



# A Ghost in the Archive

## Rewriting Perceval Landon's "Thurnley Abbey" as Contemporary Historical Fiction

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### ABSTRACT

This article uses perspectives from cultural theory and my own writing practice to argue that contemporary historical fictions can function similarly to archives as the systems in which historical discourse operates, by containing and reframing real-life historical documents within invented narratives. I discuss my work-in-progress, a novella titled *The Thorns*, which rewrites Perceval Landon's 1908 ghost story "Thurnley Abbey" and seeks to engage with one of its implied historical contexts: the fraught and often bloody history of Roman Catholicism in England, specifically during the Reformation and the Dissolution of the Monasteries. I contextualise this writing project with detailed reference to literary and cultural theories of fiction's relationship to historical discourse, specifically the idea of the archive itself, and describe some of the ways in which my novella engages with the histories behind the original text's focus on representations of silence, death and fear resulting from a disavowed past.

## Introduction

This article uses perspectives from cultural theory and my own writing practice to argue that contemporary historical fictions can function similarly to archives as the systems in which historical discourse operates, by containing and reframing real-life historical documents within invented narratives. My current creative project, a novella inspired by and rewriting large parts of Perceval Landon's often-anthologised 1908 ghost story "Thurnley Abbey",<sup>[1]</sup> is an exercise in writing a particular kind of historical fiction that seeks to excavate one of the text's implied contexts: the fraught and often bloody history of Roman Catholicism in England. This work-in-progress, titled *The Thorns*, shapes itself around evidence of this Catholic past, archiving certain real historical documents and inventing others to suit its fictional world.<sup>[2]</sup> Although the piece is fiction and not historiography, the terms 'excavation' and 'archive' have deliberate connotations of historical research and resonances in cultural theory that can be of wider use to writers of new fiction. Here, the term 'archive' is used to indicate at once the physical and digital spaces that store historical materials (documents and other objects), the verb meaning the act of storing such materials, and the abstract concept of the archive outlined in historical and literary theory. The definition of the archive as the real site of historical research is the main and first definition, encompassing as it does the physical and written evidence of past events that underpin any robust historical investigation. Accordingly, Tom Griffiths asserts that "the archive remains a defining site where historians know who they are and what they do" (2016: 14). Even this main understanding of the archive, however, figures evidence as material from which narrative is made, resulting in a legacy of literary as well as non-literary concepts, a selection of which are signposted in this article. Many if not most literary-critical readings of historical fictions point out the usefulness of images of archives and archival evidence in constructing a sense of 'authentic' history within fiction, both as tropes and the bases of historical detail. Archival, documentary evidence is usually, as Nicola Parsons states in a critique of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, "conventionally understood to guarantee authenticity" even while it "must be combined with the mnemonic frame of narrative" (2013: 120).

Historian Liesbeth Corens gestures towards both

the major definition of archives as collections and the concept of the archive while explaining the centrality of archives and record-keeping not only in the process of documenting English Catholic history throughout periods of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, rebellions, penal laws and other pressures, but also in figuring English Catholics themselves in historical narrative. In the specific context of the dispersal of English Catholics abroad during 16<sup>th</sup> century persecutions, Corens describes the collections and records assembled and edited since that time as "creative pursuits rather than finished products" (2016: 271). Archives are now more accessible than ever to scholars, readers, writers, and other interested parties owing to their digitisation and high profile in cultural products such as fiction and documentaries. As Thomas Augst explains, thanks to the labour of workers in heritage and cultural preservation, "digital tools are transforming archives into sites for the discovery and animation of historical materials" (2017: 220). This wording evokes the dynamic, discursive potential of the Foucauldian concept of the archive. The archive is not, as Foucault proposes in strikingly theological terms,

that which collects the dust of statements that have become inert once more, and which may make possible the miracle of their resurrection; it is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-thing; it is *the system of its functioning*. (1972; 1989: 146, emphasis in original)

