

**‘Causing misery and suffering miserably’:  
Representations of the Thirty Years’ War in literature and history<sup>1</sup>**

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Abstract

This article examines a range of fictional literature – poetry, prose, play and song produced between the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries – that represents aspects of the Thirty Years’ War, a conflict fought in Europe from 1618-1648. Depiction of the Thirty Years’ War in literary works is compared to that found in empirical historical evidence and historians’ analyses. It is concluded that historical fictions offer a different, but equally valid, account of the conflict to academic histories, and that by using historical fictions and empirical evidence together, a more holistic picture of events is offered than academic histories alone provide.

In 1668, the German author Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen completed *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, a novel set in the Thirty Years’ War, a conflict that had ended twenty years previously. Through his eponymous protagonist, Grimmelshausen tells a story of the human experience of participation in this war, portraying the conflict in a way rarely found in historical accounts of the period. *Simplicissimus* has been lauded not only as an achievement of seventeenth-century literature but as an eminently realistic portrayal of the experiences of participants in the Thirty Years’ War, with Herbert Langer describing it in 1978 as ‘the most impressive and poetically realistic picture of the time’.<sup>2</sup> Grimmelshausen ‘borrowed’ from other works in writing *Simplicissimus*, including the *Theatrum Europaeum*, a memoir by Matthaus Merian. Though today we might see this as plagiarism, it offers credibility to Grimmelshausen’s novel as an accurate representation of the conflict.<sup>3</sup>

The utility of historical fiction is the subject of ongoing debate for both historians and literary critics, and one does not have to look far to find criticisms of the genre. Described as ‘unconventional history’<sup>4</sup> and as being ‘written in bad faith’,<sup>5</sup> fiction and history have been seen as having different purposes: ‘traffic[king] in different kinds of truth’.<sup>6</sup> Yet balanced responses to what Jerome de Groot has termed ‘the popular history boom’ acknowledge not only the increasing prevalence of the genre, but the important role it plays in the ways in which people – not only professional historians – ‘engage with, comprehend, conceptualise or even construct historical sense’.<sup>7</sup> Jessica Hower laments that historical fiction ‘for most academics...remains vulgar

history’,<sup>8</sup> asserting instead that historical fiction’s ‘pedagogical utility’ means that it is able to do things that academic histories alone cannot.<sup>9</sup> Further, both history and fiction are formed of constructed narratives<sup>10</sup> and both are bound by the limits and conventions of narrative prose.<sup>11</sup> Though the temptation may be to see history as the fact, as compared to the fiction, histories are constructed from ‘facts [which] must be selected and arranged on some sort of plan’, relying on a ‘fictive or imaginary representation of the past’.<sup>12</sup> Historians have increasingly come to realise – as Beverley Southgate asserts – that all histories are, in a certain sense, ‘fictional’: ‘literary construction[s] based on evidence that is itself of inevitably questionable reliability’.<sup>13</sup>

The Thirty Years’ War has been the topic of a broad range of historical fiction in many forms – poetry, plays and songs as well as prose fiction – that range in date from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. Despite the prevalence of these works, however, they have been largely overlooked both for what they say about the conflict, and for what they indicate about the wider relationship between history and literature. This article addresses both of these questions. Despite the significance of *Simplicissimus*, scholars of multiple generations have held that Walter Scott was ‘the first author whose novels can properly be called historical’.<sup>14</sup> The limited scholarly attention given to literary representations of the Thirty Years’ War is due, at least in part, to its absence from any recent ‘boom’ in the production of historical fiction – the two world wars of 1914-1918 and 1939-1945 are much more popular as wartime subject matter.<sup>15</sup> In exploring texts set in the Thirty Years’ War, and studying them alongside contemporary historical evidence and analyses of the conflict by historians, this article not only supports Hower in questioning the still widespread notion that histories are necessarily more trustworthy or factual than historical fiction, but also demonstrates the benefits of using historical fiction through offering a new perspective on one particular conflict that can only be gleaned through imaginary as well as non-fictitious means.

The literary representations of the Thirty Years’ War examined here include, alongside *Simplicissimus*, nineteenth- and twentieth-century works by G. A. Henty and Oswald Dallas and the twenty-first century works of fiction *The Winter Queen* by Jane Stevenson (2001) and Daniel Kehlmann’s *Tyll* (2020). Contemporary and modern poetry and song, including children’s ditties, are examined, as is perhaps the most famous play set in the Thirty Years’ War, Friedrich Schiller’s *Wallenstein* (1799). The works considered here are not exhaustive, but have been selected both for their diversity of form and range of publication dates, and because they address particular themes that permit comparison with academic histories of the conflict. There are several important aspects of the Thirty Years’ War that are, or have been until recently, overlooked by historians but which are well covered by fictional representations. The themes considered in this article are: British

involvement in the Thirty Years’ War; the role of mercenaries; military and civilian experiences of the war; the role of kinship and patronage; and character depiction. In some cases the nature of historical fiction allows authors to get to the heart of these key issues more effectively than academic scholarship, particularly those with a ‘human’ aspect. Drawing on Robert Rosenstone, Sarah Pinto asserts that historical fiction deserves attention not just in order for historians to point out its inaccuracies, but ‘to analyse “how the past has been and is being told”’.<sup>16</sup> Rather than pitting history and historical fiction against each other as two distinct, separate genres, I conclude that histories and historical fictions can and should be used together to give a more holistic understanding of historical events.

