

Sutcliff's *The Shining Company* and the Kipling Historical Tradition¹

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To begin with some scene setting. Edwardian England. Late afternoon. A home-schooled girl alone on a hillside in Sussex. Her brother is delayed at his Latin lesson.² Suddenly, as she shoots a pebble from her brother's slingshot, she hears a cry from the brush:

She looked . . . and saw a young man covered with hoopy bronze armour all glowing among the late broom. But what Una admired beyond all was his great bronze helmet with a red horse-tail that flicked in the wind. She could hear the long hairs rasp on his shimmery shoulder-plates.

(Kipling, "A Centurion of the Thirtieth" 84)

The girl looking at Parnesius, the glittering centurion of the thirtieth legion is Una, witness of multiple historical dioramas in Kipling's two Puck books. But another English girl of a later generation was to be equally mesmerized by this shining spectacle of ancient doomed glamour. I mean of course Kipling's faithful reader Rosemary Sutcliff.³ In this paper, I want to make the case for Sutcliff as Kipling's heir and redactor, who adapted Kipling's somber reading of British history to the expectations of a post-imperial age.

To historicize this English historical novelist, a few dates and facts. She belongs to the post WWI generation. Born in 1920, she began writing in her early 20s during the worst days of the Second World War. Her first novel, never published, focused on a

British tribesman expecting a Roman invasion much as the Celts of *The Shining Company* anticipate the “Saxon flood” (89) ; this tale was composed as Churchill’s Britain was bracing for a German invasion. (“We shall fight on the beaches. We shall fight on the landing grounds. We shall fight in the fields and in the streets. We shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender”). Her writing career began in earnest postwar period and flourished from about 1950 until 1990, that is, during the years of the dismantling of the British Empire. On her father’s side, she was a navy brat who was reared at various naval stations where her officer father was stationed: Malta, Sheerness, Chatham. On her mother’s side, the tradition was colonial; most of her uncles served in India. The great fact of her early life was severe illness-- Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis which left her with deformed hands and limbs. She was a deft artist all the same and trained as a miniaturist, developing the habit of attention to minutiae so obvious in her writing. One Sutcliff trademark is miniaturist—the linking of generations of characters through a small highly wrought object: the dolphin ring of *Eagle of the Ninth*, the Capricorn bracelet of *The Capricorn Bracelet*, and the archangel dagger of *The Shining Company*.⁴

A full discussion of the formative influences on her work would demand attention to her historical era, to her family’s military tradition, to her disability (an omnipresent subtext and frequent theme), and to her “passion” (her word, *BRH* 47, 63) for Kipling. For now, I will focus on that passion and on how Sutcliff, especially in *The Shining Company* carries on and postcolonializes the Kipling tradition.⁵

Sutcliff was explicit about her debt to Kipling. Though she wrote no literary criticism, she made an exception for Kipling: “My reason for writing this monograph will be obvious to anyone who reads it: I have loved Kipling for as long as I can remember”

(*Rudyard Kipling* 7). In earliest childhood she was read to from and later herself read widely in Kipling, “especially *Puck of Pook’s Hill*, whose three magnificent stories of Roman Britain were the beginning of my own passion for the subject” (*BRH* 63). “I think I am happiest of all in Roman Britain,” she said years later. “I feel very much at home there” (Thompson 3). She also especially pinpoints in *Rewards and Fairies* “the pathetic and terrible story of “The Knife and the Naked Chalk” (*RK* 50), a tale of a prehistoric “Flint Man” who puts out his own eye to acquire the power to save his people, a sacrifice that makes him at once a god and an outcast from human community: “Oh, poor God!” said Puck” (276)

