

Men of Iron Short Guide

Men of Iron by Howard Pyle

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Overview

Men of Iron tells the story of Myles Falworth's maturation from rough-and-tumble boyhood through reckless, high-spirited adolescence to responsible manhood. The novel celebrates boyhood, with its youthful high jinks and scrapes with authority, its fierce loyalties and bitter rivalries, its hero worship, its secret societies and hide-outs. In this action-filled, fast-paced narrative, Myles achieves maturity only after he learns to channel his abundant youthful energies towards socially constructive ends and to employ his bravery, physical strength, and mental agility in a worthy cause. Myles's story is the story of every young person: his success in negotiating the formidable obstacles and trials that he must confront assures young readers that if they face their trials with the necessary courage and determination, they, too, can carve for themselves comfortable places in the adult world, where they can live productive and satisfying lives.

The novel also offers a colorful and engaging historical account of the accession of Henry IV to the English throne and the attendant social and political changes in fifteenth-century France and England. Pyle is especially adroit at providing information concerning the elaborate customs, ceremonies, weapons, and protocols supporting late-medieval knighthood.

Finally, Men of Iron is a classic adventure story, brimming with episodes of danger, intrigue, and battle, and informed with youthful energy and high spirits. It makes for exciting and informative reading.



About the Author

Howard Pyle was born in Wilmington, Delaware, on March 5, 1853. Showing considerable artistic ability at a young age, he was allowed to leave school at sixteen to pursue private art studies in Philadelphia. He placed his first illustrated article in Scribner's magazine in 1876, and, encouraged by this early success, moved to New York City to study and work. There Pyle vacillated between careers in art and in literature, eventually solving his dilemma by becoming both an illustrator and a writer. After establishing himself with Harpers, Scribner's and other major publishing houses during his three years in New York, Pyle returned to Wilmington in 1879, where he lived—a devoted family man and industrious artist, teacher, and writer—until the year before his death in 1911. These thirty years saw a remarkable outpouring of illustrations, articles, and books. His works in prose and pictures concerning colonial America helped a nation torn apart by civil war to rediscover its common roots, and his illustrations for the historical works of Woodrow Wilson and Henry Cabot Lodge provided a vision of early American costume, character, and events. Pyle's keen interest in history also manifested itself in works on piracy and on medieval life. In addition, he wrote several adult romances, thrillers, and tales of adventure, as well as a realistic novel, *Rejected of Men* (1903).

Pyle's reputation as a writer now rests, however, on his illustrated works for young people, works that occupy a permanent position in the canon of juvenile literature. The *Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* and Pyle's four-volume *Arthuriad*—*The Story of King Arthur and His Knights*, *The Story of the Champions of the Round Table*, *The Story of Sir Launcelot and His Companions*, and *The Story of the Grail and the Passing of Arthur*—offer the best indication of his considerable skill as storyteller and illustrator. He refashions these traditional tales, imbuing them with exuberance, an infectious good humor, and a generosity of spirit, revitalizing their ancient heroes for the delight of later generations of young readers. Pyle was also instrumental in the nineteenth-century revival of the folktale, producing three volumes of lively stories. *Pepper & Salt*, *The Wonder Clock*, and *Twilight Land* are characterized by a tendency toward moral instruction tempered by playful whimsy and a witty, colloquial narration. Pyle, along with his contemporary Mark Twain, wrote some of the best historical novels for young people, including *Otto of the Silver Hand* and *Men of Iron*, both set in medieval Europe, and *The Story of Jack Ballister's Fortunes*, set in colonial America. These classic works, many of which have never been out of print, constitute an enduring legacy.

Wishing to share his expertise as an artist and illustrator with the next generation, Pyle began his teaching career in 1894 at Drexel Institute's School of Illustration, commuting several days a week to Philadelphia. After resigning from Drexel in 1900, he opened his own school in his studios in Wilmington. His aim as a teacher was to foster a truly American art no longer slavishly dependent upon European models. During his sixteen-year teaching career, Pyle instructed a whole generation of American illustrators, among them such luminaries as Maxfield Parrish, Jessie Wilcox Smith, and N. C. Wyeth. At the end of his career, he turned his attention to mural painting and left Wilmington in 1910 to study in Italy, where he died on November 9, 1911, in Florence.

