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WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION

My address to The Romance Writers of Australia at their annual conference in 1996

I've been asked to talk to you today about my experiences in writing historical fiction, with particular reference to my novel *Savage Exile* which was published by Pan Macmillan here and in the UK.

When I was first asked if I would give an address, I was expecting mainly to be talking to you about how I dealt with the intimate moments between couples in the story because of my agent regularly telling people who attended her functions that I had some ability with describing them. Fortunately, another couple of speakers are addressing that subject, which lets me off the hook.

Embarrassingly, when my agent mentioned this supposed skill of mine when we were having lunch with her close friend Colleen McCullough, Colleen said that she found real difficulty in writing love scenes. And then she peered across the table at me and said, "Gee, you'd never pick it by looking at him!"

"But I've been sick!" I laughingly protested amidst other laughter at the table.

Now, back to a more conventional form of historical fiction.

One of my observations on the peculiarities of life is that the course of our progress through it is more often determined by default than by design.

We marry the person who happened to have moved next door, or we met at a dance that we didn't often go to, or met through a chance encounter with an old acquaintance. We work in a job that was mentioned by someone we hardly knew, or we saw it advertised when we were looking for something entirely different, and so on.

And it was certainly more on account of default than design that I wrote a book that was historical fiction.

Some time ago, I decided I would make a concerted effort to become a published author. I had been writing all my life in one form or another: And I believed I had some ability as a storyteller. At the time I decided to make this effort I had just finished reading *The Chronicles*

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of *Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever* by Stephen Donaldson. For those who aren't familiar with them, they are six books that have the protagonist regularly slipping from the real world into a fanciful world where he is caught up in the perennial struggle between good and evil.

The stories are not unlike the epic conflicts that occur in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. I was particularly taken in by the imaginative scope provided to the author of having his characters slipping from one world to another. This was for me, I decided. So, I set about writing a story where my leading characters were subjected to time-slip.

Early in the story, whenever they are both caught within the grip of the same life-threatening trauma, they would slip back into an ancient world. Through the use of regular flashbacks, I would cut from the ancient world back to the modern world. However, I was not too happy about occupying the ancient world with supernatural creatures as was the case with Stephen Donaldson's books. So, I roughly based my ancient world on my perception of what life might have been like in the Australian wilderness some thousands of years ago. I finished my manuscript and through a succession of circumstances – defaults, rather than designs, coincidences rather than planned enterprise – it ended up on my agent's desk. She liked it, and a well-known publisher liked it. But, as you would be aware, marketing people are more interested in stories that they know from experience are likely to sell.

Mine was a story inspired by Tolkien and Donaldson, but it also had quite a bit of Tom Clancy and Robert Ludlum in it; an uncommon mix that the marketing people believed the buying public might not be quite ready.

So, I was advised to remove the time-slip and create a fairly conventional piece of historical fiction.

Because there was quite a bit of current interest in the Australian convict era, instead of having my characters cast up mysteriously on the Australian coast some thousands of years ago, I decided to bring them here two hundred years ago. In doing so, I was no longer dealing with pure fiction. Now I had to entwine my story with threads of actual events and take into account a number of considerations that it would have been unwise to ignore.

For instance, the convict era lasted for about 60 years from 1788 through to the middle of the following century. So, this period became the outer envelope within which I could set my story.

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But to accommodate my original story, which was set in a wild untamed land, I was forced to reduce this envelope to the period before the settlements at Port Macquarie and Morton Bay had been established in the early 1820s, thereby leaving the entire coastline of New South Wales – now Australia – largely unexplored north of the *Coal River* settlement which later became Newcastle.

I decided to set the concluding sequences of my story in and around the valley of the *Coal River* – now the *Hunter Valley* – with which I am particularly familiar – shortly after settlement had begun in that area in 1804. So, this further reduced the envelope within which I could set my story to a period extending from 1804 to 1820.

Other considerations now came into play including the degree to which I wanted my story to relate to the main events and key people of the period. For instance, if I included one of the governors who was in charge during that period – King, Bligh or Macquarie – for any specific time it would have been unwise to include the wrong one.

I could, of course, have invented a fictitious governor if I wanted to use him as a major player. If I had, I would have perhaps based him on one or more of these real-life governors. This brings me to the question of license. Does a writer of historical fiction have a license to alter history? My belief is that, if we want our stories to be looked upon as serious historical fiction, we would be unwise to alter what is known.

As an extreme example, we couldn't, for instance, have the Battle of Trafalgar occur in 1800 rather than 1805 just because it would better suit the setting of our story. We couldn't have Napoleon win the Battle of Waterloo. Not if we want our story to be taken seriously.

