

In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, David Lowenthal remarks, 'The contingent and discontinuous facts of the past become intelligible only when woven together as stories. Even the most empirical chroniclers invent narrative structures to give shape to time.'¹ Historians must use their imagination to fill in the gaps of available information, and organize and sequence events to tell the story of the past. Historical fiction writers use the same narrative conventions, but add fictitious characters, plots and events which can provide new perspectives on source material. This fictitious material is not fraudulent, not meant to deceive the reader, but used to craft a story. Historical fiction is an effective tool to provide additional voices, detail, and differing perspectives to create a well-rounded pool of cultural history.²

Author Bernard Cornwell's thirteen novel series *The Last Kingdom* tells a story of the unification of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of Wessex, Mercia, East Anglia, and Northumbria in the ninth and tenth centuries from the point of view of a fictitious protagonist, Uhtred of Bebbanburg. The narrative unfolds among the lives of the real historical figures and events that led to the creation of the united Anglo-Saxon kingdom of England. Set primarily within the court of King Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons 871 to 886 and King of the Anglo-Saxons 886-899, and his descendants, Cornwell uses facts from primary sources to tell his tale. The resulting novels provide a new plausible narrative of the creation of England from the point of view of an Anglo-Saxon outsider.

Cornwell relied on two major sources for his novels: *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and *The Life of King Alfred*.³ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is a collection of annals originally compiled by King Alfred in 890, to record the history of the Anglo-Saxons. It is the primary source of

¹ David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985) <<http://archive.org/details/pastisforeigncou0000lowe>>, p. 218.

² Karen Halttunen, 'Cultural History and the Challenge of Narrativity', in *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. by Lynn Hunt and Victoria E. Bonnell (University of California Press, 1999), p. 166.

³ Bernard Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, 1 (HarperCollins, 2005), p. 345.

available information about Anglo-Saxon England. However, it is largely a listing of facts and event and does not explain what caused or what linked the events that occurred.⁴ In interviews, Cornwell states his motivation for creating the series was to provide a cohesive origin story for England, which he believed was not effectively provided widely through education. The author, who studied history at University College London, stated in a 2020 interview:

I think I got a very good education in history when I grew up in England, but nobody ever told me this. Primary school sort of taught me about King Alfred, but basically all you're told is that he was a very bad baker. Somehow we've sort of forgotten the Anglo-Saxon period.⁵

Cornwell uses historical data to anchor his story firmly in the accepted environment of the past but creates a fictional character and narrative to witness and provide meaning to the events.

National origin stories help people understand how their current culture came into existence. They allow individuals and groups to form and express their identities.⁶ Bernard Cornwell's personal characteristics influenced the traits of the protagonist he used to tell his story. Cornwell's identity was greatly influenced by his family and upbringing. He was born in London in 1944, the son of an English mother and a Canadian airman, but was adopted and raised by a Christian fundamentalist family belonging to the Peculiar People sect in Essex. The sect did not allow the use of alcohol or tobacco, did not allow watching television or theatre and disapproved of military service. Cornwell did not follow his adoptive parents' beliefs and as an adult he embraced all the things they eschewed. He became an atheist, a smoker, and a drinker. He studied history and became fascinated by military service and war.

⁴ 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle', trans. by J. Ingram and J.A. Giles, *Project Gutenberg*, 1 January 2021 <<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/657/pg657-images.html>>.

⁵ Alison Flood, 'Bernard Cornwell: "I Play Merry Hell with History, I Admit It"', *The Guardian*, 15 October 2020, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/oct/15/bernard-cornwell-history-uhthred-sharpe-war-lord>>.

⁶ Wei Zheng, Alyson Meister, and Barker Caza, 'The Stories That Make Us: Leaders' Origin Stories and Temporal Identity Work', *Human Relations*, 74.8 (2021), pp. 1178–1179.

