

## A FACTUAL NOTE ON EATERS OF THE DEAD

*EATERS OF THE DEAD* WAS CONCEIVED ON A DARE. IN 1974, my friend Kurt Villadsen proposed to teach a college course he called "The Great Bores." The course would include all the texts that were supposed to be crucial to Western civilization but which were, in truth, no longer read willingly by anyone, because they were so tedious. Kurt said that the first of the great bores he would address was the epic poem *Beowulf*.

I disagreed. I argued that *Beowulf* was a dramatic, exciting story—and that I could prove it. I went home and immediately began making notes for this novel.

I started from the scholarly tradition that examined epic poetry and mythology as if it might have some underlying basis in fact. Heinrich Schliemann assumed the *Iliad* was true, and found what he claimed was Troy and Mycenae; Arthur Evans believed there was something to

the myth of the Minotaur, and uncovered the Palace of Knossos on Crete;<sup>1</sup> M. I. Finley and others had traced the route of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*;<sup>2</sup> Lionel Casson had written about the real journeys that might underlie the myth of Jason and the Argonauts.<sup>3</sup> Thus it seemed reasonable, within this tradition, to imagine that *Beowulf*, too, had originally been based on an actual event.

That event had been embellished over centuries of oral retelling, producing the fantastic narrative we read today. But I thought it might be possible to reverse the process, peeling away the poetic invention, and returning to a kernel of genuine human experience—something that had actually happened.

This idea of uncovering the factual core of the narrative was appealing but impractical. Modern scholarship offered no objective procedure to separate poetic invention from underlying fact. Even to try would mean making innumerable subjective decisions, large and small, on every

<sup>1</sup>The classic popular account of Evans and Schliemann is C. W. Ceram (Kurt W. Marek), *Gods, Graves, and Scholars*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1967.

<sup>2</sup>M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus*, Viking Press, New York, 1965.

<sup>3</sup>Lionel Casson, *The Ancient Mariners, Sea Farers and Sea Fighters of the Mediterranean in Ancient Times*, Macmillan, New York, 1959.

page—in the end, so many decisions that the result must inevitably be still another invention: a modern pseudo-historical fantasy about what the original events might have been.

The insoluble problem prevented me from proceeding. Of course, in writing a novel, I intended to create a fantasy of my own. But fantasies demand strict logic, and I was troubled by the logic behind what I wanted to write. Since a real scholar could not do what I intended to do, I found I could not pretend, in writing, that I had done so. This was not a failure of imagination or nerve. It was a purely practical problem. Like the scholar, I had no basis for deciding which elements of the *Beowulf* narrative to keep, and which to discard.

Although the idea of working backward seemed untenable, I remained intrigued. I asked a different question: suppose, for a moment, that the practical problems that troubled me did not exist, and the process could indeed be carried out. What would the resulting narrative look like? I imagined it would probably be a rather mundane recounting of some battles that occurred more than a thousand years ago. In fact, I suspected it would probably resemble most eyewitness accounts of famous events, as written by people who are unaware of the significance of the events they are seeing.

This line of thinking eventually led to the solution to my problem. Clearly, I wanted an eyewitness account. I could not extract it from the existing *Beowulf* narrative, and I did not want to invent it. That was my impasse. But at some point, I realized I did not have to invent it—I could *discover* it instead.

Suppose, I thought, a contemporary observer had been present at these battles, and had written an account of the events that were later transformed into a poem. Suppose, too, that this account *already existed*, but had never been recognized for what it was. If this were so, then no invention on my part would be necessary. I could merely reproduce the eyewitness narrative, and annotate it for the reader.

The concept of a preexisting manuscript bypassed the logical problems which had earlier impeded me, because a found manuscript would not be my creation—even though I would create it. Of course such thinking is absurd, but it happens all the time. Often actors cannot act without a prop, or a false moustache, or some other artifice to separate themselves from the character they are portraying. I was engaged in a similar process.

What sort of narrative would be most desirable? I concluded the most useful account would

be written by an outsider—someone not part of the culture, who could report objectively on the events as they occurred. But who would this outside observer have been? Where would he have come from?

On reflection, I realized I already knew of such a person. In the tenth century, an Arab named Ibn Fadlan had traveled north from Baghdad into what is now Russia, where he came in contact with the Vikings. His manuscript, well-known to scholars, provides one of the earliest eyewitness accounts of Viking life and culture.<sup>4</sup> As a college undergraduate, I had read portions of the manuscript. Ibn Fadlan had a distinct voice and style. He was imitable. He was believable. He was unexpected. And after a thousand years, I felt that Ibn Fadlan would not mind being revived in a new role, as a witness to the events that led to the epic poem of *Beowulf*.

