

Past Continuous: Historical Fiction for Children Saturday October 10th 2009, Newcastle University.

The following contribution is adapted from a paper given at the Past Continuous conference.

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Abstract

This article is an investigation into differences in the representation of cultural identity represented in Beric the Britain by G.A. Henty (1893) and The Outcast by Rosemary Sutcliff (1955).

G.A. Henty (1824-1902) and Rosemary Sutcliff (1920-1992) both present narratives of Britain under Roman invasion through the character of a young protagonist, initially perceived in both narratives as the product of a British tribal chieftain's family with a clear cultural identity. Henty wrote in the second half of the nineteenth century at the height of imperial expansion when the sense of English cultural identity was strong. In contrast, Rosemary Sutcliff, writing post-empire, represents a more complex sense of identity. I investigate the mixed cultural identity of Sutcliff's protagonist against the foundation of the exclusively British cultural identity of Henty's Beric, thus foregrounding the increasing destabilization of cultural identity demonstrated in these two texts.

Is Beric a Briton?: the Representation of Cultural Identity in G.A. Henty's Beric the Briton (1893) and Rosemary Sutcliff's The Outcast (1955)

Between G. A. Henty's Beric the Briton and Rosemary Sutcliff's Beric in her novel The Outcast lay two world wars, both of which impacted on subsequent perceptions of cultural and social identity in England. The name Beric is incidental to both novels and does not necessarily imply the same character rewritten into a different century. Another discussion premising the influence of time and culture over and above influences of personal philosophy upon character formation may be pursued in further work on this subject.

Introduction

Henty's approximately eighty novels for young people were written between 1871 and 1902. Beric the Briton was published in 1893 at a time when the greatest imperial expansion England had ever known was beginning to be questioned. As one of the first war correspondents and a veteran of the Crimea, Henty brought journalistic experience and a background of broad reading into his writing. Although Henty was an acknowledged imperialist as his biographers note (Fenn 334, 39), (Arnold 63), he brought a balance into his description of historical and political situations that is not always acknowledged by his critics. At the same time, western scientific theories on race and development continued to contribute to the social construction of a hero figure who was young, middle or upper class, white and male. His figure was influenced by the Arnoldian boy produced by an English public school education but Henty's heroes were of an individualistic caste, acting on personal initiative and demonstrating strong leadership qualities. This persona was perceived by the author as representative of the highest form of civilised life and thus presented in fictional form as secure in his identity.

Sutcliff's Beric, in The Outcast, published in 1955, was created when English perceptions of culture, identity and the expanse of a former empire were not only questioned but recognised by critics writing on history and literature as complex, unstable and transient entities. Niall Ferguson's discussion of 'the creeping crisis of confidence in Empire' (319) demonstrates the change in attitude at all levels of society (313-28).

In this paper I aim to address the differences in cultural identity portrayed in these texts in order to demonstrate the increasing destabilization of cultural identity that occurred in the years between their publication. My argument is mainly confined to evidence within these two texts since they are the focus of this paper.

Beric the Briton

Firstly, to address the cultural identity portrayed in Henty's Beric the Briton:

At the age of eleven, Beric, the son of a chief, was taken as a hostage by the Romans as a means of maintaining the peaceful behaviour of his tribe, the Sarci, a branch of the Iceni. He spent five years living as part of the family of a Roman army officer (commander of a legion). Significantly, he is treated kindly and educated intellectually and physically, thus ensuring both his knowledge of Roman language, culture, history and military method and the development of his physical strength and skill. His status as the son of a British chief

(female) is respected and any attempt to Romanize him is non-coercive. In spite of this Roman influence at such an important stage in his development, Beric's security in his own identity is not shaken. The parting words of his mother are

My son, ... I need not tell you not to let them Romanize you ...
I will not wrong you then by fearing for a moment that they can
make a Roman of you. (Beric the Briton: A Story of the Roman Invasion 17)

There is no indication in the text that Beric ever doubted where his allegiance lay, even in his own thoughts. His subsequent career after release is that of chief opponent of the Roman oppression since the newly appointed Roman Governor treats the indigenous people harshly and perpetrates deliberate acts of provocation. Far from breaking the spirit of the colonised people, this Governor's acts enrage them to a point of rebellion that results in the uprising led by Boudicea, Queen of the Iceni. The initial success of this uprising is represented as largely due to Beric's leadership of an army from his own branch of the tribe whom he has taught to fight 'in Roman fashion' (Beric the Briton: A Story of the Roman Invasion 86) that is, in a disciplined manner, acting together. Thus he used his Roman education to act against the Romans. Throughout this period of his life, Beric demonstrates a secure identity in which his individual identity and that of his community coincide. In constructing such an integrated identity for his protagonist, Henty substantiates Audrey Jaffe's statement that

late nineteenth-century ideologies construct individual identity as a
function of group identity ... (23)

