

THE HISTORICAL NOVELIST'S OBLIGATION TO HISTORY

By MacKinlay Kantor*

Some of you may have read, or may have been told, that ever since 1956 I have been writing a novel entitled *Spirit Lake*, which will be published next year. Thus I can say truthfully that nowadays my work lies in Iowa.

But forty years ago this summer, my work also lay in Iowa. I was a sixteen-year-old who earned his forty-cents-an-hour living as an assistant furnace-installer.

And just about forty years ago this week, one night my mother, Effie MacKinlay Kantor, put into my hands a tiny magazine. It was peculiar in appearance: yellowish, with red-and-black type; and there was a strange design on the cover. This was the first copy of *The Palimpsest*, published by the State Historical Society of Iowa, and edited by John C. Parrish. It had been born only the previous month — July, 1920.

I didn't know what a palimpsest was, but I found out, that evening. The lines are before me now: "Palimpsests of a thousand and two thousand years ago were parchments or other manuscript material, from which one writing had been erased to give room for another."

I read on, fascinated.

"Out of the dusk of that far-off time came wild, strange, moving tales."

For me the Bovee furnaces of Waterloo, the bucket of retort cement, the tools, the castings, the scraped knee, the pinched fingers of the day, now stood forgotten.

"Tales that stir the blood or the imagination, that bring laughter and tears in quick succession. . . . Time is an exorable reaper but he leaves gleanings, and mankind is learning to prize these gifts."

And the final paragraph: "It is the plan of this publication to restore some of those scenes and events that lie half-hidden upon the palimpsests of Iowa, to show the meaning of those faint tantalizing lines underlying the more recent markings — lines that the pumice of time has not quite rubbed away and which may be made to reveal with color and life and fidelity the enthralling realities of departed generations."

*MacKinlay Kantor won the Pulitzer Prize in 1956 with his *Andersonville*.

On this day of dedication of the new home of the State Historical Society of Iowa, with all its richness in repository, may we offer devoted thanks to those men and women of that society who began this strenuous but rewarding task, and who are working and will continue to work in the accumulation and interpretation of Iowa's greatest treasure.

Fears and perplexities which confront our age could well grow into calamities, and contribute to disaster, were a man not equipped to face them. What is the toughest armor that the modern individual can put around himself; what is the freshest, clearest oxygen which may flow into his lungs? It is a serene, well-grounded, penetrating awareness of the Past — the blood-stained, powder-stained, fever-ridden, fierce-hearted Past — complete with its agonies, its triumphs, its rivalries, its devotions, its disillusionments and its dreams.

There is but one way to acquire this knowledge and awareness of the Past, and thus to profit from its lessons and be reassured by its extensiveness. That is through an eager and sympathetic perusal of the printed word which waits for all to read.

Always I have been an earnest believer in the effectiveness of the indirect approach, whether in literature or in love! Why the emotions should be a solid open pathway by which intellectual responses are reached, I know not; I would welcome and applaud the philosopher who could tell me. But I believe it to be true. The great barred, bossed castle doors which guard the intellect may be chained and welded shut at times; but the little postern gate of the emotions stands always open.

In the earlier portion of the Nineteenth Century, decade after decade, the American public dwelling on Free Soil had been exposed to an avalanche of anti-slavery publicity — statistics, citations — a vast barrage of printed or spoken material which came storming off the presses or came ranting from Abolitionist pulpits. Except amid groups of extremists, that same Northern public remained on the whole unimpressed. Abraham Lincoln himself is quoted as having countenanced in opinion the institution of slavery — though not with the fevered fanaticism of a Toombs or a Barksdale. And a certain disappointed, indigent ex-Army captain, whose legions would one day crush the last resistance of the Confederacy, was in that same time renting out to neighbors on the slave soil of Missouri the services of the black slaves loaned to him by his father-in-law.

But a woman wrote a novel. It was called *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The time would come when she would stand before the President, and he would look down humorously from his height and say, "So this is the little woman who wrote the big book."

Incidentally, I think that Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's reply is a classic which should be held as a pattern by all novelists who aspire to modesty: "God wrote it. I merely held the pen."

It is not that the mind of the reader is a childish mind with a response to be invoked only by the presentation of an Aesop fable or a Grimm fairy tale. It is that the heart of decent mankind is a tender heart, as vulnerable to the gentle touch of affection as it is to the bullets which may be discharged by human suffering and thus come piercing in.

