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THE BBC REITH LECTURES – The Iron Maiden TX: 20.06.2017 09:00-09:45

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Reith Lecture 2: THE IRON MAIDEN

LONDON

SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to the second of this year's Reith Lectures with the novelist Hilary Mantel. We're in magnificent surroundings today. Middle Temple Hall at the heart of one of the four Inns of Court in the centre of London. Completed in 1573 with its rich carvings and double hammer beam roof, this was the setting for the very first performance of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. Miraculously, and unlike the other Inns of Court, it survived the Great Fire of London and then both World Wars. Its long history makes it a fitting place for our subject matter.

In her first lecture, Hilary Mantel asked what history was for. Now she'll argue that the art of fiction can give the dead fresh life. Twice winner of the Booker Prize with her novels about the Court of Henry VIII, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, she's called her second lecture 'The Iron Maiden'.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the BBC's Reith Lecturer for 2017, Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

HILARY MANTEL: In my first lecture in this series, I talked about my great-grandmother Catherine O'Shea, and how she lived when she came to England. Catherine had ten children, and my grandmother, who was named after her, was almost the youngest. This second Catherine O'Shea, married a man with the robust English name of George Foster. Some of his family lived in a small Derbyshire village called Derwent, which became a drowned village - it was one of the places that were flooded in the late 1930s, to make a reservoir. When I was a child I used to think that the villagers had five

minutes warning of the flood – that an alarm rang, and they grabbed their possessions and scrambled uphill, with the water swirling about their knees as they ran for their lives.

No one told me this; I just imagined it. But they did tell me that in dry years, you could see the steeple of Derwent church standing above the waters. This was not a fact. It was something else. It was a myth.

Derwent's church was blown up in 1947. People were seeing it ten years after it was gone.

I was an adult when I found this out. I wasn't pleased that I'd been misled. But I learned three things from the drowned village.

First, how totally the past can vanish. Second, that you should check your dates. And third, that a myth is not a falsehood – it is a truth, cast into symbol and metaphor. Materially, Derwent was gone. Spiritually, it still existed.

In this lecture I should like to ask how our pictures of the past are formed. The process seems collective, mysterious, emotional as much as intellectual. Our mental pictures are soft-focus, and yet curiously adhesive. We hear the facts, and our brains print the legend. Look, for example, at how we imagine the Tudor era – which, for the English, plays so central a part in their national story.

When the Royal Shakespeare Company began the process of adapting my Tudor novels into plays, I felt my job was to give the actors some sense of dignity. I needed to tell them this: despite what people say about the dirty past, when you live in the 1500s, you are not in fact squalid, you are not flea-ridden. And unless they have been knocked out, you probably have most of your teeth.

You are not, as one theory has it, exceptionally violent because you are driven mad by vitamin deficiency. You do eat up your vegetables, in season. And neither your king nor yourself throw your chicken bones on the floor – table manners are strict and they are more complex than they are today. You don't know how disease is transmitted, but you do know enough to associate sickness with dirt. It's true your elaborate clothes can only be brushed and aired, not washed – but they never touch your body; what you wear next to your skin is frequently-washed linen. Life is precarious, it's true. Battle kills few in this era. But epidemics carry off golden lads and lasses. Young women die in childbirth. The months after you are born are the most perilous. If you survive your first five years, you are likely to live a span roughly comparable to modern people. You don't hit old age at thirty. So – I could tell my actors - wear your doublets with pride.

Of course, they were playing courtiers, the upper classes. But what about the poor, were they squalid? On screen, there's sort of generic pauper who thrives from the ancient world to the Edwardian era – fitted out with multiple rents and patches, ragged beards or exposed bosoms, gap-toothed of course, hair stiff with dirt, generally plastered with grime. Where does all this dirt come from? It's hard for us, particularly in the over-crowded parts of the world, to imagine a pre-industrialized world. Those whose memories stretch back to the 1950s and 1960s are inclined to think the past was like that, but worse. But go back a couple of hundred years, and the smog clears.