Henty's Beric displays clear parallels with the youthful hero of the second half of the nineteenth-century and is commensurate with the ideal imperial youthful hero investigated in depth elsewhere.¹ Beric displays characteristics found in the protagonist of his other stories, particular examples taken from works dealing with pre-nineteenth century historical periods are Edmund in the reign of King Alfred (The Dragon and the Raven, 1886) and Wulf in (Wulf the Saxon, 1895). Henty's awareness of parallels between colonisation by imperial Rome and the growth and colonisation of other nations by the English is implied by his references to the benefits brought by a more advanced civilization (which he believed in some instances the English to be) combined with culturally tolerant rulers. Henty draws similar parallels between the civilisation represented by Carthage before its decline in The Young Carthaginian, 1887. This belief is voiced through Beric later in the text

Rome wishes you well ... We form part of the Roman Empire now,
that is as fixed and irrevocable as the rising and setting of the sun.
... But once forming a part of the empire we shall share in

¹ See Rachel E. Johnson, "A Complete Identity: The Image of the Hero in the Work of G.A. Henty (1832-1902) and George Macdonald (1824-1905)," PhD, Coventry University in association with The University of Worcester, 2008.

its greatness. Towns will rise over the land and wealth will increase,
and all will benefit by the civilization that Rome will bring to us.
(Beric the Briton: A Story of the Roman Invasion 380)

Not generally critiqued in terms of his subtlety, Henty interpellates such benefits voiced by the colonised whilst, in this instance, writing from a point of view opposed to the colonisers. Henty uses the same technique in his novels based in the nineteenth century, he frequently includes a character whose views, although initially opposed to English rule, change after personal contact with the coloniser, for example Rujub in Rujub the Juggler, (1892) and the Mahdi chief in With Kitchener in the Soudan, 1903. This character becomes an advocate for what is perceived as the more advanced civilisation and for an integration of aspects of that civilisation as Beric does in Beric the Briton.

Beric incorporates his knowledge of Roman culture into his identity by using this knowledge against the Romans whilst maintaining contact with his host Roman family and saving members of that family from destruction. Because his identity is secure and unquestioned, he is able to balance community loyalty with personal values rooted in affection for and attachment to individuals who, collectively are 'the enemy'.

After the defeat of the Britons, Beric is taken to Rome as a captive and placed in a school for gladiators, where, in true Henty hero fashion he distinguishes himself and becomes part of Caesar's household. As part of Nero's household he consciously remains aloof from affairs of state on the basis of his identity as a Briton. He emphasises aspects of this identity to avoid being drawn in to any politically compromising situation, firmly maintaining his position as outsider

I am but a soldier, but born a free Briton and a chief. ... I seek to
know nothing of [the intrigues of court life] and am therefore in no
position to give any opinion on these matters; (Beric the Briton: A Story of the
Roman Invasion 297)

When he is forced to flee Rome and live as an outlaw in the mountains, he and his band of Britons find the life preferable to the 'gilded chains' (Beric the Briton: A Story of the Roman Invasion 322) of service to Nero because

Although the skies were bluer and the mountains higher ... than those
of Britain, it seemed to them they were once again enjoying their native
air, (Beric the Briton: A Story of the Roman Invasion 325)

This comment is consistent with that of other characters in Henty's work. They have a propensity to view their present environment in terms of England, which is 'home'. In Henty's settler stories, for example Out on the Pampas, 1871 and Moari and Settler, 1891, this emphasis on carrying 'home' with them and, wherever possible, replicating it in their present environment is demonstrated at its strongest.

On his eventual return to Britain, Beric becomes a ruler under the new, culturally tolerant Roman Governor. Because of his enlightened and educated position, that is, his understanding of the Roman way of life, he is given authority to rule independently.

The Outcast

In contrast to Henty's Beric, Rosemary Sutcliff's Beric in The Outcast is represented at the outset of his life as culturally insecure. He is rescued as a young baby, the only survivor of a shipwreck off the coast of Britain, saved by his (Roman) parents cradling him between them so that he does not drown.