I hold that the tale which is told is not categorically filed away, as the bitter statistics of the Past may be filed; but keeps dwelling within the individual, and becomes a permanent part of him — a permanent enrichment, a permanent ennoblement — if there is nobility in the tale and in the teller.

The term "historical novel" has a dignity of its own, and should be applied only to those works deliberately attempting to recreate the past.

For instance, we may not regard Herman Melville as an historical novelist. He was almost strictly contemporaneous. And contemporaneous also were the wordy romances strung together by James Fenimore Cooper. Cooper's Indians spoke with the tongue of the Longfellow who was yet to speak in that tongue. But deerslayers were still stalking the forests of America, and in the same garb of his heroes, at the very time when he decorated his foolscap with ink. . . . Contemporaneous romances? . . . Move his Delawares and his Hurons into woods a little farther to the West, and you have a result as childishly current, and of the moment, as the Gene Stratton Porter of Limberlost days, the Edna Ferber of Emma McChesney days, the *New Yorker* fiction of this day and age.

The work by R. E. Spiller, published in 1931, refers to him aptly as *Fenimore Cooper, Critic of His Times*. Obviously the implication of criticism was inherent in consideration of *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found*; but ironically the essential contemporaneous quality of Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* might also be suggested. Put a different kind of paint on the faces of Cooper's Indians, and promptly you have an extended romance of the time, if not of the place. The corn was still being parched; the eagle still saw his feathers fastened in a man's hair; the black powder was still being measured.

Now, at the risk of being accused as an impetuous and unappreciative Philistine, I am going to take my bow and arrow and go out and shoot a sacred cow. That sacred cow is *The Red Badge of Courage*.

It is not my wish to detract from its essential literary qualities. In re-appraising this book I had before me the Modern Library edition, issued by Random House, containing an introduction by Robert Wooster Stallman, Associate Professor of English at the University of Connecticut.

. . . I wonder if Stephen Crane was not put upon earth chiefly for the purpose of providing a field day for recondite or pedantic minds, in that they might roll his life and soul and works about the playing fields of their erudition, as they would so many medicine balls?

The extent to which Crane influenced American literature may be debated by those with the necessary qualifications for such argument; and so will be argued as long as the conceded importance of Crane lasts; and I am not at all sure how long that will be. But on the question of his influence on American *historical* literature, and his attainment in that field, I challenge the Crane glorifiers to point out where in any way *The Red Badge of Courage* is intrinsically a novel of Chancellorsville, or even a novel of the American Civil War, or even necessarily a novel of America.

It is all wartime, every place. It is a collection of miscellaneous, colorful, poetical fragments; nor does the breath and smoke of Chancellorsville or any other definite battle blow there.

The trees began softly to sing a hymn of twilight. The sun sank until slanted bronze rays struck the forest. There was a lull in the noises of insects as if they had bowed their beaks and were making a devotional pause. There was silence save for the chanted chorus of the trees.

Then, upon this stillness, there suddenly broke a tremendous clangor of sounds. A crimson roar came from the distance.

The youth stopped. He was transfixed by this terrific medley of all noises. It was as if worlds were being rended. There was the ripping sound of musketry and the breaking crash of artillery.

His mind flew in all directions. He conceived the two armies to be at each other panther fashion. He listened for a time. Then he began to run in the direction of the battle.

If this were but an isolated fragment, then it would be a gross distortion of justice to literary criticism (if indeed there is any justice in literary criticism) to quote it. But that is not the case. It is typical of the book.

That was one page, Page 95 of the Modern Library edition. The average page of this book contains no more Civil War, no more Chancellorsville than was shown in those paragraphs which I just read.

There is nothing about the Civil War in this book which could not have been learned by a moderately intelligent and historically-minded high school junior, in a few brief sessions with *Battles and Leaders* or whatever general secondary historical source the student chose. Dr. Stallman goes on at great length in his introduction, speaking of how Crane drew his material from "contemporary accounts of the Civil War, and very considerably, I think, from Matthew Brady's remarkable photographs."

