

BREATHING LIFE INTO HISTORICAL FICTION

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Come prepared to participate in the following IN CLASS exercises (i.e., bring a paper or laptop to write on!), or bring a historical scenario of your own to work on and share. If you bring your own, be sure you include the required WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, HOW information needed to complete your scene.

How to effectively weave historical information into a novel.

This example comes from a novel I read set in Roman Britain, just as Rome was withdrawing from Britain and leaving the land open to Saxon invaders. In this book, called *The Lantern Bearers* (by Rosemary Sutcliff), a young British-Roman soldier decides to desert his Roman legion and remain in Britain when the ship carrying his legion sails away. In an act of defiance against the darkness he anticipates the Saxons will bring to his land, he climbs to the top of the Roman beacon tower and lights the great flame that has been used for centuries to warn of danger.

These are the historical objects and information needed to tell this scene: a parapet; a brazier on a tripod with some pitch-soaked brushwood on it; a stack of dried wood; a bronze chest holding flint, steel and tinderbox; a large shield covered with bull's hide; a tank of water. GOAL: Describe how he lights this beacon

[Parapet: a protective wall or barrier around the top of the tower]

[Brazier – a metal receptacle for holding live coals or other fuel]

Let's examine two ways of writing the same scene.

LEAST EFFECTIVE WAY TO WRITE THE SCENE:

The tower was encircled with a breast-high parapet. Aquila saw the ironworked brazier sitting on top of a tripod. It was ready for lighting, with fuel stacked beside it. [IN THE BOOK SOME NARRATION OCCURS AT THIS POINT, HE LOOKS OVER THE PARAPET DOWN AT THE TOWN, REFLECTS ON WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW THAT THE ROMAN TROOPS ARE SAILING AWAY, THEN:]

There was already some pitch-soaked brushwood on the brazier. He decided to light the beacon. To do this, he had to take the fire-lighting gear out of a bronze chest. He used the flint, steel and tinderbox to kindle a fire. Flames shot up in a huge burst of fire. To protect himself from the heat, he picked up a large shield covered in bull's hide. There was a tank full of water in the corner, so he poured some water on the shield. There was a stack of dried wood beside the tripod. Using the shield to protect himself from the heat, he used the wood to feed the flames until the fire burned its very brightest.

MORE EFFECTIVE WAY TO WRITE THIS SCENE:

A little wind sighed across the breast-high parapet with a faint Aeolian hum through the ironwork of the beacon tripod. The brazier was made up ready for lighting, with fuel stacked beside it. [SOME NARRATION OCCURS HERE, HE LOOKS OVER THE PARAPET DOWN AT THE TOWN, REFLECTS ON WHAT WILL HAPPEN NOW THAT THE ROMAN TROOPS ARE SAILING AWAY, THEN:]

And beside him, the beacon stack rose dark and waiting ... On a sudden wild impulse he flung open the bronze-sheathed chest in which the fire-lighting gear was kept, and pulled out flint and steel and tinderbox, and tearing his fingers on the steel in his frantic haste... he struck out fire and kindled the waiting tinder, and set about waking the beacon... The pitch-soaked brushwood caught, and the flames ran crackling up, spreading into a great golden burst of fire; and the still, moonlit world below faded into a blue nothingness as the fierce glare flooded the beacon platform. The wind caught the crest of the blaze and bent it over in a wave; and Aquila's shadow streamed out from him across the parapet and into the night like a ragged cloak. He flung water from the tank in the corner on to the blackened bull's-hide fireshield, and crouched holding it before him by the brazier, feeding the blaze to its greatest strength. The heart of it was glowing now, a blasting, blinding core of heat and brightness under the flames: even from the shores of Gaul they would see the blaze. (The Lantern Bearers, by Rosemary Sutcliff)

What does the second version accomplish that the first one doesn't? How and why?