He is found by a member of a British tribal chieftain's family and brought up as his son. Beric has no knowledge of his cultural origin; he regards himself and is regarded by the tribe as a Briton, until natural disasters begin to affect the tribe. Since these occurrences begin on the eve of Beric's initiation and full acceptance into the tribe as a man, some members of the tribe hold his presence as an outsider, a member of an invading race in their midst, responsible for the disasters that have come upon them. They demand his ejection. Beric's position is an instance of,

in effect, the debate that pits against each other two means of determining cultural identity: one based on ascription (birth), the other on group affiliation (McBratney 285).

Up to the day before the initiation ceremony, Beric has been accepted as part of the tribe and knew no other life, although his adopted parents had told him of his origin. His awareness of his dual identity at this point in his story does not ease the pain of rejection and loss of cultural identity. At the initiation ceremony, instead of becoming fully established in his cultural identity, he is ceremonially cast out. His adoptive parents have no power over the decision and helplessly let him 'turn his face ... towards his own people' (Sutcliff 39).

Having lost his known cultural identity, Beric is adrift in a hostile world, one in which

shifting boundaries and a multiplicity of subject positions make it impossible to assume a homogeneous or stable subjectivity, (Coudray 1)

Chris Weedon observes that 'identity is central to the desire to be a 'knowing subject', in control of meaning' (21). From the time when Beric leaves his adopted family and culture, his life is represented as out of his control. Assumed amongst the Romans to be a Briton, he is prey to unscrupulous characters, forced onto a slave ship, sold as a slave to a Roman household, mistreated, and eventually sentenced to be a galley slave.

Whilst Beric is not accepted as either Briton or Roman, he experiences a sense of total alienation from both. His hold on humanity is kept alive by the fragile thread of friendship with his galley partner, whose death from mistreatment tips Beric into a frenzy of violence. As a result of his outburst, in which he attempts to kill the overseer of the galley slaves, he is scourged and tossed overboard on the mistaken assumption that he is almost dead (158). He

does of course survive but is assumed dead by the galley captain and very nearly dies after he is discovered in a state of collapse.

Sarah Henstra notes the importance of identity confirmed from outside the self in order to construct a secure sense of self worth (190). Beric's identity, both as Briton and Roman is systematically undermined to the point of the complete breakdown of his sense of self, symbolised by his apparent death by drowning. The rehabilitation of his sense of personal identity and therefore worth begins after the sea had cast him up alive for a second time. Whilst a slave in Rome Beric was seen by the Roman officer Justinus, whose character is reflected in his name. As a civil engineer, Justinus has been posted to Britain in order to build sea defence walls, and has established a household close to the place where Beric is washed up by the sea. Nursed back to health by Justinus' servants, Beric learns that Justinus' initial interest in him was due to his striking resemblance to Justinus' late (British) wife who had died of fever when she visited her people with her baby son (183). Justinus had been told that the baby died too but had always wondered whether the child had lived, been brought up by the tribe and might possibly be alive, in which case, Beric might have been Justinus' son. This proved to be a false hope, thus precluding a fairy tale 'blood will tell' (Frye) ending to the story and initiating in Beric further feelings of rejection and alienation, despite Justinus' continuing care for him.

The old sense of unbelonging was still with him, even now. He was still a stranger in a world he had once belonged to, shut out ... (197)

Beric is only able to accept his adopted place in the household after another battle with the sea during which he proved his worth to himself, thus fostering his sense of personal identity even as he felt he had lost his only chance of cultural identity.

The continuing acceptance by Justinus and eventual adoption into his family enables Beric to find the place of belonging necessary to a sense of identity (Weeks 88-100) which incorporates his dual cultural identity since it is a Roman household in Britain and Justinus himself has British blood (209). This, however, is incidental to Beric's recovery of a sense of personal identity since the emphasis in Sutcliff's work is on the possibility of building from experiences of suffering, pain and rejection to create a positive outcome and sense of belonging in the midst of an acknowledged chaotic and changing situation over which a character has little or no control. Marcus, in Sutcliff's The Eagle of the Ninth, 1954 and Aquila, The Lantern Bearers, 1959 also experience such self-discovery through extreme suffering. Beric's experience of loss as he is rejected by both the groups with whom he identified culturally, resulted in the disruption and near destruction of his concept of self.

The question to consider here might be: 'is there any true identity at the core of British-ness or Roman-ness as experienced by Sutcliff's Beric? In the end, his sense of identity is personal rather than communal. He lost both cultural identities but forged an identity through finding his own values (friendship in the galley and as slave in Rome) and acting upon them.

His communal identity in the family of Justinus is taken from a man who showed integrity and kindness. Justinus lives by the same values demonstrated by Sutcliff's Beric.