## I

We start by looking at British involvement in what is frequently characterised as a continental conflict. Historians have only fairly recently recognised the extent of British, and particularly Scottish, involvement in the Thirty Years’ War.<sup>17</sup> Through the work of Steve Murdoch, Alexia Grosjean and David Worthington in particular, historians now know that there was a strong Scottish presence in European armies on both the Protestant and Catholic side of the conflict, in positions of power as well as among rank and file soldiers.<sup>18</sup> Though this phenomenon has only been fully explored by historians in the last two decades, it was very much recognised in near-contemporary depictions of the war. The ‘anti-hero’ of Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicissimus* is half-Scottish – Simplicius learns during the course of the novel that he is related to Sir James Ramsay, a Scottish colonel in Swedish service. Grimmelshausen, who himself fought in the Thirty Years’ War, uses his firsthand knowledge of Scottish participation in the conflict in creating his protagonist: Grimmelshausen served under Ramsay when he was governor of Hanau.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the novel Scottish participation in the conflict is repeatedly acknowledged – Grimmelshausen anticipates recent historical research in asserting that ‘there were many Scottish noble-men’ in the Swedish forces.<sup>20</sup> In recent fiction, too, the international composition of armies is noted. In Daniel Kehlmann’s *Tyll* (2020), Gustav Adolf, the King of Sweden, proclaims ‘I have barely any Swedes with me. Most of them out there are Germans, a few Finns too, along with Scotsmen and Irishmen and who knows what’.<sup>21</sup> Although Grimmelshausen’s understanding of the conflict can be partly attributed to his participation in it, there is evidence that he may have had access to contemporary historical evidence in compiling his ostensibly imaginary account of the war.<sup>22</sup> A fictional letter in Book III chapter 10, from a town under threat asserting their right

to defend themselves, bears striking resemblance to a letter from Colonel James Seaton, a Scot in command of Treborn in Bohemia, refusing to give up the town to the Emperor.<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of this highly realistic letter consolidates the accuracy of *Simplicissimus* as a representation of the Thirty Years’ War.

Scottish soldiers are frequently portrayed as being particularly well suited to conflict. In Jane Stevenson’s 2001 novel *The Winter Queen*, Scottish soldiers are described as ‘pretty fighters’ hailing from ‘a nation well trained to war...a stout army of valiant Scots’, despite the novel not having an overtly military theme.<sup>24</sup> Older literature concurs – G. A. Henty’s *The Lion of the North*, first published in 1886, describes Scottish soldiers as hardier than English participants. The Marquis of Hamilton:

lost on the march many of the soldiers he had enlisted in England, who had died from eating German bread, which was heavier, darker coloured, and more sour than that of their own country. This, however, did not disagree with the Scotch, who were accustomed to black bread.<sup>25</sup>

Henty depicts Scottish soldiers as being extremely able – defeating the Imperialists even when outnumbered, and being naturally suited to commanding armies.<sup>26</sup>

Such favourable depictions of Scottish soldiers in historical literature reflect those found in contemporary accounts. Colonel Robert Monro, who fought in the Swedish army in the conflict, described Scotland as ‘the nation that was never conquered by any forraine enemy, the invincible Scots’, a theme that resonates throughout his diaries.<sup>27</sup> Similarly William Lithgow in his *Rare Adventures and Painful Peregrinations* (1632) presented Scots as ‘abler and apter to preserve and defend’ than other nations, and as incomparable to any other ‘Kingdoms or Nation within the compasses of the whole universe’.<sup>28</sup> While both of these authors were Scottish and the former a soldier – thus making it difficult for them to be impartial – this suggests parallels between fictional and eyewitness accounts of the conflict. *A most true relation of the late proceedings in Bohemia, Germany and Hungaria*, published originally in Dutch in 1620, proclaims that the troops under the Scot Colonel Gray were ‘so well-governed, and so good discipline among them, that they are praised by all men above all other Nations that are there’.<sup>29</sup>

Many Scottish soldiers were compelled to participate in the Thirty Years’ War to defend the cause of Elizabeth Stuart, the daughter of James VI and I of Great Britain. In 1613 Elizabeth married Frederick V of the Palatinate, and they were installed as King and Queen of Bohemia. In

1620, Protestant forces in Bohemia were defeated by Catholic Imperial troops who believed that Frederick and Elizabeth had no legitimate claim to the Bohemian throne. The couple were exiled to the Hague, where Elizabeth spent the rest of her life. Elizabeth was emphatically a Scottish princess, though a common oversight of the vast majority of her historical biographers has been to see her as an ‘English princess’, the ‘most celebrated beauty in England’, or the ‘darling of the English people’. England has even been erroneously described as ‘Elizabeth’s own native land’.<sup>30</sup> This has transferred to popular representations of Elizabeth – in *The Winter Queen*, Elizabeth is described as ‘the Rose of England’ and the ‘daughter of England’, and in *Tyll* as an ‘English wife’ and a ‘member of the English royal family’, with James VI termed ‘the English king’.<sup>31</sup> While the link between Elizabeth’s plight and British participation in the Thirty Years’ War had not until recently been considered in detail by historians, both contemporary and fictional accounts have linked British participation – and Scottish participation in particular – to the cause of Elizabeth Stuart. Contemporary poetry can be read as attempts to aid recruitment for armies fighting for Elizabeth’s cause. The *Nymph of the Necker to the Heroes of England* by Arthur Johnston, printed as part of his *Musa Latina Aberdonensis* in 1620, ‘make[s] appeal by pen to Britain’, hoping that a rumour that ‘heroes of Britain are coming to the rescue of Elizabeth, the princess’ were true.<sup>32</sup> References to ‘the Caledonian Princess Elizabeth’<sup>33</sup> feature heavily, with works such as this lending moral, and possibly actual, support to Elizabeth of Bohemia, ‘that glory of the world’.<sup>34</sup>

## II

In addition to ideological reasons for fighting, soldiers enlisted in the armies of the Thirty Years’ War for a whole host of motivations. The letters of Drummer Major James Spens, who served on the continent in the Thirty Years’ War, are unique in representing the views of a common soldier participating in the conflict, and only survive due to being mistakenly preserved with the correspondence of a general of the same name.<sup>35</sup> These letters show us that Spens was not compelled to serve because of a particular ideology, but that he chose military service as an available occupation. He wrote to his wife, Elizabeth Baillie, from Riga in October 1628 that if she were to hear of any work available to him in Scotland he would rather leave service and return, to take up that work and be with his family.<sup>36</sup> Similarly Sydnam Poyntz, an English mercenary who fought under Ernst von Mansfeld in Germany from 1624-1636, recorded in his memoirs that he enlisted because ‘my necessitie forced mee, my money being growne short, to take the means of a private soldier’.<sup>37</sup> This is reflected in historical fiction, with Henty describing ‘few careers open at

home to the youth of [Scotland], and very large numbers had consequently flocked to the Continent and taken service in one or other of the armies there’,<sup>38</sup> Scotland thus being portrayed as the ‘warehouse of mercenaries’ described by William Brockington.<sup>39</sup> After James Spens’s wife died in childbirth in 1632, he left the Swedish army for service in the Dutch East India Company (VOC), writing home to his parents of different motivations – of the need to escape the tragedy of losing his wife and of ‘the goodness that I find by travelling and visiting foreign countries’.<sup>40</sup>