Go back beyond tobacco, and even the domestic space smells sweeter. The by-products of heavy industry no longer cling to the hair and clog the lungs. Cities are fewer and smaller. Unless you are housed next door to some noxious trade like tanning, you can wake up and smell the flowers. As a Tudor, you might not trust your local water supply, which is why you drank ale for breakfast, but the River Thames out there was alive with salmon. Unless you were caught up in a war, the loudest sound you heard might be thunder, or church bells.

The past sees and hears differently. It measures differently, counts differently. In the medieval world, a thing doesn't happen in 15 seconds, it happens in what they call, 'the space of a Pater Noster,' the time it takes to say a prayer.

When we imagine a lost world, we must first re-arrange our senses - listen and look, before judging. But we do rush to judgement, and our judgement swings about – at one moment we find the past frightening and alien, and the next moment we are giving way to nostalgia.

Each century speaks of the grotesque cruelties of the one that went before - as if cruelty were alien to the present, and we couldn't own or recognize it. It seems we are doomed to be hypocrites - repulsed by the cruelties of bear-baiting, while polishing off our factory-farmed dinner. Often, we crave the style of the past while condemning its substance.

It's a relief to learn that some pre-modern nastiness is fabricated, for cash. The instruments of torture that you see in museums are usually 19th century artefacts. If you take, for example, the 'Iron Maiden,' a spiked metal coffin which impales its victim. It appears to have been created as entertainment by a Nuremberg antiquarian who put it on display in a used prison. And copies of this grim fantasy went on tour through Great Britain and America: and Bram Stoker, the author of *Dracula*, put it in a story. And the 'Iron Maiden' has been with us ever since - in a corner of our psyche where we keep the obscenities, under a veil of cobwebs.

What we are looking at is the commodification of the past. Supposed you have a cupboard and you want to make it pay? Why not call it a priest hole in the ancient houses of Europe. There are many more priest holes than there were ever renegade priests to go in them.

It's interesting that the Iron Maiden and similar artifacts were being created at a time when cruelty had gone behind doors. A point came, in the west, when executions were no longer public – but there were still executions. The 19th century also invented the executioner's mask. In fact, there hardly was such a thing. Why would a city's executioner wear a mask? Everyone knew who he was.

I don't deny the harshness of the past but we treat it like a horror film. It sickens us. It's safely distant and we pay to view. The heritage industry is built on confusion, a yearning for a past which is sordid and gorgeous, both together. Purer than our age, also more corrupt. There's a certain kind of historical fiction feeds collective fantasy – witness the slavish, oily royalism of the genre, which I think taps into that common childhood daydream that we are not the children of our parents, but of more distinguished strangers, who will turn up any day to collect us – to save us from our humiliating ordinariness and whisk us into fairytale.

This historical novel in its modern, commercial form is usually said to begin with Walter Scott. It was he who turned the Scottish imagination tartan. Scott was a writer of great power. He saw the pathos of the small figure swept up in history's tide; he punctured myth, as well as creating it. But for his enchanted readers, a gold-tinted mist enveloped the poverty and hardship of Highland life. His books put an imagined past at the service of the present, creating a deep politicized Scottish identity that existed purely in the fictional realm, because it did not depend on class, income or religion. All other possible Scotlands lost out to Walter's and the English found it profoundly reassuring.

Driving around Loch Lomond in 1869, Queen Victoria rhapsodized about the landscape – it was exactly what she expected, as she said it was ‘all described in *Rob Roy*.’ There weren't many folk to blight the scene, and those she saw were poor in a picturesque way; they didn't seem to want anything, and she noted approvingly ‘the absence of beggars and hotels.’ When today you are standing in a Highland Heritage Centre, and have the chance to buy, let's say, a pottery figure of Bonnie Prince Charlie which is also a pepper mill – you can thank Sir Walter.

