

A Hundred Histories

Atlas Weyland Eden

*Highly Commended
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In a merry green wood of England fair, beneath the mossy-eyed oaks who witnessed the beginning and end of countless tales, who stood longer than the Celts and Romans, who heard the creaking of Norman ships nearing the coast, who hid the fleeing Saxons and watched them die upon the arrow-stricken earth, those oaks, who spoke their secrets to the insects, and the insects told the birds and the birds told the squirrels and the squirrels whispered them to the acorns they planted — the secrets passing on to future trees — it was beneath those trees that, in this moment, several pigs scrounged for nuts.

A swineherd shouted. The pigs ignored him. A jester sat upon a stone and mused upon the age they lived in. A writer stood by a beech tree, paying close attention to everything. The swineherd and the jester ignored the writer as he wandered to and fro, muttering to himself, watching the sunset, contemplating a falling leaf. He listened as the jester spoke wise nonsense to his companion, though in an accent the writer struggled to understand.

The swineherd's hound lurched through the bushes. The writer puzzled over the dog (a greyhound, perhaps?) as it snapped and confused its charges, when the dog turned away from the pigs and ran straight for the writer. Except the dog sprinting towards him through the swine-haunted trees was not, in fact, the swineherd's dog. No bedraggled mongrel this, but a breed half deerhound, half wolfhound, well-kept fur all brown and white. The dog leapt forward, paws planted on his chest, claws sinking through fabric, and licked the writer's face.

“Maida!” he said. “Could you kindly not impersonate my characters?” Maida sat on the floor, tail wagging in the hopeful way of someone who has committed a crime, but knows they will get off lightly. Scott ran a hand through his hair. He looked about, but he was far from the 12th century English wood, and it would take a long while to return.

He limped to the window, clutching his stomach. Dawn glowed heather-pink upon the hills, awakening the pines from slumber and rousing the younger trees Scott himself planted.

“Dawn,” he mused, “a moment's winter within summer, yet shedding such tenderness upon the frosted bones of Scotland.” He sighed. “For God's sake. When I mean to write about Scottish

history, my mind travels to all manner of places, yet when I write about England, all I can conjure is Scotland.”

A knock at the door.

“Aye. Come in, William.”

In a swirl of wet wool and ink, his steward strode into the study. “Morning, sir. Morning, Maida.” His gaze passed over the pile of notes and the open copy of Chaucer. “Made a start, I see?”

Scott waved a hand. “Just trying to get a sense of the story. Haven’t thought of a single sentence. All I have is a handful of nameless characters, a forest I fail to find on any maps, and too many dates.”

William picked up a scrawled-upon parchment. “We still have the opening you wrote yesterday. England in the wake of William the Conqueror, the divide between Saxons and Normans. All a good start.”

“Only the story hasn’t started.”

William laid a log on the fire and sat at Scott’s desk. He slit open a letter. “It’s about your last poem.”

“Aye?” said Scott.

“The publisher says it needs punctuation.”

Scott rolled his eyes to Maida. “Poetry and punctuation should never be used in the same sentence.” He exhaled. “But so be it. Tell them to add whatever commas they require.”

The fire mumbled. William’s pen flickered a reply. Wood spat, paper folded.

“Ready to begin?” said William.

Scott shrugged. “Might as well try. Before the masons fill the morning with their hammering, and the poor noble chips away at the tower.” He paced back and forth, Maida following like a shadow. He cleared his throat. “After me. *The sun had just begun to set...*”

William’s pen danced across paper.

“...upon the grand emerald gaiety of—” Scott stopped. “Cross out *grand*.”

“Right away.”

“And *emerald* is too dark. Try *gold-green*.”

The pen fluttered.

“Now, *the gold-green gaiety of the*— No, cross it all out. From the top.”

“From the top.”

“*It was a burnished sunset, and in the quiet of the...*” Scott drifted off. “*In the quiet of the day-weary...*”

The pen paused. William turned in the chair. “What’s the problem, sir?”

“It’s... It’s all so far away. Everything is misted.”

“Hardly surprising, sir. You’ve never written about England, let alone England six hundred years ago. *Waverley* was only sixty years since.”

Scott cringed. “Pray don’t mention *Waverley*. I put it together with so little care, took next to none of it seriously, and it went into the world and reached such a magnitude I thought myself dreaming. By the same logic, this book, over which I agonise, will be forgotten and overlooked the moment of publication.”

“Well, one cannae argue with logic,” said William, and he got up to go. Scott started, but William smiled and said, “Just jesting. Though if you’re not ready, I can come back tomorrow.”

“Will it help? Tomorrow, it will all have sunk one day deeper into history.”

William returned to the desk. “I’m writing that down.”

“Pardon?”

“You’ll thank me later.”

Scott scratched Maida’s chin, tail thumping. William set down his pen and said, “If this book is giving you such trouble, why not write about Scotland?”