Others operated as ‘soldiers of fortune’, hoping to take advantage of their martial skills to make money by serving the highest bidder, and the presence of mercenary soldiers in the Thirty Years’ War is a well-known phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> The Scot James Turner memorialised his own experience of serving as a mercenary in *His Life and Times*: ‘that so we serve our master honestly, it is no matter what master we serve; so, without examination of the justice of the quarrel, or regard of my deitie to either prince or country, I resolved to go with that ship I first encountered’.<sup>42</sup> Contemporary views of the Thirty Years’ War, and military participants in particular, are arguably dominated by the ‘irregular and fearsome’ mercenaries that the war attracted,<sup>43</sup> and this is reflected in fictional representations of the conflict. Kehlmann describes ‘mauraders’ as being ‘disheveled, angry, without knowing at what’,<sup>44</sup> while Henty depicts soldiers with the mentality of wanting to fight, but without being concerned with the details of the cause that they were fighting for:

‘My dear fellow’, Hume laughed, ‘you will never make a soldier if you always want to know the ins and outs of every quarrel you have to fight about...to tell you the truth, beyond the fact that it is a general row between the Protestants and the Catholics, I have not troubled myself much in the matter’.<sup>45</sup>

In Oswald Dallas’s *A Ragged Renown* (1934), soldiers are described as wanting to fight, for no particular reason, at any opportunity, without regard for the cause for which they were fighting: ‘I fought on, though I should have found it hard to explain what I was fighting about’.<sup>46</sup> Further, Dallas portrays fighting as fundamental to soldiers’ way of life, being used in settling a disagreement between friends, as well as on the battlefield:

‘Oliphant’, he said, ‘I bear thee no animus’.  
‘Nor I thee’, I returned.  
‘But we are going to fight.’  
‘Aye.’

‘And one of us may be killed.’

‘True.’

‘Then let us shake hands.’<sup>47</sup>

The notion of soldiering as a profession is portrayed in Kehlmann’s *Tyll* (2020), when Hans Kloppmess introduces himself as being

once one of the Kaiser’s men...and maybe I’ll be one again, who knows? A soldier has a trade, no less than a carpenter or baker. The army is my guild...At the moment the French aren’t paying anything, but when they do pay, then it will be more than you get from the Kaiser.<sup>48</sup>

Another soldier, Korff, describes his participation in the Sack of Magdeburg, saying that ‘I was with the besiegers, it was before I was with the Swedes, at the time I was still with the Imperial troops’.<sup>49</sup> Friedrich Schiller’s *The Death of Wallenstein* (1799) features several characters who change allegiance during the Thirty Years’ War, not only between the Protestant and Imperial forces but between different factions on the same side of the conflict. At the beginning of the final act, Devereux and Macdonald are willing to move from Wallenstein’s imperial force to Butler’s, based on the notion that they would be rewarded extensively for their trouble – depicting explicitly the mentality of ‘soldiers of fortune’:

BUTLER	Thou wretched man So easily leavest thou thy oath and colours?
DEVEREUX	The devil! I but followed your example; If you could prove a villain, why not we?
MACDONALD	We've naught to do with thinking--that's your business. You are our general, and give out the orders; We follow you, though the track lead to hell.
BUTLER [appeased]	Good, then! We know each other.
MACDONALD	I should hope so.
DEVEREUX	Soldiers of fortune are we – who bids most He has us.

MACDONALD      'Tis e'en so!<sup>50</sup>

The language used by Schiller, including Devereux’s accusation that Butler is a ‘devil’ and a ‘villain’, suggests that although soldiers of fortune were a common phenomenon in the armies of the Thirty Years’ War, they weren’t looked on favourably. The concept of soldiers of fortune appears too in modern composition, such as in the song *The Rovin’ Dies Hard*, released by The Battlefield Band in 1989. One verse follows the life of a soldier of fortune during the Thirty Years’ War:

My name’s John MacKenzie, I’m a master-at-arms,  
I carry my sword and my shield on my shoulder.  
I’ve fought every fight from the Don to the Danube,  
None braver, none better, none bolder.  
I’ve stood wi’ Montrose and against him.  
I’ve battled with Swedes and with Danes.  
And I’ve carries the standard o’ many’s the army,  
Through many’s the bloody campaign.  
But now as I sit in the firelight it seems  
There’s a distant horizon to the sword buckler’s gleam.  
Till a pull at the wine bring an old soldier’s dreams from afar  
- For the rovin’ dies hard.<sup>51</sup>

To someone with specialist knowledge of the Thirty Years’ War, the soldier described appears to have been a member of Mackay’s Regiment. He has fought with Swedes and Danes, stood with Montrose at the sack of Aberdeen in 1639 as a Covenanter and battled against the Royalist Montrose in 1644-45. As well as accurately depicting the career of someone who could have been a combatant, and suggesting changing allegiances, this song also conveys the prevailing attitude ascribed to early-modern soldiers of fortune – that in retirement, this soldier longs to be in combat again.<sup>52</sup> Kehlmann’s fictional Tyll Ulenspiegel sang

a ballad of war, of riding together and the clanking of weapons and the friendship of the men and standing the test of danger and the jubilation of the whistling bullets. He sang of the soldier’s life and the beauty of dying in battle, he sang of the whooping joy of each and every man who rode against the enemy on horseback, and we all felt our hearts beat faster.<sup>53</sup>



Certainly there are suggestions in contemporary works, including military marches, that those fighting in the Thirty Years’ War enjoyed combat. *Lesley’s March*, attributed to the Scots army in 1640, shows that even at this late stage in the Thirty Years’ War the army maintained their belief that they were the best soldiers in the world:

Qhuan tae the Kirk we come,  
We'll purge it ilka room,  
Frae Popish reliques, and a' sic innovation,  
That a' the world may see,  
There's nane in the richt but we,  
O' the auld Scotch Nation.<sup>54</sup>