An important art educator, Howard Pyle is called the "Father of American Illustration" for his role in elevating American illustration to a position of world eminence. In addition, he is recognized as a classic American writer for young people, a significant figure in the "Golden Age of Children's Literature."

Setting

The novel opens in 1400, only a few months after Richard II has been dethroned and Henry IV has succeeded him as king of England. Unjustly implicated in a plot against Henry, the blind Baron Falworth, Myles's father, flees his ancestral home at Falworth Castle for Crosbey-Holt, an obscure, strawthatched farmhouse on the grounds of St. Mary's Priory. The first quarter of the novel features the country fairs, monastic routines, and quiet peasant farm life of rural medieval England. At sixteen, Myles leaves this idyllic English countryside for Devlen Castle, seat of the powerful Earl of Mackworth. Pyle provides a detailed picture of medieval castle life, its cramped living areas and spacious public rooms, its cold discomforts and splendid pageantry. Made a knight in 1411, Myles goes on a brief expedition to France before returning to London. There he defeats his ancestral enemy before turning his back on the frivolity and political intrigue of the London court for a quiet married life at Falworth Castle, his reclaimed baronial estate. The novel, then, affords a panoramic sweep of rural, castle, and court life in medieval England.

Social Sensitivity

Written one hundred years ago, *Men of Iron* is clearly a "boy's novel," conceived as such and pointedly addressing this audience. Few women appear in the novel, except for Myles's mother, who weeps at his departure for Devlen Castle, and the Ladies Anne and Alice, who spend their lives sequestered in the Earl of Mackworth's private quarters, hungering for tales of bold adventure told them by Myles when he steals into their privy garden. *Men of Iron* is hardly an exemplar of gender-balancing in audience appeal or in narrative concerns, but readers must remember that the book depicts a time when views regarding the position and occupation of women were narrow indeed.

The violence in the novel is another issue of potential concern. Myles's conflict with Walter Blunt is no boyish skirmish: Blunt attempts to kill Myles with a wooden clog, a dagger, stones, and a broadsword. Pyle declines to detail the broadsword duel between Myles and Blunt, indicating that "fisticuffs of nowadays are brutal and debasing enough, but a fight with a sharp-edged broadsword was not only brutal and debasing, but cruel and bloody as well."

As an adult, Myles agonizes over his bloody battle with the Earl of Alban, consulting Prior Edward over the ethics of killing an enemy in fair fight. The priest hesitantly advises him, both before and after the duel, that war and bloodshed, though cruel and ever to be avoided, are apparently placed in the world by God as an occasional means of bringing forth good from evil. Pyle's treatment of violence is sensitive and deliberate, and he never includes violence gratuitously.



Literary Qualities

Men of Iron offers an engrossing plot predicated on two formulas familiar in literature for young people. Roughly the first half of the novel features a "school story," the adventures of a young boy moving from the security of home into an initially alien environment to acquire an education. This part of the novel—modeled on Tom Brown's *Schooldays* (1857), the best seller by Thomas Hughes that established the genre—features the trials and occasional joys of a central character who must establish his position in his peers' social order as well as accommodate the demands placed on him by adults. The tensions within and between the two worlds of peers and adults provide the central plot interest of the school story, producing in *Men of Iron* a plot replete with exciting, fast-paced action and adventure as well as subtle psychological insight into character and motive.

The plot of *Men of Iron* unfolds in an appropriate and compelling sequence.

The first section of the novel provides the bits and pieces of the eight-year-old Myles's fragmented and impressionistic recollections of his early boyhood. The second section details Myles's arrival at Devlen Castle and his initial weeks there, during which he must fight for a place in the social hierarchy of the boyworld. The transition from boyhood to reckless adolescence concerns the third section of the plot, and the fourth section portrays Myles's gradual passage from adolescence to full manhood. Pyle handles the maturation of his central character with subtlety and convincing psychological accuracy, making for an absorbing and highly readable plot. Although the novel chronicles the maturation of one particular boy, it is clearly meant to reflect the rewards and difficulties faced by all engaged in the passage from childhood to adulthood.

