

Notes from the Underground

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THE HISTORICAL UNDERGROUND

Historical Connections in A Song of Ice and Fire

By: Kallista Cross, Former TCC Student

George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* is often praised for its complexity, moral ambiguity, and richly imagined world, but what makes it so profound to me is how deeply it is rooted in real history. Martin clearly draws inspiration through historical events, cultures, religions, geography, and political systems from around the world, and he brilliantly weaves them into a fantasy setting that feels believable because of how well it reflects on what happened in the past. His fictional world that fans often refer to as "Planetos" serves as an imaginary reflection of our own history, which helps readers explore historical themes through the lens of fantasy.

Martin's literary influence includes J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, which along with his work belongs to the medieval fantasy genre. Magic, mythological creatures, and epic struggles for power are central features of both stories. Unlike Tolkien's clearer moral divisions, however, Martin's work embraces moral uncertainty and more accurately reflects how political power functioned in historical societies. Another major influence is H. P. Lovecraft, whose work seems to have inspired the religious elements surrounding the maritime culture of the Ironborn in the Iron Islands of Martin's fantasy world. Their worship of the Drowned God, for example, and their use of the phrase "what is dead may never die," echoes Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. Powerful themes of dread, fatalism, and the powerful presence of forces beyond human control are predominant in both as well.

A key element of value in Martin's work is how masterfully he builds the geographical features of his world using recognizable historical equivalents from our past. The North of Westeros, for example, reflects regions such as Russia or Eastern Europe:

vast, sparsely populated, cold, and notoriously difficult to conquer. Like these regions in our world, power in the North is concentrated in key strongholds, and survival depends on resilience rather than luxury. Then there's the fertile region known as The Reach that resembles medieval France and its associations with agricultural abundance, wealth, and powerful armies when mobilized. Or the Dothraki's resemblance to the Mongolians of the Eurasian Steppe, these geographic parallels are not superficial. Instead, they help explain political behavior, military strength, and cultural values within the story – as they do in history.

The Iron Islands resemble Scandinavia and Viking culture. Both developed raiding traditions because their lands were poor for farming, which forced them to rely on the sea for survival and wealth. The Ironborn, like the Vikings, value strength, seafaring skills, and conquest; while Dorne's hot climate, late conquest, and distinct cultural identity provides a historical comparison to Spain or parts of the Middle East. The resemblance that Martin's Dornish culture has to Spain reinforces the idea that geography shapes political independence and resistance, which is a popular position amongst many historians.

Martin's use of history becomes even clearer in his portrayal of war. His War of the Five Kings, for example, closely parallels England's Wars of the Roses—which was a dynastic struggle between rival noble houses claiming legitimacy through shared ancestry. The Lannister's contentious relationship with the Starks reminds us of the tension between the Lancasters and Yorks in their conflicting claims to power and loyalty. Both conflicts are intensified by weak or ineffective rulers (Robert Baratheon in Westeros for Martin, and Henry VI in England in history) whose failures destabilize their kingdoms and invite chaos.

Civil war also appears in his story of the Dance of the Dragons, which is a Targaryen succession crisis that compares to the historical period known as the Anarchy in England (1135-1154). In both the story and our historical reality, a ruling monarch names a female heir whose male relatives contest her claim, thereby plunging the realm into violence. These parallels demonstrate Martin's understanding of how succession disputes have historically torn societies apart, regardless of dragons or magic.

One of Martin's most striking historical references comes from the infamous Red Wedding scenario he constructed to depict the Stark's gruesome demise, which recalls a historical event known as the Black Dinner at Edinburgh Castle in 1440, where guests were murdered after being offered hospitality. In both events, the massacres were direct violations of sacred social norms.