He began his professional life as a television producer. As he stated in a 2021 interview, 'In many ways, the things they disapproved of became my wish list.'⁷

In 1979, Cornwell moved to the United States and became an author of historical fiction. Living in a society with a definitive origin story, he developed a desire to write an origin story for his home country. The idea for *The Last Kingdom* series developed upon his introduction to his Canadian birth father in the 1990's. His father, whose surname was Oughtred, shared their family tree which traced their ancestry back to seventh century Northumbria.

I saw this name Uhtred. He said they lived at Bamburgh castle. Once I realised I was descended from this man who was the Lord of Bebbanburg, that was it. I had to write a book about the creation of England.⁸

Cornwell created a fictionalized version of his ancestor and imbued him with his own values and beliefs by creating an Anglo-Saxon protagonist who rejects the Christian culture of his people and embraces the pagan, free-spirited warrior culture of the Vikings (in the series, people we now include under the umbrella 'Viking' are specifically referred to as Danes). Through Uhtred, Cornwell retrospectively tells the story through his perspective and with his judgement, narrating a new point of view and interpretation of events that led to the creation of England.

King Alfred is a main character in the series, and appears in the first six novels. Although Cornwell's portrayal of King Alfred is consistent with historical sources, his interpretation of the sovereign's character traits differs widely from *The Life of King Alfred*, the contemporary Latin biography. Written in 893 by Welsh born Bishop Asser, the work is the best resource for information about King Alfred. The *Life of King Alfred* is based largely on the information provided by *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. In addition, Asser served in the king's court for

⁷ Anne Diamond and Bernard Cornwell, 'Anne Diamond Interviews Author Bernard Cornwell, OBE', *Viking TV*, 15 April 2021 <<https://viking.tv/tv/this-week-on-viking-tv/thursdays/anne-diamond-interviews-author-bernard-cornwell-obe>>.

⁸ Flood, 'Bernard Cornwell'.

several years, as a teacher and a clergyman. Asser worked closely with Alfred as a fellow Christian and scholar and had the opportunity to observe him and converse with him for several months annually between 886 and the completion of the biography. Yet Asser is an unreliable narrator. *The Life of King Alfred* is the work of a man who knew the king well yet it is overtly flattering of the king and his achievements, possibly due to being commissioned by King Alfred himself. The result is a biography that lacks objectivity and may stray into misrepresentation of the King.⁹ As Jenkins states in *Re-Thinking History*, 'historians do not usually see themselves as writers of fiction, but inadvertently they may be.'¹⁰ Like *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, Asser's work also lacks detail explaining how and why events occurred. Cornwell provides rich detail in his imaginative story that focuses on the and fictional actors and actions which drove the real events. Through *The Last Kingdom* we see an alternative perspective, and maybe no more fictitious, to Asser's. Cornwell shows us Alfred through Uhtred's lens, which is that of a pagan and a warrior, but that does not necessarily diminish its value as an alternative voice to describe King Alfred.

To establish Uhtred's world view and his proximity within the Anglo-Saxon royal court, Cornwell imagined a character who is an Anglo-Saxon aristocrat with Danish values. Uhtred is born an Anglo-Saxon Christian in Northumbria. He is the son and heir of the Earl of Bebbanburg. As a young boy he witnesses his father's death during a battle with Danish invaders. Following the battle, Uhtred's Uncle seizes the Earldom of Bebbanburg and a threatened Uhtred is adopted into a Danish family. He is raised as a pagan and taught to worship the Norse gods. He learns that worship for the Danes is tied to feasting and drinking and sacrifice, that they celebrate the warrior ethos and that reputation is valued above all else. Though he loves his new family and embraces the Norse culture, Uhtred is driven to reclaim his place as Earl of Bebbanburg and is often conflicted about his own identity and his

⁹ Wormald, Patrick, 'Alfred [Ælfred] (848/9–899), King of the West Saxons and of the Anglo-Saxons', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 3 April 2025
<<https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-183>>.

