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ARTICLE

The Middle Ages as Creative "Topic"

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Abstract

This article explores the Middle Ages as a creative "topic," examining how personal encounters with medieval places, objects, texts, and histories can generate creative as well as scholarly engagement. Drawing childhood experiences, public history, and translation together with creative non-fiction, it argues that medieval scholarship is enriched by acknowledging the speculative and creative dimensions of reconstructing a fragmentary past. The article considers creative non-fiction as a mode of historically grounded enquiry that combines research with narrative, description, uncertainty, and perspective. It proposes creativity not as an alternative to scholarship, but as a productive extension of it.

Keywords: creative non-fiction; historical imagination; medievalism; public history; topic-based learning

When I have been presenting my work to the world outside academia, I am often asked why I became a medievalist. The honest answer is that I do not know: it happened incrementally, almost accidentally, mainly through continuing to study medieval literature and culture at university. I found (and continue to find) things that interest me. This led to a kind of exploratory pursuit of my topic and of the wider period, a pursuit that continues today. There are, however, some primal and formative memories that I think help explain (at least to me) what the Middle Ages have meant to me throughout my life and help us understand the different kinds of creative inspiration offered by the medieval past.

First, when I was a child, my father would take me to the sandstone ruins of Heighley Castle (Staffordshire), the medieval seat of the Lords Audley, a short hike over the fields from where I grew up. Almost nothing remains of the castle, which was destroyed in the seventeenth century and has since been left to the ravages of brambles, badger setts, and the weather.[1] The moat can be traced, and there were (last time I visited, in the early 2020s) only two significant pieces of masonry remaining. Desolate, muddy, and inaccessible, it was a place of unutterable romance and mystery to me as a child, especially when shards of medieval tiling or Civil War cannonballs revealed themselves. There was scarcely a hint of human life in this wild place, but it asked to be peopled by the imagination: great lords and peasants had communed here, long ago but not so long ago, so close in place but

[1] Tringham 2013.

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irretrievable. This then was a place of nostalgia, in its proper sense: the aching loss of the past, the distressing, almost grieving, longing for a lost age, full of want. Heighley was a place that offered almost nothing material but for the young me offered enormous potential for fantasy.

Nostalgia is often thought of as a naïve mode of historical thought, but it is very pervasive and perhaps dangerous.[2] Personal and affective, often tending to jejune sentimentalism, nostalgia privileges individual connections to history whilst claiming a deep interrelatedness between past and present. The young me loved to stand on the bailey at Heighley Castle and think about how this storied place would have been different in the past and could have been different in the present. Much later on, at university, when I was studying *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, I would read articles arguing that these unique and transcendent poems might have been read by the lords of Heighley and their circle in Cheshire and Staffordshire.[3] I was then able to connect that childhood yearning to the lived experience of the past with the historian's endeavour: one of our roles is to synthesise, or attempt to synthesise, what we know of the past with what remains of that past today. In other words, nostalgia, as a "form of desire," is not necessarily far removed from the historian's remit, a desire intimately to know the past, even as we might disavow "nostalgia" as an unreliable and embarrassing longing.[4] I have tried, in my career as a medievalist, to retain a sense of the mysterious lostness of the past whilst focusing on what we do know, however imperfectly. The past for me is not a positivist playground of fantasy that can form a whole picture, but a puzzle of fragments leading to an indistinct assemblage.

The second moment that I recall playing a role in my development as a medievalist also comes from my childhood. Numerous school trips and family days out were spent at Little Moreton Hall (Cheshire), a stunning timber-framed mansion, dating from around 1500, in the care of the National Trust. Little Moreton was described by Nikolaus Pevsner as "happily reeling, disorderly, but—no offence meant—it seems at first unbelievable, and then a huge joke."[5] Unlike at Heighley, at Little Moreton Hall the past was alive and present: in the guides, in the information boards, in the pewter drinking vessels on display, in the garderobe toilet that one could look down straight into the moat, in the knot garden vivid with Shakespearean herbs, in the lavender scones in the tea room, and especially in the gift shop. But there was one particular place in the Hall that I was captivated by: the kennel in the main courtyard. The kennel, half-timbered like the rest of the house, seemed to speak of the everyday experience of people in the past, their animals, their familiars, their pets. Yet, a guide would warn us, this may not have been a dog kennel for an adoring pet; it may have been a kennel for a bear, for bear-baiting competitions, and for the wakes, festivities in honour of saints on their saint day.