Where is the resemblance to Brady photographs, where the actuality? Crane's people scarcely wear uniforms; you don't know what weapons they're shooting; you don't know how many rounds they've got in their pouches. It could be the Revolutionary War, it could be a Napoleonic war. There were practically no battle scenes, as such, photographed by Brady, except perhaps of artillery firing; because of the infancy of the process of photography, it would have been impossible to get troops moving in action. Brady photographs consist chiefly of a group of people posed in kitchen chairs around a farmhouse which is General So-and-so's headquarters; or a group of railroad men posed beside an engine; or a group of swollen corpses after a battle has passed.

Over the field went the scurrying mass. It was a handful of men splattered into the faces of the enemy. Toward it instantly sprang the yellow tongues. A vast quantity of blue smoke hung before them. A mighty banging made ears valueless.

Couldn't that have been the Battle of Bennington, or the Battle of Blenheim — or Normandy, 1944? Name it.

Read this book if you will for its poetry — and for the disordered imaginative portrayal of a battle which the author never saw completely, even with the eye of an addicted mind. Read it for its verve and philosophy. But pray do not regard it as a recreation of 1863. I hold it to be no more 1863 than it is 1918 or 1814 or 1777. Let the scholars gather round for their abstruse discussions, and let the literary editors attempt to formulate a prose as descriptive and unique as Crane's prose, in their *discussion* of his prose. (The eternal habit of critics.) But show me the history. You can't; you can't show the history to anyone, because it is not there. It does not exist in this book. I declare it to be worthy of no consideration as an

American historical novel. It is a novel placed allegedly in an American historical background.

No wonder that it was widely read and translated abroad. The story is the story of any Nation, any war, any soldier.

Dr. Stallman says:

Zola bored him. He disliked Zola's statistical realism, and he disliked Tolstoy's panoramic method, finding "Peace and War" (as he called it) tiresome.

I can understand this perfectly. I think he disliked statistical realism and panoramas because they were too damn much work. Crane was not at all interested in achieving the realism essential to bringing the past to life. Therefore I affirm that he was no historical novelist.

In wholesale fashion we should except from any claim on critical attention those stories wherein no effort has been expended to present history even in the guise of fiction.

In the same manner we ignore the comic books of the present day newsstand when we are considering the modern novel.

Indeed, as for a segment of those same comic books, they are but the modern extension of the old-fashioned historical juvenile. Historical juveniles comprised the bulk of the historical fiction which was written in America until a long generation ago; Britain also had its share. I am thinking of the voluminous works of G. A. Henty and Harry Castlemon, and the many writers who followed them — imitators not so much in style or content as in tradition.

Certainly some of these books were not without their value as projections of the past. But since they were aimed directly at a juvenile audience, they were necessarily reduced in scope. So, too, were the romantic novels of the past designed for popular appeal to an audience more adult in years — written by people like Charles King, shall we say; or Thomas Nelson Page, or Robert W. Chambers.

Again, there were books written even by romancers who sought inevitably the popularity which may be awarded by teen-age brains dwelling in man- and woman-grown bodies — books which bear rereading today solely for the history projected therein, however fragmentary and illusive, and because of the skill of the authors displayed in the telling.

But there was a limitation of basic conception — that limitation wrapped like swaddling bands around any writer of America in that period — any

writer who had neither the audacity nor the genius to become a Whitman.

Ruling custom and current social taste — often more or less the same thing, in this field — decreed that the beauties, glories and even dangers of the past could be painted; but that vice (as much a part of the pattern of human behavior as godliness, and, we fear, far more prevalent) must be ruled out. Vice was winked at or ignored except by a few bold reformers, according to the attitude then current. Thus historical novels such as *Janice Meredith* offer too fair and childish a face, no matter how much hard historical digging has gone into them.

The bodies were by turns pretty or ugly to look upon; often they were muscular; but they never were guilty of defecation. . . . It matters little if we present the soul and the dream, the far-reaching complexities of the human brain, and ignore the animal harbored in that same body. Any reader of ordinary intelligence must recognize that a great many puzzles of our existence are born in the flesh, not in the mind.

How much human agony *and* delight have stemmed directly from the sexual compulsion? How many statesmen have made decisions influenced primarily by gout or toothache? How many delinquencies have come about merely from the need for food, shelter, clothing? How many marriages have swayed in the balance or gone tottering merely because of some deviation in the woman's menstrual cycle?