¹⁰ Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (Routledge, 1991).

place in a world where Danes want to conquer all Anglo-Saxon lands. His Danish father tells him he must make his own way in life by learning to fight for what he wants. Uhtred is an experienced young warrior eager to prove himself as a swordsman and yearning to reclaim his birthright when he enters service with King Alfred in 873.¹¹

In its historical context, the reign of King Alfred was greatly influenced by the invasion of Viking raiders. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* shows that Viking incursion in southern England increased through the 830's and by the 850's the Vikings were staying in England year-round. When King Alfred took the throne in 871, Wessex was fighting Viking invaders. Unable to defeat the Vikings, King Alfred made peace to gain their withdrawal from the kingdom.¹² However, the Vikings withdrawal from Wessex territory was not King Alfred's only goal in his fight. King Alfred deeply believed in the wisdom of Christian ideals, that Christianity was the one true religion, and that adhering to Christian teaching would assure his victory over the Vikings. He believed peace would be assured between people who shared in the Christian faith. For lasting peace, King Alfred wished to convert the pagans to Christianity.¹³

In *The Last Kingdom*, King Alfred's desire to defeat the Danes and their pagan religion is at the heart of his relationship with Uhtred. By the time the two men meet in 873, Uhtred is betrayed and untrusted by the Danes and must seek safety among the Anglo-Saxons. King Alfred uses this situation to bond Uhtred to his military service for a year. This establishes their symbiotic relationship, in which King Alfred needs Uhtred to help defeat the Danes and Uhtred needs the King's patronage. The story is told through the development of their relationship during the historical events that occur until the King's death in 899.¹⁴ The relationship is representational of King Alfred's struggles. His fight against the Danes is also the fight against Uhtred's pagan beliefs, his quest to unify the Anglo-Saxons is also the

¹¹ Bernard Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, 1 (HarperCollins, 2005) pp. 43-228.

¹² Ingram and Giles, 'Anglo-Saxon Chronicle'.

¹³ Julia Schich, 'King Alfred's New Concept of Society' (Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 2015) <https://www.academia.edu/22347735/King_Alfred_s_new_concept_of_society>, pp. 4-16.

¹⁴ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, pp. 228-233.

attempt to gain Uhtred's freely given fealty. Cornwell uses the animosity between the two men to show King Alfred through a more critical eye than offered by Asser.

Additionally, Cornwell's stated intention in creating the series is to establish an origin story for the English people. Asser, living contemporarily with King Alfred, could not know that the unification of Anglo-Saxon English people that began with the Treaty of Wedmore in 886 would lead to the unification of all people living in what we now call England.¹⁵ Or that pagan people who called themselves Danes in the late ninth century would become Christian and consider themselves English less than a century later. Asser's biography stressed the king's and his ancestors' achievements fighting the invading Vikings, which is understandable, as preventing the fall of Wessex and later all Anglo-Saxon held territory was King Alfred's primary focus. With the advantage of knowledge of the events that were to follow, Cornwell can connect the actions of King Alfred's reign to the ultimate unification of the nation. With this knowledge, Cornwell's narration shows King Alfred equally concerned with his sole, underlying goal of unifying a Christian Anglo-Saxon nation under one king.

The first book of the series, also titled *The Last Kingdom*, opens with a prologue narrated by an elderly Uhtred. He sets the tone of the novel by stating of King Alfred, 'He was my king and all that I have I owe to him. The food that I eat, the hall where I live, and the swords of my men, all came from Alfred my king, who hated me.'¹⁶ The animosity between the two main characters of the series is not only interpersonal tension but reflects the tension between Danes and Anglo-Saxons. The relationship between King Alfred and Uhtred is built on distrust but contains mutual admiration, and the admiration allows the relationship to continue throughout the story.

¹⁵ Asser's *Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, trans. by Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (Penguin, 1983), p 29.

¹⁶ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, p.15.