The novel also provides a reliable reconstruction of castle life in Henry IV's fifteenth-century England. The precisely drawn, unromanticized portrait of the late Middle Ages includes historical information about medieval knighthood and ceremony. In addition, the novel provides some insight into the political intrigue surrounding the dethroning of Richard II and the accession of Henry IV, and briefly chronicles the English ventures into France during this period, as well as the tensions between Henry IV and his son, the Prince of Wales.

Pyle tells his story in a cordial, engaging authorial voice, beautifully crafted sentences, and a highly readable style.

Although some of his phrasing is deliberately archaic so as to capture the sound, texture, and tone of fifteenth-century English, these archaisms present only minor difficulties for the modern reader. Pyle's own black-and-white illustrations for the volume aid the reader in envisioning medieval costume, setting, and events.



Themes and Characters

The characters in *Men of Iron* divide into two groups. The novel focuses on those characters belonging to the boyworld, including Myles Falworth and the other squires and bachelors gathered at Devlen Castle to train for knighthood.

The second group of characters consists of those remote adults who regulate castle life and are responsible for training the boys in their charge. These adults operate largely behind the scenes, the boys often remaining puzzled by their actions and motives.

During the course of the novel, however, these two groups gradually converge as Myles and his cohorts mature and gain admittance into the adult-world. At the end of the novel, Myles recognizes how the adults surrounding him have been watchful and concerned while allowing him repeated opportunities to prove himself and to grow in mind, spirit, and body.

Myles Falworth, the central character in the novel, is a lad of spirit, pluck, and mettle, an acknowledged leader in the boy-world. Bold and outspoken, he is also generous and openhearted, winning firm friends and admirers as well as enemies among his peers at Devlen Castle. Myles faces a difficult position at the castle: his father, Baron Falworth, is in exile, unjustly accused of treason, and Myles's patron and kinsman, the powerful Earl of Mackworth, can show him no open favor. Not understanding that the Earl is in a delicate position for harboring the son of an accused traitor, Myles denounces the Earl for cowardice in not declaring the Baron's innocence before the King. Feeling isolated and friendless, Myles is quick to imagine slights and often fights before thinking.

He leads a rebellion among the younger boys against the senior bachelors, organizes a secret club based on romantic Arthurian notions of honor and chivalry, and engages in serious and bloody battles with his bitter rival, Walter Blunt. In addition, Myles foolishly trespasses in the ladies' garden to visit the Earl's daughter and his ward, the Lady Alice, an infraction of castle rules few others have dared.

Though hotheaded and often heedless, Myles remains ever honorable, admirable, and attractive. He counters boyish recklessness and excesses with skill, bravery, and dedication to his tasks, earning the regard of the Earl, who champions him secretly, eventually arranging for Myles's knighting by the King himself. Once Myles has transformed himself into a serious, levelheaded, virtuous knight and has earned the respect of the adult-world, he is able to defeat his family's enemy and regain his good name, titles, and possessions.

He reaches his full maturity when he marries Lady Alice and returns to his estates to live "rich and happy and honored and beloved after all his hard and noble fighting."

Other central characters in the novel's boy-world include Myles's first and truest friend, Francis Gascoyne, and Myles's foe, Walter Blunt. Francis shows little of Myles's ambition, initiative, or prowess, but he remains goodhearted and ever faithful. An



ordinary boy, Francis is an engaging confidant and supporter for Myles and at times serves as a refining influence on Myles's "ruder and more uncouth character." Walter Blunt, on the other hand, proves a bitter foe for Myles. A treacherous bully, Blunt forces the younger boys to perform menial tasks for him and his fellow bachelors. When Myles first resists his tyranny, Blunt almost brains him with a heavy wooden clog after the other bachelors gang up on Myles and hold him down. The more Myles resists Blunt, the more dangerous Blunt becomes. In a one-on-one unarmed fight, for example, Blunt almost stabs Myles with a knife he has concealed. On other occasions, he plots to slit Myles's ears, a dishonorable punishment reserved for thieves and poachers, and tries to stone Myles and his allies. Finally, Myles accepts Blunt's challenge to a duel with broadswords, defeating Blunt after a bloody fight.

