

WHAT IS HISTORY?

Joan Clark

Résumé: L'auteur parle des recherches historiques auxquelles elle a dû se livrer avant d'entreprendre son cycle narratif viking et, en particulier, son dernier roman, *The Dream Carvers*, qui porte sur l'exploration du mythique Vinland.



Joan Clark

Photo credit: Jane Crawford

For me the greatest challenge in writing historical fiction is coming to terms with what history is, or isn't. Is history what we remember? What we have read? Is it only what has been written down as fact? Does it exclude what has never been recorded? At what point on the continuum does history become myth? When do we regard fiction which takes place in a previous time as "historical"? In a sense everything is historical or nothing is. Throughout the writing of *The Dream Carvers* and its mother novel, *Eiríksdóttir*, I was guided by the words that the Icelandic novelist, Halldor Laxness, wrote in *Christianity at Glacier*: "... the closer you try to approach history through facts, the deeper you sink into fiction."

This in no way implies that facts can be disregarded. All known facts must be taken into account if the writing is to maintain its integrity. When a writer engages in research, she soon learns that not everything purported to be fact *is*. Sometimes it is nothing more than received opinion repeated so often that it is viewed as fact. Every "fact," so called or not, has to be carefully assessed before being accepted or rejected. Judgment calls are required. One of the judgment calls I made early on in writing *The Dream Carvers*, parts of which rely heavily on the Icelandic sagas, was to decide on the location of Vinland. Some saga scholars place Vinland in the area of Rhode Island. Helge Ingstad, who located Leif's houses in 1961, places Vinland in Northern Newfoundland. If I had accepted everything in the *Greenlanders' Saga* as fact, I would have agreed with Ingstad's opinion. But I could not agree, since some of the incidents and details in the sagas were too improbable to sustain belief. The incident where Tyrkir, the German, found wine grapes growing nearby Leif's houses could not have been based on fact. Even taking climatic change into account, wine grapes do not and have never grown anywhere near Northern Newfoundland.

An intelligent reading of the sagas has to bear in mind the fact that they were written at least 200 years after Leif's voyage by scribes whose primary sources were long since dead. Oral storytelling only carried them so far. After that, the scribes were left on their own to invent, which they did. The point of story making was, after all, to entertain as well as to record. For a fiction writer like

myself, it came down to deciding which facts were cancelled out by others. Before I felt comfortable doing this, I read extensively about the social, political, cultural and economic aspects of the medieval Norse world. I went back and examined the probable facts of Leif Eiriksson's voyage: the coming and going within a year, the timing of sunrise and sunset, the flora Leif came upon (wild grapes, self-sown wheat, maple trees) and the landscape he encountered (a stream running from lake to sea, a salmon run, extensive shallows). Why did any of this winnowing out matter to a fiction writer like myself? It mattered because I was interested in developing Vinland thematically, what it represented in the Norse imagination, how it became part of a dream, a utopian quest, a need in Thrond (and in us) for optimism. While I was preparing to write the novel, there were many other instances of this winnowing out of facts.

Looking at the Norse artifacts was another way of establishing facts. An artifact speaks more clearly and eloquently to a fiction writer than the written word. That is why I tramped through the museums of Scandinavia looking at thousands of artifacts used by the people who came to America 1,000 years ago.

That is why I tracked down and looked at (and if possible, held) every Beothuk artifact I could find. Fortunately they were close at hand: the tools and weapons; the utensils and clothes; the amulets. There was nothing ambiguous or suspect about these artifacts. They spoke very clearly about the task they were designed to do. They asked the questions and supplied the answers. Little is known about the Beothuks. There are a few eye-witness accounts written by earlier settlers, a 300-word vocabulary list with various interpretations (which I used to form names in the novel), a few pictures drawn by Shawnadithit. The picture of the dancing woman was particularly significant for *The Dream Carvers*. I thought this image was a fact I could trust. That was why the dancer is important in the novel.

After the lengthy process of finding and sorting the facts, the next challenge was to use the facts in a way that would not suffocate the story. A story has to undergo several drafts (a minimum of three) before I internalize the facts, absorb them into my imagination, freeing me to find the story. I say "find" because I believe the writing of every story is a process of discovery. The challenge and, therefore, the difficulty is finding the story without trashing what has been isolated as facts.

I enjoy researching a story, the process of uncovering information and acquiring knowledge. Inevitably, the research takes me into an unanticipated, and if I am lucky, quixotic direction. When I was researching *The Hand of Robin Squires*, I came across a number of idiosyncratic people who either purported to have the answer to the mystery of the Oak Island treasure or, at one time or another, made an attempt to find it — a Belfast pub owner, for instance, who had me checked out before he would answer my inquiries about his theory regarding the treasure site. (His answer was written on stationary featuring green leprechauns tapping a red toadstool with tiny picks!) This man, along with other eccentrics, led me to write a tongue-in-cheek short story, "The Stuff Dreams Are Made Of," which is not about the treasure, but about the "characters" trying to

find it. Another bonus provided by researching *The Hand of Robin Squires* was coming up with a valid theory to explain the fact that the platforms in the treasure shaft were equidistant and that two of them were covered with enough putty to glaze the windows of a house in Chester. To my knowledge, in the twenty years since the book was published, none of the people involved in locating and examining the excavation evidence of the treasure shaft has seriously considered the theory “buried” in *The Hand of Robin Squires*. Nor has anyone come up with another theory to explain either the distance between the platforms or the putty.