Hollywood might be able to get away with having Lady Jane Grey and her husband, Lord Guildford Dudley living happily ever after, rather than having their heads chopped off, but not so writers of credible historic fiction.

So, what license do we have? What can we get away with and what should we leave completely untouched? I believe the answer can be obtained by putting ourselves in the position of the reader, and decide what would, or would not, offend our sensibilities.

We do have the license, I believe, to place our characters in the midst of actual events. Without detracting from the credibility of our story, our protagonists can be placed in the midst of (say) the fighting at Trafalgar or Waterloo. They can have conversations with historical figures such as Lord Nelson or Napoleon, provided these historical figures – about

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whom much is known – are not placed where they could not have been at that time and on that day. To misplace them would be to tax the sensibilities, and thereby the respect, of our readers.

And as with any fiction, I believe we do have the licence to have what happens to our characters based on what actually happened to real people in similar circumstance. We can even add to the credibility of our story by doing this. If something similar really happened, we could hardly be accused of stretching the limits of credibility.

CS Forester, for instance, based many of the exploits of his fictional characters on the real-life heroes he described in his historical works, including Horatio Nelson. And many of the characters and incidents that Charles Dickens describes in his stories were based on real people and real events.

As I have mentioned in the acknowledgments in *Savage Exile*, some of what occurs to my characters is based on what actually happened to two women, Eliza Fraser and Barbara Crawford, who survived shipwrecks on the coast of what was then New South Wales. Because I had two of my female characters also being cast upon the New South Wales coast during the convict era, I thought it appropriate that they experience some situations similar to those experienced by these two women.

This brings me to the subject of research.

(Note that the following predated the advent of the Internet.)

I've always had an interest in history. At home I have a library of over 800 books that include encyclopedias and atlases, and numerous historical works and books on art. Art books provide an invaluable source of information for historical writing, because, down through the ages, it's the artists of the time who have captured the landscape, the architecture and the people, as photographers would capture these things today. But despite having a wealth of useful information at home, for *Savage Exile* I was still forced to trek backwards and forwards countless times to the State Library. The main reason for this was my suspicion that I was either not getting the complete story in some areas, or it was a distorted story, thereby requiring further research.

Whereas I believe that we can generally trust the artists of the time to capture what they see fairly accurately – except perhaps in the case of commissioned portraits – this can't be said regarding many historians. Although important events these days are usually covered by such

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a plethora of print and tv media, that there is usually little doubt about the actual sequence of events or the detail, this was not the case in the past.

The further back in time that events occurred, the sparser is the coverage at our disposal. Even for major events that occurred as late as the 19th century, we often have to rely on only a handful of accounts that may themselves have been derived from as few as one or two sources. We can usually rely on the dates being correct and the identity of the prime participants, but often we cannot rely on much else.

For instance, we can safely assume that the Battle of Waterloo was fought on 18th June 1815, and that the main generals were Napoleon and the Duke Wellington. We can safely assume that the French were beaten and have some idea of what were the deciding factors in the outcome of the battle.

But I can assure you, French accounts of exactly what happened on that day differ remarkably from British accounts. Worse still, most of what has been written about the battle not only reflects the prejudices of the writer but also reflects the prejudices of the sources the writer has used. So, not only do we often get corruption of what has happened in the past, we also often get compounded corruption of it.

I mentioned that I believe we have the license to place our fictitious characters interacting with real people and being present during actual events. In his novel *Les Misérables*, Victor Hugo had Monsieur Myriel conversing with Napoleon. And later had Thénardier, the inn-keeper ('Master of the House' in the musical) robbing corpses on the field at Waterloo, a site that Hugo knew well because of family connections with the chateau Hougomont which played a part in the battle.

What is unfortunate is that many historians also believe they have the license to introduce fiction into their supposedly factual recording of events. "To fill in the gaps," they would plead; "To give the narrative more life and a greater degree of immediacy."

I have been a bit sceptical about historians ever since I read an account by Professor Manning Clark of a supposed argument between the poet Henry Lawson and his mother after which the young Henry ran out of the house and stood in a sorghum patch where he contemplated the meaning of life and his sorry lot within it. All this happening about sixty years before sorghum was first planted Australia.

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So, even with acclaimed historians inclined to add their own embellishments, where does this leave us? Sceptical, is the answer. As I mentioned, we can probably rely on the dates of major events and the identities of the prime characters, particularly if this information is supported by more than one source, but anything else we should treat with a degree of suspicion.