I follow Kim Sherwood (2019) in citing Foucault in this context of using archival 'traces' in writing historical fiction, but there is more to say about the utility of the archive for writers. This is not to imply that archives produce fictions as readily as facts, or that historical facts and fictions are of equal status, but that the archive (as a literary concept as well as a reality and a practice) can behave not only as a resource but as a kind of organising structure for writers of fiction, an idea I am testing with my current work. Treating fiction as a space to explore the concept of the archive is far from new in historical fiction, as is shown in the examples I will cite, but I contend that exploring the fiction-of-archive further allows for more detailed understanding of what I would call "textual" historical detail, or detail supported by documentary evidence that can be expanded by fictional means without undue conflict with fact. Fictions thus

elucidate the role that they play in developing historical knowledge in ways that further creative and critical debates, and new creative practice. The work of historical novelists often theorises their epistemological stake in writing, not merely writing about, the past; I discuss two of these, Caryl Phillips and Hilary Mantel, below. This article is one of the first in creative writing scholarship on the topic of the archive to offer extensive perspectives from literary studies, discussing these in terms of strategies specifically for the use of creative writers. The piece is organised into three sections: The Fiction as Archive, further explaining my conceptual framework in this article; “Thurnley Abbey”: Organising Ignorance into New Writing, giving an account of my critical engagement with Landon’s 1908 story; *The Thorns*: Rewriting “Thurnley Abbey”, exploring my own writing project; and a Conclusion.

### The Fiction as Archive

My own impulse to develop Landon’s short story began with my teaching of nineteenth century fiction and, later, contemporary historical novels. In the story, a traumatised passenger on a sea crossing, Alistair Colvin, tells a fellow passenger of a fateful trip to Thurnley Abbey, the family seat of his friend John Broughton. He recounts that during this visit he saw a figure in his room, the skeletal ghost of a nun that attacked him and left physical bones in its wake. Landon’s early 20<sup>th</sup> century-set text presents 16<sup>th</sup> century history as a jarringly ghostly and yet physical presence by way of the interconnected Images of the Abbey itself and the religious, corporeal and seemingly vengeful haunting even though the story is not, strictly speaking, historical fiction. The Abbey’s social, political, and religious history lingers in the details of the building (restructured over several centuries) and its contents which, significantly, are “put in thorough repair, although not a stick of the old furniture and tapestry were removed” (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 469):

The larger part of this building remained as it had been in pre-Reformation days, but a wing had been added in Jacobean times, and that part of the house had been kept in something like repair by Mr Clarke. He had in both the ground and first floors set a heavy timber door, strongly barred with iron, in the passage between the earlier and the Jacobean parts of the house, and had entirely neglected the

former. So there had been a good deal of work to be done. (ibid.)

The Gothic image of the barred door between the house’s sections from the two time periods, pre- and post-Reformation, signal that the “good deal of work to be done” is for the reader as much as the Broughton family: there are pieces of evidence and spaces in the text itself to explore further, as well as spaces for a writer to add further evidence. The revolutionary contexts of the Reformation and Henry VIII’s Dissolution of the Monasteries are apparent. Appropriately, the story’s narrator Alistair Colvin relates that the actual “long-vanished Abbey of Closter” was located “some five miles away”, and the house itself built on the site of its infirmary (ibid.). The lost Abbey, then, is an historical narrative emerging in a spectral fashion not only as realist detail but as something unquiet, demanding something of the present time. It is no surprise, then, that its actual ghost, “a figure swathed in a rotten and tattered veiling”, with a face “not entirely that of a skull, though the eyes and the flesh of the face were totally gone” (475), is both frightening and heartrending: a spirit but also a forgotten corpse that brings to mind Roman Catholicism’s venerated relics but also countless, repeated legends of veiled or hooded ghosts and sealed rooms full of bones as discarded proofs of neglect and murder. Broughton urges Colvin to speak to the ghost if he should see it, and when Colvin has seen it and tells his friend that he has “smashed the foul thing into a hundred pieces” (476), Broughton cannot speak but only moves his mouth and hands, “just as a baby who cannot speak moves its hands”. Broughton’s distress and the “cowardice” (ibid.), as Colvin sees it, of the man and his wife fainting with fear, are symbolic of a history resurging out of the Abbey itself which its inhabitants are powerless to silence or deny any longer. This seems to be confirmed in the story’s final lines when Broughton is able to speak again, but can only say to Colvin, “half as a question, half as a reproach, ‘You didn’t speak to her.’” (478) This need for dialogue between the living and the dead is kept mysterious and thus the history behind the story is left somewhat inert; we are not told why Broughton wanted Colvin to speak to the nun, or whether the Broughtons had seen her and perhaps failed to speak to her themselves. The story misses, or neglects, many opportunities to engage with the past more closely, and the result is horror. I saw this clearly, living in Yorkshire whose centuries of Catholic history are both prominent and curiously subdued,

marginalised into the work of specialist museums, niche publications and research groups active in the region such as the Bar Covent Museum in York, the Catholic Records Society, and the English Catholic History Association.