Scott was a shrewd manager of his own talent and he made a lot of money. For historical novelists, he is therefore both a source of encouragement, and a warning to mind what you do. I don't think any of us escape unease about our trade. Historical fiction faces two ways – making its reader say, ‘I'm glad it's not then,’ and at the same time, ‘I wish it were then.’ It has mostly been a conservative, nostalgic art form, prone to flatter the reader by embellishing the received version of events, and to sooth the reader, by taking the politics out of the past. The counterforce is real history – messy, dubious, an argument that never ends.

So what can historical fiction bring to the table? It doesn't need to flatter. It can challenge and discomfort. If it's done honestly, it doesn't say, ‘believe this’ – it says ‘consider this.’ It can sit alongside the work of historians – not offering an alternative truth, or even a supplementary truth - but offering insight.

I remember a conference in the 1990s, discussing with a colleague what historians made of historical fiction. He said, ‘It's like pornography to them – they think it's shameful, but they can't wait to get hold of it.’

We've moved on since then. Historical fiction doesn't just mean ‘historical romance.’ And writers of all kinds are aware of the potential deceptions of the smooth narrative. When the reader of a story asks, ‘How do I know which bits of this are true?’ he must ask that question of the historian, as well as the novelist.

If anxiety about historical fiction lingers, we must look at the impulse of paternalism that lies behind it. Readers are not victims who need protection. The novelist doesn't spoil history for others. She doesn't trash her sources once she's used them. The archive remains secure. The palaces and battlefields remain as if she had never passed through. Others can visit them, taking their own sensibility. She offers a version of the past – there can be others, and there will be. The novelist owns up to invention. It is the core of her art.

The historian's processes are more hidden. He's not a simple chronicler, piling event on event. He seeks out the meaning of the story he tells. But like the novelist, he is

the product of his own biography. He brings his personality to his work. What he writes and how he writes may be swayed by academic fashion. He may be locked in a power struggle with some mighty historian of the last generation, trying to knock him off his pedestal. There are wars that are fought in footnotes, invisible to the general reader. They can become sharp and personal. It doesn't mean that the process is corrupt – it means it is human. The historian, ideally, struggles for neutrality. The novelist doesn't. She is allowed to be partisan. She must be. Her history comes from the point of view of her character – she is allowed to get behind him.

In my adventures with the Tudors, I have found that this is the point often misunderstood. I have been taken to task, for example, for my portrait of Thomas More – Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, an astute politician who, 400 years after his execution, was made a saint. While still hale and hearty, More wrote his epitaph, telling us what to think about him. I have taken his instructions, and my portrait is defensible. It's just unfamiliar to the general reader, but then that's not the point. It doesn't matter what I think of More. I am trying to get into the head of my main character – his rival Thomas Cromwell – and work out what Cromwell thinks of him.

Both men are artefacts - I am keen to point this out, by often referring to their portraits. Thomas More was a conscious creator of his own legend. Thomas Cromwell had entered into fiction less than 20 years after his death, when the Italian writer, Matteo Bandello, filled in his missing years in a way more entertaining than likely. At the Frick museum in New York, Holbein's portraits of More and Cromwell hang either side of a fireplace. It is *only* a fireplace: it's easy to create a false polarity between the two men, who had so much to say to each other. Thomas More is looking fiercely, attentively at whatever passes before him, and Thomas Cromwell, it seems, is gazing into the next room.

He's not looking at us. He's giving us nothing. He's going to let us struggle. Historians and novelists are engaged in a common struggle with evidence – its subjective, partial, patchy, frequently encoded nature. Historians are trained in how to handle evidence, and novelists have to learn it. Engagement with the evidence is what raises your game. If you regard it as something that gets in the way, or as something for you to chew up and consume uncritically, your novel will be unhistorical and unconvincing. That may not stop it selling, of course, but it will stop it lasting.