Out the window, the pines swayed. Scott closed his eyes and pondered. “This land is a well I have drunk from so many times, I fear to dry it up. It has given me so much in this life that I hoped to give something back, and perhaps I have. My heart will always stay here, but my mind wishes to

test new horizons. I seek to write Scotland's history, but one cannot untangle our history from England's, and so it is there I must travel." He opened his eyes. "In my youth, I loved the chivalry, the swordplay, the dragons and knights of old England, and my imagination would run away in great flights of fancy.

"The myths of Scotland are the myths of my bones, but England's fairy tales are as allusive as they are alluring. I don't know if I can write about that age in a way grounded and true." His voice grew low. "Maybe I'm not ready. Maybe I don't know enough. Maybe I'll never know enough."

William rose to his feet, laid a hand on Scott's shoulder. "You're Walter Scott, you'll figure this out. They call you the Wizard of the North for a reason. When you're ready to write, you know where to find me." The door opened and closed, and Scott stood alone, with Maida at his heels and crossed-out words on his desk.

"Well, what do you suppose I do?"

Maida yawned.

"That's all very well for you to say."

Maida lay down by the desk, front legs stretched out, head raised.

"You make it look easy. What I'd give to sit down without these blasted pains." He squatted and stroked Maida between the ears. "Don't tell the others," he whispered, "but you're my favourite."

I know, wagged Maida's tail.

Scott straightened and turned to his desk: papers speckled with William's handwriting, piles of bookmarked references ranging from English history, to collections of ballads, to accounts of black magic. "Some days," he said, "I suspect the battlefield would be kinder. Less time to agonise, glory coming swifter, though most likely passing sooner."

His gaze rested upon a white riverstone serving as a paperweight, pocketed on a walk along the Tweed. He picked it up, considered its coolness.

"You know, Maida, a stone such as this could have seen any number of things. Impossible to know how it came to be, how old it is, where it was before the wheels of time placed it in my hand.

For all I know, it could have come from England hundreds of years ago. Perhaps it was a chip off the very stone where Arthur's sword lay planted."

Maida's nose twitched, as if pondering the prospect.

"I suppose my imagination has run away again. But still, you never know, do you? You never know all the stories something so small has lived through." He slipped the stone into his pocket, took a steadying breath, and closed his eyes.

Sunset edged into dusk, hints of twilight seeping through the branches. The swineherd and the jester spoke at length; the swineherd's dog rested, matted fur grey as bark, while the pigs rooted for acorns.

Oaks danced in the wind, and the writer gazed into the canopy. The swineherd, remembering his charges, hurried away. The writer felt for the stone, steeled himself, and approached the jester.

"Pardon me?" he said. The jester drummed his fingers along one leg, humming a forgotten tune. The writer cleared his throat. "Pardon me, but may I ask your name?"

The jester turned, and — for the first time — gave a reply. "Thou mayst know me as Wamba, son of Witless, thrall to Cedric of Rotherwood."

"Wamba, son of Witless?" The writer smiled. "Aye, that sounds right. Also, I wished to ask — and I hope this isn't too forward — is this what jesters really looked like?" He waved a hand at the purple-and-crimson costume, the bells atop the jester's cap. "I thought I'd got carried away."

The jester nodded with a jangle. "Indeed, it is, or else my reflection has been lying to me all these years."

The writer chuckled. "You're humorous, at least. Though I have doubts about the voice."

"How I speaketh? Be there a problem upon my tongue?"

"No, I mean — well, I don't know. I don't know how anyone talked in this age. There are precious few written accounts, and who's to say people spoke the way they wrote? Who's to say anything we imagine about the past is true?"

“Well, regardless,” said the jester, “this be how Wamba sounds, even if Wamba speaketh this way alone.” The writer frowned. The jester tilted his head. “What vexes thee, friend bard?”

“All this feels real, when I am here,” the writer gestured to the wood, “but how can I know if anything lines up with history?” He sighed. “I fear it’s all too long ago.”

“Each moment is history to the moment that succeeds it,” said the jester.

The writer paused. “May I use that?”

“I dare say you mayst, though you use a fool’s words at your own peril. And while I speaketh such perilous things, I thinkest that if thou cannot know for sure the truth of this age, then none other alive wouldst know much better. So doth it matter if what thou creates is true, when no man can say otherwise? After all, what is history but so many stories, gloriously misremembered through the centuries?”

The writer said nothing. A robin hopped across the grass in a flourish of red. The swineherd’s hound lay upon a bed of moss, twitching his nose as a fox whispered through the trees. The tang of oak leaves hung in the air.

“Perhaps,” whispered the writer. “Perhaps...”

The trampling of horses echoed through the trees. The swineherd gathered his grunting herd, readying to leave; the jester jumped to his feet. “Friend bard?” quoth the jester. “Wilt thou join us?”

The writer breathed the ancient air. “I will stay here, friend jester, for the tale is quickening. I feel it in the leaves and in the soil, and in the beating of the hoofs. All I must do is watch, and write.”

The riders came closer, the story spun into shape. The jester lingered, laughing. “William will have his work cut out, next time we meet,” said the writer, with a smile, while a hundred histories went marching past, and the words began to flow.