Pendragon: Arthur and His Britain Short Guide

Pendragon: Arthur and His Britain by Joseph P. Clancy

Contents

Pendragon: Arthur and His Britain Short Guide....1

Contents....2

Overview....3

About the Author....4

Setting....5

Social Sensitivity....6

Literary Qualities....7

Themes and Characters....8

Topics for Discussion....10

Ideas for Reports and Papers....11

For Further Reference....12

Copyright Information....14

Overview

This well-written and well-researched book helps readers understand how legends are rooted in actual history.

Clancy shows how the legend of King Arthur grew out of historical fact, and provides readers with a greater appreciation for the literature that history inspires.

Pendragon's introductory chapter discusses the relationship between poetry and history. Clancy emphasizes that the historian and the poet, although different types of writers, need not always be opposed in intent or practice. The historian, like the poet, must keep his or her imagination active and apply it to the task of explaining the motives and feeling behind historical fact. Hence, in Pendragon, Clancy complements his sound historical research with poetic insights in an attempt to recreate the Britain of King Arthur.

Clancy musters convincing evidence that Arthur did exist and that he had the powers, and perhaps the title, of king.

Arthur's importance as a historical figure, Clancy shows, is attributable to the twenty-five or thirty years of peace that he won for the Celtic peoples. Monastic and scholarly culture flourished during these years, laying the groundwork for the eventual introduction of Christianity and artistic accomplishment to the Saxon conquerors. Clancy evaluates various versions of the Arthurian legend, showing how each century stresses different aspects of the story.

Clancy also traces the growing importance of central characters such as Lancelot and Guenevere. Clancy notes that "to live amid events is to be surrounded by trees; to live after those events is to look at a forest." Writing some fourteen centuries after Arthur's lifetime, Clancy attempts to guide his readers through the dense and variegated forest of Arthurian myth and legend that has grown up over the years.

About the Author

Joseph P. Clancy was born on March 8, 1928, in New York City. He attended Fordham University, where he earned his undergraduate degree in 1947, his masters degree in 1949, and his doctorate in 1957. During his school years, Clancy worked at the New York Public Library. He has taught at Marymount Manhattan College for many years and continues to make his home in New York City.

A gifted poet, Clancy is probably best known as one of America's most talented translators. He edited and translated The Odes and Epodes of Horace (1960), Medieval Welsh Lyrics (1965), The Earliest Welsh Poetry (1970), and TwentiethCentury Welsh Poems (1980). Clancy earned an award from the Welsh Arts Council for The Earliest Welsh Poetry. He is a member of American Literary Translators and the Welsh Academy.

Clancy's interest in Welsh culture and his knowledge of the language prepared him to write about the legendary King Arthur, whose earliest records, and quite probably his roots, lie with the Celtic peoples of Britain, the ancestors of today's Welsh.

Setting

Clancy dates King Arthur's birth at about A.D. 460 and his death at about 520. These were unsettled times; the Roman power that had occupied, controlled, and protected Britain from invasion for more than three hundred years had withdrawn from the island in the face of barbarian threats and political instability at home. Several Germanic tribes, especially the Saxons, began to take possession of eastern Britain. Clancy believes that a man named Arthur commanded a company of assault troops who effectively repulsed the invaders and ushered in a peaceful, albeit brief, era for the Celtic peoples of Britain. Although Clancy grounds his book in the events of King Arthur's time, he discusses literature dated from the sixth century up through the present and, in discussing how the Arthurian legend has grown over the years, offers a glimpse of some 1500 years of history.

Social Sensitivity

Historians engage in a quest for the truth about the past, and in a great many cases, they report on customs and laws that seem insensitive by modern standards. Inevitably, Clancy's recreation of fifth- and sixth-century Britain turns up practices that seem insensitive to modern readers. Romans often sold Britons as slaves on the open market, and Arthurian legends portray women, such as Guenevere, as mere love objects for knights.

Whereas historians traditionally write in an objective style, Clancy chooses to deal directly and subjectively with the sensitive issues unearthed by his historical probings. When, for example, he writes about a Roman massacre of Druids in the first century A.D., he comments: I am not soothed by being told that Agricola and Tacitus were civilized men horrified by such Druid practices as human sacrifice...If I must choose, I prefer religious zeal to cold-blooded social and military practicality—which leads me to wonder what [Arthur] thought. As a Christian typical of his age, he probably saw God's hand punishing the heathens.