The nearby town of Congleton (still sometimes known to locals as "Beartown") certainly had a long history of bear-baiting and Cheshire was a centre of seventeenth-century bear entertainments.[6] Worrying—that is, tormenting—bears (a creature long extinct in

[2] See Dell 2018, 2026.

[3] Bennett 1979, 76; for an overview of this contentious point, see Bennett 1997; Bowers 2012, 1–13; Duggan 1997.

[4] Dell 2018, 276.

[5] Hartwell et al. 2011, 432.

[6] Baldwin 1995; Baldwin, Clopper and Mills 2007; Davies et al. 2025 list bear entertainments and baiting at Brereton near Congleton 1624 (919–20), Congleton 1624 (1045), Knutsford 1617–26 (692–3) and 1638 (965), and Tattenhall 1616 (783). Cheshire bears and bearwards were also active at the Southwark bear garden. Ravelhofer 2002 gives a brilliant account of the role of bears and other animals as "hybrid courtiers" (294) in late medieval and early modern England.

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England) with dogs is so inimical to modern sensibilities, whereas the housing of a loyal hound as a pet and companion chimes with our values. I do not know the truth of the bear-or-dog kennel at Little Moreton Hall, and my attempts to find out about the kennel have not been very successful, but this speaks to my point: is the past affectively recognisable (dog kennel) or shockingly different (bear baiting)? Were the people of Little Moreton Hall in the past like us, or unlike us? What do we recognise and misrecognise? Was the courtyard there the setting for acts of care or of violence against animals: hunting with dogs and baiting the bear? Even if it were a dog kennel, does this suggest a similar understanding of a dog's place within a household to today? The kennel at Little Moreton Hall then stands as a motif of how the past is beguilingly engaging, a material thing full of immaterial questions, a place similar to but not the same as our own experiences.

Framing such childhood encounters with the Middle Ages was my favourite class at school: this was neither English nor History or even anything that would count as a curricular subject today: it was something called "Topic." "Topic" was a session, at least once a week, where we wrote, drew, or created something on a "topic" given to us by our teacher: it might have been a term like "water," or "autumn," or "Sir Walter Ralegh" but usually it was based on our local environment and places. Topic-based learning remains a pedagogical approach (and is not unlike the contemporary practice of interdisciplinarity) in which understanding is taught via a theme rather than through a discipline.[7] Topic-based learning is particularly useful in combining academic knowledge with a student's personal and holistic view of the world insofar as it allows students to bring their individual knowledge and interests to bear on a topic. "Topic," as it was practised in my rural primary school around fifty years ago, was not unrelated to modern topic-based learning but it was fundamentally creative at heart.

I mention this here because it chimes with how I have approached the Middle Ages in some of my academic work and in all my creative work for non-academic audiences. This work has not sought to inform the audience of a particular approach or bring to light one source, but rather sought to provoke the audience to think anew, with fresh eyes, about a topic with which they were familiar. My first encounters with public medievalism followed this trajectory: working with the Jewish Museum London on two exhibitions, I brought my scholarly expertise on medieval antisemitism to the curatorial team in order to explore Jewish:Christian relations in a broader narrative.[8] Central to these public exhibitions was the notion that the audience did not have to gain an expertise like that of the curatorial team; rather, we wanted to use the exhibition to prompt new thinking, new ways of looking, amongst our audience about the topics in question. Far from conceiving of this work in didactic terms, I approached my work with the Jewish Museum London as a way of meeting members of the audience on their terms; I believed that prompting or provoking one new thought, one new idea, one new relationship with materials from the past, amongst visitors would be its own valuable outcome.

Topic-based creative non-fiction

In the foregoing comments, I have introduced the idea that there is almost always an element of creative desire, of speculation and informed supposition, in how we approach the premodern past. My own move towards creative non-fiction arose directly from my experiences of writing modern English translations of medieval texts and realising the

[7] Bourke 2006.