Yet the Grundies who ruled the late Nineteenth Century, and extended their sway up into the Twentieth Century, decreed that few if any of these things could be mentioned, let alone explored. Tolstoy might write of the beaming face and delighted voice which greeted the fact that the baby's napkin was spotted with a good bright yellow stain, instead of the green which had shown there when the child was sick. Tolstoy did do this, and many similar things. But if they were done in American historical fiction of that age, I have yet to hear of them.

We can assume, then, that in America for a long time the terms "romance" and "historical novel" were practically synonymous. If you attempted to present the past without its hurt and evil and shock, then simply you did not present the past. You could not, with any enduring value, project the reader into a never-never land peopled solely by curly-haired heroines in antique stomachers, immaculate in person as they were in their thoughts; or captives who embodied every noble masculine virtue; and captors whose worst oath was a *Damme!* or an *Odd's Blood!* . . . The

cannon always seemed somehow a little too polished. If a cap misfired, it was only to save the life of the hero. If Washington prayed on the twenty-second of the month, his prayer could be recounted in its entirety; but if he was suffering from diarrhea, that might never be mentioned.

The life of the camp-follower was as much a part of army life as the story of the gunnery sergeant; but it could not be told. . . . At the ultimate extreme it might be suggested that an appalling stench came from the prison ships. But had a novelist dared to recount in detail the conditions prevailing below decks on one of those Revolutionary prison ships, he could not have found print, much less an audience. And, in turn, he would likely have found himself incarcerated in one of the calaboses of his own age!

Some of the legions of decency may have been sincere, but all of them were stifling. The hard flat board of prudishness was strapped across the brow of our green literature, and thus the cranium was distorted and misshapen, as surely as were the skulls of unfortunate Indian infants in the Columbia Valley long ago.

But let it not be assumed for one moment that the vast bulk of printed so-called historical fiction which has come tumbling from the presses during the past twenty-odd years has *per se* an historical or even literary value comparable to the best of those restricted works of the past. The mere existence of the screen itself, and possible emoluments accruing therefrom, were sufficient in many instances to disrupt effectually the long time which should have been spent and should be spent by the writer in the absorption of what is commonly termed his background.

I feel a certain guilt in this matter, because, according to printed opinion, I had a share in designating what was then termed the modern approach to historical fiction. I am referring to my fourth published and first historical novel, *Long Remember*, a story of the Battle of Gettysburg, which was a Literary Guild selection for May, 1934.

At the time I was young, and thus an experimentalist (I hope that I never become too old to be one, when peculiar ambition seems to demand it). It was my desire to make the Gettysburg battle as contemporaneous, as much a part of the reader's life, as if the wounded were still having their bandages renewed in the hospitals — as if the wheel-ruts of the Whitworth rifles were still creased across the nasturtium beds. Besides being spurred by the ordinary ambitions and considerations which impel the novelist, I

was imbued deeply with the notion that I must make the lesson and tragedy of Gettysburg a part of the lives of all readers.

It was a happy year of my young life when I saw these desires gratified, if not wholly satisfied, in the reception of the book by critics and public and historians. I was glad when I learned that *Long Remember* was to be a book club selection; but also I was glad when I found that it was to be used as a supplementary text-book at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

The historical value of previous works by Mary Johnston and James Boyd and certain other authors must not be discounted by any discerning reader; still perhaps they did not have what we could call, for lack of a better term, a modernity, a white-hot reality of the telling. I mention these writers not in the light of comparison, but as part of a chronological study of the progression of the American historical novel.

In reviewing *Long Remember* in *The Nation*, April 11th, 1934, Mr. Allen Tait wrote: "He is the first novelist in this country to apply to historical fiction the principles of the minutely documented realistic novel." Another reviewer suggested: "It would be valuable if a school of American historical fiction could be erected upon the foundation of *Long Remember*."

That school is in existence today, and has been for some time. Assuredly it has its retrograde dunces as well as its Rhodes Scholars.

Following *Long Remember* appeared such works as *So Red the Rose*, *Gone with the Wind*, and a host of others — whether to the enrichment or confusion of American historical literature, I leave for judicious critics to decide. I do believe this: that today, in 1960, the average American reader knows more about the facts and the feeling of the Civil War time than the average American reader did twenty-six years ago. That might be extended to cover a number of other periods in our history as well. Still, the Civil War, our greatest national disgrace and heroism, is top dog.

