as the Industrial Revolution which brought people flooding into the burgeoning

cities, the new centres of wealth and power, transforming England from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban country.

And so, moving swiftly past the Victorian age and two World Wars, we arrive at the present day. We tend to think that the dilemmas and preoccupations of the modern world are entirely new and that we are the first generation to experience them. But have things really changed that much through the ages? Perhaps in some ways they haven't. Perhaps we experience the same things as our ancestors, only in different guises. Perhaps in some ways we live parallel lives to our forefathers.

I love historical crime novels. A good historical crime novel takes you on a journey into that different country that L P Hartley spoke of and, like novels set in strange and unfamiliar present day cultures, part of the enjoyment of reading them can be spending a few hours immersed in that alien world while your detective tries to work out the solution to the mystery.

But historical and contemporary crime novels have a great deal in common – they both deal with human beings and their weaknesses. And what happens when someone is pushed to that breaking point which results in murder.

When I first began writing I found myself torn between the past and the present. I have always had a great interest in history but, on the other hand I had a great desire to write about today's society and what drives people to commit the ultimate crime, taking the life of another human being.

When I began work on my first novel *The Merchant's House* I wanted to centre my plot around a dilemma faced by some sections of modern society. The murderous possibilities of this particular subject intrigued me and for a while I was prepared to

abandon my passion for history to write about the contemporary world. Then an idea struck me. As my books are set in Devon, a county with a rich and exciting history, why not have two narratives, one from the past and one from the present? After all, the problem I was writing about was as relevant to the people of the seventeenth century as it is today. Indeed my plot for *The Merchant's House* is even reflected in a story from the Old Testament. And so I began to weave my two stories together - a modern day murder investigation and a seventeenth century crime revealed in the lost journal of a Dartmouth merchant – and, to my delight it seemed to work very well. In all of my Wesley Peterson books since I've used historical and contemporary cases, entwined together, one reflecting the other - old sins and new.

Sometimes I stumble on the historical story first. Before I began work on my fourth book, *The Funeral Boat*, an interesting entry in the *Anglo Saxon Chronicle* caught my eye. In the year 997 'The Danes went around Devonshire killing and burning each thing they met and brought with them to their ships indescribable plunder.' Shortly after reading this passage I came across a newspaper report about a violent gang raiding isolated Devon farms, terrorising the farmer and his family then ransacking the place for valuables. I couldn't help thinking how similar those unfortunate farmers must have felt to those people back in 997 who were attacked and robbed by another kind of invader. Viking raiders or criminal gangs – if you're on the receiving end there's probably very little difference.

Another of my books inspired by a historical story was *The Shining Skull*. Walking down a street in Dartmouth one day I noticed a blue plaque commemorating someone known as 'The Calculating Boy'. Intrigued, I found out more about this

amazing prodigy and found him to be George Parker Bidder, a child who possessed the remarkable talent of solving mathematical calculations in his head. In the early nineteenth century George's father hawked him round fairs and inns where he performed his calculations for money. Fortunately in real life the story ended happily when, thanks to a wealthy patron who recognised his talents and undertook his education, George studied at Edinburgh University, followed a career in civil engineering and became one of Dartmouth's most noteworthy residents. But George Parker Bidder's happy story could have ended so differently. His father's efforts to make money from his gift could have resulted in disillusion and a sad, burned out teenager who sought to escape the exploitation by means of drink or rebellion. I began to think of child stars of the recent past, pushed and pressurised by their parents. Some, like George, survive and prosper but others find themselves resenting the pressure and the denial of a normal childhood. In *The Shining Skull* a teenage singing star begins to rebel against the mother who exploited her budding talent and pushed her into the lucrative but highly pressurised world of the record industry. How similar were those parents' motives - that father who hawked his young son round fairs and ale houses for money and the mother who groomed and exploited her young daughter in order to enjoy vicariously the lifestyle of a pop star?