When we offer historical fiction to the public, we do have responsibilities – to our readers, and to our subjects. We shouldn't condescend to the people of the past, nor distort them into versions of ourselves. We should be wary about the received version. We should not pass on error. We should seek out inconsistencies and gaps and see if we can make creative use of them.

The more history you know, the more you can enjoy good historical fiction. You may disagree with the writer's interpretation, but if the fiction is taking advantage of what the form can do, the propositions in it will not seem pure and simple: you will be alerted to the cracks and fissures.

A good novelist will have her characters operate within the ethical framework of their day – even if it shocks her readers. Generally – and nothing is true of all times and places – our ancestors had a respect for the past we lack – a devotion to authority, tradition, precedent, hierarchy. We find this difficult, and we also find it difficult to

understand their religious experience. Their lives were lived in an exquisite tension between the claims of time and the claims of eternity. This life was short and hard. Its aim was salvation. The single aim of salvation permeated their thinking and governed their actions day by day. If we enter into their concerns, it helps us understand the history of the Christian West. But it does much more. It helps us see how in our own era, religious faith – globally - has the power to build or destroy.

And here I must make an apology. In these lectures, I am aware that my references are Eurocentric and my examples parochial. It's not that I think there is no other kind of history; it's just that we haven't got all night. And it seems most useful for me to work with what I know. But the first lesson in understanding the past is not to assume anything about ethics, values, tastes. You must ask whether there is such a thing as human nature. Many writers of historical fiction feel drawn to the untold tale. They want to give a voice to those who have been silenced. Fiction can do that, because it concentrates on what is not on the record. But we must be careful when we speak for others. Are we being colonialists? Are we parasites? If we write about the victims of history, are we reinforcing their status by detailing it? Or shall we rework history so victims are the winners? This is a persistent difficulty for women writers, who want to write about women in the past, but can't resist retrospectively empowering them. Which is false. If you are squeamish – if you are affronted by difference – then you should try some other trade.

Above all, you shouldn't condescend to the past. We should not simply *assume* that 'later' means better.' Casually, we use the word 'medieval,' to mean primitive; and 'modern' is a term laden with value judgements, mostly in our favor. We see ourselves as pre-enlightened and a that's dark, constrained, we want to speed away from it.

But in early modern England, where I have located my fiction, the past was what we were fighting our way back to – a pristine world, unsullied, simple. We look forward, to the benefits of technology - they looked backwards, to the benefits of virtue. If you wanted to do something new, you were as well to present it as something old. But even then, you were chasing extinction. The golden age was always lost and gone, and the future offered more hazard than hope. Like us, the people of the 16th century had their prophets of doom. We have climate change and they had sin. *We* think we could avoid it, if we were less selfish – *they* thought it would end anyway. For them, time is not an arrow pointing forwards, but a candle burning down.

People who write fiction about the past are always asked for 'modern parallels' - as if only the present validates the past, and as if historical fiction were an exceptionally tricky and labour intensive way of doing journalism. But the past is not a rehearsal: it is the show itself. Our ancestors were not us, in an unevolved form. Often it seems that when we imagine the past, what we are recreating is the lost world of our infancy, when we were innocent. In our own personal olden days, we had no conscience, and knew no restraint. Like our imagined forebears, we were dirty, and we threw our dinners on the floor.

If we want to cast our ancestors as our shadows, as aspects of our-self unrestrained by shame, we should be aware of the psychological forces in play. Are we looking into the past, or looking into a mirror? Dead strangers are not our baby selves, nor our animal selves, nor our employees. They did not live and die so we could draw lessons from them. If I think back to the history I was first taught, it was distorted by all

the wisdom of hindsight. We did not know history was a skill. We thought it was a branch of morality - all about issuing report cards. 'King Henry's conduct this term has been monstrous. Next term, he must stop taking wives, and concentrate on building up the navy.'

