
Conventional scholarly wisdom suggests that the period from the Restoration to the middle of the eighteenth century is something of a historiographical desert. Between the ambitious chronicles of Holinshed at the end of the sixteenth century and the narrative histories of David Hume and Edward Gibbon in the middle of the eighteenth, historiography (so the story goes) remains the preserve of hacks and dunces who recycle or even plagiarize the works of others to produce pedestrian accounts of their own past and that of other nations.

If history writing during this period has held any interest for literary scholars, it is usually because of its contribution to the emergence of the form that we have come to know as the novel. The use of essentially fictional devices (invented speeches, for instance) by eighteenth-century historians has been seen as a key factor in the development of novelistic prose (Mayer), although Karen O’Brien has cautioned that historians of the period regarded their narratives as different in kind from those of their novel-writing contemporaries. The increasingly self-conscious approach of historians, influenced by empiricist philosophy, to the notion of fact has also been linked with the early novel’s engagement with—as Michael McKeon termed them—“questions of truth” (Origins xxii).

In Historical Literatures, Noelle Gallagher convincingly overturns critical commonplaces and received attitudes toward eighteenth-century historiography to provide a thorough, elegant, and judicious account of this period’s ideas about writing the past. Where others have seen only a wasteland, Gallagher identifies a varied and vibrant critical terrain in which writers in a wide range of genres created new, diverse species of historical writing. Gallagher associates these not only with authors who self-consciously identified themselves as historians (for instance, Roger North and John Oldmixon) but also with authors of polemic (secret history and scandal chronicle), poetry (panegyric and satire), and personal,
autobiographical forms of writing (apologia and diaries). The result is an account of early eighteenth-century historiography that reveals it to be as complex, sophisticated, and diverse as the rich agglomeration of literary forms that we routinely bracket together under the generic label “prose fiction.”

Gallagher contends that historiography during this period displays a number of characteristics that differentiate it from the kind of neoclassical history described and advocated by French theoreticians of historiography. Writers of history between 1660 and 1740 regarded the recent, as well as the ancient, past as a valid area for historical inquiry. They explored the individual psychology of key historical actors, regarding characters in history as more than just stock types. They often focused on particular moments in history, depicting the past as a series of discrete events rather than in terms of a coherent, overarching narrative. These characteristics are, of course, also important aspects of early novels. But by focusing on history writing rather than fiction, Gallagher reveals the sophistication of an ancient literary form’s modern manifestation.

Unlike earlier commentators, Gallagher takes seriously the pretensions that the texts she analyzes make to “literary” status. She attends closely to the stylistic peculiarities of the authors—a technique that proves fruitful in analyzing not only the work of John Dryden and Andrew Marvell, but also less obviously those of literary figures such as John Oldmixon and Colley Cibber. In discussing Cibber’s Apology (1740), for instance, she observes, “throughout the work, Cibber manipulates the rhetoric of apostrophe, using the conjunction of specific addressee and broad audience to commemorate those actions that substantiate an artist’s—rather than a statesman’s—claims to historical importance” (22). In an analysis of Daniel Defoe’s Secret History of the White-Staff (1714), she observes that the first-person narrator repeatedly uses the tag “I say,” which “not only reinforces the White-Staff’s status as argumentative prose, but also highlights its use of vocal or conversational idioms” (83). This analysis is not always executed with elegance. Commenting on one passage, Gallagher remarks that “the conglomerations of nouns in these lines … establish subject-predicate relations by means of analogy, creating metonymic associations between the persons involved and the items that they sell” (134). Nonetheless, her analytical method means that Gallagher takes these texts on their own terms, as sincere interventions in a broad tradition of history writing with recognizable conventions and literary ambition.

Given the astuteness with which Gallagher analyzes the rhetorical strategies of early eighteenth-century history writing, it is something of a pity that she pays relatively little attention to the ways in which her chosen texts engage in contemporary political debate. Perhaps Gallagher is reacting to the priority that earlier accounts, such as Laird Okie’s Augustan Historical Writing (1991), gave to the partisan conflicts of later Stuart England. The fact that polemical genres such as secret history and, to a lesser extent, satire were associated with an oppositional political position does, however, deserve to be foregrounded (McKeon, Secret History; Patterson). Attention to contemporary literary-political culture might have complicated some of Gallagher’s arguments. Many Whig secret historians
espouse a kind of grand historical narrative (about France’s desire to achieve universal European domination, for instance) even as they draw attention to discrete historical moments and explore the psychology of individual historical actors. These texts draw on both “ancient” and “modern” literary cultures, resisting critical attempts at neat categorization.

Gallagher’s account of historical literature makes no claims to completeness, but an account of its principles of selection among the myriad forms of history writing generated during the period under consideration would have been illuminating. I wonder to what extent Gallagher’s arguments would find support from other kinds of historical writing not considered in this book—historical drama, ballads, periodical literature, or court memoirs, for instance. When she turns to history “more narrowly defined” (159) in the final chapter of her book, Gallagher chooses Roger North’s Examen (1740) and John Oldmixon’s History of England (1724–1726) on the grounds that these texts “provide for a relatively uncomplicated analysis in that each of them can be associated very clearly with a particular subgenre of historical literature” (160). In fact, Gallagher’s nuanced analysis of these texts belies her own assertions about their “uncomplicated” relationship with other, more ephemeral forms of historiography. Even so, I would have liked to have seen Gallagher take on the Earl of Clarendon and Gilbert Burnet—even more canonical history writers whose works nonetheless bear a close relationship with satire, secret history, and the other historical traditions that this book explores.

*Historical Literatures* will be of great interest to students of both history and English literature. Its findings will surely inspire further research in this rich field, even as they provide a compelling series of arguments with which all future scholars in this area will need to engage.

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WORKS CITED