Writing Exercise #1:

Scenario: Someone has been murdered! You and two of your friends are walking home from a tavern after dark when you find the murdered man (or woman) in the street with someone appearing to be running away from the scene. You and your friends chase the "murderer", who ducks into a cordwainer shop. You and your friends follow, hoping to corner the "murderer" inside. You or one of your friends is carrying a lantern, which gives you some light. You must describe your surroundings while maintaining the tension of the scene. In addition to SIGHT and HEARING, you must use at least ONE other sense (TASTE, TOUCH, OR SMELL)

You may choose the sex and name of the victim, and the method of the murder.

Setting: a medieval shoemaker/cordwainer shop. A cordwainer is a medieval shoemaker who made soft leather shoes. The word "cordwain" was an anglicized form of "cordovan", the leather produced in Córdoba, Spain. The term "cordwainer" was used in England as early as 1100. A cordwainer differed from a cobbler in that the cordwainer used new leather to make shoes, while the cobbler used old or recycled leather and did repairs.

WHO

(mix and match the names as you please)

Christian names

Alan
Stephen
Henry
Richard/Diccon
John
Edward/Ned
Agnes
Custance
Edith

Surnames

Archard
Basset
Courci
Le Clerc (the clerk)
Peveril
Ditton
De Beauvais
Hartcourt
Belicote

WHAT

See list of shoemaking tools below

Did they wear: For this scene, just imagine the men in short tunics (knee length) and hose, cloaks fastened by brooch or cord, bareheaded or with small round cap, longish hair (to back of neck), ankle-high shoes or boots, gloves; women (if you include them) long gowns fitted to waist then flowing, with wide sleeves, shoulder-length veil covering hair bound to head by gold or silken band; can embroider clothes if you want to; colors: scarlet (for nobles), green, yellow, red, yellow-brown, red-brown, black, grey

WHEN

England, mid 13th Century

WHERE

Medieval shoemaker/*cordwainer shop
Lower floor is the shop, upper floor is the family living quarters
Set between a hatmaker's shop and a candlestick maker's shop

HOW

Cordwainers used a "last", i.e., a wooden foot-shaped form to stretch and shape the leather to make a shoe. Most cordwainers had a collection of lasts in various general sizes. He would have custom-fitted lasts for his special customers. The making of lasts became a specialty as did other tasks in the shop. Patterns were necessary for cutting the leather, so some of the workers specialized in pattern-making. Others became cutters, also known as clickers, who cut the leather to the pattern shape. Closers sewed the upper part of the shoe together. After the closer finished the upper portion, the maker would

attach the sole. Finally, the finishers would line the shoes and dye and polish the finished product. <http://geomacc.com/history/cordwainer.shtml>

Items in the shop:

Ankle shoe: footwear that extends just above the ankle

Awls: A hand tool with a pointed blade and a handle (or haft) used to pierce holes in leather or fabric for sewing and stitching

Baker's brake: a tool made of a long stick or bone used to polish, burnish or slicken leather

Bespoke: a shoe that has been custom made (spoken for)

Boot: distinguished from a shoe by extending above the ankle; may be calf, knee, or thigh high

Bristle: a long hair from a wild pig attached to a thread and used as a needle

Buckle: fastening device made of a metal frame with a hinged pin

Buffet: a low three-legged stool

Button: a small knob used to fasten shoe straps

Cheesey: leather that is firm and good for use

Cheverel: kid or goat ski leather, known for its stretchiness

Clams: a wooden clamp held between the shoemaker's knees to hold his work

Cleaning brush: coarse brush of pig bristles or horse hair for removing dirt

Cutting pattern: the parts of the shoe laid out flat so the overall design can be seen

Dragont: a semi water-soluble resin used to help set seams

Lace: A long strip of material, usually leather, that is threaded through pairs of holes along either side of an opening, to draw the opening closed.

Last: A wooden model that shoes and boots are made on.