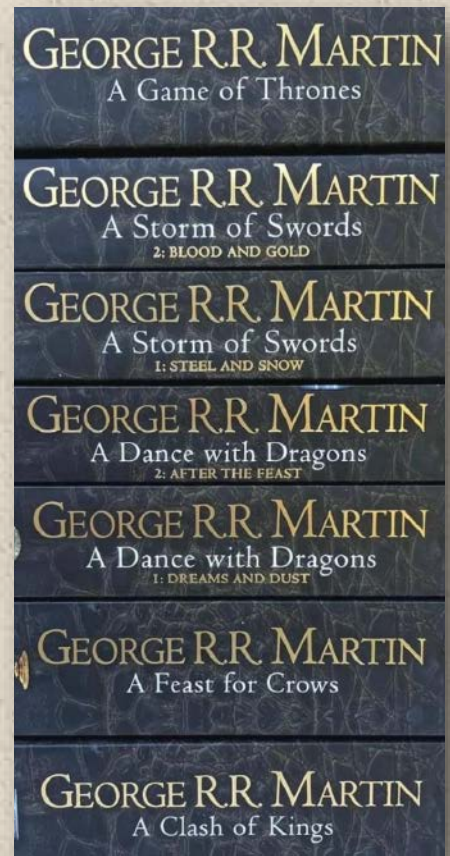
The Wall in the North that protects the people of Westeros from the "Wildlings" in the land beyond is inspired by Hadrian's Wall that the Romans built to separate their empire from the perceived barbarians living on the other side. While Martin distorts its size and exaggerates its features, the purpose remains the same: defining civilization by exclusion.

Even technological and military elements in *A Song of Ice and Fire* have historical roots. Wildfire, for example, is a devastating weapon used in Westeros that closely resembles the flammable liquid known as "Greek fire" that the Byzantines used in warfare for centuries. Both could burn on water, and both symbolize how technological advantages can shift the balance of power in warfare. Both also contain an element of mystery about them as well, since modern scholars have not discovered the formula for Greek fire and the people of Westeros do not know the recipe for Wildfire.

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Cultural Encounters at TCC: An Argentinian Student Exchange

By: Bradley J. Borougerdi, Faculty

In the online United States History 1301 course that I teach, there is a discussion board exercise I have for my students to do in their second unit of the semester. In it, I define what a cultural encounter is, give them some examples of the historical encounters we will be discussing in that unit (between the Wampanoag Indians and European Pilgrim colonists from the 1620s to the 1670s, to be exact), and explain how influential these types of encounters have been throughout history. Anyone who pays attention during this unit knows by the time we are done (if they didn't already know, that is) how significant such encounters are for shaping the historical pathways people end up following in their lives, but in this assignment students are also tasked with describing an experience they have had in their lives that would qualify as a cultural encounter. If they cannot think of a personal example, then they can pick a historical one or even make one up. Invariably, though, most students pick an example from their own pasts that has left an indelible mark upon their worldviews—or what I like to call their cultural lens.

Of course, by cultural encounters, I am referring to the process that begins to unfold when people or societies with different cultural lenses come in contact with each other. Those who initiate the contact are often called “cultural agents” or “agents of transfer,” because the way they experience the encounter often influences how (if at all) it gets woven into their way of life back in their culture—which cultural historians often refer to as the “receiving society.”

Cultural agents and their receiving societies have something we like to describe as a cultural lens. We all have one. It shapes how we see the world, influences what we focus on or pay attention to, and informs us of how to interpret reality. Common phrases you might have heard like “follow your heart” or “go with your gut,” for example, are really reflections on what David Foster Wallace called the “default settings” that have formed over the course of our lives. Our lived experiences—or responses to living in the world and reacting to what we encounter, in other words—combine with the collective memory of those who came before us to invest our worlds with meaning and help us make sense of who we are, where we've been, and where we are going.

These cultural lenses of ours help us make informed decisions in our daily lives, but they can also blind us from the valuable insight that can occur when we come in contact with people or societies from different cultures

than ours. This is where critical thinking skills come in, which are the cornerstone of any good historical education. A strong understanding of perspective, deep commitment to self-reflection, and a healthy dose of skepticism towards all thoughts and encounters will help ensure you are examining the world in such a way that will increase your chances of benefiting from cultural encounters instead of missing out on an opportunity to grow and add value to your life.

This Spring, for three weeks between February 7-28, TCC southeast students will have the chance to experience a valuable cultural encounter if they happen to be in one of the classes that each of the 5 foreign exchange students from Argentina will be visiting during this time—or if they happen to cross their paths in the halls of campus throughout the day. These students are part of a cultural exchange program we are engaged in with the San Patricio Language Institute (SPLI) in Merlo, Argentina. A group from this institute also came back in 2020, just before our campus shut down for COVID. One of the students stayed at my home while they visited, and we still keep in touch. Another of the visitors from that trip, Patricio Ferrari, became a lifelong friend of mine who introduced me to a wonderful poet I

had never heard of before—a Portuguese polyglot with more identities than one can count but who most know as Fernando Pessoa.