As you can probably imagine, the history of (say) the Kalgoorlie gold fields in Western Australian as related by Sir Paul Hasluck, former prominent Australian conservative politician from Western Australia and later, Governor General, would be very different from that related by Frank Hardy, former prominent Australian novelist, playwright, political activist and member of the Communist Party. One solution is to avoid being too specific regarding any areas where we are unsure of the truth. Or, if specific detail is required, another solution is to create our own detail.

As long as whatever we add is reasonably believable and does no conflict with what are possibly accurate historical accounts, we are on fairly safe ground. As writers of fiction, we do have a license to call on our imagination to fill in any gaps. It's a pity that so many historians also believe they are similarly entitled, when what they write is regarded by many as being sacrosanct.

The Battle of Trafalgar and *HMS Victory* figure prominently in a couple of scenes in *Savage Exile*. The research problems I encountered included discovering the surnames of the crew spelt differently in different accounts. For instance, was the Boatswain's name Willmett (m-e-t-t) or Willmot (m-o-t)? A minor point perhaps; one that could be solved by the toss of a coin. But did this alternative spelling indicate that the source was a verbal account many years after the event? Perhaps at a time when the records could not be easily checked? Perhaps when those telling the story were old men being interviewed later in the nineteenth century, when there were more newspapers and more inquisitive journalists around to badger them for specific details they could no longer accurately recall?

Although legend tells us that Lord Nelson's body was preserved in a barrel of rum, I could not find one reference to this. All accounts I managed to unearth stated that his body was preserved in brandy; and in one account – for the trip from Gibraltar back to England – essence of brandy. Rum didn't get a mention anywhere. So, when you hear of the daily rum issue to sailors in the Royal Navy being called 'Nelson's blood' because of the legend, you get some idea of how far a little disinformation can travel. And further to his supposed

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association with the Royal Navy's issue of rum, seemingly reliable accounts have Nelson insisting that wine rather than rum be issued to his men.

Did Nelson on his death bed say, 'Kiss me Hardy' or 'Kismet Hardy'? Even though most accounts, after he said whatever, he said, have Captain Hardy leaning forward to kiss Nelson, my money would still be on 'Kismet'. Nelson had spent a considerable time in the eastern Mediterranean and in other areas where the Arabic 'kismet' (fate) was uttered as often as the oriental 'karma' was uttered in a similar vein further to the east.

I think Hardy mis-heard his admiral amidst the screams of the injured and the thunder of the guns. Without any firm evidence to refute this, I'm allowed to believe it. Some accounts have him kissing Nelson on the cheek and others have him kissing him on the forehead. None that I saw had him kissing him on the lips. And I can assure you, as a former navy man myself, you definitely can't believe all you hear about life at sea.

One of the things I did take on trust was that Nelson was a firm man but a fair one, and that he was well liked by the crew. Another was that Captain William Bligh, of *HMS Bounty* fame and former governor of New South Wales, was also a fair man, but that he had quite a bombastic nature and was inclined to outbursts of colourful language. Again, without any firm evidence to refute these assertions, I'm allowed to believe them, and that is how I portray the two men in my book.

For *Savage Exile*, I also researched the subject of Aboriginal lifestyle and legends. Fortunately, I already knew something of both. One of the difficulties with the written information that is available is that it was predominantly gathered in the 20th century, with most of it relating to the groups that were still living in the wild across the far north of Australia. Very little of what was available, that I could rely on, related to those who lived in the areas I was interested in around the Hunter Valley and New England districts early in the 19th century. This is understandable of course. By the late 19th century, most of the groups who did live in the wild in those areas had either perished or been driven away.

One thing I found during my research was that, although there were similarities in the beliefs and in the rituals carried out by most language groups, there were also marked differences.

And it is unlikely, for instance, that the information available on (say) the people living in Arnhem Land today, has much significance regarding the Kamilaroi peoples living in and

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around the Upper Hunter and Liverpool Plains districts early in the 19th century. More than likely, they were descendants of different immigration waves.

The result was that I cautiously restricted any references to superstitions and rituals to those that were either fairly common to most language groups, or ones about which I had some personal knowledge regarding the Eastern Kamilaroi before their recollections may have since been influenced by later-day historians keen on pushing a particular point of view.

In keeping with this weekend's theme, it's probably appropriate that I mention how I dealt with the romantic interludes that occur in *Savage Exile*. I am often asked if I had any trouble with writing these scenes from a female perspective.

The answer is a definite, No! For a start, by the time any of the women in *Savage Exile* become romantically involved with anyone else, their characters had been developed to a degree where I didn't have to interfere much at all. How they thought and how they acted was simply a reflection of who they were. They definitely had minds of their own, and regarding most of their encounters with others, whether of a sexual nature or not, I could usually just type away on my keyboard with not a lot of control over what they were presently doing, or much idea of what they were going to do next.