Just as Kipling’s three Roman stories are the original core of the two Puck books,⁶ so these four stories cited from the Puck books are the seeds of Sutcliff’s own corpus of historical fiction in which the themes of sacrifice and Roman Britain are everywhere. (It’s hardly necessary to mention Sutcliff’s use of the motif of the sacrificial wounded god-king, most notably in her Arthos/Arthur but also evident in her multiple figures of maimed outcast heroes. Talcroft’s recent *Death of the Corn King* has demonstrated Sutcliff’s use of the “pathetic and terrible” cost of kingship in her world.) As for Kipling in *Puck of Pook’s Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies*, Sutcliff’s large project is the Matter of Britain, both the legendary lore of the founding of the British nation and the “little narratives” of all sorts and conditions of proto-Britons whether Romano-Britons, Celts Welsh, Celts Irish, Celts Scottish, Saxons, Angles, Gododdins, or even Islamo-Brits. Indeed the Bard Aneirin in *The Shining Company*, singing the glories of lost Celtic heroes for all times to come, is the narrative equivalent of Kipling’s Puck who similarly ensures the survival of the lost little narratives of British history. But her favorite ground is clearly Roman Britain, particularly the period treated by Kipling which she explicitly

traverses in *The Capricorn Bracelet*, *Frontier Wolf*, and *Lantern Bearers*. In fact, virtually all her major novels--both the explicitly Roman Aquila series and the Arthurian and Dark Age novels—trace the percolation and diffusion of *Romanitas* through an increasingly ethnically composite environment. Even in *The Shining Company* the Welsh-speaking Gododdin-Votadini-Brittonic Celts, British tribesman of the 7th century, see themselves as Romans and vow “to take this fort of our Roman forefathers and hold it”(220).

Beyond Sutcliff’s explicitly acknowledged debts to Kipling, she has a probably unconscious habit of taking Kipling as the very air she breathes⁷—for example, in the recurring life-cycles of her Parnesius-like protagonists as well as in her default subject position as male. A piquant example of an unconscious Kiplingism is her regular use of “Hai mai,” a Hindustani exclamation meaning, literally, “O mother!” (like “Mamma mia!”). It’s quite appropriate for Kipling’s Kim during his wanderings through northern India to say, “*Hai mai!* I go from one place to another” (166) or “*Hai mai!* If a Sahib kills a man he is hanged in the jail” (219) or (to the Lama) “Holy One . . . *Hai mai!* But I love thee” (320). It is quite another thing for a Scottish smith of the second century, to declare “Stuan! Fosterling! Hi mi! It is as good as ten hot suppers to see you . . . “(80); or for a Celtic warrior in late-6th-century Chester to mock Welsh Prosper: “Hai mai! Large ideas of themselves some people have” (73).

More significant than these small debts, however, are Sutcliff’s dependence and enlargement upon Kipling’s habitual manner of looking at history. Their shared philosophy of history has four features: #1 History is not the story of progress but the story of how things fall apart. #2 History may seem to offer the individual choices but they are determined and irrevocable. #3 History offers an aesthetic rather than a moral

satisfaction. #4 History is discontinuous; there is no continuous knowable historical pattern for human beings or for nations. Meaning can be retrieved only in fragments.

First, on the issue of progress, as Meghan Mercier has argued,⁸ there is a stream of principally British historical fiction which rejects the dominant 19th-century optimism of both Whig and Hegelian readings of history. These two optimistic world views see history as the progressive story of developing civilization. But Kipling, on the contrary, thinks such historical optimism a self-delusive though perhaps necessary blindness: “Every nation, like every individual, walks in a vain show—else it could not live with itself” (*SM* 119).⁹ The beautiful poem that introduces the three Roman stories is a lament for the transience of all empire and all claims to historical meaning:

Cities and Thrones and Powers,
 Stand in Time’s eye,
 Almost as long as flowers,
 Which daily die:
 But, as new buds put forth,
 To glad new men,
 Out of the spent and unconsidered Earth,
 The Cities rise again.

