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Is Henty's History Lost in Graphic Translation? Or Won by the Sword in 45 pages

Introduction

One of the two main motivators for G. A. Henty's prolific production of historical adventure stories was to teach history. His strong storylines were, and still are according to the reprinters of his work, recognised as a significant factor in his appeal to readers of all ages and to his success as a novelist. Henty's work has been critiqued as formulaic¹ because of the prominence of his hero, predominantly but not exclusively, young and male, the predictability of the hero's triumph and the comfort to which he retires after his adventure.

The hero's varied achievements, embedded into an historical event, involve him in a number of dangerous adventures in which his strength and ingenuity is tested and as a result of which he is recognised by the foremost leaders of the day as a valuable asset. Henty's endeavour to 'write good history' (1902: 105) was supported by meticulous research from the sources available to him. The strong linearity of the plot, together with the strong presence and activity of the hero lends itself to revision into a graphic format, therefore my aim is to examine whether this revision has been at the cost of abandoning the historical content of his writing in order to produce a swashbuckling yarn or whether some historical content (other than costumery) has been included without the pace of the story being adversely affected.

At least six of Henty's novels have been reproduced in graphic novel format, most of which have been translated into several European languages. The titles are:

In Freedom's Cause; In the Reign of Terror; The Lion of the North; and Won by the Sword. These titles have been translated into several European languages. In addition, The Young Carthaginian and With Lee in Virginia have been revised as graphic novels, the latter as late as the 1990s. The majority appeared in the Classics Illustrated series from the late 1950s to the 1970s. (I am indebted to Roger Childs of the Henty Society for this information.) Three of these publications are held in the Brown Collection of Henty and Hentyana which is part of the University of Worcester Research Collections.

¹ Arnold, G. (1980) *Held Fast for England: G. A. Henty Imperialist Boy's Writer*, Hamish Hamilton, London. Butts, D. (1992) In *Stories and Society*(Ed, Butts, D.) Macmillan, London, pp. 65-83. Carpenter, H. and Pritchard, M. (1984) *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

I have chosen Won by the Sword firstly because it deals with a complex but defined period of history, the Thirty Years War in Europe, and secondly because it is in a larger more colourful format than the other titles to which I have access.

There is one question about the version I examined which may be asked of the Classics Illustrated series as a whole, it is:

‘Does this revision fit Mike Chinn’s definition of a graphic novel as a ‘long, complex, character-led story ... that [is] beyond the normal comic book’? (Chinn, 2004: 7) when the Classics Illustrated series of comic books of the 1950’s and 60’s’ have been described by Chinn as ‘literally books in comic format’?’

This question is not addressed in the present paper since the focus is on the historical content of the revision. I raise it as a further issue for discussion and one to be kept in mind whilst reading this material.

Won By the Sword

The Classics Illustrated version of Won By the Sword was published in English by Gilberton Company, NY in 1959 and the French translation by Williams in 1974. Internally the illustrations are identical, whereas the covers are significantly different. In 1959 the swordfight between the hero and his antagonist is depicted as static, against a backdrop of stone steps as compared to the vitality and action shown in the 1979 translation showing the sword flying out of the antagonist’s hand against a backdrop of strident brushstrokes to indicate rapid movement creates suspense, excitement and a sense of danger, encouraging the reader to anticipate a fast-paced and breathtaking read as he turns the page. In view of this difference, there is a further, related question to ask as a reader in addition to ‘Is the history lesson lost?’. This question is ‘Is this anticipation satisfied?’ It is necessary to ask this question since Henty’s desire to teach history was embedded in a belief in achieving this aim through the medium of an entertaining and enjoyable story.

The purpose of the story, taken from Henty’s Preface to Won By the Sword is ‘to continue the history of the Thirty Years’ War’ in Europe with France taking the place of Sweden as the main player.

He continues

The success of France was greatly due to the fact that her armies were led by two of the greatest military geniuses of all time, viz., Condé and Turenne... (Henty, 1899: vi)

This comment provides an instance of Henty subverting the, often erroneous, stereotypical image of his writing as promoting the English as the only worthy race.

It is the second of these two men, Turenne, who provides the military focus for the boy hero Hector Campbell, the orphaned son of a Scottish officer. By choosing a Scot as the hero of the story, Henty ensured greater commercial success for his work since a story with a French hero would not have sold so well in England. Henty's Prefaces served to initiate the reader into the historical event or events which underpinned his hero's adventures. They are always clear and succinct.

The graphic version succeeds in distilling this scene-setting into 70 words:

In 1618 a fearful struggle began among the nations of Europe. It is known as the Thirty Years War. By 1635 it seemed that all of Germany would soon fall to the armies of Austria. As the ally of Spain, Austria would then be able to dominate France. To prevent this, Richelieu, the French Minister brought France into the war.

Then began the final phase of this long and bloody conflict. (1959: 1)

This final short paragraph prepares the reader for the story to come. So far, the graphic version has succeeded in conveying enough information to orientate the reader into the immediate historical context. However, I noted in the title that the graphic form of Won By the Sword is 45 pages. The original text runs to 384 pages of close text. Within the 45 pages, verbal text is confined to the expected running bar across the top of each picture and speech bubbles depicting character interaction.