[8] Jewish Museum 2015–2016, 2019.

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creative potential—of experimenting with voice, of working with register, of engaging with the warp and weft of language—that translation involves. This then became a kind of "research loop": editing and translating medieval texts alerted me to new details, interpretative cruxes and unanswered questions in the text which led me back to traditional research questions. So I have for some time been convinced that creative processes can stimulate scholarly questions and vice versa. In terms of both language and history, what remains interesting to me about the medieval English past is its "same but different" quality, something that is present but alien, partial but lost, and creative non-fiction centres the narrator's perspective and consciousness in a way that seems to me highly appropriate. In the remainder of this essay I want to address how scholarship can itself become a creative artform, as I have sought to retain my own sense of creative (and joyful) engagement with the past and communicate that to others.

My book *A Travel Guide to the Middle Ages: the World through Medieval Eyes* was written as a topic-based exercise in creative non-fiction.[9] In the summer of 2020, Tom Killingbeck, then an editor at Penguin Random House, had approached me during the Covid-19 lockdown about the possibility of writing a book about medieval travel. His approach was based on my scholarly work in medieval pilgrimage and my translation, published in 2012, of one of the most widespread medieval travel guides, *The Book of Marvels and Travels* attributed to Sir John Mandeville (*c.* 1356).[10] Killingbeck and I had several productive online conversations and the idea, the topic, for the book was born: given the radical disruption and transformation of travel during the pandemic, what had travel been in the past? How far had travel changed in time? Could the history of travel tell us about its present and future?

My "topic," then, was medieval travel. This topic was a combination of present concerns—the rethinking of travel during the pandemic—with my own longstanding research interest in travel writing, pilgrimage, and place-making in the past. Such a combination is, I think, key to public history with integrity: one speaks to a broad audience's interest in the topic but one is bringing to that topic one's specialist understanding. Creative non-fiction is sometimes distrusted as a scholarly mode because it deals in creative thought rather than evidential fact, reflecting a legitimate worry about blurring the lines between fact and fiction. For instance, creative non-fiction writers have an ethical responsibility to be clear about the genre of their work and to support it with sources and research where possible. At the same time, creative non-fiction is an ideal way to explore those many things we do not and cannot know with certainty about the past. This is not to say that there are not facts about the past but that something as apparently insignificant as the kennel at Little Moreton Hall can potentially tell several, or many, different stories. As medievalists, we are constantly dealing with the plausible and the hypothetical rather than the evidentially "true" in a strictly factual sense.

Whilst creative non-fiction is a useful mode for considering half-truths and plausibility, the perceived tension of fiction *versus* fact is a distraction from the truly valuable potential of creative non-fiction for scholarly research. Whilst the definition of creative non-fiction remains fraught, I would say that at the heart of creative non-fiction is storytelling and facility with language.[11] In conventional scholarship, our academic language is often designedly estranged from our creativity, as we strive for objectivity, dispassionate precision, technical terminology, and expository clarity. Paradoxically, in this way all academic

[9] Bale 2023.

[10] Mandeville 2012.

[11] On the definitions of creative non-fiction, see Gutkind 2006; Singer and Walker 2022, 2–4.

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writing is itself a kind of creative writing, as we learn to adopt rhetorical voices—the scholar, the authority, the expert—that ape disciplinary norms and traditions (or, in other words, ventriloquise other scholars' writing). Creative non-fiction allows for play and ambiguity, comedy or emotion, to feature in our writing and is perhaps best thought of as privileging narration and description over argument or demonstration. I am not proposing that creative non-fiction is an appropriate mode for all scholarly enquiry but I have found it exceptionally enriching as a form of historical enquiry.

