Leaving [Lymond] was less like leaving ... one of her friends ... and more like losing unfinished a manuscript, beautiful, absorbing and difficult, which she had long wanted to read.

Dorothy Dunnett,  *Pawn in Frankincense*, 477

Working on my graduate degrees in the 1960s I came to recognize that the reign of “new” criticism, with its emphasis on irony, ambiguity, and the decoding of meaning, was almost over. The new expertise would be the “new” historicism, a muscular return to the vision of the interactive self-making of literature and time, speech and self, culture and nature, an approach that is still in the ascendant, having assimilated insights from, and generated insights to, linguistics and formalism, gender and queer studies, psychoanalytic and ethical criticism, post-colonialism and cultural studies.

Fortunately for me, the private library prowls of my teens had given me not only the solitary joy of the Ayn Rand reader, but also the time and culture hunger of an avid historical novel fan, and I had found my richest food here in the unfolding novel sequences of the Scottish writer Dorothy Dunnett. Dunnett’s saga of Francis Crawford of Lymond, later called The Lymond Chronicles, covered the years 1548–58, the period key to the founding text of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. The sequence’s six volumes appeared in 1961–75, the time of my own self-fashioning.

The voice of Dunnett’s narrator, informed, engaged, rhetorically confident in a range of modes from the domestically comic through the shrewdly analytic to the flamboyantly dramatic, kept me turning the pages, especially as it became clear that, like the Victorian novelists...
who were drawing me toward graduate school, she knew how to keep her secrets through a long text in a way that could draw tears as well as deepen ethical and historical consciousness. As a baby assistant professor I traveled to Scotland to meet the author, later gave papers on her works at conferences, and as a second novel sequence began to come out, covering, as readers slowly discovered, Lymond’s ancestors from the fifteenth century, I wrote introductions to the American editions. This was scholarship, but it was also a labor of lexical love, the child of a reader’s romance.

Dorothy Dunnett, herself a hero to a substantial international group of devoted fans, is slowly engaging the attention of the academic reader as well, helped by the steady advance of interest in women’s writing and popular culture, in Scottish literature and culture, and in the centrality of the historical novel to British letters (Booker awards went recently to Hilary Mantel’s two revisionary sagas about Tudor England). As early as 1978, in The Scottish Novel: A Critical History, the respected critic Francis Russell Hart had noted in Dorothy Dunnett’s novels “a striking exception [to] the evasion of historical understanding” in most of the genre writing of the time, and allotted her a place in “the persistent tradition of Scottish romance,” which always included a wrestle with “the ethical dilemmas of historical transition [and] the counterpoint of ironic domesticity and the romantic past” (1978: 193–194, 188).

In a 1990 appreciation of Dunnett’s work, Cleo McNelly Kearns draws attention to an interesting aspect of the plight of the genre: “it seems to strike at the dead centre of public taste, neither high enough for autocritique nor low enough for thrills,” a dilemma that she reminds us has haunted the novel itself from its beginnings. As an example of the special critical task of historical fiction, Kearns argues, Dunnett’s novels deploy their Barthesian “reality effects” in the context of a hybrid blend of what we historically “know” and what we know is being invented, showing “the weave of history from both sides ... without breaking the pact with the popular base [and] without a trace of didacticism” (1990: 36–37, 47). Glenda Norquay writes that Dunnett’s “wit, erudition and flair for language” take the reader “into a world of textual jouissance, a delight in artifice and artificers which might be seen as postmodernist” (2013: 137).

Mariadele Boccardi’s formidably informed and reasoned The Contemporary British Historical Novel (2009) probes the history and dilemma of the genre with special reference to the “England” that has had to perceive itself in “decline” over the past 75 years, and to the literary culture that has had to take account of post-modernism’s challenge