

Bits and pieces

While I, and all other authors, wait for bookshops to reopen and push on with other writing projects, the normal round of talks and public appearances is almost completely suspended. More than a year ago I was invited to give a public lecture at Ohio State University on the subject of experimental archaeology and woodland history. It was a very attractive invitation: paid travel to and from Columbus, dinner, a chat with academic staff and post graduates, and the chance to develop some ideas for the *Wood Age* book.

Well, I duly delivered the talk, from the now-tedious comfort of my desk, on March 19th. It seemed rather unreal and not entirely satisfactory. Zoom meetings are bad enough, but when you are the only voice talking at your own screen, it is a disembodied experience during which it's easy to suddenly feel very self-conscious. Is there anybody out there? Hello...? Quite apart from the disappointment of losing out on a foreign trip, I miss the eye contact, the body language of an audience that gives you subliminal feedback, which you need to adjust tone or pitch as you go along – and this was a quite unknown audience. In the end, I think it went okay and I had about an hour's worth of questions afterwards – generally a good sign.

Behind the scenes, publishing involves trying to create and exploit new markets for authors. My publisher's policy is to acquire World Rights in their authors' works. In effect, they act as sub-agents for the right to translate or publish in other countries. Occasionally, I get an email or call saying that such and such a publisher (often in the US but sometimes in the Far East) wants to sell a version of one of my books. So far as I'm concerned it's free money. I get a cut of the deal. In the long-term future it might mean an invitation to visit another country, as in the Ohio State gig. Incidentally, when I was introduced there by the host, it was interesting for me to hear that my best-known work over there is *In the Land of Giants*. *The King in the North* has never been published in the States, for reasons I don't understand.

Anyway, I found out last week that our enterprising rights manager, Claire Kennedy, has managed to pull off a deal for *The First Kingdom* in Russia. I rather like the idea that the first British kings might become Czars...

Creative Non-fiction?

There has always been a debate about the literary merits of non-fiction. I've mentored physics and maths PhD students who believe resolutely that there is no narrative in academic science writing. At least, that's their starting position. It usually doesn't take too long to show them that all the narrative elements are, or should be, there: front-loaded tension, calls to adventure (why are you writing this PhD?); progressive complications and resolutions.

I sometimes hear a similar philistine thoughts from those suffering 'missed-out-it is' – those who see non-fiction as largely content driven. They ask: 'why did you leave such and such out?' There's some truth in the idea of 'unvoiced' authorship, especially in the most technical writing – encyclopaedias; dictionaries; and academic textbooks (although even then there's no reason for bland writing to make the text even more indigestible).

I reckon I write best when I can chuck about a third of my material away. That allows me to construct a narrative which is driven by... well, what? What's the job of the creative non-fiction writer? To explain, for sure, where possible: in *The First Kingdom*, I wanted to explain to readers how and why archaeologists, linguists and historians can take such apparently incompatible views of the 'Dark Ages'. But as a writer I also want to evoke and inspire – inspire a reader to keep reading; evoke the landscape; the period, if possible, and the sense of excitement that I get as an archaeologist when confronted with the conundrums posed by the evidence – or lack of it. I also want to bring the reader into the writing as a collaborative partner – to allow and encourage them to question; to fill in the blanks with their own knowledge or ideas. Otherwise I am creating a passive reader ('Too many notes, Mozart...'), when what I want is discourse.

Underlying the obvious chronological trajectory of a book about the past, the evolution of Insular landscape, geography and society, is – I hope – an analysis of power as it was expressed in lordship, patronage and the exploitation of the land. In the Early Medieval period the means by which power was displayed, extended and negotiated are highly visible as they rarely are in post-industrial societies. The rules are the same, but they are easier to make out from the background; to understand in social terms; more starkly scrawled on the materials at hand: coins and pottery; architecture; the geography of township and petty kingdom. But if I didn't think these ideas were absolutely relevant to the modern world, I wouldn't bother writing about them. When all's said and done, everything I write is political, from the choice of subject to the narrative shape and content-editing.

The Wood Age

The Wood Age book is coming along – at least in terms of roughing out chapter drafts. Here I am confronted with the problem that I've alluded to above: how to treat a subject as huge as the history of ships and ship-building in only 9-odd thousand words. There's no way that it can be content-driven. Well, oddly enough my Ohio talk has helped with that, because it made me think about some of the underlying themes of the book: how human technologies reflect their ecologies – and then to think hard about what that means. So I've chosen to write about how boat design and technology have been driven by broader social and cultural ecologies – long-distance trade, elite consumption and the unequal distribution of the world's precious resources. More politics... Of course.