Lasting: forming the leather over the Last

Lasting tack: reusable tacks used in lasting a shoe or boot

Paring knife: knife used to trim away excess leather

Pincers: an iron tool used in lasting for hammering tacks and for pulling them out.

Rag stones: whet stones for awls

Readymade: mass produced, as opposed to Bespoke

Roan: low-grade sheep skin used for slippers

Rubbing pin: tool used to smooth cut edges of leather; usually made of abrasive sandstone with wooden handles

Shank: A piece of material (stiff leather) to strengthen the part of the sole under the arch of the foot

Shears: Large scissors made from a single piece of metal used to cut leather

Shoeing horn: tool made of wood, horn, or metal to pull out the back of the shoe while the foot steps in; short for shoes, long for boots

Thumb leather: a piece of leather wrapped around the thumb to protect it while stitching

Trenket: A shoemaker's cutting or shaping knife; the head is often shaped like a half-moon

Footwear of the Middle Ages: I. Marc Calson

<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/APP1.HTM>

<http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/shoe/RESEARCH/GLOSSARY/bdef.htm>

Writing Exercise #2:

Civil War setting: In addition to SEEING and HEARING, you must include at least TWO other senses (SMELL, TASTE, TOUCH) in this scene, and you must use dialogue to impart the historical information about the Battle of the Crater.

WHO

(feel free to mix and match first and last names)

Men

Dominicus Abbott
Isaac Adams
Charles Haller
Samuel Harmon
Nathaniel Sandford
Joseph Gentry Sewell
Elijah M Wilson
George Washington Burkett
James Humphrey Camp

Women

Mary Elizabeth Beavers
Rachel Auxier
Emma Linder
Olivia Armstrong
Ella Cornelia
Catherine Maberry
Sarah Harris
Lucinda Derryberry
Mattie Hornbuckle

Names taken from *Civil War Veterans: Features Biographies and Obituaries*:

http://www.skyways.org/genweb/civilwar/civil_war_veterans.htm

Occupations

Blacksmith
Wainwright (wagon builder)
Farmer
Grocer/Dry goods
School teacher
Banker

WHAT

Did they eat?

This meal consists of the following dishes:

Potato pie: In a pie dish, layer peeled, very thinly sliced potatoes, hard boiled egg yolk, a little chopped onion, a sprinkle of pepper and salt; lay some bits of butter on top; enclose in puff pastry. Bake.

Stewed duck: duck cut up and cooked in saucepan along with slices of cold pork or salt ham, a large chopped onion, some powdered sage, parsley, catsup, and black pepper. Stew until tender, add brown sugar and browned flour, boil, serve in deep covered dish accompanied by green peas.

Pork cutlets: Sprinkle pork cutlets with pepper and salt. Prepare a coating of bread crumbs, minced onion, and sage. Dip cutlets in a beaten egg, then the coating, then fry in boiling lard. Remove cutlets, skim fat from the gravy, add a little flour, boil, then pour in dish around the cutlets. Serve with applesauce.

Green corn pudding: grate 2 dozen ears of corn coarsely; add salt, white sugar, milk. 2 eggs (well beaten); top with a piece of butter a little bigger than an egg; bake i a slow oven; should be nicely brown when done, consistency of mush. May be eaten with sugar, but better with a little butter.

Cider to drink.

Recipes from The CWI (Civil War Interactive) Cookbook:

<http://civilwarinteractive.com/cook/>

Summary of the Battle of the Crater:

By mid-June 1864, after more than a month of campaigning, Union and Confederate forces had become engaged in the siege of Petersburg. The men of the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, composed largely of former coal miners, devised a plan for breaking through the Confederate lines: they would build a mine under the enemy earthworks. Then they would pack the mine with explosives, blow open a hole in Confederate lines, then Union troops would rush in and take the city. Eager to restore his reputation after his defeat at the Battle of Fredericksburg, Major General Ambrose Burnside agreed to the plan.