And worse – we thought history was out there somewhere, glowing like a planet – independent of human agency. Now I know that it is something we carry inside. Recently, a friend of mine visited Robben Island, where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. The guide was a former inmate. At the door of each cell, he stopped: and knocked, and waited. The cells are empty: but he was listening for the unquiet dead. The island has held political prisoners since the end of the 17th century. Some still living, most dead, but all transformed: they have entered history - which means they work away, active among the living.

This prison guide was like the people of the drowned village of Derwent, who could see their church steeple ten years after it was demolished. He could see the spirits that lingered after the bodies had gone. I like his reverence and respect: I like his hesitation on the threshold, and his recognition that the space of the past belongs to those who have suffered in it. He brings me back to those words of St Augustine, with which I began my first talk: the dead are invisible, they are not absent.

[APPLAUSE]

SUE LAWLEY: Thank you very much Hilary. Well, let's see what our audience here in Middle Temple Hall thought of all of that. Can I see some hands?

Q: PAUL MCCAFFREY, City worker. Someone once said 'those who forget history are condemned to repeat it.' So if you believe that history is inconstant and definitely not a rehearsal, can we use it to draw modern parallels and teach us something about the present?

HILARY MANTEL: Well, I'm not sure that we can learn from history in any mechanical way because I'm not sure that circumstances ever repeat so exactly. I was very struck recently by a very good TV programme presented by the historian Tom Holland about ISIS and the origins of violence, and what I drew from this programme is know your history because your opponent will. Who remembers in the West the expulsion of the last caliph from Constantinople, 1924? He went with 2,000 pounds Sterling, Swiss visa, and a special carriage on the Orient Express with his wife's and his baggage. Not the most humiliating retirement from public life, you would think, but widely perceived as a humiliation in the Islamic world and specifically referred to by Osama Bin Laden at the time of 9/11. And I think that without an engagement with history equal to that of our opponents, the opponents of freedom, we are not so much doomed to repeat history. We're doomed to destruction.

Q: DIARMAID MacCULLOCH, Historian. Over the last twelve months, I've become increasingly irritated by the analogy between the English reformation and Brexit. Now, do you share my irritation?

HILARY MANTEL: Yes. I have also been distressed by what's a very simplistic analogy. First, let me say that in the ten years beforehand we broke with Rome, Europe had been reconfigured because you had the rise of the protestant states in Germany,

within the Holy Roman Empire, but states becoming either Lutheran or non-aligned. You had the Scandinavian monarchies, the Swiss cities breaking with Rome, becoming Lutheran. What foreign policy in the 1530's was trying to do was not come out of Europe but go into a new kind of Europe. It's unhistorical and I think unhelpful to compare the Reformation with Brexit.

Q: FRASER NELSON from The Spectator. And you say that the novelist creates a version of the past and that she owns up to invention. So how far do you allow yourself to push it? How far would you allow yourself to stray from history to tell a good story?

HILARY MANTEL: I'm someone who doesn't regard the facts as a constraint. I regard them as a stimulus to creative thought. So what I want to do is work with the historical record and with gaps in it. The reason I don't simply make it up is that I've become interested in art that's found, as well as art one creates. And I think that the great strength of historical fiction is that it allows you to find art in the common record, in our common story. The closer to history, the stronger the story, in my view.

SUE LAWLEY: I'm looking for some female voices. We've had all men so far. Here's one...

Q: My name is SARAH DUNANT and I'm a writer. I would say that what's happened to history over the last 40 or 50 years is that we have a new history which is about the people who got away. Now they're not all famous but if you look at composites, you can make historical women who simply lived in the cracks and lived ordinary lives. I suppose I wanted to ask you as a woman as well as you as a historical novelist where you stand on that.

