

First Kingdom publication

Christmas aside, when even the self-employed must have the discipline to turn the computer off and not answer emails, there has been another flurry of FK business to attend to, once more distracting from the job in hand. I did an online interview with Ellie Cawthorne for BBC History Magazine, which I think will come out in January; and there's going to be a podcast to go with it. And I finally fulfilled a promise to Kate Appleton, Head of Zeus's Head of Publicity (which makes the whole organisation sound like a Medusa), to put together a video for the launch.

All very well, I said to myself; but I don't have professional editing facilities at home; and although I have a perfectly decent camera (a Fujifilm X-E3) and a good add-on sound recorder (a Zoom 2), it's not the matter of a moment to put together something that doesn't look like a poor imitation of a holiday video. It's true that I know my way around a documentary style film – I made many shorts and two features for Tyne-Tees TV in the days when they still made programmes. I got to learn from some seriously good news crews, camera and sound technicians and editors. I know, in theory, what shots to take – reverses, stills, pans etc – and what not to try (zooms and 'clever' moves). But it's not the same when you are trying to film yourself. You have to guess all the framing, timing and so on. And in December, there's often very little light or time.

A week before Christmas I headed out to the nearest river (a couple of minutes away): here there is atmospheric sound and background movement. One good reason for shooting by a river is that the ambient sound covers any extraneous noise – cars, planes, dog walkers shouting at their dogs, etc. Alas, as I parked the car a party of 50 primary school children were setting off on a lesson. A swift escape; and I found a wood a few miles away where I knew there'd be no-one to disturb me. The day was fading fast. I got a few quick shots – no attempt at speech, which I could add as a voiceover later; and I was lucky with shots and fragments of natural lighting.

I set the video up with still images and subtitles and some moody (fee-free) music. Then the river shots; and an added voiceover, all edited in a package called *Openshot* (another freebie); which took some time to master. Anyway, readers can judge the results for themselves – I've added a link to the final cut on the main page of the website.

The Wood Age

I have been writing a chapter about carpentry through the ages; essentially to show how carpenters from the last two and a half thousand years, from anywhere across the world, would recognise each other's tools and techniques. It gave me a chance to re-read the utterly charming and evocative *Village Carpenter* (1937) by Walter Rose, who died in about 1960 having inherited a vocation for joinery from his father and grandfather in rural Victorian Buckinghamshire. He remembered the drudgery and skill of saw pits, sash

window moulding planes and bored out elm pumps; and would have understood perfectly the sense of spiritual fulfilment experienced by a later contemporary, Tsunekazu Nishioka, one of the last of the Master Temple Carpenters of Japan, who has left us a record of his restoration of the world's oldest standing wooden building, the Hōryū-ji Buddhist complex in Nara Province – first constructed in the 7th century AD (or CE, as one should now call it). Being able to link such apparently exotic worlds within the narrative, without it sounding clunky (like a jump cut edit in a video), is one of the well-honed tools of the non-fiction writer. It's satisfying when it works. I can't witness the interaction conversation between the two – they never met – but I can try to evoke a sense of mutual comprehension and admiration between two craftsmen from different traditions.

The protagonist in non-fiction writing

Talking of well-honed tools... I think I've said before that I have learned much from filmmakers, who know how to distil narrative in an engineered framework that can be deconstructed, cut and pasted and re-imagined. In my writing head, I have a camera and sound crew helping me envisage where to place myself and my characters. I see how 'editing' not only makes for refreshing brevity, but allows readers to contribute to the flow by imagining some of the narrative and visuals without me making it too obvious.

The best lesson I ever learned, and the best £80 I ever spent, was on a screenwriting course run by Steve Chambers, who weaned me off prolix description and onto the engineering of imagery. And through film I came to understand the importance of knowing your **protagonist** – not necessarily the main character, but the character who undergoes the most profound emotional journey across what's known as a balanced narrative, which starts with a call to adventure, progresses through reverses and complications to a catharsis and denouement, when all but the protagonist goes back to 'normal'.

Non-fiction writing also benefits greatly from using the idea of the protagonist to carry the story. In *The Prometheans*, for example, although the narrative focuses on John Martin, the protagonist is the spirit of the age which he exemplified. In *The King in the North*, the protagonist is an idea of Early Medieval Britain – a cultural landscape. Fiction writers play with this idea in the same way – in *Howard's End* it's the house that takes the role of the protagonist, for example. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is the main character, but his accomplice Sam is the protagonist.

I don't always absolutely know the protagonist when I start; but if I don't know at the end, then it's a duffo. In *The Wood Age*, the protagonist is a virtual museum where I am curating all the stories and artefacts of those many millennia of human endeavour that encode our cultural adventure and creativity. Something worth celebrating in these uncomfortable times...