As Uhtred shares his memories in the story, he first hears of Alfred of Wessex from his Danish father Ragner, who calls Alfred a weak man. The reason for this characterisation, Ragner explains, is that Alfred spends half his time rutting girls and the other half praying to his god to forgive him. 'How,' Ragner asks, 'can a god disapprove of a good hump?'¹⁷ Here Cornwell is favorably showing not only the sexual attitudes of the pagan Danes of the ninth century, but the sexual attitudes of Western Europe and the United States in the twenty first century, the setting in which he created the novel. Alternately, Asser describes the same behavior by a young King Alfred through the conventions of ninth century Christianity. Asser states that King Alfred, unable to resist his carnal desires, would secretly pray to God to afflict him with an illness to help him strengthen his resolve to resist his urges.¹⁸ Uhtred then first meets Alfred before he becomes king, when he stumbles upon the man kneeling, sobbing, beating his chest with his fists, and praying, 'spare me, I am a sinner.'¹⁹ Cornwell captures Alfred in prayer using unflattering and unmasculine imagery, and Uhtred his protagonist considers Alfred a pious weakling. Although Alfred's behavior is the same in both narratives, the writers' response to it is completely different though correct from their respective perspectives. Asser's narrative reflects how he wishes his contemporaries will see Alfred's behavior and Cornwell's narrative reflects his own judgement through Uhtred.

Cornwell also judges the military victories over the Danes and the conversion of pagan invaders in a different way than Asser. Asser states King Alfred's achieved victory at the Battle of Edington in 878 as God's will. He recounts that the Vikings were terrified and in despair at the defeat and that Guthrum and thirty of his men accepted Christian baptism to ensure peace. He did not write a word about the men who fought the battle.²⁰ Cornwell places the victory in the hands of the men who fought in the battle, and emphasizes that Uhtred the pagan played the most important role in the achieving the victory. He does this by sending one of Alfred's priests, Father Pyrlig, to Uhtred on the eve of the battle, with a

¹⁷ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, p. 68.

¹⁸ Keynes and Lapidge, *Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, p.116.

¹⁹ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, p. 90.

²⁰ Keynes and Lapidge, *Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, p.109.

request that Uhtred embrace Christianity. King Alfred believes he will not receive God's blessing for victory if Uhtred remains a pagan. Cornwall shows his disagreement with the King's belief through the actions of Father Pyrlig in his second book of the series, titled *The Pale Horseman*. Father Pyrlig, a former soldier himself, confides to Uhtred that he misses his former life as a warrior, and states:

This isn't just a war over land, it's a war about God. And Alfred, poor man, is Christ's servant, so he will do all he can for his master and that means trying to turn you into a pious example of Christian humility.²¹

The priest shows pity for King Alfred's mistaken faith that God has a direct hand in the outcome of the battle. He concludes their conversation by stating, 'Don't worry, I'm not going to talk Christ into you, whatever the king wants.'²²

Cornwell's narrative continues to describe the effort it took Uhtred and Father Pyrlig to locate the enemy Danes prior to the battle. It explains the treachery of Anglo-Saxons who allied themselves with the Danes against King Alfred. It includes a conversation between the two men and King Alfred the night before the battle.

King Alfred: I spoke to the army tonight.

Uhtred: I heard you did, lord.

King Alfred: What did you hear?

Uhtred: That you preached to them, lord.

King Alfred: What do they want to hear?

Father Pyrlig: They want to hear that you are ready to die for them.

King Alfred: Die?

²¹ Bernard Cornwell, *The Pale Horseman*, The Last Kingdom, 2 (HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 399-400.

²² Cornwell, *The Pale Horseman*, p. 400.

Father Pyrlig: Men follow, kings lead. They don't care about Saint Augustine...²³

Cornwell's narrative does not just tell the reader what he wants to convey, he shows the reader and engages them emotionally. He effectively lets the reader make up their own mind about the significance of the event and the role people played, though the ultimate outcome of the battle is the same as in Asser's biography. Cornwell describes the preparation for and the events of the Battle of Edington in detail over the following 59 pages.²⁴ Neither Asser's account or *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* give any detail of the battle or explain how King Alfred defeated the Danes. Cornwell's account focuses on the actions of men and discounts the influence of the Christian God or pagan gods on the outcome. Guthrum's baptism is mentioned only in the 'Historical Note' chapter at the end of book three.²⁵ Yet both accounts convey the importance of the victory, its location and date, and the outcome for the Danes.

