



The Historical Novel in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Representations of Reality in History and Fiction

Brian Hamnett

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Even at the height of its popularity in the early nineteenth century the historical novel faced criticism at many levels. After its predominance in the 1810s and 1820s writers and historians shunned it as a travesty of their respective disciplines. Even so, the historical novel has frequently attracted a wide-ranging public right up to the present day. Brian Hamnett examines key novels, by authors including Scott, Balzac, Manzoni, Dickens, Eliot, Flaubert, Fontane, Galdos, and Tolstoy, revealing the contradictions inherent in this form of fiction and exposing the challenges writers faced in attempting to represent a reality that linked past and present. He argues that the historical novel in the nineteenth century was a common European phenomenon with considerable interconnection of themes and periods. Accordingly, the book ranges from the British Isles and France through the Germanic territories, Italy and Spain, to the Russian Empire, identifying the different objectives and phases of the historical novel. Although historical novels did appear in the two previous centuries, the form came to maturity in the nineteenth century, a consequence of the developing nature of history as a discipline distinct from literature and philosophy, and the increasing primacy of the novel for writers and the reading public. Yet, the frontiers between history and literature remained blurred, and the two disciplines continued to influence one another as each sought a faithful representation of human experience.

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