HILARY MANTEL: We have a shortage of information about women's lives. This does not prohibit you from making those women live again, but if you are a novelist who works as I do, very much with real people who happen to be dead, you are somewhat inhibited by the fact that women have not historically exercised political power. Now one thing that historical fiction can do very well is the untold story. What has never come onto the record. But my particular joy is that when I'm writing about the reign of Henry VIII, I simply don't have this problem because I need not distort or exaggerate anything. The women are real players. Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn are two of the most intelligent and astute and shrewd politicians in Europe.

Q: SUZANNAH LIPSCOMB, Historian. Taking your point about fate and about avoiding what E.P. Thompson calls 'the enormous condescension of posterity,' and also aware that whatever interpretation we take to understand the driving forces behind Henry VIII's reformation, Thomas Cromwell was at least it's stonemason, if not it's architect. So how did and do you go about writing about Cromwell's faith? How do you let that aim of salvation permeate his actions and his thinking day by day?

HILARY MANTEL: There was a tendency in historians from the last century and into the 20th century to cast Cromwell very strangely as a cynic, an unbeliever, someone who simply used religion as part of the manipulation of – in other words, it was just a branch of politics but with a prayer book. I think this is completely unhistorical. I think that he was a man driven by faith, by money as well. The two things are not necessarily

incompatible. I see him as very much dug into, very forming community which was worldwide. The Reformation didn't mean that scholarship drew into a huddle, and-----

SUE LAWLEY: But as a religious man, how would he have dealt with his conscience when he, effectively in your version, fitted up Ann Boleyn as a kind of multiple adulteress?

HILARY MANTEL: May I recommend to you the third book? (Laughter) These and other questions. I won't say they'll be answered, but they will be posed.

SUE LAWLEY: I tell you what, we've got two Cromwell's sitting on the front row. Look, here is Mark Rylance and here is Ben Miles. One of stage, one of screen. What did you make of him gentlemen? Do you think he was a religious man? How much do you think he cared that he fitted up Ann Boleyn? Ben...

BEN MILES: I think he was a religious man, yes, concerned with faith a lot but I saw his activity, it was a constant questioning of established mistruths. To me, that was the essence of what you could call his faith, was his belligerence in trying to demystify religion.

HILARY MANTEL: I think that the crunch comes when, and Archbishop Cranmer says 'but no, what will we do because Ann was our patron; she protected our reformed faith.' And Cromwell says 'yes, but I can protect it better.'

SUE LAWLEY: Mark...

MARK RYLANCE: That makes sense to me too. I think I imagined that whether you approved of Henry VIII or not, his kingship was an act of God. And it was your job to try and make sense of that.

HILARY MANTEL: Yes. And make God obey some or all.

SUE LAWLEY: So Cromwell had to deliver because that's what the king wanted and he had the divine right.

MARK RYLANCE: It seemed in the way Hilary wrote it that he did his best to find a middle way and to convince and to preserve himself and find a way out of the dilemma, but once she wasn't willing to bend in that way, then it was an opportunity to resolve an old wrong, which was the wrong that had been done to Wolsey by those four gentlemen.

HILARY MANTEL: In the end, you see, I think Ann was threatening his life. It's a question of survival. It's her or it's me.

SUE LAWLEY: I'll take a quick last question at the back there.

Q: My name's SASHA SIMIC and I work in books. Isn't the power of history and the reason that history is contested, because the story is that things were different before and can be different again? And I think that is so important that it's something not to be lost, I think.

HILARY MANTEL: I think you've nailed it. History, the study of history is a revolutionary study. If things were not always as they are now, they could be different in the future. They could even be better.

SUE LAWLEY: And there we must leave it. Our thanks to our hosts here in Middle Temple Hall in London and of course, to you, the audience. The Reith pages via the BBC Reith website have transcripts, audio and much more so do have a look. It's quite an archive. We'll be in Antwerp next week, a former Tudor economic powerhouse, for Hilary's third lecture where we'll be hearing a story of obsession that comes with a warning, 'too much history can be bad for your health.' But for now, our thanks to our Reith Lecturer 2017, Dame Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

END.