Similarly *A Soldier’s Song*, attributed to the Swiss satirist Johannes Grob (1643-97), demonstrates not only the efforts made to keep up morale, but also that soldiers enjoyed what they were doing:

How the drum sounds  
How the fife sings  
How the shawm, the trumpet and the drum ring out  
See how bravely the flag is fluttering  
That the heart throbs with merriment!<sup>55</sup>

Of course, that battle songs were intended to keep up morale must cast doubt on whether soldiers’ hearts really would ‘throb with merriment’ at the prospect of battle. Indeed, there are suggestions both in historical fiction and contemporary historical evidence that soldiers of fortune suffered. Maximilian of Bavaria warned Emperor Ferdinand III about the scarcity of provision: ‘the poor soldiers are through and through paupers, stripped bare, exhausted, starved and in such a condition that it is easy to commiserate with them’.<sup>56</sup> Soldiers frequently hailed from the same social background as the civilians they were billeted with.<sup>57</sup> Some soldiers suffered at the hands of the peasants they have traditionally been depicted as targeting through plundering and pillaging – in 1642 the soldier Peter Hangendorf, serving in Dierdorf near Limburg, had too much to drink one night and fell behind his regiment, whereupon ‘three peasants hiding in a hedge beat me up thoroughly and took my coat, satchel, everything’.<sup>58</sup> In 1633 Maurus Freisenegger, a monk at Andechs, Bavaria, describes soldiers as ‘half-filled companies of blackened and jaundiced faces,

starved bodies...the face of hunger and famine’.<sup>59</sup>

Seventeenth-century fiction has addressed the suffering of soldiers, challenging Jerome de Groot’s assertion that Sebastian Faulks’s 1993 *Birdsong* ‘was one of the first of these types of novels to really deal with the grinding horror of the trenches, the grimness and trauma which are now familiar tropes’.<sup>60</sup> While fighting on the continent, Grimmelshausen changed sides several times, fighting primarily for the Catholic/Habsburg side, but fleeing after the battle of Nördlingen in 1634 and serving under Colonel James Ramsay in the German town of Hanau.<sup>61</sup> Significantly, Grimmelshausen challenges the notion of soldiers of fortune being cold-hearted. The life of a mercenary soldier is instead portrayed as:

eating and drinking, going hungry and thirsty, whoring and sodomising, gaming and dicing...murdering and being murdered, killing and being killed...being feared and being afraid, causing misery and suffering miserably – in a word, injuring and destroying and in turn being injured and destroyed. They went about their business until, one by one, they expired, perished, died, croaked their last in battles, sieges, attacks, campaigns.<sup>62</sup>

Simplicius recalls a rhyme about the life of a soldier: ‘Hunger, thirst, cold and heat,/ Empty purse, weary feet/ Ruthless killing, wanton strife/ Add up to a lanzknecht’s [mercenary’s] life’.<sup>63</sup> Thus Grimmelshausen humanises mercenary soldiers, presenting a view of them contrary to later literary representations, and historical evaluations, of soldiers in the Thirty Years’ War. Modern fiction, too, has recognised the suffering felt by soldiers. In Daniel Kehlmann’s *Tyll*, a group of pikemen were described as ‘feral people with shaggy beards. Some had open wounds, others were dragging sacks full of booty. A smell of sweat, disease, and blood hung over them, and they gazed with small, hostile eyes’.<sup>64</sup> Following a battle, ‘the wounded were squatting on the roadside, in makeshift bandages, staring motionless into space...The camp outside [Augsburg] stank even worse than the battlefield. Like visions of hell, the deformed bodies, the festering faces, the open wounds, the heaps of excrement’.<sup>65</sup> *Tyll* reflects Hangendorf’s firsthand account, described above, when, upon finding a dead body with bare feet, Konrad Purner says ‘That’s normal...no one leaves a corpse his boots. If you’re unlucky, you get killed just for the shoes’. Later in the novel, this premonition is realised, as Korff confesses ‘I killed a comrade for his boots. Mine had holes in them, he was fast asleep, it was in the camp at Munich, what should I have done, I do need boots! So I struck. I strangled him, he opened his eyes, but he couldn’t scream. I just needed some boots’.<sup>66</sup> Writing nearly four centuries apart, both Grimmelshausen and Kehlmann, with the former drawing on his

own experience as a soldier in the Thirty Years’ War, remind us that depictions of these soldiers in academic histories has largely ignored the human aspect. The fact that mercenaries offered their services to the highest bidder or lacked a strong ideology did not lessen their suffering.

### III

Military participants in the Thirty Years’ War were thus affected, and so were the lives of civilians – a theme rarely considered in historical works, which have more often focused on the political, religious and military aspects of the conflict. Throughout *Simplicissimus* Grimmelshausen addresses the unpleasantness of war, noting that ‘where you have war, the innocent suffer along with the guilty’.<sup>67</sup> The novel features many unpleasant scenes, including peasants’ thumbs being thrust into their pistols (as a makeshift thumbscrew), liquid filth being poured into the mouths of victims (termed the ‘Swedish drink’) and sport being made out of executions – lining prisoners up and taking bets on the number that could be shot with a single bullet. The prevalent theme of suffering led Cicely Wedgewood to describe *Simplicissimus* as a ‘nightmare novel’,<sup>68</sup> but it is a highly realistic one, with many aspects of Grimmelshausen’s narrative supported by historical evidence. Philip Vincent comments on the torture of civilians by soldiers: ‘the mouths of some they have opened with gags, and then poured down their throats water, stinking puddle, filthy liquids, and pisse itself, saying “This is a Swedish draught”’.<sup>69</sup> The impact of the conflict on civilians is well-covered by historical fiction, perhaps in part because authors sought to provide content with which readers could identify. Daniel Czepko, a seventeenth-century German poet, highlighted the plight of the civilian peasants who were affected:

Princes may like to wage wars  
But I will not sell my skin when they beat the drums  
This poet’s handful of blood should not fight unto the grave  
For the property of another  
Though wars may be cruel,  
They still only affect those who did nothing to cause them  
It is only the subjects who are felled by lightning and balls  
When great lords do battle.<sup>70</sup>

Impact on civilian life was felt most keenly, perhaps, by the destruction of land caused by fighting. The Silesian poet Martin Opitz, in his *Poem of Consolation in the Adversity of War* (*Trostgedichte In Widerwertigkeit Dess Krieges*) (written 1621, published 1633) wrote:

The trees stand no more  
The gardens are desolate;  
The sickle and the plough are now a cold sharp blade.<sup>71</sup>

For many civilians the wars represented personal catastrophes, which have not been deemed remarkable enough to make it into the history books but which were significant enough to be recorded by individuals.<sup>72</sup> One diary entry from 1634 Germany records:

The Marquis of Salada lodged here with three legions...they behaved worse than barbarously; they destroyed everything...not even leaving enough to appease the hunger of the poor farmers. My house...suffered an equally terrible destruction.<sup>73</sup>

The economic consequences of the destruction of agricultural land is recorded in many contemporary accounts. Hans Heberle, a cobbler from a rural village near Ulm, produced an account of the inflationary crisis in Swabia and its impact on ordinary people.<sup>74</sup> He described how ‘produce became very expensive...an Ulm measure of fruit costs up to 50 florins; of rye, 46 florins; of barley, 26 florins; of oats, 15 florins...’.<sup>75</sup> The direct consequences of this were that ‘they starve, along with their wives and children, all because of the money, for everything that is needed to nourish and support people has become horribly expensive’.<sup>76</sup> Lorenz Ludolph, Pastor of Reichensachsen and Langenhain in Hessen, complained in 1642 that ‘in such times one had to hold baptisms and festivals without meat soup, without boiled or braised meat. We had to learn to eat green cabbage, pea soup without dripping!...There continues to be a shortage of cattle, no pigs, not a goose to be found in the village’.<sup>77</sup> Heberle shows commanding understanding of the impact of changes in currency in noting that ‘no one can comprehend how many kinds of coins there are, because all the emperors and kings, princes and lords, counts and nobles, cities and villages, even tinkers and vagabonds, have coined and are permitted to coin money’.<sup>78</sup> Though historical fiction has recognized the suffering felt by civilians during the Thirty Years’ War, the economic issues highlighted by Heberle do not feature prominently in their depictions of

experiences of the conflict – perhaps because authors felt that they were unappealing to their intended audience. The same could be said of the population decreases that we know were a result of the conflict.<sup>79</sup> Rather, historical fiction focuses on the consequences of the conflict for human experience.

Henty’s *The Lion of the North* (1886) contains several scenes depicting the impact of fighting on the peasant population, noting that ‘the march of an army could be followed by burned villages, demolished houses, crops destroyed, and general ruin, havoc and devastation’.<sup>80</sup> Henty also touches upon the actions taken by villagers to protect their property. In a conversation between Malcolm and the village pastor, the clergyman states: ‘it is lawful, nay it is right to defend one’s home against these lawless pillagers and murderers, but as you say, evil though their ways are, these freebooters are stout men-at-arms, and we have heard that they have taken a terrible vengeance on the villages which have ventured to oppose them’.<sup>81</sup> In Chapter 6, however, ‘The Attack on the Village’, the actions of Malcolm and his fellow villagers are portrayed as being just as violent, with the freebooters being ‘slaughtered like rats in a trap’, and Malcolm observing that ‘when men take to the life of wild beasts they must be slain as such’.<sup>82</sup> The lengths taken by peasants to defend their homes are portrayed not as acts of self-preservation, but on a par with the actions of the freebooters from whom they were defending their village. Kehlmann’s *Tyll* (2020) provides evocative descriptions of the impact of the war. Kehlmann describes the impact of the Battle of Zusmarshausen, the final battle of the Thirty Years’ War, on a fictional village:

The village of Markl was completely destroyed: walls full of holes, cracked beams, rubble in the road, a few old people begging for food next to the filthy well. The enemy had been here and taken everything, and the little that they had been able to hide had been taken afterwards by friendly troops, that is, the Elector’s soldiers, and no sooner had these soldiers withdrawn than what the villagers had managed to conceal even from them was in turn taken by more enemy forces. “Which enemies, then?” the fat count asked worriedly, “Swedes or Frenchmen?” It was all the same to them, they said. They were so hungry.<sup>83</sup>

Elsewhere in the novel Kehlmann describes ‘a village that had been burned down to its

foundation walls, and there they saw a heap of corpses...blackened faces, a torso with only one arm, a hand clenched into a claw, two empty eye sockets over an open mouth, and something that looked like a sack but was the remains of a body’.<sup>84</sup> The desperation felt by villages throughout Europe during the conflict was put particularly chillingly in a contemporary child’s ditty:

Pray, child, pray!  
The Swede is coming now,  
Oxenstierna is coming,  
My child will learn to pray,  
Pray, child, pray!<sup>85</sup>

Losing family was a common theme. In a scene in *Tyll*, a group of soldiers is trapped in a mineshaft, and they begin sharing stories of the loss of loved ones:

“Outside Magdeburg I lost my brother,” says Korff. “A shot in the head.”  
“I lost my wife,” says Matthias. “At Braunschweig, she was with the supply train, the plague took her, our two children too.”  
“What was her name?”  
“Johanna,” says Matthias. “My wife. I can’t remember the names of the children”.  
“I lost my sister,” says Tyll.<sup>86</sup>

Indeed, Hans Heberle lost all but one of his ten children during the war. Between 1634-35 alone he lost two children, both parents and four siblings to a plague epidemic.<sup>87</sup> Although the bubonic plague was common, affecting both rural and urban populations, it is again not a prevalent theme in historical literature concerned with the conflict.<sup>88</sup>

#### IV

The importance of family connections, along with other forms of patronage and networks, is frequently addressed in literature set in the Thirty Years’ War, though again historians have only relatively recently examined this theme in detail.<sup>89</sup> *Simplicissimus* conveys the importance of

connections, not least in noting that ‘promotion...was a distant prospect if one had no friend at court to put in a word for one’.<sup>90</sup> Grimmelshausen suggests that promotion was only possible either if you were ‘hauled up by your cousins’ or you used a ‘silver ladder known as the Bribery Backstairs’.<sup>91</sup> In *The Death of Wallenstein* Schiller criticises promotion through birth as opposed to ability, reflecting a common trope of Enlightenment writers that skill should outweigh connections. Schiller’s Irish soldier Butler comments:

BUTLER        Be the whole world acquainted with the weakness  
                    For which I never can forgive myself,  
                    Lieutenant-general! Yes; I have ambition.  
                    Ne'er was I able to endure contempt.  
                    It stung me to the quick that birth and title  
                    Should have more weight than merit has in the army.<sup>92</sup>

Having family as support was seen as particularly positive. Grimmelshausen’s protagonist Simplicius noted that a Swedish Colonel ‘had no doubt I would find relatives in the main Swedish army who counted for something, for there were many Scottish noblemen there’.<sup>93</sup>

That contacts could aid promotion is a theme prevalent in much historical fiction on the Thirty Years’ War. In Henty’s *The Lion of the North*, while Malcolm Graeme proceeds in his career partly on his merit and ability as a soldier, he also relies initially on the patronage of his uncle to enter Swedish service.<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere in the same novel, a sergeant rewarded for his service is described specifically as ‘of good family’.<sup>95</sup> In addition to aiding professional promotion, kith and kin ties might make a soldier’s experience in the field more pleasant. Graeme’s village friends implore him: ‘do not talk of payment...as long as there is flour in the store-house and bacon on the beams, any Scottish soldier of Gustavus [Gustav II Adolph, King of Sweden] is welcome to it, still more if they be comrades of thine’.<sup>96</sup> Such a connection, though, was also dependent to some degree on ideology, in that this welcome was only available to those Scots serving the Swedish – i.e. Protestant – forces. In the final chapter of Henty’s *Won by the Sword* (1899), a group of Scotsmen try to persuade their colonel, Hector, to come with them to Scotland. He refuses, saying: ‘certainly not to Scotland, I have no friends there, and from all that I have heard the people are so hard and bigoted, so full of their religious differences, that I should feel sorely out of place with them’, to which his comrade replies: ‘Well, as soon as I am settled in England I will have a letter conveyed to you in some way at the address of The Scottish Soldier. Wherever I am, there will be a home

always open to you, and glad indeed I shall be to have you near me’.<sup>97</sup> This both characterizes Scotland as an unruly mercenary nation and highlights the importance of connections. Henty frequently drew on the large Scottish contingent that scholars have only recently recognised as being present in the Swedish armies during the conflict, depicting friendships formed both in and before service:

Loud and hearty was the cheering when the two Scotch regiments united, and the friends, Munro and Hepburn, clasped hands. Not only had they been at college together, but they had...travelled in companionship on the continent for two or three years before taking service.<sup>98</sup>

Like Grimmelshausen before him, Henty drew on fact in presenting his characters, in this instance a real friendship between the leaders of two Scottish regiments in the war – Robert Munro and John Hepburn. Monro wrote in his memoirs of a long friendship between the two, describing ‘this kind of friendship, growne up with education, confirmed by familiarity, in frequenting the dangers of warre’.<sup>99</sup> The Englishman Sydnam Poyntz, who served as a soldier in the Thirty Years’ War under Mansfeld, wrote in his *Relation*, ‘Having understood that Captaine Sidnam was my Godfather, I made my self knowne unto hym’.<sup>100</sup> Thus, again, recent historical research into these aspects of the Thirty Years’ War are reflected in historical fiction based on it – with much of the fiction predating any scholarly attention from historians.

## V

Many fictional works set in the Thirty Years’ War employ characters who exist in the historical record, as we have seen with Grimmelshausen’s James Ramsay and Henty’s Monro and Hepburn. In both cases, the characterisation of these figures reflects what we know about them from historical evidence. Although Ramsay had strained relations with the German political authorities, Grimmelshausen’s favourable depiction of him is consolidated by historical evidence.<sup>101</sup> A contemporary chronicle, the *Hanauer Geschichtblätter*, praised Ramsay, concluding that ‘the city of Hanau has good reason to preserve the honourable memory of this officer with his remarkable sense of duty’, a view consolidated by Ramsay’s entry in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*.<sup>102</sup> Jane Stevenson’s depiction of Elizabeth of Bohemia reflects many aspects of her character that we know to be true: although she gave birth to thirteen children, she was not maternal and saw her



children as a source of worry rather than joy.<sup>103</sup> In *Tyll*, Elizabeth internally apologises to her second born son that ‘I was not a good mother to you...and I probably loved you scarcely as much as I should have’.<sup>104</sup> In Stevenson’s *The Winter Queen* (2001), Elizabeth is accurately depicted as being very concerned with her daughters making good marriages:

Her mind rushed optimistically over the many problems that lay in Charles Louis’s way, beginning with his uncle, and began to play with the idea of her daughters’ prospects. If all went well, and Charles Louis regained the Palatinate within a year or so, then his oldest sister would be perhaps twenty-two or three and Louise about twenty; a little elderly for royal brides, but not shamefully so.<sup>105</sup>

We know that Elizabeth was perceived as unorthodox, contributing to an unfavourable reception from her Bohemian subjects,<sup>106</sup> and in Stevenson’s novel she is depicted as such, for example she ‘rode astride’ rather than riding sidesaddle.<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth’s relationship with her husband Frederick is also accurately portrayed. Though the marriage was diplomatically conceived, Elizabeth and Frederick were in love. In *The Winter Queen*, Elizabeth proclaims that she ‘fell in love with the man I was to marry’,<sup>108</sup> and in *Tyll* she is described as being ‘fond of her poor king’, with Frederick ‘still lov[ing] her, just as she loved him’.<sup>109</sup> Indeed, we know that upon Frederick’s death in 1632, Elizabeth was distraught, writing to her brother Charles I that she was ‘the most wretched creature that ever lived in this world, and this I shall ever be, having lost the best friend that I ever had, in whom was all my delight’.<sup>110</sup>