The next stanza notes not just the transience of those cities but also our blindness to that transience and delusive pride in our triumph:

So Time that is o’er kind
 To all that be,
 Ordains us e’en as blind
 As bold as she:

That in our very death,
 And burial sure,
 Shadow to shadow, well-persuaded, saith,

“See how our works endure!” (“A Centurion of the Thirtieth” 81)

It is loss rather than progress that most interests Kipling and Sutcliff. Kipling begins his account of Roman Britain in the period in which it is already falling apart and the empire is retracting. Though *Eagle of the Ninth* is set in the two centuries before Kipling’s tales, its spirit, like the spirit of all Sutcliff’s works, is also elegiac. The book begins with evoking the loss of the Ninth Legion and its eagle and ends with a vision of Roman culture merging into tribal Britain. In the same spirit of certain loss, Sutcliff models *The Shining Company* on the tragic *Y Gododdin*, a poem celebrating the heroic deaths of three hundred picked warriors in a last ditch stand against the Saxon horde. Though young Prosper, the narrator, repeatedly likens his three hundred companions to the three hundred Spartans who died at Thermopylae (see 4, 85, 179, 225, 271), the Spartans at least achieved their mission to delay the Persians and to save the rest of the Greek forces to fight again. But the heroism of the Shining Company is fruitless, rather like that of the Light Brigade, and buys the Celts no time against the triumphant Saxons.

Like Kipling’s, Sutcliff’s text is planted with signals of inevitable crack-up. The Centurion of the Thirtieth arrives at Hadrian’s Wall to find that the Roman Road north is blocked up “and on the plaster a man had scratched ‘Finish!’ It was like marching into a cave” (“On the Great Wall” 101). The same “finish” for heroism is forecast in the opening pages of *The Shining Company* as Prosper studies his Greek lesson and reads the famous Simonides lines for the Spartan Three Hundred:

Tell them in Sparta, you who read,

That we obeyed their orders and are dead.

Second, as to choice, both Kipling and Sutcliff write in such a way as to undermine effective free agency in an historical subject. That both writers are fatalists is evident from their narrative strategies. They always elect a retrospective narrative stance towards a body of history that is regarded as over and done with. There is no sense of living forward in their works. Both Sutcliff and Kipling characteristically employ characters who, like Simonides' Three Hundred are the speaking dead. Even as they are technically alive, they recognize "finish" written on the wall. History will roll over them no matter what they do. Dan and Una, the retrospective consumers of British history, hear it spoken from dead mouths magicked into existence; but the two modern children can neither intervene in the events they transiently perceive nor ever remember them after the magic is over. That narrative structure emphasizes irrevocability of events as does the recurrent refrain of the historical subjects in the Puck books: "What else could I have done?"(98); "I don't see what else she could have done" (217); "What else could I have done" (276).¹⁰

Sutcliff similarly in *The Shining Company* as in most of her texts writes through a retrospective narrator and also furnishes the historicizing apparatus (maps, glossary, author's notes) that places the events of the novel as long gone. Her protagonist—self introduced as "I am—I was—Prosper" (3)—is a speaker for and from among the dead. From the very first paragraph, he looks back on a fixed, tragic, irrevocable past which never in the book is experienced as a present:

"This is the Gododdin, Aneirin sang it." So spoke forth Aneirin, Chief of Bards to King Mynyddod in Dyn Eiden, when he made his great song of the men who went to Catraeth. But of course he sang only of the Three Hundred, the

Companions with gold torques about their necks, not of the shieldbearers who rode at their heels. Yet we also were young, with the hearts high and the life sweet within us, and our homes left behind (3).