Questions of speech and silence evoke long-standing debates about fiction writing and its relationship to history. The fictitious Thurnley Abbey, like many such real houses in England, is no longer a religious house, its history interwoven with and dominated by that of the ascendancy of the Church of England. Any act of writing ‘into’ Landon’s story in order to understand this process would be historiographic in nature, and a creative form of writing alongside English Catholic history. As I explored this subjugated history I perceived that there were, as an early line in my work-in-progress states, “thorns in time” (Bibby 2019: 17) – images and anecdotes of marginalised Catholic history in mainstream narratives of the making of British society, communities (notably in the north of England, the location of several Catholic uprisings during the Tudor period), and religious life. Written settings are, themselves, archival and ghostly in a way that recalls Landon’s unsettling descriptions of Thurnley Abbey, quoted above. Paul Magrs, in advice to authors on writing convincing settings, describes the need to collect diverse details and materials, weaving some of these into a scene; to select “aspects of the setting that would seem most pressing to the characters in the scene; then build outwards as they notice more and more out of the corner of their eye” (in Bell and Magrs 2001: 171). Settings and their histories may haunt, but they also draw the eye and provoke thought with their distinctiveness and, as in the case of Thurnley’s Jacobean furniture, their historical resonance almost as archives themselves. The prolific scholar of historical fictions Jerome de Groot notes some of the ways in which novelists can “articulate their own historiographical practice in the various notes, acknowledgements, bibliographies and addenda that are added to their books” (2009: 264); fiction is indeed implicated in such “historiographic practice” and archival activities, and not only for purposes of representing pasts but of seeking to know what their written and material traces mean. De Groot acknowledges that “historical fiction seeks to contribute to mainstream historical knowledge, as it represents the past in the present according to certain key rules, most often by the use of evidence, realism, and a seriousness of tone” (2016: 3). Clearly the “seriousness” aspect can take many creative forms

beyond “the realist mode in historical expression”, as fictions take part in “establishing modes of historical awareness, engagement, narrativization, and comprehension” (6). Those historical fictions which archive historical traces in imaginative ways frame and refigure documents in fiction precisely to restate literature’s serious stake in making knowledge, and in ways that supply further directions for writers in terms of how they might situate fiction in relation to fact. In the case of *The Thorns*, I determined that the piece would expand the story of the Broughtons and their haunted home, while taking the moments in Landon’s original that are suggestive of that home’s history, and archiving its documents there. As in Foucault’s dynamic formulation of the archive and Coren’s assertion of its creative role in Catholic historiography, the story will constitute an archive not in the sense of an inert, physical location of pure, dry “facts”, but as a written formation giving “animation” (Augst 2017: 220) to historical narrative.

Kuisma Korhonen’s summary of the ‘history/literature debate’ invokes the archive specifically as a concept, underpinned by the work of historian and theorist Hayden White, and is instructive for writers interested in the formal intersections between writing and documentary evidence. Korhonen specifies that White is clear on the distinction between actual past events and writing, and that, importantly, “the mere collection of facts [...] is, for [White], not yet historical discourse, but rather formation of an *archive*” accessible in turn to multiple other discourses (Korhonen 2006: 12, emphasis in original). Across White’s works which include his classic *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), “historical discourse” refers to “interpretation of this archive of past events by means of narration”, allowing the work of historians and literary authors to “overlap” (Korhonen 2006: 12). Korhonen’s use of the word “techniques” underlines the technical similarities between historiographic and literary outputs, but White’s work itself goes further by analysing their comparable significance in terms of supporting knowledge. As Korhonen observes, “artistic imagination [...] has a more serious role in our attempts to encounter the past in its otherness”, such as the undocumented majority of past events, people, and voices (2006: 18). Fiction, as Hayden White asserts in his essay ‘Historical Discourse and Literary Writing’, may help to remedy the shortcomings of an “older historiography” in which the historical document “was to be read for what it

yielded in the way of factual information” (White 2006: 26).