Asser's biography shares King Alfred's love of learning by listing his many accomplishments. He first explains how King Alfred arranged and oversaw the education of his children. He then lists the many duties King Alfred pursued, to include directing the government, hunting, designing, reading, and listening to Mass several times a day. Asser appears most impressed writing that King Alfred sought further education in the liberal arts and brought learned men from within and outside his kingdom to his court to instruct, as he did Asser himself.²⁶

Cornwell does not list King Alfred's accomplishments, but shows the reader through the observations of his characters. In book one, when first speaking with Uhtred, he asks him if he can read. Uhtred observes King Alfred is pleased to learn he can, then hears the priest named Beocca praise Alfred's scholarship in reading and in writing. In other scenes, King Alfred is seen writing down the words spoken during negotiations, working among scrolls

²³ Cornwell, *The Pale Horseman*, p. 414.

²⁴ Cornwell, *The Pale Horseman*, pp. 414-473.

²⁵ Bernard Cornwell, *The Lords of the North, The Last Kingdom*, 3 (HarperCollins, 2007) p.426.

²⁶ Keynes and Lapidge, *Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, pp. 117-124.

with his hands covered in ink, and reading. King Alfred himself gives reason for the importance of literacy when he states, 'A soldier who reads is a soldier who can read orders, a soldier who will know what his king wants. Suppose you are in Northumbria, Uhtred, and I am in Wessex. How else will you know my will?'²⁷

With that question, Cornwell deftly emphasises the main theme of the series, which is King Alfred's desire to unite the Anglo-Saxons of England into one nation. In the moment, Uhtred is surprised by what he hears, as King Alfred only holds rule over Wessex at the time. But the protagonist editorializes in the story and makes a statement as an older man, remembering that although unknown to his younger self, at that moment King Alfred was already thinking of a time when there would be one kingdom under one English king.²⁸ As the series progresses, King Alfred reveals his dream of a united England more often and to more people. In book four, *Sword Song*, he shares his dream with the leaders of Mercia, and it is then that Uhtred realizes King Alfred's dream is to use his army to take the other three kingdoms and that Uhtred would be needed to lead the effort.²⁹ Uhtred is swept into the events that eventually, after King Alfred's death and under the reign of his grandson King Aethelstan, unite England.

Asser's biography of King Alfred ends prior to the death of the King, but the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle first published in 890 continued to be updated for centuries.³⁰ The fifth book of the series, *The Burning Land*, opens with an older Uhtred remembering a recent visit to a local monastery. While visiting the scriptorium, Uhtred witnesses a scribe writing a Mercian annal entry for the year 892. The entry recounts how a Mercian leader defeated the Danes in battle with the help of God. After reading the entry, Uhtred responds by snarling, 'God? It was with my help! I fought that battle, not Aethelred!'³¹ Cornwell's narrative displays the

²⁷ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, pp. 105-193.

²⁸ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, p. 193.

²⁹ Bernard Cornwell, *Sword Song*, The Last Kingdom, 4 (HarperCollins, 2008), p. 300.

³⁰ Keynes and Lapidge, *Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*.

³¹ Bernard Cornwell, *The Burning Land*, The Last Kingdom, 5 (HarperCollins, 2010), p. 19.

problem with primary source material, in that its truthfulness or objectivity is difficult to determine. As stated in the book *Reading Primary Sources*, 'it should not be forgotten that the idea of 'facts' to be found in archival sources is in itself fictitious, since the management and storage of information in archives have an important bearing on the selection of those texts which actually come under the scrutiny of the historian.'³² Cornwell uses Uhtred to show that even documents created within living memory of an event cannot always be relied upon to contain facts, as the intent of the patron or author may affect the contents of the document. It is realistic to think the information in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* was selected to at the very least show the kingdoms and their accomplishments in the best light and mention the individuals with the most influence and power over the creation of the annals.