Elsewhere, though, there is a difference between fictional character depiction and historians’ characterisation, both in terms of people’s actions and disposition. Though it has been said that in *The Death of Wallenstein* Schiller was ‘closer to his historical sources than in any other’ of his works,<sup>111</sup> Schiller’s depiction of individuals and relationships varies between accurate and fictional. The relationship of Wallenstein with his advisers – ignoring their plea for him to reconsider his plan and pursuing a route which would always end in disaster – complements Worthington’s historical analysis of him as an impetuous and headstrong general.<sup>112</sup> However, other relationships are not so accurately depicted. Schiller’s Gordon is a character with a strong sense of loyalty, who tries to convince Butler to remain loyal to Wallenstein. Schiller portrays Butler as the ring-leader and plotter in Wallenstein’s assassination, and the other characters, including Gordon, as being on the sidelines and withdrawn from the action. By contrast, the historical record sees all four assassins as having equal parts to play in the plan, with Gordon

playing more than one side in the conflict, with no true loyalty to either. While it was Butler who, according to an Imperial field-marshal, ‘will deal the blow, as he has had me assured through an infantry captain’,<sup>113</sup> Wallenstein’s biographer, Golo Mann, cites a letter from the commander of an Imperial regiment, Giulio Diodati, in which he claims that Gordon took ‘instructions’ from him, leaving Gordon ideally placed to fool Wallenstein into continuing with his plot, and the protagonist unaware of his impending assassination.<sup>114</sup>

Surviving historical evidence makes it difficult to ascertain whether Gordon and Butler played equal parts in the assassination. Moreover, it is impossible to accurately recreate these characters’ thoughts or motivations. As Robert Penn Warren writes, both fictional and historical characters are to some degree imagined.<sup>115</sup> What is clear is that Butler had to campaign for his rewards far more than the Scots involved. Worthington attributes this to the contributions made by Scots to the Habsburg service at various junctures in the wars, rather than an indication that the Scots were more influential than the Irishman Butler but, all the same, this counters Schiller’s portrayal of Butler as the ringleader.<sup>116</sup> Contemporary evidence sees the Scots as being the most instrumental – Turner in his memoirs states that:

In this yeare that the Emperors Generalissimo Wallenstein, intending to betray his master, familie and armie, [was put to] death by Gordon and Leslie at Egar in Bohemia... the actors were well rewarded by the Emperour, especiaillie Leslie.<sup>117</sup>

Though Schiller does not include Walter Leslie as a character, this is an artistic decision rather than a mistake – in his earlier *History of the Thirty Years’ War* (1790), Schiller had recognised Leslie’s involvement in the assassination plot and left out any mention of the fictional character of MacDonald.<sup>118</sup> Schiller’s downplaying of Leslie’s involvement can therefore be read as a deliberate attempt to lessen the credit given to the Scots over the assassination, in a bid to counter the balance by portraying the Irish Butler as the most influential character. Schiller does this, perhaps, to atone in some way for the fact that Butler had to work much harder than the Scots to gain his reward, despite playing an equally integral part in the plot; again reflecting Enlightenment ideas that ability, rather than birth, should be rewarded. This artistic decision had knock-on effects. In downplaying the involvement of the Scots in Wallenstein’s death, Schiller necessarily omits to mention the prowess of the Scots as soldiers, something that we see conveyed in many other works, as discussed above. Similarly in Henry Glapthorne’s *The Tragedy of Albertus Wallenstein* (1639), neither Gordon or Leslie are portrayed in a particularly flattering light,<sup>119</sup> perhaps because, as a play initially

produced at London’s The Globe, Glapthorne was wary of presenting the Scots as heroic. Thus, Glapthorne’s characterisation reflects a context of continuing hostilities over the Union of 1603 and the proposed Union of Parliaments, rather than serving as an accurate representation of events.

## VI

The Thirty Years’ War has been depicted in various forms of historical fiction since the seventeenth century. Henty portrays the war from a military point of view and Schiller focuses on a specific event, while Grimmelshausen’s and Kehlmann’s accounts are the most emotive, if also the most shocking. Contemporary poems appear at both extremes – those lamenting the damage caused by the wars, and those intended to recruit participants to the conflict – and songs range from battlefield marches to child’s ditties, presenting both positive and negative experiences of the war.

In comparing depictions of the Thirty Years’ War in literature to those found in contemporary historical evidence and in historians’ analyses of the conflict, several conclusions can be drawn. There are themes explored by historians – such as the effect of the war on population, the economy, and the plague – which do not feature prominently in fictions. Instead, historical fictions tend to focus on personal relationships and on individual experiences of the conflict, for their own part portraying aspects of the Thirty Years’ War that histories alone do not illuminate. The omission of these themes from academic histories is partly due to a lack of surviving empirical evidence: as noted above, James Spens’s letters, unique for their insight into the experience of soldiers fighting in this conflict, have survived only accidentally.<sup>120</sup> Works of fiction like *Simplicissimus* add to surviving sources and afford us a greater understanding of the impact of the Thirty Years’ War on both the military and civilian populations. Further, historical fictions can ‘provide an opportunity to see the weaknesses’ of these histories.<sup>121</sup>

In order to benefit from the wealth of material offered by historical fictions, scholars must dispense with the still widespread view of this genre as necessarily less reliable than empirical historical evidence. A common criticism of historical fiction is its ‘inaccuracies’, but historians, just like literary authors, ‘have the problem of what to leave out’,<sup>122</sup> and frequently work with incomplete or untrustworthy source material. We are schooled to exercise caution in using such evidence, yet many continue to be reluctant to apply the same critical skills to historical fictions. As Jerome de Groot has suggested, ‘if we are attentive to the peculiarities of historical fictions we

might see that they are presenting a version of history that is as compelling, and as effective, as those written by historians’.<sup>123</sup> As we have seen through this analysis of views of the Thirty Years’ War, fictions frequently reflect aspects of history that academic histories have omitted. Literary representations, as seen in *Simplicissimus*, can in fact be more sympathetic to the lived, individual experience than academic historical analysis.

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1 I would like to thank Professor Mark Towsey and Professor Steve Murdoch for their comments on previous drafts of this article, Professor Steve Murdoch and Mr Alex Blank for providing several references cited, and the two anonymous reviewers for *Literature & History* for their constructive feedback on the original submission.

2 H. Langer, *Thirty Years’ War* (Dorset, 1978), p. 218.

3 L. Tatlock, foreword to J. Osborne’s translation of *Simplicissimus* (Tennessee, 2008), p. vii. This common practice is described by Daniel Kehlmann in *Tyll* (2020), in which the fat count stole others’ work, in this case from *Simplicissimus*: ‘in a popular novel he found a description he liked, and when people urged him to recount the last battle of the great German war, he told them what he had read in Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicissimus*. It didn’t quite fit, because that passage was about the Battle of Wittstock, but it didn’t bother anyone, no one ever raised any questions. What the fat count could not have known, however, was that Grimmelshausen, though he did experience the Battle of Wittstock firsthand, had himself been unable to describe it and instead had stolen the sentences of an English novel translated by Martin Opitz, the author of which had never witnessed a battle in his life’: *Tyll*, p. 161.