White then comments instructively on the “operation” that takes place in order to construct historiography: “facts” are extracted from pieces of documentary evidence and correlated where possible with each other, in such a way that “presupposes that the object of study remains *virtually* perceivable by way of the documentary evidence”, and which reads “through and around” the document’s overtly literary features (ibid., emphasis in original). Here, fictional aspects of factual writing suggest that fiction does work as an archive in that it is not only a repository for certain historical evidence (as in fictions that incorporate historical documents, as do Caryl Phillips’s ‘Northern Lights’ and Hilary Mantel’s *A Place of Greater Safety*, discussed below) but also signals, like an archive, that narratives of a real past are represented by that evidence. Therefore, the work’s literary features do not prevent it from collecting evidence and forming an archive as physical archives do, but can aid this process. Literary and, at the same time, historiographic paths beyond this “older historiography” are discernible in White’s suggestion of modernism as a literary mode evidently involved in, and not secondary to, the writing of history. Modernists authors were, for White,

as interested in representing a real instead of a fictional world quite as much as any modern historian. But unlike their historian counterparts they realised that language itself is a part of the real world and must be included among the elements of that world rather than treated as a transparent instrument for representing it. (White 2006: 25-26)

Crucially for writers of historical fiction today, modernists therefore “created a new conception of realistic representation itself and beyond that a new notion of reading which permits a creative re-reading even of the formerly transparent historical *document*” (ibid., emphasis in original) This fresh possibility of “creative re-reading” of evidence with a stake in the real world and past is evident in recent historical fictions that tread a paradoxical line between historically documented events and objects and fictional invention.

Consequently, historical fiction is more made than simply written, and made from different

but complementary discourses – literary and historiographic – in order to serve both literary and historiographic purposes. White is correct to argue that fiction functions as a “metacode” for translating “knowing” into “telling” (1987: 1). This is why Mantel’s novel of the French Revolution *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), one of the exercises in fiction writing discussed in her first Reith Lecture (Mantel 2017), ends with its narrator faltering at the moment of the executions of Georges-Jacques Danton and Camille Desmoulins, and then the insertion of a real document. The narrator explains: “There is a point beyond which – convention and imagination dictate – we cannot go; perhaps it’s here, when the carts decant on to the scaffold their freight” (Mantel 1992: loc. 15570). These limits of “convention and imagination” refer to historiography more than fiction, even though this is a novel and even though, immediately and in the same paragraph, the text takes us beyond that limit, to Danton witnessing “each bright efflorescence of life’s blood” as his colleagues and friends are guillotined (loc. 15579). Mantel’s novel both does and does not represent a history beyond the limits of the kind of documentary evidence to be found in an archive. The book’s final paragraph, then, asserts its stake in producing knowledge about its historical period by archiving such documentary evidence: the paragraph is a real section from *The Times* newspaper of 8 April 1794, detailing that “When the late reconciliation took place, between Robespierre and Danton, we remarked that it proceeded rather from the fear which these two famous revolutionists entertained of each other, than from mutual affection” (loc. 15593). This description also acts as a description of the literary narrative that precedes it, and links the text’s huge amount of invented dialogue between Danton and Maximilien Robespierre more strongly with the notion of evidence. Of course, this dialogue is not historical evidence but is certainly part of what Mantel, with reference to the broad idea of history in her 2017 BBC Reith lecture ‘The Day is For the Living’, described as the “method we have evolved for organising our ignorance of the past” (Mantel 2017) in productive, and not restrictive, ways.