The story opens with Hector Campbell, the protagonist, introduced on the first page of both versions as a born leader.

(Henty, 1959: 2)

He is one of the more typical Henty heroes and remains so throughout both texts. This illustration shows him leading a group of boys re-enacting one of General Turenne's victories just as the General himself rides by. The encounter leads to Hector's entry into the General's household and consequently his entry into a life of soldierly adventure.

The graphic version of the novel follows the plot line of the original very closely, the ‘cuts’ come in the historical detail given by Henty and which provide an in-depth historical context. For example, in the period between Hector’s enrolment with Turenne and his first major adventure in which Hector distinguishes himself as an outstanding officer, Henty explains the position of Richelieu and the complexities and intrigues of the French court factions. He also positions the Turenne family in relation to France.

The graphic version communicates this information in a corner explanation

In the weeks that followed, Hector served as Turenne’s Aide in several skirmishes with the Spaniards. One day ... (1959: 8)

and then jumps, cinematically, from each major action to the next so that it becomes, in Chinn’s terms, ‘more like a full feature-length movie’ (2004: 6). Hector is accompanied by his servant, Paolo a youth who is almost, but not quite, as brave, strong and astute as himself. No sooner has he been handsomely rewarded for one impossible mission than his next is in



frame with the runner ‘Two weeks later ...’ (1959: 16).

Clearly the narrative is focalised through Hector. In the original, his story is a thread upon which the historical encounters and events hang; a story sometimes focalised through Hector and sometimes through another character but always deeply embedded in the historical occasion.

Comic book and graphic novel theorists , for example (Sabin, 1996: 9) and picture book theorists such as (Wolfenbarger and Sipe, 2007: 273, Lewis, 2001) agree that pictures and text have to work together. Sabin, quoting Frank Miller, notes that the gap between illustration and narration is where reality lies (1996: 9). This statement is remarkably close to Tzvetan Todorov's definition of fantasy as residing in the hiatus between the real and the imagined (Todorov, 1975) and indicates another discussion on the closeness of historical fiction to fantasy, particularly in their graphic format. Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, as picture book theorists, suggest there are at least five ways in which pictures interact with text. Applying their exposition of the five ways to the Classics Illustrated version of Won by The Sword, this version falls into the category of 'complementary', that is, in which both illustrations and written text provide information, with the illustrations as the dominant partner, but neither extends the meaning of the other. A typical example of this lack of extension can be seen in this frame from the account of Hector's second major action



(Henty, 1959: 17)

The running bar states exactly what is happening and the picture depicts the action stated. Any other historical details assimilated by the reader relate to costume (and a little to gunnery – the metal bands on the wheels of the cannon). Only the statement in the speech bubble lifts the incident beyond mundanity since it serves to personalise the action taken.

The retelling rarely takes the reader beyond this level of excitement. Where there is any sense of urgency or suspense in the illustration it involves horses and/or carts and is created by the inclusion in the illustration of clouds of dust conjuring into the reader's imagination the scene of thundering hooves.

In this instance, Sabin's note that

The illustrations [in comic books] are not really illustrating what's going on. The narration isn't really describing what's going on either. There's a gap there, and somewhere in that gap is reality. (1996: 9)

is not borne out. The reader's imagination has few if any gaps to fill.

In contrast, Henty's description of the spiking of the guns incident is told in short sharp sentences creating the sense of urgency and danger so lacking in the graphic version

There was a shout of triumph. One of the gates fell to the ground. Hector dashed forward. ... Hector ran up the steps close to the gateway on the rampart. .. "Now, my man, open that bag." In it were a couple of dozen nails and a hammer. "Drive one of those down the vent of this gun. That is right. One more blow. That will do." (1899: 87-88)

And so on, as Henty goes on to describe how Hector's company managed to save the remainder of Turenne's army from destruction.

Hector's distinguished adventures continue. He is sent as an aide de camp to another general whose army is closer to the action and is again rewarded for performing an action which has a decisive impact on the outcome of the battle. Hector returns to Paris as a Colonel. When he is summoned into the presence of the queen (the king, Louis XIII, had in the meantime died), he is granted a title and estate for his service to France.

It is during this break in the military action that the graphic version injects some historical background into the narrative. At no point has the death of either Richelieu or King Louis been reported. Their death is implied by the information

'In Paris, Hector presented himself to Queen Anne and her minister, Cardinal Mazarin' (Henty, 1959: 24).

The speeches of both the Queen and her minister reiterate Hector's rise to prominence in words lifted from the original text without hinting at the thickness of the life threatening web of intrigue closing in on Mazarin the Queen's first minister. Hector saves Mazarin's life by discovering a plot to assassinate him but at the same time endangers his own life since he thwarted the would- be assassins.