I have also participated in a cultural exchange program with visitors from Russia who lived with me for awhile, and I have been to Russia on one such trip where I stayed with different families in eight different cities across the

country over the span of five weeks. These types of experiences have opened my eyes to ways of thinking about life and orienting myself to the world that I could have never imagined before experiencing them. It is not something that can be explained as much as it needs to be lived. My friend, Josh Birchall, who is a linguist that does field work with the various language groups of people living along the Amazon River, says the same thing: something happens to you when you open yourself up to engaging in contact with people who come from a different culture than yours.

Try it. Get involved in a cultural exchange program. Participate in a study abroad program before you graduate college. Travel somewhere in the world where people speak a different language than you. Step out of your comfort zone and embrace the struggle. The experience is quite transformative. Join the Historical Underground or come visit us on the third floor of SE06 in office 3125A or the nook next to it for more cultural conversations.



An image of Yerba Mate, which is the national drink of Argentina. In everyday Argentine usage, someone might say “mi mate” to mean the cup itself, which Argentines often carry with them throughout the day to sip on. It has a slightly bitter taste with interesting mood-enhancing qualities. I never would've been exposed to this amazing beverage if it weren't for the cultural exchange program with SPLI back in 2020.

Conversations with History: An Interview with Josué Muñoz

By: Editors from Underground

THU: What's your position at TCC, where does that fit into the chain of command within the campus administration, and what do you do?

JM: I am the Dean of the Human & Public Service Pathway. The dean position is third in-line from the campus president. Most of my time is spent reviewing issues, finding solutions, preparing for future semesters, and waiting for the next new thing the college decides to pursue.

THU: You're one of the few left who've been here since the start of *Notes* but it's been awhile since we've produced an edition. Can you tell readers what comes to mind when you think about it?

JM: I have enjoyed reading the articles because there's always new perspectives to learn about people, events, or places. Recently discovered artifacts always create a new lens to review history.

THU: How would you define history and why does it matter?

JM: History is the collection, study, interpretation, and analysis of important events, people, and places that changed the path of a state, nation, or the world. It's important because it allows us to view past events and see why, what, and/or who caused them. For better or worse, history reflects humanity and hopefully will steer future generations down a better path and not repeat the worst examples from the past.

THU: What is the most powerful historical place you've ever visited, when did you go there, and what impact did it have on you?

JM: I've had the privilege of visiting some very important historical places. The last place I visited was Machu Picchu in Peru last summer. I have also visited Tenochtitlan in Mexico, the Colosseum in Rome, Versailles in France, and other places that have stood the test of time. I enjoy traveling and learning about other cultures, languages, and ancient sites. All these places have shown me that every



Dean Josué Muñoz is one of the "OG" (Original Ground-floor) supporters of *Notes from the Underground*

empire has a rise and fall and that all kings, queens, presidents, and dictators—no matter how powerful they think they are—end up dead because no one is eternal except the history books.

THU: If you had to pick a favorite historical quote, what would it be and can you tell us something interesting about the person who is attributed to this quote?

JM: "*Es mejor morir de pie que vivir arrodillado*" – Emiliano Zapata. The quote translates to, "It's better to die on your feet than to live on your knees." Zapata was a famous Mexican revolutionary who confronted an oppressive and corrupt Mexican government. He fought for social justice, land reform, and demanded the return of land taken from the peasants.

THU: Tell us about one of the historical sites on your bucket list that you plan to visit and explain why you want to go and what you would do while there.

JM: My bucket list is rather long, so it is difficult to pick just one. One day, I plan to visit China's Forbidden City, the Taj Mahal in India, Petra in Jordan, and the Acropolis in Greece—among other places. I want to visit these places because I have read about all of them in history books and often daydream about what those places must have been like at their peak. Visiting historical places brings a sense of reality to the places and the people who built them. It's amazing to stand in front of them and realize they are not imaginary places built by characters in a novel.

THU: If you had to pick a historical figure to face off with in a Mixed Martial Arts match for one ten-minute round while that person had one hand tied behind their back, who would it be and why?

JM: This is a great and fun question. I would choose Genghis Khan because he was known for his intelligence and power. I would like to meet him in person, while fearing for my life.