Three characters in the novel serve as direct emissaries between the boy-world and the adult realm. Diccon Bowman, an old family retainer, trains Myles in the use of the various weapons a knight must wield. Diccon also trains Myles in wrestling, a peasant skill that serves him well in his later combat with Blunt.

Diccon's grandfatherly influence on Myles ends when he takes his young charge to Devlen Castle. There Myles falls under the influence of Sir James Lee, a curmudgeonly old soldier in charge of training the squires and bachelors. Sir James appears cold and stern and is known for his bitter temper, but it is also he who reports Myles's escapades to an amused Earl and who affectionately claims Myles as his son after the younger man's first successful tilt as a knight. The third mentor in Myles's life is Lord George Beaumont, the Earl's younger brother. A soldier of fortune, Lord George puts the finishing touches on Myles's evolution, providing him with appropriate dress and introducing him to an aristocratic set of young men, including the madcap Prince of Wales, eventually Henry V. Myles becomes the Prince's favorite.

These three tutors are instrumental in Myles's move from boyhood to full maturation.

The characters belonging strictly to the adult-world are remote and inscrutable for much of the novel. The narrative's conclusion reveals how significant a role they play behind the scenes. The Earl of Mackworth is a determining force in Myles's life, though to all appearances he takes no notice of the boy at all.

Formidable and forbidding, the Earl has a thin face, deep-set eyes, bushy eyebrows, a hawk nose, and an iron-gray beard. When Myles first sues for acceptance at Devlen Castle, the Earl pretends that it is a nuisance to be bedeviled by such poor suppliants.

Though Myles denounces the Earl for not championing his father, the Earl is his secret friend, acting behind the scenes to provide him with appropriate training and equipment. Through adroit political maneuvering, Mackworth arranges for the King himself to knight Myles and arranges for Myles to defeat his family's enemy, the powerful Earl of Alban. Mackworth's championing of Myles is not entirely disinterested, however, for Alban is a dangerous political rival and one of Henry IV's favorites.



Alban proves a treacherous foe indeed, attempting to blind and maim Myles in the same underhanded way that he blinded Myles's father in an earlier tournament. Although Mackworth is more astute than Francis Gascoyne could ever be, a similarity exists in the friendships they both offer Myles. The Earl of Alban correlates directly with Blunt in that he is as vicious as Blunt shows every promise of becoming. These parallels between Myles's boyhood alliances and foes and those of his early adulthood provide an effective symmetry between the boy-world and the adult realm in the novel.

This dialectic between the adolescent and adult worlds is characteristic of maturation narratives such as *Men of Iron*. The successful negotiation of the maturation process is understandably a central thematic concern of many novels for young people. In *Men of Iron*, Pyle presents childhood and adolescence as periods fraught with trials, troubles, and dilemmas but relieved by joy and optimism. Like most maturation novels, it promises its youthful readers that if they confront their trials and difficulties with honesty, courage, and resourcefulness, they can be assured of winning kindly helpers and a secure place in the adult world.

Another major theme in the novel involves the necessity of fighting against oppression. Myles fights against the tyranny of Walter Blunt and the senior boys, even when the fight is difficult and dangerous. When Myles grows up and engages in a life-and-death struggle with the Earl of Alban, his spiritual advisor assures him that often bloodshed is necessary to achieve justice. The novel thus addresses the difficult theme of the place of war and violence in the world, and admits their necessity when no other way to right serious wrongs exists.



Topics for Discussion

1. Myles Falworth and Francis Gascoyne become close friends early in the novel. How do each of these boys round out what is lacking in the other's character?
2. The friendship between Myles and Francis gradually changes as the novel progresses. Discuss these changes and the reasons for them.
3. Soon after Myles's arrival at Devlen Castle, he decides to resist the timehonored custom of serving the senior bachelors. Francis asks him if it is not arrogant for him "to come hither to this place, and then not submit to the ways thereof, as the rest of us do?" Who is right, Myles or Francis?
4. Some readers have seen Myles as too aggressive at Devlen Castle, as extreme in pursuing every opportunity for confrontation with Walter Blunt. Other readers have seen his resistance to Blunt as in every case admirable and justified. Who would you agree with?