### “Thurnley Abbey” – Organising Ignorance into New Writing

Although in Perceval Landon’s story the discursive “animation” (Augst 2017: 220) of history takes the form of a ghost, it does not have to. The issue of what results when history is fictionalised –

whether knowledge, ghosts, or both – is central to many of accounts of what historical fiction does to knowledge. Hilary Mantel created just such an invaluable resource when, in the lecture quoted above, she pondered evocatively that “We sense [the dead] have something to tell us, something we need to understand. Using fiction and drama, we try to gain that understanding” (Mantel 2017). Her image of writers “chasing after” the dead is also a metaphor for the desire and process represented both in “Thurnley Abbey’s” depiction of the past and my project to approach that past anew by rewriting the text. Mantel suggests that although the past is indeed “past” and unreachable, writers can “listen” to the dead as a strategy, and I would argue that Landon’s story also suggests this in its description of John and Vivien Broughton and their guest Colvin literally listening in terror to phantom footsteps outside the Broughtons’ room, moments after Colvin has fought with the nun and scattered her bones:

After ten seconds’ utter quiet, I seemed to hear something. I could not be sure, but at last there was no doubt. There was a quiet sound as of one moving along the passage. Little regular steps came towards us over the hard oak flooring. Broughton moved to where his wife sat, white and speechless, on the bed, and pressed her face into his shoulder. (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 477)

Writers perhaps do not need to chase after the dead as Mantel describes; the dead may approach the present in those “[L]ittle regular steps” with an unnerving banality which, at the same time, speaks to writers’ and readers’ reasonable desire for history to be knowable. This is key to how and why historical fictions work partly by archiving narratives, items of language, and historical details. Narratives themselves are ghostly in their absent-presences over and alongside other narratives, from evidence and documents. Historical fiction, perhaps more than any other type, figures things that are both there and not there, real and unreal.[3] In addition, Mantel is correct that ‘history’ refers not to the past itself but to “the method we’ve evolved for organising our ignorance of the past” (2017). Historical fiction has certainly always encoded an awareness of the tension between the evidence, facts, and various narratives (including but not limited to myths and speculations) underpinning the historical contexts with which they work, and as such, fictions position themselves within the process of creating historical knowledge

by archival means: “information” alone, as Mantel explains, “is not knowledge” (2017).

As I thought imaginatively about the sixteenth century contexts Landon’s story implies, its sealed rooms brought to mind local examples of abandoned ‘priest holes’ such as those underneath the chapel in York’s Bar Convent and in an upper room at Ripley Castle near Harrogate, home of the Ingleby family who were, historically, Catholic recusants. The capacity for the literary text to function as an archive through these figured spaces and others recalled another short historical text concerned with a real, historically marginalised identity in the north of England. In Caryl Phillips’s story ‘Northern Lights’, part of his volume of imaginative life writing *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), Phillips reflects on the life of British Nigerian David Oluwale who died in 1969 after being assaulted by two police officers who were later convicted of his manslaughter. The text pieces together Oluwale’s story using fictionalised eyewitness accounts, a sweeping historical account of Leeds from its foundation onward, and lastly by gathering documents relating to its historical context. The story therefore archives both real and fictitious evidence in an inseparable combination as a way of voicing Oluwale’s beloved Leeds and as a vital aspect of centring Oluwale himself in his own story, part of the larger history of Leeds. The story’s final lines make clear the importance of this intertwined archival and literary work: “You have achieved a summit, David. Climbed to the top of a hill, and from here you can look down. You are still in Leeds. Forever in Leeds” (Phillips 2007: loc. 3123). In light of this, there are further implications of *The Thorns*’s archival strategies, in terms of resisting the anti-Catholic resonances of the gruesome haunting in Landon’s “Thurnley Abbey”. My novella ends not with the silent and dead nun but with her living equivalent praying over the land in the months before the Abbey’s Dissolution. She is necessarily displaced in time.

### ***The Thorns*: Rewriting “Thurnley Abbey”**

In this final part of the article, I offer brief insights into my writing process and the practical consequences of my sense of “responsibility to the past” (de Groot 2016: 31), specifically as regards knowledge of English Catholicism. I will discuss selected aspects of the manuscript and how it negotiates Landon’s original, especially the figures of the nun and Vivien Broughton, the Jacobean

history of the house itself, and the original text's almost complete silence on that broader past. *The Thorns* replaces Alistair Colvin's central perspective in Landon's original story with the previously minor one of Vivien, the wife of John Broughton. I imagine her past as a pupil at a northern Catholic school based loosely on York's Bar Convent, and her awareness, early in her marriage, that Thurnley Abbey is a place of historic pain now rarely mentioned until her husband admits that he has long been haunted by a tormented nun. The novella combines sections of Vivien's perspective with fictional historical documents detailing parts of the Abbey's past along with fragments of real documents relating to English Catholic history, as Vivien discovers the haunting's origin in the murder of a local 'holy maid' by John's ancestor. At the book's conclusion, it is revealed that the collection of documents we have read have been compiled by Vivien herself as a way of coming to terms with the Abbey's history. She has created the only real dialogue possible between the living and the dead: an archive, to be accessed and interpreted.