Fortunate are we who were released from the constriction of prudery at a time when our family conflict was so recent in recollection that many of us could know, as living individuals, people who participated therein.

But on the heads of those of us who broke this trail a generation since, must be pressed the blame as well as the wreaths. We opened up suddenly a new Miracle Mile whereon the unscrupulous could set up shop and manufacture and market their wares. The anachronisms of Hollywood are a byword; but they can be matched, page for scene, by lurid chronicles

which have in part sustained the lending libraries and doped the minds of the populace for more than two decades.

People who had been flooding the market with sex novels about flappers who were lured to roadhouses, found that they could write those same sex novels about the American historical scene: they had only to dress their flappers in crinolines. Many of these authors were adroit story tellers, although wholly unequipped for such a task through any emotional addiction to the past, through any previous condition of scholarly servitude. But, as I say, many of them *were* adroit story tellers; and have been able to buy Cadillacs and double martinis — to say nothing of an occasional mink stole!

These people piled sin upon sin, whether through the media of novel, radio, screen, or — later — television. The slipshod intellect approaches these matters with a debonair gesture. It is more than a quarter-century since first I went to work in Hollywood; I was greeted, then as later, with the shrug and the casual annoyed reaction: "Oh, what possible difference does it make? Who will know the difference? You and six other people." To me it is worse than a crime against Nature to have extant motion pictures, dramatic projections, or the printed word, manhandling carelessly the sacred facts of the past.

I think that a young doctor has to study for seven years before he obtains his degree. How long does a missionary or a minister have to study — or a priest? Is it asking too much that demand or restriction be imposed (could they be imposed: impossible, of course) on those careless hands which would come fumbling into our old trunks and saddlebags?

The lack of time and attention languished by some people in their efforts to familiarize themselves with the progress of events and manner of living of another time, passeth all understanding. I recall how a publisher of the late 1930's requested me to read a manuscript: a single-volume history of the Civil War. This was presented in a flighty, chatty, slangy version — designed, I assume, to catch the eye and appeal to the mind of that same portion of the reading public which depends for its formed opinion on contemporary affairs on the capsulized projection thereof presented in *Life*, *Time* and *The New Yorker*. (Incidentally, the author achieved later some reputation by dealing with the naval, not the general, pageant of our historic past.)

On reading this manuscript I was appalled by the loose flimsiness of his approach, and said so. The publisher stared at me. "Why," he said, "do

you realize that this man spent *one whole year* studying the Civil War?" I was filled with thoughts too acid, if not too full, for utterance.

There was another case, that of a young first-and-last novelist — a term on which I hold the copyright — a term which describes those persons who find that winds which blow through that dark between-the-worlds space in which novelists must wander are too cold to be endured. He came my way, sent by a dear friend, Steve Benet, whose great heart and generosity were often matched by his unrestrained enthusiasm for fledgling authors.

This man had written a book about the Iroquois, and while I knew nothing in this world about the Iroquois, the young man spun a very good yarn. I was deluded into thinking that his story represented an earnest exploration of the field.

I said to the author, in a manner of respect, "You must have spent an incalculable amount of time studying the Iroquois."

"Indeed I did," he responded feelingly. "I had to read three books."

I fumbled around for a moment. I couldn't believe my ears. I thought somehow or other that he must have said three hundred books, that my ears were tricking me. "Did I understand you correctly? Did you say *three* — one, two, *three* books?"

"Yes," he said. "What a job that was!"

As to whether or not his novel was ever read by anyone at all expert in the field of the Iroquois, I have no knowledge. But I believe that if anyone with a more than casual familiarity with the tribe and the time had read his book, they could have shot it full of holes.

I have no blood feud with that pouting passionate, bare-bosomed hussy of the 1860's who comes raiding across the Ohio with Morgan, wrecks trains with Mosby, or goes loping with streaming hair through the Shenandoah Valley on the heels of George Armstrong Custer. She is by Rhett Butler out of *Scarlet O'Hara*, and was born under a jukebox. Her hair-do is by Antoine and her gowns by Adrian, if she can slug faster than Floyd Patterson and shoot straighter than Sergeant York. She is a fragrant puppet, constructed to delight those credulous souls who believe that a few You-Alls can resurrect the Virginia past, and that the Vermont Green Mountains are made of maple sugar. She is a honey-chile, if she is a wild cat, and I think that even Bruce Catton would be willing to leer at her. But let her speak of John Hall Morgan instead of John Hunt Morgan — let her gaze soulfully into Mosby's brown eyes instead of his gray ones — let her garb

her beloved Custer in a jacket of silk instead of the jacket of velvet which actually he designed for himself — then am I ready to strip to the waist and fight her with knives!