The West Country is known for its tales of smuggling and wrecking. When a ship foundered on the treacherous rocks around the coastline and was swept ashore whole villages would come down to the beach and help themselves to the pickings. It was this that inspired my seventh novel, *The Skeleton Room*, a book I had great fun researching as I came across such characters as the Gregg family of Clovelly who, in days gone by, lured ships ashore then killed, pickled and ate the passengers and crew. They were

reputed to have claimed more than a thousand victims although these tales tend to become rather exaggerated over the years. Fortunately the people who rushed down to Branscombe beach in January 2007 when the SS Napoli came ashore behaved in a far more civilised manner when they stripped the ship of its cargo. But we can see the same historical instincts alive and well

So how easy is it to blend historical and modern day narratives? Have things really changed very much over the years? Let's consider a few of our modern day preoccupations.

Let's take immigration and our multiethnic society, for example. In 43 AD when the Roman army set foot on British soil, they didn't only bring with them the gift of Roman civilisation, they brought soldiers from all over the Empire, turning Britannia into a truly international and multicultural land. The tombstone of Antiochos, a Greek doctor, was discovered in Chester. And also buried at Chester was Aurelius Alexander, sometime prefect of the tenth Legion there, and a native of Syria. The fort at South Shields was home to a unit of Arabian boatmen who'd previously served at the other end of the empire on the upper reaches of the River Tigris. Hadrian's Wall was patrolled by auxiliaries recruited from as far afield as Africa, Asia and Europe as well as native Britons, and all over what was Roman Britannia we see tombstones and altars erected by these early immigrants. And later there were many more waves of immigrants from Vikings to Huguenots to Jews fleeing the Russian pogroms in the nineteenth century. Immigration is certainly nothing new.

And what about the role of women in times gone by? You may be surprised to learn that Alfred the Great introduced strict laws against sexual harassment. A man who

fondled a freewoman uninvited incurred a fine of five shillings, the money being payable directly to the female victim. Perhaps any lawyers present will correct me but I suspect that women haven't enjoyed such effective legal protection from harassment until relatively modern times

In Anglo Saxon England women often held positions of power. Some fifty of the religious communities founded in the seventh century were double houses where men and women lived and worshipped side by side and these were all under the direction of an Abbess rather than an Abbot – it seems educated men thirteen hundred years ago had no problem submitting to the authority of a woman. One of the most famous of these pioneering women was St Hilda, after whom this college is named, who hosted the famous Synod at her abbey in Whitby. According to Bede she 'compelled those under her direction to devote time to the study of holy scriptures' with such success that five of her monkish pupils went on to become bishops. In the secular world King Alfred's daughter, Aethelflaed, ruled the country, pursuing her father's policy of building burhs – or fortified towns – as a defence against the Vikings. William of Malmsbury, a pre-conquest historian, wrote that she 'protected her own men and terrified aliens.' The Lady of the Mercians, as she was known, was respected by friend and foe alike and by 918 even the Vikings of York had surrendered their allegiance to her without a fight.

In medieval Wales too women were not considered to be the property of their father or husband as their sisters over the border in England were after the Norman Conquest. Under the laws of Hywel Dda dating from the tenth century, a woman could divorce her husband if he brought a mistress under her roof and property was divided if the couple separated. Welsh law also gave any illegitimate sons acknowledged by their

father equal shares of land with their legitimate half brothers. In England illegitimate children enjoyed no such rights until recent times. However, in the sixteenth century Wales was brought entirely under English law and the position of women took a backwards step.

So we've dealt briefly with immigration and the role of women but these weren't the only aspects of life with some surprising parallels to the present day.

Take sin, for instance. Sin was all the rage back in the middle ages and the church did a roaring trade selling indulgences where, once the sinner had confessed and been absolved, remission for sins was granted for a small fee and the sinner spared the appropriate time in purgatory. Pardoners, such as the one depicted in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, made a tidy profit out of selling indulgences but this is all in the past isn't it? Surely nothing like this would go on today. And yet I was reading an article in the newspaper the other day comparing this trade which ended with the Reformation, with all these new schemes to offset our carbon emissions. Producing carbon is the modern deadly sin but remission can be obtained – we can buy our way out of sin by purchasing carbon credits. It doesn't matter whether those purchases actually make any difference...but we've bought our way out our own personal sins, just like our medieval ancestors used to do. It's just an idea but I thought it was a rather apposite one.