After one more campaign which includes capture and escape, Hector once again returns to Paris where court intrigues are deepening and where his formerly banished enemy has been pardoned. The account of the campaign in the graphic version does give the reader some historical context but only in terms of who is attacked, by whom and where, placing the action in the actual geographical area in which it took place.

The last part of the story concentrates on Hector's part in the battle, his capture and escape and his flight to England after his enemy's violent but unsuccessful attempt on his life. The action in the illustrations and recounted in the running bars speeds up when Hector and his five companions are attacked by twenty five hired assassins. The illustrations are more animated and the words and phrases imply more movement: 'The attackers rushed forward'; 'Hector's swift blade ...' (Henty, 1959: 41-42) , illustrated below.



Throughout the graphic version of the novel, there are no bubbles indicating sound. This omission is particularly noticeable in scene of the assassins attack.

One major episode that is left out of the graphic version altogether is Hector's rescue of two female members of the French nobility when the chateaux in which they are staying is attacked by French peasants. This episode is not integral to the outcome of the war but it is significant in that it foregrounds Hector's ability to act swiftly in a critically dangerous situation both in action (the rescue) and in speech (defusing the anger of the peasants). Also, it is this episode that provides Hector with a wife when he eventually settles in England.

Once across the channel, Hector purchases an estate with the gifts received from Mazarin and the Queen for his loyal service. The last two frames inform the reader, in the running bar, that the thirty years' war has ended, giving the date, with the words

One day, late in 1648, there was news.

Then Paolo speaks

The post has just arrived from France, hostilities have ended. The Thirty Years War is over. (Henty, 1959: 45)

Conclusion

To conclude I will turn back to the two questions asked at the beginning of this paper

‘Is the history lesson lost?’ and ‘Is the anticipation action satisfied?’

I believe the evidence does not allow the answers to these two questions to be simply ‘yes’ to the former question and ‘no’ to the latter although these answers are partially true. The second question can only be answered personally and depends on previous experience of the comic book or graphic novel form. A reader in the 1950s would no doubt give a different answer to one in the 21st century. Although the two questions are not entirely separate since Henty specifically stated in the preface to his story Young Buglers (1880) that his aim was to teach history and to produce a good story (Henty, n.d.: Preface) I will concentrate on the first one, since the question of history is the main subject of this paper.

From the title page onwards the text in the graphic version of Won By the Sword summarises the historical context just enough to give the reader an understanding of the historical framework within which the adventures are embedded. Throughout the text (and I include illustrations and words in the term text) the historical context is minimal, informing the reader which battle is being fought, by whom and in what location. From this information the reader learns that the thirty years’ war began in 1618; was fought predominantly in France and Germany; that the two major French generals were Turenne and Condé; that La Rochelle, Turin and Rocoi saw major action, and that the war ended in 1648.

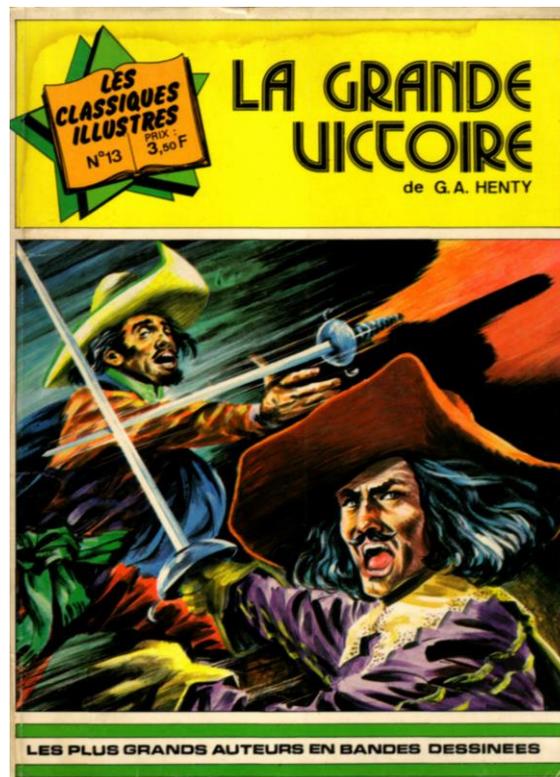
Since the Classics Illustrated series was designed to be educative, there is a note after the final illustration:

Now that you have read the Classics Illustrated edition, don’t miss the added enjoyment of reading the original, obtainable at your school or public library. (Henty, 1959: 45)

This exhortation is followed by three pages of solid text, one giving a brief biography of George Alfred Henty with a note about some of the other books he wrote, the next on

Wallenstein ‘One of the most powerful military figures to emerge during the Thirty Years’ War, (Henty, 1959: flyleaf) and the final page on the process of the Thirty Years’ War.

Given this amount of information, it cannot be said that the history is entirely lost, although it is presented in a less exciting way than it is in the original. The amount of detailed description of both history and battle in the original together with depiction and development of character provides a depth of understanding of the period and event not available to the reader of the graphic version. The graphic version is a taster for a full account from an historical point of view. Nevertheless if the internal illustrations reflected the cover of La Grande Victoire, the reader’s anticipation of excitement might be fulfilled.



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