I do not think it fault-finding to demand that Fort Sumter be fired on in April instead of October; to insist that Abraham Lincoln speak in his congenital nasal treble, instead of a deep sonorous voice; to demand that George Pickett be placed in command, not of the fifteen thousand troops involved in the assault on the third day at Gettysburg, but in command of the five or six thousand whom actually he did command. I do not think it is being hypercritical; I think it is exhibiting good sense. If people are not taught to recoil from falsehood, they will never be able to award honesty the warm welcome which it deserves.

So-called historical novelists of the group I have been castigating have had a more horrific field day in the back yard of American tradition than Hollywood ever had. In 1956, Cass Canfield, the president of Harpers', sent me some bound proofs while I was in Spain. These represented a novel which was soon to be published — another novel about the Civil War. (When hard at work, I don't read any books sent to me like this; I don't see how anybody could, and still get his work done. However, we were just recuperating from the flu at that time, lying around in our rooms in Madrid; so I started to read.)

Soon I was screaming. Not content with having his Civil War soldiers use GI slang which was not invented until World War II or the Korean War, the author had given Jeb Stuart a black beard instead of a red one.

He had indited also a thrilling scene in which a Union cavalryman, in disguise, finds himself confronted by a party of Confederates, and is stricken suddenly with the thought that he is wearing the belt-plate which should have accompanied his uniform. Hastily he puts his hand over the belt-plate, which, we are told, is inscribed *U.S.A.*

There was no reason in the world why he should have done this. Most of the belt-plates extant in the Confederacy, and worn by the soldiers thereof, were Northern belt-plates — Federal Government belt-plates which had been stolen from arsenals in the South, or later perhaps captured from the Yankees. This soldier should have been very proud indeed of his belt-plate. It was a museum piece, and would command a high price today. Because, inscribed *U.S.A.*, it was undoubtedly the only belt-buckle worn by a soldier of the North which bore those letters. All the rest said simply *U.S.*

However, the real payoff came on a springtime day in 1863, as recounted by the author. A soldier and his sergeant were discussing the raid on which they were about to embark. "Don't think too lightly of it," said the sergeant, or something like that. "How would you like to wake up and find yourself in Andersonville?"

Why not indeed? Andersonville, in the spring of 1863, was a very nice place: lovely pine woods, green grass, plenty of birds and bees. They didn't even start to build the stockade until the following December. The first prisoners didn't come in until the next February.

Now, I recited these details and a number of others to my friend the publisher, and the general editorial reaction seemed to suggest that I was being captious. Captious indeed! Let the historical novelist create all the fictitious characters he cares to create. Fictitious scenes, fictitious utterances . . . let him erect and polish and garb the illusion that is his . . . *so long* as he stays within the limits of his own creation. But let him *not* select the *fact* from where it lies, a dusty sapphire in the jewel-box of Time, and take it out, recut it, reset it, and declare that he has an emerald.

The historical novelist himself must be the historical expert, the technical director which every Hollywood producer advertises that he has engaged.

. . . To what avail these technical directors serve in the films, I do not quite know. I have been acquainted with some of them, and know their frustration.

Once Dwight Franklin was serving in such capacity on a picture being made by Cecil B. DeMille. Dwight had his pirate horde armed appropriately with cutlasses of the period; he came back from lunch to find a full-fledged boarding attack going on on the set, with pirates scrambling merrily over the bulwarks, all waving Chicopee sabres — the curved cavalry sabre commonly used in the Civil War.

When Dwight Franklin protested, DeMille made a gesture of contempt. It was the old thing: who'll know the difference — you and six other guys? "Yes," said C. B. (rest his soul). "You had the pirates armed with cutlasses, but they didn't flash enough! I want to see a lot of *flash* in this scene."

His attitude is reflected and protracted in a great many of those authors who would nowadays engage in pursuit of that partridge so native to our mountains and our plains: the wild American historical novel.