Although the ghost at the climax of Landon's story is not inevitable, as I have suggested, I decided not to remove the haunting from my version as a trope of disavowed historical knowledge. Landon's ghost brings to mind the visible victims of the Reformation's violence, often absent from non-fiction representations focusing on England's Protestant modern identity, although such ghosts are mainstays of lurid Gothic descriptions. Jerome de Groot, a critic who, like Korhonen, refers directly to the notion of the archive, suggests that part of the inherent ethical quandary involved in writing historical fiction is that "the historical novelist fudges the actuality of death, substituting instead a comforting fiction that draws the sting of the past, disavows its trauma", and that furthermore, "The reality of the past is found in the pitiless archive; the novel is an attempt at ignoring that actuality" (2016: 34). The deathliness and inherent bleakness of real pasts are, as I have argued, personified in Landon's nun, illustrated in the reader's impossible journey to the guillotine with Danton and Desmoulins in *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), and seen also within the final days of David Oluwale's life in Phillips's "Northern Lights" (2007). However, those same fictions attest that although documented history is in one sense a set of traces of the dead, it is in another sense a means of acknowledging lives in their vivid reality. Accordingly, *The Thorns* incorporates the haunting at

its start rather than its end, although it then refocuses Landon's settings and characters back on the lives silenced in its internalised history by gathering and archiving documents of their existence. In this way, I seek to emphasise the ethical necessity of the archive, however "pitiless" it may be. These documents are, again, sometimes historical and sometimes fabricated, and where I invent documents, I do so because they can only exist in the story's fictional world. My finished manuscript will include a metafictional "editor's note" by Vivien Broughton. The note will serve to explain which documents exist outside the story, echoing the kind of author's note in historical novels that de Groot rightly describes as indicating "the writer's standpoint and to outline how they relate to history, their sense of responsibility to the past, and how they articulate something fictive out of source material that cleaves to a kind of truth" (2016: 31).

I thus rewrite and expand the original story into a novella format in order to find this unnerving nun, her physical existence, her life and death, and the Thurnley Abbey that clearly existed in the world of the text long before the Broughton family. In other words, the new story builds on, as contemporary historical fictions habitually do in the ways I have indicated, the idea of historical discourse as growing out of the "formation of an *archive*" at the basis of what is considered history rather than literature (Korhonen 2006: 12). The novella's fictional components work by organising and framing this archive. This also allows for more critical use of the original's cautionary hints of sixteenth century anti-Catholic persecution and acknowledgement of more recent anti-religious prejudice, providing, I hope, opportunities to empathise with persecuted religious communities around the world and across centuries. As part of the manuscript's tracing of the discursive, creative journey between what Hilary Mantel distinguishes (echoing Kuisma Korhonen) as information and knowledge (2017), *The Thorns* documents the transition of Thurnley Abbey from church to private ownership. This is a destructive, devastating process that leaves behind Abbey ruins, a modern house carrying the name, and documents attesting to processes of destruction and reconstruction. I sought to write about the memory of that former time in a village nearby, where recusant Catholics kept their beliefs after the Reformation, secretly or not depending on the religion of the reigning monarch. I found the bases for some of my fictional documents of this period in

The Cecil Papers, a digitised archive in which post-Reformation, anti-Catholic voices of the sixteenth and seventeenth century are strident and suggest exactly the kind of Foucauldian “animation” giving way to knowledge that I wished to harness using my fictionalised archive. The search term “papist” retrieved many such voices, and as my task was to reconstruct Landon’s story rather than to write another Reformation history, I wrote some of these voices into a picture of Thurnley Village’s recusants.

