

'Dear Professor Adams...'

I have a basic honours degree in Archaeology, and a teaching qualification; that's it. But I am often honoured with the title Dr or Professor. I have stopped complaining; it seems churlish to refuse the honour...

I get plenty of correspondence, one way or another, from readers. Sometimes it's kind praise; sometimes it's praise with a 'but'... pointing out mistakes. You have to take those on the chin and hope that you get them in time to make an alteration for a paperback edition. Otherwise you have to live with them. One of the worst was a careless throw-away to the effect that if one lived in a busy modern city like Hong Kong, one might not see a tree all year. Damn stupid: there are plenty of trees in Hong Kong. I wish I could correct it.

I have kept up some very long term correspondence with readers who are intelligent, knowledgeable and engaging – and I value them extremely for their interest, insight and reflective knowledge. Some of them become friends and it's as though there is a global diaspora of people from all walks of life who just connect, somehow, through the writing.

Then, there are those with what I will compassionately call an *idée fixe* (that's not what I call it in private). I have received claims that, for example, the reader had been reincarnated from one of my historical subjects; reviews from people with very fixed views whom I have 'deeply offended' – I notice, people don't ever seem to be mildly offended; just deeply offended. But by far the bulk of the *idées fixes* concern Early Medieval battlefield sites, 'King Arthur', or some other legendary figure from the Dark Ages or Viking period. I do, honestly, try to answer them all, knowing that what many of them want is my endorsement of a very narrow perspective. Mostly I'll swap two or three emails before I am convinced that they don't want to hear anything I say; and, more annoyingly, they wouldn't go off and read the huge amount of academic and non-academic literature that one needs to digest in order to get a handle on a period. There is a cadre of lazy thinkers who just want their prejudices reinforced. Well, it's my own fault for writing about such interesting times. I wouldn't have it any other way.

Incidentally, I recently got asked by Alex Clifford, who runs a podcast called *History's Most...* for an interview, which you can hear by following the link on my Home Page. The questions were intelligent and thought-provoking and it was more like a chat between people with mutual interests than a Q and A. Very refreshing; and not edited down to 'highlights'.

The Wood Age: hitting the wall

Actually, the Wood Age project – now called *The hand that wields the axe* because Roland Ennos has just published a Wood Age book – is going well. I have finished ten chapters, the latest a romp through what I am calling 'complex cultures'. But, as I often say to those who are struggling with long-form writing– especially PhD students – you are bound to hit the wall at some stage in a big writing project: when you hate everything you've written; the creative juices fail and you just stall. You shuffle papers on the desk; check to see if it's raining still (it is); and even go so far as to do shopping and Hoovering, just to avoid the reality of failure. I'm not sure if they find it so consoling when I tell them that, fourteen books in, I still get that dreaded feeling of hitting the wall, at some point. The trick with being a professional writer is to accept that it's part of the process; find a way of always being constructive – checking footnotes; organising offprints and bookshelves; reading a book – and then, not resenting the time spent cooking, washing up or Hoovering. After that, you need a method to fall back on – and I think I have written about that before, so I'll spare the reader any more of it.

In Chapter Ten I have tried to perform a circus acrobatic trick of linking Shakespeare's Globe theatre, Seahenge, the mead hall of Beowulf, a Haida 'totem' pole, a 10,000 year old Russian carving, a violin and printing press. At the time it seems like it works; but only a pause for breath, a little time and reflection will enable me to go back and see if I think it still works. Meanwhile, onto the next chapter...

Suggested reading

Here are a few books that I have either enjoyed enough to re-read them many times, or have changed the way I think in one way or another. Some I wish I'd written myself.

Riddley Walker by Russell Hoban: A marvellously lyrical oral history of the future

The Songlines by Bruce Chatwin: A radical and attractive thesis on nomads and the human condition.

The Ascent of Man by Jacob Bronowski (BBC Books, paperback): the book of the epic series, commissioned by David Attenborough in 1969. A brilliant distillation of scientific history; and watch the films too.

Chance By Joseph Conrad. If there is a finer novel in the English language, I've yet to read it.

Pincher Martin by William Golding. Shattering moral and existential boundaries.

A Small Town in Germany by John le Carré. Really very brilliant.

The Ecclesiastical History of the English People by Bede Oxford World Classics is the best modern translation). Our founding text: subtle, infuriating, cunning... a paper trail of maybes that evokes an almost lost age.