To return to Halldor Laxness’s words, which I found as inspiring as they were enigmatic. His words reminded me of the relativity of time, that the further we go back in history, the more difficult it is to trust the facts. Truth becomes blurred. In the face of so many unknowns, there is a point at which imagination takes over fact. It is then up to the imagination to recover the lost reality.

The hardest part of writing *The Dream Carvers* was getting the imagination to travel the blurring distance of 1,000 years sustaining a story located both in and out of time. To accomplish this, I tried to find a voice that would carry the distance, that seemed to come out of a northern medieval world yet was also accessible, immediate, credible, what we call “real.” Finding this voice took a long time because it was a process of examining every word I wrote. In addition to conveying the right meaning, the word had to be appropriate to a medieval world. Contemporary novels brim with technologized words which would be out of place in a novel coming out of 1,000 years ago. Time and again, I reached for a word only to reject it because it was contemporary, extravagant or in another way inappropriate for the voice. Wherever possible I used simple, declarative sentences. I used metaphors that were spare and appropriate to that physical world. Often I took out a word only to return it again. It was a process of trial and error with only the sound of the voice inside my head to use as a guide. I think finding the right “voice” (read, “language”) to tell historical fiction is as important as the fact. In addition to carrying the lamp of time, the voice sets the tone and texture of the story, establishes credibility.

From *The Dream Carvers* (a beginning I wrote about 20 times):

I was an animal, a caribou maybe, or a bear. An animal tied to a pole. The pole, carried by four red hands, bobbed and wove between stands of spruce. Tree spikes pierced my body like iron nails. I was dragged through a thicket of alder whose rough-leaved branches scraped my face. The pole plummeted and my head bumped a large rock. Pain shot from the nape of my neck, crawled under my hair, gripped the sides of my forehead like claws. I closed my eyes, bracing myself for certain death.

While I am conceiving a story, be it historical or not, I seldom understand why I am attracted to it. The genesis of stories is mysterious and astonishingly fragile. (In the case of *The Dream Carvers*, the genesis was seeing the image of the Norse houses, imagining the voices in the wind.) Part of the process of writing the story is figuring out the attraction. I like to think this adds to the mysteriousness, the indefinable quality of a story, that which helps lift it from the page. The reason for writing any story, amorphous as the initial impulse might be, is simply that it is there. The fact that the impulse (or, if you like, inspiration) comes from the

past makes it no less real. Increasingly, I am brought up short by the arrogance of the present, the assumption that the most relevant and therefore important stories, are happening now. Halldor Laxness's words are important because they imply an open approach to history. They encourage us to think about the relationship between imagination and time. They visualize a continuum that is vertical and horizontal. They validate seeing history through fiction.

Joan Clark's novel, *The Dream Carvers*, her seventh children's book, received the *Geoffrey Bilson Award for Historical Fiction for Children*, and *Mr. Christie's Book Award*. She lives in St. John's, Newfoundland, and her books are available through Penguin and Stoddart.

ILLUSTRATING HISTORY

Heather Collins

Résumé: L'auteur décrit le travail de documentation historique auquel elle a dû se livrer afin d'illustrer l'ouvrage intitulé *A Pioneer Story*.



Heather Collins

When I was asked by Kids Can Press if I'd be interested in illustrating a book on pioneer life in Canada, my initial response was, "Why me? I'm not known as an historical illustrator."

I enjoy both picture-book work and non-fiction work, which is unusual, since illustrators usually fall into one camp or the other. As it turned out, *A Pioneer Story* required an illustrator who could do both narrative illustration for the fictional story chapters and explanatory illustration for the non-fiction sections. And because I'd already illustrated another Kids Can title, *Writing, A Fact and Fun Book*, which included a few historical images for which I'd had to hunt down references, they were convinced that what I didn't know, I could find out.

So the job was mine! My first chore was to estimate my time so that the production schedule could be drawn up — no easy task, as I'd never worked on a book of such length — 240 pages! I felt shaky, but estimated five months, and told Kids Can six. Little did I know!

My task was eased immeasurably by working with Barbara Greenwood, an extraordinary writer, with the same passion for detail and accuracy that I have. We were well-matched and developed a relationship of mutual respect. As Barbara did her own research into the period, she did something which proved invaluable to me, and which helped make the book both accurate and the award-