This first paragraph, quoting from an elegy for long-dead heroes, embeds the living Prosper and his comrades in a plot that can only end in one way, the way the song records. After all, “the end of a story is part of it from the beginning” (59).¹¹

Third, as the quotation above suggests, Sutcliff’s conception of history, like Kipling’s, is literary and beautiful. Though History cannot offer the solace of progress or happiness, it can offer an aesthetic and moral frisson which is rightly called tragic and a sense of lost glory which is rightly called elegiac. Tragedy and elegy combine in moments of remembered self-exposition, moments of special shine, a shine Sutcliff associates with glory, as in this observation from *The Capricorn Bracelet*: “The whole city was at its fairest. I have noticed more than once, since then, that things sometimes have a special shine about them, just before they come to an end, like—oh, like something painted and garlanded for sacrifice” (“A.D. 62—Death of a City” 19). Such a glory hangs on Parnesius in the broom and on the Shining Company in Aneirin’s mist, transcendent and glamorous:

I saw the Wild Hunt. I saw riders with black eye sockets in glimmering mail where their faces should have been, grey wolfskins catching a bloom of light from the mist and the moon; a shining company indeed, not quite mortal-seeming, but made of another kind that might dissolve at any moment into the mist that smoked about them (238-39)

Self-sacrifice as an act of aesthetic satisfaction is a motif of *The Shining Company*. Llif the Pict spends his last hours before the last battle decorating his body with spiral warrior patterns in woad and is questioned by Prosper:

“Why the beauty work?

“It is the custom of my people to wear such patterns when we go into
Battle . . .”

“That I understand when you go into battle naked, But in leather and
ringmail, who will know?”

““I shall know,” Llif said...” (226-27).

As the Welsh poet David Jones writes of *Y Gododdin*¹², it serves both as a life poem and a death poem: this “earliest surviving poem in the Welsh language, . . . as it were celebrative of that birth, does in fact celebrate the death of three hundred horsemen” (53). What is culturally vivifying exists in close relation with and as a result of human sacrifice.

Fourth, to develop the question of meaning and telos, for Kipling and Sutcliff the meaning of national history, if there is one, does not emerge from or into any grand unifying narrative. On the contrary. Because Kipling and Sutcliff write history in the genres of tragedy and elegy, their pasts are not represented as continuously available. Their pasts are only available through shining fragments: sometimes through auratic objects like the Archangel Dagger, the dolphin ring, or Queen Elizabeth’s green dancing slippers; sometimes through memorable words (*Y Gododdin*) or actions (the charge of the Shining Company) or places (“the road through the woods”). The Brittonic Celts’ relation to the Romans—“our Roman forefathers” (220)—in *The Shining Company* is a case in point: these Celtic warriors feast in what they call “the Fire Hall, the Mead Hall, the Great Hall” though “old Nurse” still uses “the Roman name for it”(48); they ride

among the “cluster of thatched bothies” in Deva/Chester but also glimpse in some “man-high wall . . . the power and glory that was Rome” (71); the warriors draw lots from “an age-eaten Roman helmet” (184). If Sutcliff’s Celts are true Romans, it is only by fits and starts. If Kipling’s Dan and Una are true English children it is by discontinuous tales of Picts and Jews and Angles and Saxons and Romans and Normans. But Kipling’s turn-of-the-century medley with its juxtaposed multiplicity is a much less fraught mixture than Sutcliff’s post-war representation of contesting traditions and modes of life. On the one hand, her works regularly depict both viable intermarriage (always frightening to Kipling) and also irresolvable cultural incompatibility.¹³ If there are successive, usually Celtic-Roman marriages in Sutcliff’s novels (the Roman soldier turned border tribesman in *Eagle of the Ninth*), there is also ferocious irreconcilable hatred between peoples (for examples, the Celts and loathed Saxons in *The Shining Company*). For Sutcliff, even cultural reconciliation comes at a high price: an enslaved Briton tells his Roman master: “You cannot expect the man who made this [British] shield to live easily under the rule of the man who worked the sheath of this [Roman] dagger. . . . And when the time comes that we begin to understand your world, too often we lose the understanding of our own” (80-1). Not all historical goods are compatible; change always means that something valuable of the past is lost. History for Sutcliff is emphatically not a story of ever-accreting gains but of breaks in continuity and necessary losses.