Sometimes they really surprised me, and I found myself staring in disbelief at my computer monitor. I'm not joking!

As a matter of interest, the most powerful relationship in *Savage Exile* is a predominantly Platonic one that develops between two of the women, an uncompromising bond that was completely unplanned when I began to write the story. A bond for which the biblical Ruth's declaration to Naomi of, "Whither thou goest, I will go" would not have been out of place.

I don't believe any of us should have much difficulty with writing from the perspective of the opposite sex. I have a theory that this person inside our heads that looks out at the world through our eyes – this identity of ours, this id, this self – would be the same self whether we were male or female. So, any one of us should be able to write from a male or a female perspective. If we were writing from the viewpoint of the opposite sex depending on what we were writing about, we might need to take into account that our physical characteristics were somewhat different, but what we have in here behind our eyes would be the same self, albeit a self that reflected what we had individually experienced in getting to where we were at the time of looking out from behind those eyes.

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In one of your recent newsletters, I read the article '*Know your Alpha Man*'. Within the article there was some mention of what readers expect and usually find in romance novels.

Comparing this with what they would find in my book, I don't think these same readers would be too disappointed, at least as far as the female characters are concerned.

But I'm not too certain how the male protagonist in my book shapes up with respect to this so-called alpha male. He certainly is not 'arrogant' or 'overbearing' or in any way 'brutal' as described by Robyn Donald in the article; nor is he Elizabeth Lowell's 'bleak, powerful hero who puts love's transforming power to the ultimate test'. Compared to these couple of characters, he's almost a sensitive new age guy: a regular SNAG: A gamma male rather than an alpha one.

Actually, and I suppose not surprisingly, I based him on myself. And people who know me and who read the book would recognise this. Provided they aren't too distracted by the fact that he is some twenty years younger, a foot taller and has a thick mop of red hair. He's also a lot braver than I am.

When my publisher read the completed manuscript the one major change I was asked to make was to organise the action in chronological order. It took me only a couple of days to accommodate this. I was also asked to amend a few paragraphs that had some of the trappings of what is known in the trade as a 'bodice ripper'.

I amended the offending paragraphs accordingly but wasn't completely in agreement with the observation. For a start, after fighting to survive shipwrecks, mountainous seas and the terrors of the untamed Australian wilderness, my female characters were no longer wearing bodices that were in a condition that were worth ripping, even by one of these aforementioned alpha males.

Finally, I'll leave you with a couple of my thoughts on the future of this writing business we're in.

Napoleon Bonaparte reportedly made the comment, "Imagination rules the world". Perhaps he did. Perhaps not. Perhaps he stole it from someone else. Perhaps some historian was giving free play to his or her own imagination. Anyway, regardless of who first said it, I think it's an accurate observation. Imagination does rule the world. And you and I are in the imagination business.

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The pundits tell us that the next great age will be the *Information Age*. Developments in technology have ensured that there is now, and will be in the future, no shortage of ways of packaging and communicating information. This puts us in a great position by being in the imagination business. But we have to be careful. Our writing shouldn't become so formularised that it can be replaced by a computer program.

From what I've witnessed in the development of computer programs, a keyboard operator will soon be able to enter the names of the characters of a story, select the required plot and the writing style, and then sit back while the computer generates the complete manuscript.

But what a computer cannot do is experience life as we experience it. A computer has no real understanding of the agonies and ecstasies of a love affair. It has no real understanding of the hurt we feel if we are betrayed, or the guilt we feel if we do something we know is wrong.

And it has no real knowledge of the scope of our despair or elation. For instance, it doesn't know the depths to which our spirits can plunge when someone close to us has died or is critically ill, or the heights to which those same spirits can soar at the birth of a child or at the success or the achievements of a loved one.

As long as our writing continually captures and communicates these emotions there will be a demand for it, and we will thrive.

And that concludes my address.

Author's Note

I smile fondly now at the memory of those who were sitting close to the aisle coming out of their chairs to grasp me by both hands as I made my way back to my seat. Little did I know at the time that AI, as I now understand its capabilities – despite keeping it at shouting distance from me because of fear of being infected – can do a reasonable job of replicating the emotions I said were beyond the ability of a computer. So, now I feel guilty because of having perhaps misled them.

But at least I entertained them for a while, which helps assuage my guilt. The reaction of those who grasped my hands possibly wasn't entirely caused by my closing remarks. My anecdote about the time I lunched with my agent and Colleen McCulloch, may have put them

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in the mood to enjoy my presentation and laugh regularly throughout it, surprisingly so when I believed I was being serious.

John Lewis