The mine took nearly a month to build (June 25-July 23). Once finished, it was packed with 8,000 pounds of black powder.

Burnside selected Brigadier General Edward Ferrero's division of United States Colored Troops to lead the assault. Upon learning that Burnside intended to lead with his black troops, Major General Meade intervened fearing that if the attack failed he would be blamed for the needless death of these soldiers. Meade informed Burnside the day before the attack that he would not permit Ferraro's men to spearhead the assault. With little time remaining, Burnside had his remaining division commanders draw straws. The ill-

prepared division of Brigadier General James H. Ledlie won the task. At 3:15 AM on July 30, the fuse was lit to the mine. After an hour of waiting without any explosion, two volunteers entered the mine to find problem. Finding that the fuse had gone out, they re-lit it and fled the mine.

This time the charge detonated killing at least 278 Confederate soldiers and creating a crater 170 feet long, 60-80 feet wide, and 30 feet deep. As the dust settled, the Union's attack was delayed by the need to remove obstructions and debris. Finally moving forward, Ledlie's men, who had not been briefed on the plan, charged down into the crater rather than around it. Initially using the crater for cover, they soon found themselves trapped. Rallying, Confederate forces in the area moved along the rim of the crater and opened fire on the Union troops below. Union troops were finally forced to flee back to their own lines.

The disaster at the Battle of the Crater cost the Union around 3,793 killed, wounded, and captured, while the Confederates incurred around 1,500. The resulting attack had failed and the armies remained stalemated at Petersburg for another eight months. In the wake of the attack, Ledlie (who may have been drunk at the time) was removed from command and dismissed from the service. On August 14, Grant also relieved Burnside and sent him on leave. He would not receive another command during the war.

<http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/civilwar/p/crater.htm>

Did they wear?

Women:

Corset stiffened with whale bones; crinoline (petticoat of stiff material worn under a full skirt to make it bell out); bodice (part of dress that covers the upper body); skirt often held up with "braces" (suspenders); belt; slippers of satin, silk, knit or crocheted. A fine lady never wore makeup. Gloves were worn, but removed for eating. Usually stuck to two main colors for their ensembles. Most women's clothing was made of wool, cotton, or a blend of both; silk and linen were used for fancy dresses; fabric patterns were mostly solid colors, followed by stripes and plaids (gingham). Women wore their hair up with a straight part, hair combed over the ears, and secured in a chignon (bun) at the back of the head. The bun might be covered with a lace net called a snood.

Clothing: <http://www.visit-gettysburg.com/civil-war-womens-clothing.html>

Fabrics used for Civil War clothing: http://www.ehow.com/info_8428071_fabrics-used-civil-war-clothing.html

Hair styles: <http://www.visit-gettysburg.com/civil-war-bonnets.html>

Union soldier:

A dark blue frock coat (close fitting knee-length coat) with sky blue piping (infantry); the frock coat had epaulettes (ornamental shoulder piece); the frock coat was

single breasted for lieutenants and captains with between seven to nine buttons; buttons featured the US eagle; officers wore navy blue trousers with a black or gold stripe; boots; officers wore a sword belt with a rectangular buckle with an eagle motif; officer's rank was displayed on their epaulettes, no bars for a second lieutenant, one bar for a first lieutenant, two bars for a captain; uniforms were made of wool. Most hair was parted in the middle or on the side; most hair did not fall past the bottom of the man's ear or past his uniform collar, although it could be longer in back, falling as far as the shoulders; long sideburns (named for General Ambrose Burnside) were stylish, as were short beards.

Union officer uniform:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniform_of_the_Union_Army#Uniform_coat

Encyclopedia of Hair: a cultural history – Google Books

WHEN

August 1864

One month after the Battle of the Crater

WHERE

Philadelphia, PA.

At the dinner table

HOW

Your choice: how something was cooked, how the battle was fought, etc