In teasing out the philosophy of history passed down from Kipling to Sutcliff, I’ve tried to show its non-progressive tragic glamour and its emphatic discontinuity. These are the qualities that help make Rosemary Sutcliff the foremost juvenile historical novelist of Britain’s long imperial recessional.

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 Endnotes

¹ Just as Isaiah Berlin called his famous book on Tolstoy's philosophy of history *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, I would really like to call this paper "The Dormouse and the Owl: An Essay on Kipling's and Sutcliff's Philosophy of History." Like Berlin, I'm interested here in attitudes toward history. Berlin writes about two ways of looking at history through his allusion to the Greek proverb that "The Fox knows many things but the Hedgehog knows one thing." I would use the dormouse and the owl to suggest historical outlooks as well: the dormouse representing self-protective oblivion and the owl, fruitless understanding. .. The dormouse is an image of the historical amnesia Nietzsche, very close to Kipling in his view of historical knowledge, prescribed as an anodyne against historical trauma. Hegel's owl is the symbol of retrospective historical knowledge. Kipling's final story in the Puck books involves the search for a dormouse, whose sleep symbolizes the protective oblivion of King Harold, immune to sorrow for as long as

he could not remember his historical fate. For Kipling, as for Nietzsche, only historical amnesia, allows us to live in happiness.

“We’re looking for old Hobden,” Dan replied. “He promised to get us a sleeper.”

“Sleeper? A *dormeuse* do you say?

“Yes, a dormouse. . . .”

“Ere he be. . . a little red, furry chap curled up. . . his tail between his eyes that were shut for their winter sleep.”

“. . . Don’t breathe on him, said Una.” It’ll make him warm and he’ll *wake up and die*” (Italics mine; Kipling, “The Tree of Justice,” *Rewards and Fairies*, 1910).

Hegel’s owl represents the inefficacy of historical understanding to change the course of history:

One more word about giving instruction as to what the world ought to be. Philosophy in any case always comes on the scene too late to give it . . . When philosophy paints its gloomy picture then a form of life has grown old. It cannot be rejuvenated by the gloomy picture, but only understood.

Only when the dusk starts to fall does the owl of Minerva spread its wings and fly (Hegel,

“Preface,” *Philosophy of Right*, 1820).

² In her “Reconstructed Pasts: Rome and Britain, Child and Adult in Kipling’s *Puck of Pook’s Hill* and Rosemary Sutcliff’s Historical Fiction,” Deborah Roberts emphasizes the gender discrepancy in classical education and the irony that girls, schooled in the classics in translation, had a markedly greater interest in historical fiction than boys. Sutcliff was largely home-schooled. She did not study Latin.

³ Shiningness is regularly associated by Sutcliff with the lost past. The title of her autobiography, *Blue Remembered Hills*, for example, is drawn from a poem by A. E. Housman. Note the second stanza:

Into my heart an air that kills
From yon far country blows:
What are those blue remembered hills,
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content,
I see it shining plain,
The happy highways where I went
And cannot come again. *A Shropshire Lad* (1896)

⁴ The Archangel Dagger was made in Constantinople. “The hilt was a wonder. Of chiseled silver, the grip shaped like a human figure—no, not human, not mortal, that is, a fierce and austere male archangel clad in his own close-folded wings, the head with its gilded halo forming the pommel, the feet strong-planted on the cross-piece” (*Shining Company* 21). Compare this dagger with Kipling’s decorative capitals, many formed of weapons, in his illustrations for *Just So Stories*. The miniaturist’s eye is another quality that links the two writers.