Clancy's authorial intrusions, unusual for a historical work, serve the purpose of analyzing and thereby softening the impact of disturbing issues and events. On the whole, however, readers should find little that is disturbing in Pendragon. Arthur's court was founded—at least according to legend— on standards of conduct that remain admirable today. Clancy acknowledges the central role that Christianity played in court tradition, and he discusses the many religious aspects of the Arthurian legend, but at no point does Pendragon espouse Christianity at the expense of other faiths.

Literary Qualities

Because Pendragon explores the relationship between Arthurian history and literature, Clancy's style is at once straightforward and imaginative. He recounts his scholarly investigation of Arthur in the form of a detective story, finding and evaluating historical and literary clues and placing them in the context of other clues. Clancy avoids needless decoration in his writing, but he effectively uses analogies.

As a relief from the demands of formal logic, Clancy sometimes adopts an informal tone and directly addresses the reader: "If you have studied Latin, you share with this young man [Arthur] at least one thing, a schoolbook—Julius Caesar's De Bello Gallico [Of the War in Gaul]. I remember being thoroughly bored by it, though I suppose it did help me to learn Latin." Clancy's writing has the virtues of variety and clarity, and his informal tone offsets the sheer volume of historical information that underlies the book.

Themes and Characters

In Arthur's time, Britain probably contained cities and former Roman camps, such as Bath, Chester, and York, that had fallen into decay with the withdrawal of Roman troops, the invasion of barbarian tribes, and the reduction of trade with lands on the Continent. Against this backdrop of chaos, Clancy attempts to pinpoint a single man whose legend has endured to this day. Much of what Clancy has to say about Arthur as an actual historical personage is, of necessity, conjecture. He begins his discussion with as definitive a statement as the facts warrant: "It is not unreasonable...to believe that an extraordinary man, one who could be used to ensure other men's heroism...actually lived in the early sixth century." In reconstructing Arthur's life, Clancy works as both historian and poet, breathing new life into the facts and legends about this extraordinary man that have been passed down over the centuries.

Arthur, according to Clancy, probably spent his boyhood on a fairly prosperous villa, or country estate, in west-central Britain. Assured of leisure time because of his family's economic status, Arthur—or Artorius, as he was most likely named—probably read many books as a boy and learned about Roman history and Roman methods of warfare. Arthur probably also became very familiar with the geography and Celtic culture of western Britain, knowledge that would serve him well later in life, when he was called upon to lead the country's defense against the Saxon incursion. Clancy's choice of the word "pendragon," Welsh for "commander-in-chief," as the title of his book reflects this Celtic part of Arthur's heritage.

In relatively straightforward fashion, Clancy maps out the course of British history before, during, and shortly after Arthur's time. Having established this historical framework, he goes on to trace the development of Arthur as a legendary character. As authors such as Geoffrey of Monmouth—a "poet posing as a historian," according to Clancy— first begin to develop the Arthurian legend, Arthur appears as a great conqueror who delights in his circle of knights and his own military prowess.

In later versions of the legend, Arthur stands at the center of a court that tries unsuccessfully to live by standards as noble as his. The thirteenth-century French stories, frequently referred to as the "Prose Lancelot," and the popular fifteenth-century writings of Sir Thomas Malory depict a heroic Arthur betrayed by his wife, Guenevere, and his best friend, Lancelot. This betrayal destroys the Arthurian dream of a pure and righteous realm centered on the kingdom of Camelot.

Clancy stresses that the figure of Arthur familiar to modern readers is the product of layer upon layer of poetry, hearsay, and "history" heavily tainted with hero-worship. A Norman poet named Wace first mentioned the Round Table in 1155, and "Camelot" itself "is never heard of in the earliest stories; it suddenly appears as the site of Arthur's court in twelfth-century French poetry."

In general, the large cast of knights and damsels that populates Arthur's court plays second fiddle to the shifting historical context in which Clancy places his work, revealing in the process that notions of decency, bravery, and purity are timeless ideals.

Topics for Discussion

1. Did three centuries of Roman rule benefit the native British? What have been the effects of modern colonial rule in places such as Africa and India? Is there any similarity between Roman rule of Britain and British rule of its colonial states?

2. What part do the circumstances of Arthur's early life and education, as Clancy sees them, play in Arthur's role as a future ruler?