Although he has a degree in history, he does not consider himself a historian. He considers himself a novelist and in interviews stated the first responsibility of a historical fiction writer is to entertain. That does not diminish the importance of research to create historical fiction. 'The more research a novelist does then the greater the chance that his guesses are accurate and the more detail he amasses of the period then the greater the authenticity.'³³ Like a historian, the author uses primary sources and academic research to prepare for writing his novels, and visits sites that are included in the stories. As an author of fiction though, he freely discloses when he uses his imagination to fill in gaps of information not provided by sources or when the changing of timelines or events is necessary to move the story line forward. Acknowledging that source material may already contain fabrications, the validity of historical fiction to tell a story of the past through educated guessing increases. More importantly, the importance of entertainment value in historical fiction contributes to its readability. Cornwell's series provides detailed stories of everyday life that are relatable on an emotional level to the reader, thus creating a narrative that feels real to the reader.

³² *Reading Primary Sources*, ed. by Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, Second (Routledge), p.17.

³³ C. J. Adrien, 'How Historical Is Historical Fiction? An Interview with Bernard Cornwell', 20 March 2024 <<https://www.cjadrien.com/p/bernard-cornwell-historical-fiction>>.

Cornwell uses several tools to tell a realistic and entertaining story. Throughout the series, he uses spelling for place names as they appear in the Oxford Dictionary of English Place Names for the late ninth and early tenth century.³⁴ He uses Old English and Danish names for his fictional characters and Old English and Danish words when relevant to the story, however his language is straightforward and clear. His level of descriptive detail engages the reader's senses to the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the era. Several times in the series, the protagonist Uhtred states his memory of events and situations may be incorrect, a tool to give overall credibility to a story with probable errors.

Cornwell ends each novel in the series with a chapter titled 'Historical Note.' The chapter provides the author's first-person reflection on his research, what is historically accurate within the novel and what is invented for the story. As he stated in an interview, Cornwell believes the most important part of researching a novel is knowing what historical information is irrelevant to telling the story. His goal is to give the reader a compelling story true to the past as far as possible.³⁵ The result of his creativity is a series of novels, printed in multiple languages available throughout the world, and providing the origin story of England to an audience outside of academia. The series was also developed into a television series in 2015. The television series stayed accurate to the novels by taking much of its dialogue and scenes directly from the written series, and when the visual medium required the story to be altered, it stayed authentic to its source material by depicting the same or similar outcome for all important plot points. The television series enabled the story to reach a wider audience.

Asser's biography of King Alfred is considered a primary historical source, and Cornwell's work is historical fiction, but as Hilary Mantel once stated:

³⁴ Cornwell, *The Last Kingdom*, p.8.

³⁵ Adrien, 'How Historical Is Historical Fiction?'

The most scrupulous historian is an unreliable narrator; he brings to the enterprise the biases of his training and the vagaries of his personal temperament, and he is often obliged, in order to make his name, to murder his forefathers by coming up with a different take on events from the one that held sway when he himself learned the discipline; he must make the old new, because his department's academic standing depends on it. Once this is understood, the trade of the historical novelist doesn't seem so reprehensible or dubious; the only requirement is for conjecture to be plausible and grounded in the best facts one can get.³⁶

The past is gone and can only be brought back through media. Historians and writers both must make up all its descriptive categories to sequence events and show cause and effect.³⁷ Historical fiction can create a valuable study of the past through the well-researched production of work that explains people and events with contemporary sensibilities, voices, and values. By presenting the historical events through a fictional plot, Cornwell provides an imagined but fact-based narrative that is a valuable addition to the body of work about King Alfred and the origin of England.

³⁶ Hilary Mantel, 'Booker Winner Hilary Mantel on Dealing with History in Fiction', *The Guardian*, 16 October 2009, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/17/hilary-mantel-author-booker>>.

³⁷ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p.10.

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