I never had them do that to my cutlasses; but I had them do that to my Belle Isle. I spent considerable effort and many pages in *Arouse and Beware*

describing the Belle Isle prison, and how it was walled merely with a ditch and low earthen parapet. But what greeted us when the film was first projected before the eyes of American audiences? A stockade a mile high. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer *knew!*

The task facing any novelist, if he is at all sincere in ambition, is an horrific task. He must be all things to all people. He must be sexless, devoid of ruling prejudice, insofar as it is humanly possible to be so.

Would he be not only a novelist, but an *historical* novelist? Promptly his chore is doubled. No longer may he rely principally upon his own emotions or his own inventiveness. The bone and the tusk and the projectile-point of accomplished fact of the Past are waiting somewhere for his finding. But he must know where to dig, and once finding the place, must labor long. The poet who would stroll through the choice woodland and sing like its many bluebirds does not need to bear the weight of pick and shovel upon his shoulders; and without pick and shovel he may not dig up the potsherd which lies hidden deep in the black soil to be told of. And the historian-become-archaeologist-and-desiring-to-be-novelist-as-well—he must dig up the sherd, tell of it, and *then* walk the woodland and sing with all the grace of the bluebirds.

There are limits beyond which one should not proceed in an identification with the past; but I am a firm believer in the necessity for personal, mental and sometimes physical exploration. I have never believed that a reality near to actuality could be achieved by an individual who did not, to the limit of his imagination and endurance, delve for the experience which he relates. Furthermore, in such explorations new details project themselves, details which one never considered before.

Those of you who may remember *Arouse and Beware* know that it is the story of two Union prisoners escaping from the Belle Isle prison near Richmond, Virginia. In early March of 1936, when I was engaged in research on this novel, I determined to go to Richmond and familiarize myself at that particular season with the area northwest of Richmond. I had been there before, traveling on back roads, armed with a series of maps of Goochland and Louisa and Spottsylvania counties: maps prepared in 1863 under the auspices of General Gilmer, Lee's engineer.

The morning when I was preparing to leave Westfield, New Jersey, for Richmond, our young son took it upon himself to fall through the ice into a pool in a neighbor's yard. Great screams from the children, running to

and fro. . . . Timmy was rescued and brought in. It was an icy day — very cold. His mother was alarmed about him; she stripped off his clothes and rubbed him all over, and checked with the doctor over in Summit. The doctor said, "Watch him carefully, and if he seems to suffer any ill effects, put him to bed."

I hated to leave; but my wife said, "Timmy will be perfectly all right. You go on to Richmond, because this is the week which matches the week in your story. You want to see how it is climatologically right now. Don't hesitate for a moment; everything will be all right."

So I went. As our British friends would say, good job I went when I did; because soon after I'd left Westfield, the child came down with a raging temperature, and had to be watched critically for hours. Nothing of this did I learn until late that evening, when I telephoned from the Hotel Richmond, and learned that Tim was perfectly all right; his fever had broken. But I recognized a little of what my wife had been through that day. Also it's a long way down from Westfield to Richmond. *Then* there was no system of turnpikes or superhighways or huge bridges spanning the Chesapeake and Delaware. You had to go all the way around Robin Hood's Barn, through West Chester, Baltimore, Washington. An exhausting trip.

So, after this conversation, I felt in need of a little sustenance, and went up to a cafe on the roof where a party was in progress. They were having two or three parties; it was a public liquor and dance place. Some hospitable Richmond folks seated at a nearby table, seeing a lone man there, took pity on me and invited me over for a few drinks. Later we went out to the home of some of these people, and partied a while longer.

I was feeling really no pain when I came back to the hotel and got into bed. Then I started to upbraid myself. I thought, "You came down here to work and explore and work on your book; and here you've been going out carousing with a gang of people, no matter how nice they were."

After this mental castigation, I lay restlessly in bed; I won't say I was drunk; I'd certainly undergone some sort of change; I no longer felt exhausted and physically tired. My mind was jumping and jerking. I thought of the James River, how it must be rushing coldly over its rocks, with the memory of ice still remaining. I thought of Belle Island, which is still Belle Island, with the caissons of modern bridges sinking down; but in Civil War days it was a wasteland, smack in the middle of the river between Richmond and Manchester.