Another sin of modern days is smoking. For many centuries the smoking of tobacco was considered perfectly acceptable and during the two World Wars it was virtually universal. At one point it was even considered to be good for the health. However, one man who was ahead of his time sin-wise was King James I. In his 'Counterblast to Tobacco' in 1604, he called it 'loathesome to the eye, hateful to the

nose, harmful to the brain and dangerous to the lungs' and vehemently denied that 'this vile custom' had any medical value whatsoever.

How familiar these words sound. Perhaps smokers in Jacobean times felt a little persecuted too.

One thing we regard as a particularly modern feature of life is the compensation culture. Think of all those adverts on the television asking whether you've had an accident within the last five years and telling you that you must be entitled to thousands of pounds in compensation. Surely it all started in the States when ambulance chasing lawyers there thought it up as a nice little earner. But I'm afraid to say the concept is considerably older than that.

It's back to our old friends the Anglo Saxons again and it began when St Augustine landed in Kent in 597 AD and persuaded King Athelbert to write down his laws, laws which contained a great deal of detail about compensation. If somebody broke your arm, for instance, the compensation due to you would be six shillings (£600 in today's money). The loss of a foot was fifty shillings (£5,000) and the same for the loss of an eye. Loss of speech would be twelve shillings (£1,200) and the loss of a man's private parts was priced at six hundred shillings (or £60,000). We still put a value on body parts today. After the 7/7 bombings a broken leg was valued at £3,300; loss of sight at £110,000; and total paralysis or brain injury £250,000.

The Anglo Saxons also had a system of compensation for loss of life known as weregild (literally man money). If you killed a king you would have to pay twelve thousand shillings in compensation (or £1.2 million in today's money). A thane or nobleman would cost you one thousand two hundred shillings (£120,000), a churl or

peasant two hundred shillings (£20,000) but – and there’s a nasty element of racism here – if you killed a Welshman the price was only sixty shillings (or £6,000).

We complain today about the burgeoning culture of government surveillance in this country. It is said that there are around fourteen million CCTV cameras watching our every move today. But back in the eleventh century William the Conqueror used every means in his power to exert control over his population. He wanted to know all about his citizens and he sent out his agents to compile the Domesday Book, detailing every community in England, every person and their possessions. This was an exercise in state control on a national level to ensure that he could squeeze every penny of taxes out of the English. Now, almost a thousand years later we worry again about what information the state has on us and how it will be used. How the Normans would have loved the CCTV camera – perhaps it’s a good thing the Romans never discovered electricity after all.

Rulers through the ages have wrestled with the problem of how to keep the population occupied and acquiescent, perhaps so they didn’t pay too much attention to what those in power were up to. The Roman satirist Juvenal wrote ‘The people long eagerly for two things, bread and circuses’. This seems particularly appropriate today as we seem to have rather a lot of ‘circuses’ in the form of sport and TV – shows such as *Big Brother* and *I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* are possibly our equivalents to making people fight wild beasts in the amphitheatre while Premiership footballers are our modern star gladiators – only with less risk to life and limb.

Thinking of TV, when I look through the listings I notice a lot of programmes that bring to mind the freak shows at Victorian fairs. Instead of the Elephant Man, the

Bearded Lady or the real live mermaid we have Jerry Springer and the Jeremy Kyle Show, Embarrassing Illnesses, the Woman with too much Skin or the Child born with eight Limbs. The technology might be different but the instinct is certainly the same. Things really haven't changed that much, have they?