3. Whenever a legend reappears, its form is molded by the period's problems.

Thus, Sir Thomas Malory's Arthur confronts fifteenth-century problems; Alfred, Lord Tennyson's Arthur confronts nineteenth-century problems; and T. H. White's Arthur confronts twentieth-century problems. To what extent does this phenomenon alter the "facts" of a legend?

4. Do we learn as much about important historical events from historical fiction as we do from straight history books? What do we learn from studying history and literature concurrently? Is it possible to separate the study of history and literature?

5. To what extent are historians themselves dependent upon fictionalized accounts written during the time period they are studying? How have historians, for example, used books such as Homer's Riad (700 B.C.) or Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852)? Of what historical value are novels such as Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884) in the study of a particular historical period?

6. List several books written in the recent past that you think will be of value to historians of the future. On what criteria have you based your selection?

7. Which of the portraits of Arthur that Clancy reviews present a personal view of the man and which present an impersonal ideal? Is Clancy's historical view personal or impersonal?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Various sources present different versions of Arthur's birth, but each version is alike in that it involves the supernatural. Compare the legends that surround the birth of Arthur with stories about the births of other heroes, such as Moses, Hercules, and Perseus.

2. There is some disagreement about the use of horses in warfare during Arthur's time. Clancy argues that Arthur must have used horses effectively, while other historians such as Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson take the opposite position. Research the development of the use of the horse for military purposes, paying special notice to the effect caused by the invention of the stirrup.

3. Compare one of the poems in Tennyson's Idylls of the King (18591885) with its source in the writings of Malory; Tennyson's The Fair Maid of Astolat" is especially good for this purpose. How does Tennyson adapt his source in order to put forth his own meaning?

4. How did the Roman occupation of Britain contribute to English place names? Locate present-day English cities that were once Roman settlements; any city, for example, with the word "Chester" or "caster" in it was probably once a Roman camp ("castrum"). What factors went into determining where the Romans established cities or camps?

5. Investigate various national heroes, such as Joan of Arc, Charlemagne, Moses, Martin Luther King, Jr., or others of your own choosing. How do they differ from Arthur, and what does the nature of a national hero tell us about the nation that venerates him or her?

6. Camelot has been presented in many Arthurian romances as a kind of Utopia, at least for a time. How does Camelot compare with other Utopias in literature: Eden, Arcadia, even the American West of song and story?

For Further Reference

Brengle, Richard L., ed. Arthur, King of Britain. New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1964. Provides translations of the early documents relating to Arthur as well as critical articles, study questions, and a brief bibliography. Of special interest to readers of Clancy are The Arthur of History," The Historical Arthur," and observations on Arthur by Winston Churchill.

Chambers, E. K. Arthur of Britain. London: Sedgewick & Jackson, 1927. Although more than half a century old, this book by one of the great scholars of English literature is still most valuable.

Chretien de Troyes. Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart. Translated by Deborah Rogers. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984. One of de Troyes's many twelfth-century romances about Lancelot and other chivalric heroes.

Jackson, W. H. T. The Literature of the Middle Ages. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960. A very good general handbook to medieval literature, this survey has a chapter on the audience for literature during the medieval times and also a good survey of the various genres examined by Clancy, including Arthurian romance.

Ker, W. P. Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature. 1905. Reprint.

New York: Dover Publications, 1957.

This book supplies a good overview of the heroic age, its ways of thinking, and its literature.

Loomis, Roger Sherman, ed. Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959. Loomis is one of America's principal Arthurian scholars, as was his wife Gertrude Schoepperle Loomis. This book has valuable material on Merlin. R. S. Loomis is also the author of Arthurian Legends in Medieval Art.

Malory, Thomas. Morte D'Arthur. Edited by D. S. Brewer. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Malory's history of Arthurian chivalry, originally printed in 1485 by William Caxton, was among the first to popularize the Arthurian tradition.

Tolkien, J. R. R. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975. A Middle English version of these classic Arthurian romances.

Vinaver, Eugene, ed. The Works of Sir Thomas Malory. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947. Vinaver was the greatest Malory scholar, and this work, based on a manuscript discovered in the twentieth century, is a better version than that based on the early printed version of William Caxton (1485).

Weston, Jesse L. From Ritual to Romance. Reprint. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957. This well-known study was used as one basis for T. S. Eliot's influential poem The Waste Land (1922), which itself contains some Arthurian material.

White, Terence H. The Once and Future King (1958) and The Sword in the Stone (1939). New York: Putnam Publishing Group. Popular adaptations of the Arthurian legend.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996