How did the river sound? How did the river smell? . . . In the middle of the night I looked at my watch — I guess it was two or three o'clock in the morning. And this was about March 4th or 5th, and it was about that date that I had my people fleeing away, and two of them swimming the river from Belle Isle to the Richmond side. I thought, "I wonder what it's like down there on the Island?"

No sooner thought, than I was out of bed, got myself dressed, went down to the garage, had them bring out my car. I drove to Belle Isle (you have to approach from the far side now, in order to get on the Island), past the brick and tile factory, and on out to the north end where the prison camp existed originally.

I had to leave my car some distance away from the site of the camp. I walked down to the margin of the river and heard the wild cold conversation, the tumult of the river boiling over its rocks beyond. I stood there and shuddered for my two starved prisoners; I thought what courage it must have taken for them to essay that swim, knowing that any moment bullets from the guards' rifles might rip their bodies.

Well, there weren't any guards around to shoot at me. Before I knew it, I had all my clothes off, and was wading out into the river.

I can testify from actual experience that the James River at Richmond, Virginia, in the first week of March, is a mighty cold place. I'm not a very good swimmer; but I didn't imagine that either of my men in the story was a very good swimmer either. So I struck out, and the next moment the current had me, and I was rolled underneath and tossed here and there, and banged against a rock. It wasn't very deep, but the current was so strong that you couldn't stand up: so for all intents and purposes, you might have been in twenty-five feet of water.

That cold, involuntary, inebriated submersion was just what I needed to shock me out of inebriation — or madness. Because, somewhere down under that water and banging against those stones, I thought, "Why, you can get killed this way!" After that I concentrated my endeavors in trying to return. I finally got back to shore; I ended up some distance below where I'd started out. I reached quieter shallows and managed to stumble over the rocks to safety.

Possibly I was trying to emulate my son in an icy midwinter submersion. But I was more fortunate than little Timmy: I didn't experience any fever. I deserved to have pneumonia or worse.

Finally I put on my clothes, and with chattering teeth got into the car and drove tremblingly, and I suppose erratically, back to the hotel. I went up, took a long pull out of a bottle which merely *happened* to be in the room, and fell into bed. I woke up in the morning all right except for a few bruises.

This I would not recommend — most heartily would *not* recommend — as a necessity for any novelist.

That was the second greatest peril I was ever in, in a deliberate exploration of the past. I think the *greatest* peril was the time when I decided to eat Andersonville food, and prepared it out of mouldy cornmeal and so on, without salt. . . . I don't recommend that either.*

What must the historical novelist be, as well as technical director? He must be an antiquarian of the first water. He must be at times botanist and zoologist, entomologist and ichthyologist. He must don in turn the frilled apron of the housemaid and the leather apron of the farrier. He must wear the spectacles of the schoolmaster, the opera cape of the actor, the shabby gilt slippers of the prostitute.

The demand put upon any creative novelist, to begin with, if he would excel, is enormous: patience, penetration, sympathy . . . as much slavish devotion to humanity as was manifested by the entire throng of Apostles . . . the malevolence of a council of inquisitors: these must be his virtues and his practice.

But he who would bring the Past quivering to life cannot buy his paints at the nearest shop and spread them quickly upon his palette. He must bruise the petals of rare flowers found in unfrequented spots, and mix them with the gum that oozes from equally lonely trees. He must climb distant and dangerous cliffs in order to scrape up his ochre. He must go far into the Sahara of libraries, to shoot the lonely camel whose hair, and only whose hair, will be fit to make his brush.

*It is comforting to know that MacKinlay Kantor survived to complete not only *Andersonville*, but also his latest novel with an Iowa setting — *Spirit Lake*. The editor first met "Mac" in 1931 when he was one of a party of sixteen who made a cruise on the *Arbutus*, chartered by "Steamboat Bill" for a round-trip from Dubuque to the head of Lake Pepin. "Mac" was then hovering on the eve of a brilliant and fruitful career — beginning with *The Voice of Bugle Ann* and *Long Remember*. He has a complete bound set of *The Palimpsest* and considers it one of the richest sources for the historical novelist. He is a Life Member of the Society.

All patriotism and all pride require that he shall make a molten sacrifice of his eyes and his fingers. The past lies buried deep and cannot be torn from its immurement without pain.

To the young and ambitious, I would say: "Go and live in that other time, before you would tell of it."

This has been done, it can be done, it will be done again.

I thank you.