4 B. Fay, ‘Introduction: Unconventional History’, *History and Theory* 41.4 (2002), p. 1.

5 T. Litt, ‘Against Historical Fiction’, *Irish Pages* 5.1, Language and Languages (2008), p. 111.

6 M. Oja, ‘Fictional History and Historical Fiction: Solzhenitsyn and Kis as Exemplars’, *History and Theory* 27.2 (1988), pp. 116, 119, 121.

7 J. de Groot, ‘Invitation to Historians’, *Rethinking History* 18.4 (2014), pp. 601-2.

8 J. Hower, “All good stories”: Historical fiction in pedagogy, theory, and scholarship’, *Rethinking History* 22 (2018) pp. 5-6.

9 Hower, “All good stories”, p. 8.

10 B. Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (London 2009), p. 195.

11 D. Kelley and D. Harris Sacks, ‘Introduction’ to D. Kelley and D. Harris Sacks (eds.), *The Historical Imagination in early modern Britain: History, Rhetoric and Fiction, 1500-1800* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 1; see also Hsu-Ming Two, ‘Historical Fiction and Fictions of History’, *Rethinking History* 15.2 (2011), p. 301.

12 R. Slotkin, ‘Fiction for the purposes of History’. *Rethinking History* 9.2/3 (2005), p. 222.

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15 J. de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Oxford, 2010), p. 102.

16 S. Pinto, ‘Emotional Histories and Historical Emotions: Looking at the past in Historical Novels’, *Rethinking History* 14.2 (2010), p. 200, citing R. Rosenstone, ‘Does a Filmic Writing of History Exist?’, *History and Theory* 41 (2002), p. 143.

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18 A. Grosjean and S. Murdoch, *Alexander Leslie and the Scottish Generals of the Thirty Years’ War, 1618-1648* (London, 2014); D. Worthington, *Scots in Habsburg Service* (Leiden, 2003).

19 J. Grimmelshausen, *Simplicissimus (1668)*, trans. M. Mitchell (Cambridge, 1999), V.8; p. 382.

20 *Simplicissimus*, V.20, p. 418

21 *Tyll*, p. 218.

22 Langer, *Thirty Years’ War*, p. 218.

23 Seaton to Marradas, November 25th 1621, translated in J. Polišenský, *Tragic Triangle* (Prague 1991), p. 245.

24 J. Stevenson, *The Winter Queen* (London, 2001), pp. 210, 233, 270.

25 G. A. Henty, *The Lion of the North (1886)*, (Ohio, 1999), p. 155.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 40, 194, 98.

27 Brockington, *Expedition*, p. 196; see also p. 49.

28 W. Lithgow, *Rare Adventures and Painefull Peregrinations* (Glasgow, 1906), p. 427, 97.

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- 29 Anon., *A most true Relation of the late Proceedings in Bohemia, Germany and Hungaria* (Dort, 1620). P. 10.
- 30 C. Oman, *Elizabeth of Bohemia* (London, 1964), p. 53; J. Ross, *The Winter Queen* (London, 1979) p. 1; A. Buchan, *A Stuart Portrait* (London, 1934), p. 18-9; M. Green, *Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia* (London, 1909), p. vii.
- 31 *The Winter Queen*. pp. 180, 189, 287; Tyll, pp. 244, 313, 61.
- 32 *Musa Latina Aberdonensis*, I.VIII, *The Nymph of the Necker to the Heroes of England*, pp. 76-8.
- 33 *Ibid.*, I.XXXVI, *Gradulatory Poem to Speed on his way with Good Wisbes the High and mighty Prince Ludwig, Count Palatine, Duke of Bavaria* etc, p. 225.
- 34 *Ibid.*, I.VI, *Austria to Bohemia*, p. 53; I.VIII, *The Nymph of the Necker to the Heroes of England*, p. 78.
- 35 A. Grosjean, S. Murdoch and S. Talbott, ‘Drummer Major Spens: letters from a common soldier abroad, 1617-1632’, *Northern Studies*, 47 (2018), p. 76.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 78; letter on pp. 90-1.
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- 38 *The Lion of the North*. p. 26
- 39 W. Brockington (ed.), *Monro, His Expedition with the Worthy Scots Regiment called Mac-Keys* (London, 1999), p. xix.
- 40 Grosjean, Murdoch and Talbott, ‘Drummer Major Spens’, pp. 78-9; letter on pp. 99-100.
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- 42 J. Turner, *Memoirs of his Life and Times* (Edinburgh, 1829), p. 14.
- 43 Langer, *Thirty Years’ War*, p. 101.
- 44 Tyll, p. 301.
- 45 *The Lion of the North*, p. 17.
- 46 O. Dallas, *A Ragged Renown* (London, 1934), p. 87.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 221-2.
- 48 Tyll, p. 143.
- 49 Tyll, p. 296.
- 50 Schiller, *The Death Of Wallenstein*, V.ii.
- 51 Brian McNeill: The Battlefield Band, *The Rovin’ Dies Hard*.
- 52 Thanks to Professor Steve Murdoch for alerting me to this song and its significance.
- 53 Tyll, p. 8.
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- 55 Langer, *Thirty Years’ War*, p. 223.
- 56 H. Jessen (ed.), *Der Dreissigjährige Krieg*, 2nd ed., (Düsseldorf, 1964), p. 377, cited in G. Benecke, *Germany in the Thirty Years War* (London, 1978), p. 72.
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- 58 In J. Peters (ed.), *Ein Söldnerleben aus dem Dreissigjährigen Krieg*, (Berlin, 1993), p. 103, cited in P. Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: A Sourcebook*, (Basingstoke, 2010), p. 254.
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- 60 de Groot, *Historical Novel*, p. 102.
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- 63 *Ibid.*, I.16, p 52, see also I.17.
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81 *Ibid.*, chapter 5.

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96 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

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108 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

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