Creative non-fiction is necessarily concerned with the real or historical world, rather than the fantasy world or the unknown (which is the domain of fiction), undergirded by detailed research. At the same time, as my earlier examples of Heighley Castle and Little Moreton Hall show, there is much about the real and historical world that necessarily remains conjectural and of the imagination: thus, creative non-fiction relies on description and immersive prose to conjure a plausible setting or scene that no longer exists. This creative scene-setting offers us, as scholars, the chance for reflection both on what we do know as scholars and what we do not: for instance, in *A Travel Guide to the Middle Ages* I wrote about a Genoese merchant, Jeronimo di Santo Stefano, who was marooned in the Maldives in the late 1490s. He wrote a brief but compelling account of the six months he was there: there were, he wrote, 7 to 8000 islands, small, low and many of them uninhabited, some peopled with multitudes, black-skinned, naked, courteous and healthy. They had coconut trees, followed Islam, had a chief who ruled them, and they lived on fish and imported rice.[12] These are the only local details Santo Stefano included; we are not sure how many or which islands he visited and he said nothing about such crucial issues as the weather or the wildlife, two of the things which struck me most forcefully when I visited. So in my account of Santo Stefano's journey, I was able to cross-reference his details with some other material supplied by medieval travellers (especially Ibn Battuta, who visited some 150 years before Santo Stefano) but also to blend in my own observations: about flying fish, crabs and stingrays, and the enormous flying foxes gliding between the breadfruit trees, in order to build for my readers a more evocative version of place than that offered by the scant sources we have.

A Travel Guide to the Middle Ages is structured, approximately, along Mandevillean lines. The book starts with Martin Behaim's Nuremberg globe of 1491, an artefact which cites Mandeville and presents the view of the tricontinental world as it was on the eve of Christopher Columbus's momentous journeys. The book then follows various travellers from England to Jerusalem and thence, on an increasingly fragmentary and marvellous route, to Ethiopia, Persia, India, China, Japan and the Antipodes, to the very ends of the earth and back. Mandeville's fourteenth-century travelogue gave me this loose structure but more importantly, Mandeville provided a distinct aesthetic of travel, poised between the spiritual and the earthly and between geographical fact and marvellous fantasy. In other words, creative non-fiction offers a set of tools—such as irony, humour, doubt, mixed perspective, allusion, and intertextuality—perfectly suited to the Mandevillean nature of travel writing in the later Middle Ages. It is in travel writing that we gain some of the first examples of first-person narrative and claims, albeit disingenuous ones, of eye-witness veracity so this mode provided me with an excellent foundation on which to write about experience, perspective and misunderstanding. For example, I repeated Mandeville's apparently factual description of the island of Pytan, where tiny people live off the scent of wild apples. Is this a fictional place or an imaginative space of moral instruction, a land of natural virtues and wonder? For thousands of readers in the Middle Ages, Pytan was one place amongst thousands where

[12] Major 1857, 227–34.

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marvellous versions of humanity potentially existed. The "truth" of the people of Pytan resided in its capacity to inspire curiosity and thought. The apple-loving Pytanites were depicted alongside what we now might think of more factual marvels of nature (such as giant snakes, incredibly sweet fruits, and cascades of precious gems), though none of them were likely to be apprehended as fact by a medieval reader.

I was keen too that my reader should retain a strong sense of a historical, if cacophonous, primary archive of travel writing; thus, I included short pieces between chapters from primary sources. These include an illustration of the medieval names of the winds, a currency exchange list, a textbook conversation for travellers in a roadside lodging, a guide to etiquette in a Mongol *ger* (yurt). Such primary extracts root the book in the historical "truth" of travel as it was understood in the Middle Ages and will hopefully stimulate readers to think about the wealth of sources available to us. Creative non-fiction need not therefore reject a traditional "thesis + evidence" academic writing model, but might organise this material differently and let the audience find its way through some sources.

Finally, creative non-fiction offers us, as analogue thinkers and creators, a highly personal voice that resists AI and data-driven creativity. Almost any kind of generic writing can now be digitally emulated and any identifiable voice artificially mimicked. Creative non-fiction allows us to maintain the sense of *making* and *crafting* a narrative, a narrative that reflects something unique to the writer and presents something original to the reader. Our paths through the past are unclear, and our boundaries are drawn with the imagination: it behoves us to find ways of writing that reflect the desire for, and potential of, the past's incompleteness.

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