The position of Sutcliff's Beric, although his origins appear as privileged in terms of birth and adoption socially, is one of disillusion, disempowerment and ostracization from all that is familiar. His identity is undermined and by default all his other certainties in life are also undermined. The tension between the two sides of his identity, neither of which are realised, means that although he never loses his dual identity, it is never possible for him to identify fully with either Briton or Roman; neither does he lose the scars left by the cruelty and rejection.

Sutcliff's Beric remains, even after his situation has changed for the better, in a position where he has to carve a life from the situations he is in despite the overwhelming political waves sweeping around him and threatening to engulf him. His life of constant struggle is depicted by the sea imagery which runs constantly through the text from the time he is saved from the storm which shipwrecked his family, through his time as a galley slave rowing against the sea, to his battle with sea before his adoption. Building the sea defence wall is illustrative of his rebuilding his life in the family of Justinus,

Up here, shoulder to shoulder with Justinus in the breach, he had
only one thing to do: to keep out the sea that was doing all in its power
to come in (217).

'Reclaiming' the land of his life required constant effort and determination from Beric, in order to keep out the waves of negativity, mistrust and loss that threaten to drown him mentally and emotionally. Thus, Sutcliff's Beric discovers a sense of belonging based on acceptance not birth.

It is worth noting another major difference in outcome between the nineteenth and the twentieth century text. In the latter, Beric does not find his father (nor Justinus his son) which would be the predictable final chapter if this was a nineteenth-century Henty text, but the ending resolves into a happier situation nevertheless, with the expectation that further difficulties will follow. Against tides of political upheaval, preserving Beric's land of identity in the island of his new adoptive family will be just as much a struggle as that faced by Justinus and Beric in their work of building and maintaining the wall against the unpredictable sea.

Conclusion

It is clear from a brief examination of these two texts that the identity of Henty's Beric is, in Ruth Robbin's terms 'coextensive'(11), that is his sense of identity integrates both the collective (cultural) and the ascriptive (birth or lineage) and is consequently stable and secure throughout. As Robbins also observes,

Identity ... has to be striven for. But it certainly helps to have been

born into a privileged class and a privileged gender to make the strife worthwhile (87).

Thus from a position of leadership Henty's Beric is able to exercise control in whatever hostile situation he finds himself. This control correlates with the English control of the environments they dominated as empire builders. It is a nineteenth-century perspective on the position of the youthful hero who is able to control his environment rather than to be controlled by it.

Throughout Henty's text, Beric's identity as a Briton is unquestioned and frequently reinforced by himself, by other characters, and by reference to his undisguisable physique whilst in Rome. He displays 'unreflective Englishness' or Britishness, (Henstra 181) even whilst absorbing and even defending the Roman way of life and civilization. His security in his identity enables him to not only absorb Roman culture and military prowess sufficiently to use Roman knowledge in his struggle against the Romans but also to work alongside the Romans without his countryman interpreting his cooperation as betrayal. His life is

Reflective of 'cultural identity in an imperial world' (McBratney 279)

In contrast, Sutcliff's Beric suffers increasing destabilization and eventual loss of both the identities (that of Briton and of Roman) that he thought he had.

Written in 1955, post World Wars I and II, this perspective on Beric's experience reflects an increasing destabilization of cultural identity due to the social, intellectual, and political upheavals occurring in England from the end of World War I, a destabilization and uncertainty demonstrated by the ongoing current twenty-first century discussion in England on the nature of Englishness. Examination of the historical fiction of the post war period by other writers, for example the work of Cynthia Harnett (1893-1981), Geoffrey Trease (1909-2009) and Henry Treece (1911-1966) also demonstrates characters who do not control their immediate environment and peers as fully as does the Henty hero, but neither do they forge their character and identity through such extreme suffering as that encountered by Sutcliff's protagonists.

Thus in these two texts, both Henty and Sutcliff provide a reading of cultural identity reflective of their own time. In answer to the question in the title 'Is Beric a Briton?' the nineteenth-century Beric, certain of his identity, is a Briton. His identity is not doubted either by himself or the Romans. The doubts of his countrymen and their fear of his Romanization are rapidly dispelled on his return to the tribe. The twentieth-century Beric is a casualty of 'a collective identity adrift at the lapse of empire' (Henstra 181). He is no longer a Briton, neither is he a Roman. He carves an identity out of finding he has a place in a family in which the leading figure shares his dual cultural identity. Sutcliff's Beric discovers that his personal identity and his ability to make a positive contribution in the unstable world in which he lives and over which he has little or no control has greater significance than a collective identity which, when tested, proves to be as unstable as a rough sea.

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