

## English 6450: Historical Novels, Novel Histories

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### Course Description

Just as Napoleon is about to mount his fateful campaign in Belgium, Thackeray pauses his 1848 novel, *Vanity Fair*, to address those readers “who like to lay down the History-book, and to speculate upon what MIGHT have happened in the world, but for the fatal occurrence of what actually did take place.” In this course, we’ll consider the ways in which late Romantic and Victorian literature transformed history into a space for such “speculation.” Through self-reflexive narration, experiments in temporality and causality, and counterfactual discourse, these texts revealed that the purpose of historical writing wasn’t to review a sedimented set of facts, but to analyze our assumptions about causality and closure. Less invested in “accuracy” than we might imagine, these works often adopted an experimental approach to the writing of history at a time when traditional historical narratives (military, imperial, and personal) were growing in popularity, and new genres (evolutionary and geological) were emerging. How did these works confront and grapple with the interrelations among determinism, free will, and contingency? Why were re-creations of the past, in the form of historical fictions, monumental surveys, and immersive displays, so popular during this period? How might we interpret historically based literary works with relation to the contemporaneous enthusiasm for re-enactments, the installation of life-size dinosaur models in urban parks, or living displays of Indian workers performing traditional forms of labour?

Our readings will include selected major works by Scott, Dickens, Eliot, and others, which we will supplement with a range of recent critical and theoretical scholarship. While our primary focus will be on the historical novel, we will also examine the period’s historical and historicizing impulse as a broader cultural phenomenon, as expressed in its many popular histories, exhibitions and museums, and geological and archaeological writings.

### Evaluation

- 25% One oral seminar presentation (approximately 20-25 minutes)
- 55% Final essay (approximately 4500 words)
- 10% Active, informed participation
- 10% One short bibliographic essay (approximately 1200-1500 words) on an assigned text

### Readings (tentative)

Scott, *Waverley*  
Hogg, *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*  
Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (selections)  
Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (selections)  
Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*  
Eliot, *Middlemarch*  
Birdwood, *The Arts of India* (selections)

+ a selection of critical and historical works by Svetlana Boym, Ian Duncan, Catherine Gallagher, Saloni Mathur, Ralph O’Connor, Katie Trumpener, Hayden White, and others