Why?

5. After Myles has entered the privy garden and met the Ladies Anne and Alice, he writes a letter home describing this event. His father has a letter sent to the Earl of Mackworth to tell him of Myles's repeated entries into the garden, whereupon Mackworth catches Myles there. Why does Myles's father tell on him? Is this the right thing for his father to do?

6. After Myles is prevented from meeting the Lady Alice in the privy garden, he writes her a letter that falls into the hands of the Earl of Mackworth. The Earl forbids Myles to write to her again.

What harm is there in Myles's writing to the Lady Alice?

7. When Myles first meets King Henry IV, he realizes that a king "was in nowise different from other men." What in the King's appearance and later actions makes him like any other man?

8. The Prince of Wales calls the Earl of Mackworth "Lord Fox." Why is this an appropriate nickname for the Earl?

9. Toward the end of the novel, Myles is dubbed "Saint Myles" by the Prince and his companions. This shows how much Myles has changed during the novel. Which Myles do you find more interesting and appealing, the boy or the mature knight? Why?

10. Myles's duel with the Earl of Alban is the climax of the novel. Why is this such a crucial battle? What are some of the important results of Myles's victory?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. At one point in the novel, Sir James Lee says to Myles, "Thou art a foolish boy and knowest naught of the world," a judgment later echoed by the Earl of Mackworth. How is Myles ignorant of the ways of the world? What important lessons does he learn as the narrative progresses?

2. *Men of Iron* is set at the turn of the fifteenth century, just after Richard II has been dethroned by Henry IV. Henry makes several appearances in the novel and Richard II is referred to repeatedly.

After reading at least one reliable source concerning this change of dynasties, write a report filling in the historical background for this novel.

3. Pyle provides a shortened account of the preparations for the ceremony of knighthood with the Order of the Bath.

Locate a source recounting this ancient ceremony, and report on the details that Pyle omits from his account.

4. When Myles is knighted by the King, he is repeatedly compared to Sir Galahad of King Arthur's court. Who is Sir Galahad, and why is this comparison a great compliment to Myles?

5. William Shakespeare wrote two plays—*Henry IV, Part I*, and *Henry IV, Part II*—concerning Henry IV's accession to the English throne and his troubled relationship with his son, the Prince of Wales. This relationship is briefly alluded to in *Men of Iron*. What additional insights do Shakespeare's plays afford in understanding this uneasy fatherson relationship?

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Related Titles

Other historical novels for young people by Howard Pyle include *Otto of the Silver Hand* and *The Story of Jack Ballister's Fortunes*. *Otto of the Silver Hand*, perhaps the best of Pyle's historical novels, is set in a medieval Germany ruled by ruthless robber barons. The novel ends with the triumph of civilization and order over brutality as the robber barons are suppressed and the enlightened reign of the Emperor Rudolph of Hapsburg begins. The novel is acclaimed for its realistic, unromanticized portrayal of life in the Middle Ages. *The Story of Jack Ballister's Fortunes* is set in eighteenth-century England and in the American colonies.

Kidnapped from England and sold in Virginia as a "redemptioner," or indentured servant, Jack flees a brutal master to join Blackbeard's notorious pirates in North Carolina. Sickened by the pirates' brutality, Jack helps a captive heiress escape from them, and her grateful father champions Jack's rights to his inheritance in England. Pyle's most ambitious novel in this genre, *The Story of Jack Ballister's Fortunes* offers a large cast of interesting characters, an intricate plot, and a series of exciting adventures. For older readers, Pyle's *Within the Capes* (1885), *The Rose of Paradise* (1888), *The Buccaneers and Marooners of America* (1891), *The Price of Blood* (1899), *Stolen Treasure* (1907), and *The Ruby of Kishmoor* (1908) offer pirates, mysterious murders, romances, and plentiful adventures on the high seas.



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