Another aspect of English life that doesn't seem to have changed one bit over the centuries is the culture of binge drinking that the government is panicking about at the moment. Who can forget Hogarth's famous cartoon from the eighteenth century of Gin Lane? But was it always thus in England? Reading historical accounts, it certainly sounds like it. In fact a surviving twelfth century manuscript refers to 'Potatrix Anglia', which, translated from the Latin is 'England the drunken.' And I was interested to learn that Oriel College here in Oxford has just acquired an essay by Sir Walter Raleigh dated around 1600, in which he writes that alcohol 'transformeth a man into beast' and that strong drink is a 'bewitching and infectious vice'. Of course things became really bad in the eighteenth century when the introduction of gin into Britain, like the epidemic of booze and drugs today, had terrifying social consequences. Drunk for a penny, dead drunk for tuppence, they used to say and it seems that Hogarth's Gin Lane bears an uncanny resemblance to some of our high streets on a Saturday night. Gin Lane or Vodka Shot Avenue? Is there really that much difference?

But surely crime is worse today than it has ever been. Well, possibly not. If we were to travel back in time to eighteenth century London we might come across a report written in 1751 by Henry Fielding, author of Tom Jones and founder of the Bow Street Runners, entitled an 'Inquiry into the causes of the late increase in robbers.' He blames factors rather familiar to us today for London's rocketing crime rate; the breakdown of

family and community among the people who flooded to London around that time seeking a living. Fielding encountered all those crimes we know today; robbery, theft, rape, murder, criminal gangs and organised crime. He even indulged in a little early crime prevention by encouraging the public to report crimes and give descriptions of wrongdoers and he set up a magazine called the Covent Garden Journal giving information about crime and criminals...not unlike today's Crimewatch on TV.

Back in the fifteenth century, things were little better. In the fourteen fifties Margaret Paston wrote that 'I never heard say of so much robbery and manslaughter in this country as is now.' Villains in those days were no respecters of churches. There are several references in the Paston letters to people being attacked whilst at Mass. In one incident the Rector of Winchelsea was reading the gospel at Mass when he was attacked and robbed by three armed men. If you weren't safe in church at the time of the Pastons, travel was even more hazardous. The Italian envoy at the time wrote 'there is no country in the world where there are so many thieves and robbers as in England; insomuch as few venture to go alone into the country, excepting in the middle of the day, and fewer still in the towns at night, and least of all in London.' Robbers often broke into houses or ambushed the unwary traveller. In a letter of 1461 Margaret Paston warns her husband 'beware how you ride or go, for naughty and evil-disposed fellowships.' And she added 'God for his mercy send us a good world.'

However the citizen living in fear of crime at this time received little sympathy from Lord Chief Justice John Fortescue who actually boasted of the number of robbers England harboured and regarded them as a sign of the great spirit of the country. It

seems the judiciary were out of touch with the worries of the ordinary man and woman in the street in the fifteenth century, just as some say they are today.

I recently came upon an intriguing article in which Professor Robert Bartlett of St Andrews University wrote that that symbol of youthful thuggery, the hooded top, was no modern phenomenon . Hoodies were very much in favour with twelfth century juvenile delinquents. Teenage apprentices, it seems, were the scourge of London back then. Violent, lawless and away from parental control, they often rioted and made trouble and they would use their hooded tops to hide their identity.

So, in conclusion, was Henry Ford right when he claimed that history is more or less bunk or was George Santayana more accurate when he said in 1905 that ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it?’ Well, the more I study history the more I find things that resonate with our modern world.

History throws light on the nature of the human condition. We share many of the preoccupations of our ancestors. We can feel the resentment of the Anglo Saxon thane when his new masters, the Normans, come to collect details of his personal life and possessions for the new Domesday Book, William I’s instrument of control. We can empathise with Margaret Paston when she worries about her husband being attacked on a journey. We know how the eighteenth century Londoner feels as he picks his way past the threatening gin sodden drunks on the streets, trying desperately not to attract the attention of all those ruffians and robbers hiding in the shadows.

As crime writers we have to examine human nature and human frailty, something that, let’s face it, hasn’t changed at all over the centuries. The same old instincts of

avarice, lust, hatred, love, jealousy and resentment apply as much today as they have always done, leading the weak and the wicked to commit the ultimate crime - murder.

History isn't bunk. Sometimes we don't realise how much it seeps through into our modern day lives, that strange country where they allegedly do things differently but which sometimes seems so terribly familiar.