A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE, CONTINUED . . .

"Martin's work embraces moral uncertainty and more accurately reflects on how political power function[s] . . ."

Of all the historical analogies in the series, though, the strongest is between the Dothraki and the Mongols. Both societies revolved around a nomadic way of life, with a horse-centered culture shaped by vast grassland environments. Horses provide food, transportation, military power, and even spiritual meaning. Leadership titles such as "Khal" and "Khan" are strikingly similar, along with social customs like the Dothraki bloodriders and Mongolian blood brothers. Also like the Mongols, the Dothraki are viewed as savage "others" by settled societies, yet their military effectiveness and internal loyalty challenge those assumptions.

Finally, religion in *A Song of Ice and Fire* also reflects real historical belief systems. The Faith of the Seven, for example, resembles Catholicism in its structure, hierarchy, and use of authority to influence politics. The Old Gods parallel nature-based religions such as Druidism that emphasize spiritual connections to land and ancestry. The worship of R'hllor contains similarities to Zoroastrianism with its focus on light versus darkness and a prophesied savior figure. The belief systems in Martin's world shape political alliances and conflicts the same way that religions have done throughout human history.

Taken together, all of this explains why Martin's world feels so real. He doesn't just invent new places and characters in a foreign world, but rather grounds them in recognizable historical references and patterns from the past. *A Song of Ice and Fire* demonstrates that fantasy does not escape history; it reinterprets it. By drawing on real events, cultures, and ideas, Martin invites readers to engage with the past in a way that feels immediate, complex, and deeply human. If you have not read it, you should get started. It is vast and contains many thousands of pages, but it is worth it. In fact, he hasn't even finished writing it yet, so try to see if you can catch up to where he is so that you can share his epic ending with the rest of us.

Notes from the Underground

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"HISTORY IS OUR WEAPON OF CHOICE"

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

When sitting down to start this edition, the phrase that kept coming to mind was "New Beginnings." Many of those who were affiliated with TCC the last time we dished out an issue of this publication (April 2023) are no longer with us, and those who still remain have endured drastic transformations to the way we work. Newly built and recently renovated buildings, changes to our office spaces and the way we interact with students, as well as differently styled classrooms have all required significant adjustments for us all. Life comes with many changes we have to endure along the way, for better or for worse. Those out there, like us in here at The Underground's Center for History and Culture who do what we do because we love it, are often frustrated by changes that make it harder to do what we already do well; but passion is persistent, and its flame has kept our hope alive.

The first edition of *Notes from the Underground* appeared back in November 2011, which is the same year The Historical Underground (Southeast's historical society) was founded. We didn't even print the names of those who wrote the articles back then! For the next half-year after that first edition, we cranked one out every month. We produced nine editions in 2012, which was the peak. Six more came out the following year, but since then we have only been able to push out two editions a year (and some years, none at all). Of course, lots of this has to do with how many students we have who are willing to take it upon themselves to write an article—for it is a rule of the Underground that every edition must contain at least one student entry.

We are excited to be in a position again where we can start the year off with a fresh February edition, which has not happened for us since 2019. I am not sure that we will ever reach the fiery days of monthly production again, but it feels good to hit the ground running for the new year with an article from a former student who actually submitted a much longer version of her reflections of *A Song of Ice and Fire* about three years ago now. Now she will finally be able to see her polished thoughts in print. One of our own editors, Bradley J. Borougerdi, contributed a short piece on cultural encounters to fill some space and inform our readers of the cultural exchange students we have coming in from Argentina this month, and the Dean of a newly established student pathway called Human & Public Service has delivered an updated interview for the *Conversations with History* piece we often feature in *Notes from the Underground*. He was the first TCC administrator to be interviewed for one of our publications back in April 2019, so it's nice to see him come back to answer different questions (Genghis Khan has nothing on you, Josué!)

As always, we appreciate you taking the time to read this, and we hope you consider submitting a piece between 400-1500 words for a future publication. If you are a professor, tell your students about their opportunity to become a published author. Most of our previous editions can be viewed in our publication archive at www.thehistoricalunderground.com, while physical copies of some can be found in certain spots around campus. Spread the word, and help us to keep people reading . . . to keep people writing . . . and thus, keep all of us . . . learning.

~ Editors from the Underground