⁵ Summary of *The Shining Company*: Set in early 7th-century Britain, *The Shining Company* depicts Celtic resistance to Saxon invasion and is based on a particular tragic historical episode. The novel is tragic in its depiction of the irrevocable past: “I do not think that you can be changing the end of a song or a story . . . as though it were quite separate from the rest. I think the end of a story is part of it from the beginning.” Around 600 AD three hundred picked Celtic warriors spent a year training and feasting at Edinburgh along with their three hundred shield bearers. This was King Mynyddog’s “shining company” that was sent out to repel a much superior force of invading Saxons. Except for one, all of the company died in battle. From this heroic disaster came “The Great Song” or “Y Gododdin,” a famous medieval poem by the Welsh bard Aneirin in which the deeds of every single one of the three hundred are set forth. Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Shining Company* is a novelistic retelling of Aneirin’s “Y Gododdin” in the voice of a boy, Prosper, a young shield bearer, whose life begins in a narrow Welsh valley and ends, though the dislocations of history, in Constantinople. Leaving Wales in the company of his best friend, the young Irish slave Conn, Prosper becomes the chosen shield bearer to Prince Gorthyn. The youths have longed for a wider world after seeing a traveler’s exquisite dagger—the Archangel Dagger—forged in Constantinople. After the feasting and training and falling in love at Dyn Eidin (Edinburgh), the court of the feeble and calculating King Mynyddog, the Three Hundred and their shield bearers, heartened by the songs of Aneirin, encounter a vastly larger Saxon force and are all but wiped out. When Prince Gorthyn is killed, Prosper becomes shield bearer to the heroic Cynan, the sole survivor of the massacre of the Three Hundred. Prosper and Conn also survive. Conn, now a smith, returns to Wales. Cynan and Prosper set out for Constantinople

where the dagger came from and where lies the hope for a continuation of the Roman tradition that animated the Shining Company.

⁶ See *Something of Myself* (177-78) for the genesis of the Puck book in Kipling's cousin's request that he "Write a yarn about Roman times here . . . about an old Centurion of the Occupation telling his experiences to his children."

⁷ Hilary Wright argues that "I suspect that [Sutcliff] is not fully aware" of "how deeply she has been influenced by Kipling" (90).

⁸ Meghan Mercier is completing her Ph.D. in English at George Washington University with a dissertation on "The Anti-Historical Impulse in Late 19th- and 20th-Century Juvenile Historical Fiction." She delivered a paper based on that dissertation research on Thursday, June 10, 2010 at this ChLA conference titled "Odd Couple: Nietzsche, E. Nesbit, and the Uses of History."

⁹ Kipling's explicit reference is to the American self-delusion of being "a godly little New England community, setting examples to brutal mankind" and actually committing genocide by "having extirpated the aboriginals of their continent more completely than any modern race had ever done" (119).

¹⁰ These words belong respectively to a boy who submits to slavery in "Cold Iron," to Dan speaking of a queen who sends brave men to their death in "Gloriana", and to a tribal chief who sacrifices himself for his tribe in "The Knife and the Naked Chalk."

¹¹ In a self-reflexive passage early in the novel, Conn considers the issue of choice in the retellings of legendary and historical narratives: "I do not think that you can be changing the end of a story like that, as though it were quite separate from the rest, I think the end of a story is part of it from the beginning" (59).

¹² Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937), a mythical treatment of WWI trench warfare, uses quotations from *Y Gododdin* to frame every section.

¹³ A highlight of *The Eagle of the Ninth* is a discussion between the British slave Esca and the Roman Marcus Aquila. Esca compares a British with a Roman pattern:

"Look at the pattern embossed here on your dagger-sheath," he said at last. "See, here is a tight curve, and here is another facing the other way to balance it, and here between them is a little round stiff flower; and then it is all repeated here, and here, and here again. It is beautiful, yes, but to me it is as meaningless as an unlit lamp. . . . Look now at this shield boss, see the bulging curves that flow from each other as water flows from water and wind from wind, as the stars turn in the heaven and blown sand drifts into dunes. These are the curves of life. . . . You cannot expect the man who made this shield to live easily under the rule of the man who worked the sheath of this dagger. . . . And when the time comes that we begin to understand your world, too often we lose the understanding of our own" (80-1).