Catholics were, one letter said, “The worst and most dangerous people in the world” (The Cecil Papers 1602). I noted that while Landon’s John Broughton lived in particular terror of the nun haunting his house, his wife Vivien, “deeply religious in a narrow school” (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 468), although also scared, kept calmer than him. I decided that her family lived in the north and had only renounced their Catholicism at the turn of the nineteenth century. Vivien knows this, and knows there are hollow walls at Thurnley Abbey concealing priest holes, but does not tell her husband. My story records a fictitious interview with her ancestor whose wife was a proud Catholic, upon paying a fine for recusancy to the local authorities:

My wife was baptised in your church, my lords, but as it was before and in the stone font. Blood stood out under her cheek, blistered, they say, but her skin did not break. They said she was marked, God help us. She tells me the tale with pride, my lords. (Bibby 2019: 43)

My writing draws close to the living bodies of Thurnley’s Catholics, in a reversion of the historical accounts’ closeness to their persecuted and sometimes executed bodies. If Landon’s nun is a reference to an anti-Catholic horror of relics – and this seems likely – my portrayal refocuses on those relics as objects of veneration and symbols of Christian resurrection. In the main part of the story, Vivien experiences a kind of double vision when discovering the Abbey’s newly-unlocked rooms and Catholic objects. Knowing that there have been no known Catholic recusants living on the estate since penal times, she imagines instead generations of women with secret faith:

Perhaps there were two of them: wife and daughter, hiding gaudy crosses somewhere, and chalices in tins. They wove the King’s own nightmares around their parlour walls. Their

man might have cut into the Sunday joint as he said, a request and a smile, at first: Give this up, now. (122)

I conclude this part of the article with glimpses of the world of sixteenth century Catholic rebels as these glimpses occurred to me, and as they occur to Vivien in the story, after I “archived” the words of a letter held in the Cecil Papers: “We vehemently suspect...” (1602):

We vehemently suspect: An altar. A garden.  
A large iron pot. A promise. Soft beds. A doorway, looking outside onto the King’s land. (Bibby 2019: 49)

This homely context is the one in which we see the nun, living and at peace at the close of *The Thorns*. History has folded back on itself as the processes of my writing and the fictitious Vivien’s research compel it to do, although in place of the image of the dead nun, I substitute the living woman. Both, I find, may appear when creative writing seeks to archive traces of the past.

## Conclusion

In this article I have combined my perspectives as academic/critical and creative writer to suggest that fictions can function similarly to archives. This is firstly because, as is true in both historical research and literature, the term ‘archive’ indicates at once a physical or digital collection of historical evidence, the act of collecting this evidence, and the more abstract but crucial concept of the collection of historical “traces” (to borrow Sherwood’s [2019] idea) that gives rise to inevitably imaginative narratives. I have argued that these intertwined ideas are of practical use to writers of new historical fiction because of the ways in which literary and historical discourses work alongside each other to allow for creative investigations into historical narratives, and have applied this idea in my reading of Perceval Landon’s 1908 ghost story “Thurnley Abbey” and my own work-in-progress inspired by it, *The Thorns*. The dead nun’s “[l]ittle regular steps” (Landon in Cox and Gilbert 1991: 477) in Landon’s original story break a silence that is as much historiographic and literary as ghostly, calling for more writing to break the silence further. *The Thorns* is an exercise in reasserting what the archive has been and can be beyond a set of

physical spaces, accessible and comprehensible only to professional historians. By constructing a fictitious history for Thurnley Abbey which is rooted in the real, traumatic, and contentious history of English Catholicism, I hope that *The Thorns* will contribute to a body of creative writing that redefines continually the dynamic relationship between the practices of fiction and of historiography, making new archives wherever histories and stories are found.

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## Notes

1. Landon's "Thurnley Abbey" was published originally in a collection titled *Raw Edges* (Heinemann, 1908), is included in *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (Cox and Gilbert, eds. 1991: 466-479), and is included frequently on ghost story blogs.
2. My work towards *The Thorns* began in 2017 as research presented in a paper at the Creative Histories conference at the University of Bristol, and written up as a blog post for Storying the Past: <https://storyingthepast.wordpress.com/2017/10/23/criticalcreative-histories-finding-english-catholic-pasts-in-perceval-landons-thurnley-abbey-by-leanne-bibby/>
3. I am grateful to Dr Sophie Nicholls for suggesting this link between stories and rewritings as ghostly, when I presented an early version of this research at Teesside University's School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Law's Research Seminar Series in November 2017.

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## **About the Author**

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