Although the full manuscript of Ibn Fadlan has been translated into Russian, German, French and many other languages, only portions had been translated into English. I obtained the

<sup>4</sup>Among the many discussions of Viking society for the general reader, see: D. M. Wilson, *The Vikings*, London, 1970; J. Brondsted, *The Vikings*, London, 1965; P. Sawyer, *The Age of the Vikings*, London, 1962; P. G. Foote and D. M. Wilson, *The Viking Achievement*, London, 1970. Some of these references quote passages from Ibn Fadlan's manuscript.

existing manuscript fragments and combined them, with only slight modifications, into the first three chapters of *Eaters of the Dead*.<sup>5</sup> I then wrote the rest of the novel in the style of the manuscript to carry Ibn Fadlan on the rest of his now-fictional journey. I also added commentary and some extremely pedantic footnotes.

I was aware that Ibn Fadlan's actual journey in A.D. 921 had probably occurred too late in history to serve as the basis for *Beowulf*, which many authorities believe was composed a hundred and fifty years earlier. But the dating of the poem is uncertain, and at some point a novelist will insist on his right to take liberties with the facts. And *Eaters* contains many overt anachronisms, particularly when Ibn Fadlan meets up with a group of remnant Neanderthals. (One of the oddities of this book is that the intervening decades has seen a scholarly reevaluation of Neanderthal man; and the notion that there

<sup>5</sup>To my knowledge there are still only two principal sources in English. The first is the text fragments I read as an undergraduate: Robert Blake and Richard Frye, "The Vikings Abroad and at Home," in Carleton S. Coon, *A Reader in General Anthropology*, Henry Holt and Co., New York, 1952, pp. 410-416. The second source is Robert P. Blake and Richard N. Frye, "Notes on the Risala of Ibn-Fadlan," *Byzantina Metabyzantina*, 1949, v.1 part 2, New York, pp. 7-37. I am grateful to Professor Frye for his assistance during the first publication of this book, and this recent revision.

might have been a few still around a thousand years ago in a remote location does not seem quite so preposterous now as it did then.)

But certainly, the game that the book plays with its factual bases becomes increasingly complex as it goes along, until the text finally seems quite difficult to evaluate. I have a long-standing interest in verisimilitude, and in the cues which make us take something as real or understand it as fiction. But I finally concluded that in *Eaters of the Dead*, I had played the game too hard. While I was writing, I felt that I was drawing the line between fact and fiction clearly; for example, one cited translator, *Per Fraus-Dolus*, means in literal Latin "by trickery-deceit." But within a few years, I could no longer be certain which passages were real, and which were made up; at one point I found myself in a research library trying to locate certain references in my bibliography, and finally concluding, after hours of frustrating effort, that however convincing they appeared, they must be fictitious. I was furious to have wasted my time, but I had only myself to blame.

I mention this because the tendency to blur the boundaries of fact and fiction has become widespread in modern society. Fiction is now seamlessly inserted in everything from scholarly

histories to television news. Of course, television is understood to be venal, its transgressions shrugged off by most of us. But the attitude of "post-modern" scholars represents a more fundamental challenge. Some in academic life now argue seriously there is no difference between fact and fiction, that all ways of reading text are arbitrary and personal, and that therefore pure invention is as valid as hard research. At best, this attitude evades traditional scholarly discipline; at worst, it is nasty and dangerous.<sup>6</sup> But such academic views were not prevalent twenty years ago, when I sat down to write this novel in the guise of a scholarly monograph, and academic fashions may change again—particularly if scholars find themselves chasing down imaginary footnotes, as I have done.

Under the circumstances, I should perhaps say explicitly that the references in this afterword are genuine. The rest of the novel, including its introduction, text, footnotes, and bibliography, should properly be viewed as fiction.

When *Eaters of the Dead* was first published, this playful version of *Beowulf* received a rather

<sup>6</sup>For trends in post-modern academic thought, see, for example, Pauline Marie Rosenau, *Post-Modernism and the Social Sciences: Insights, Inroads, and Intrusions*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1992; and H. Aram Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism*, Routledge, New York, 1989.

irritable reception from reviewers, as if I had desecrated a monument. But *Beowulf* scholars all seem to enjoy it, and many have written to say so.

M.C.

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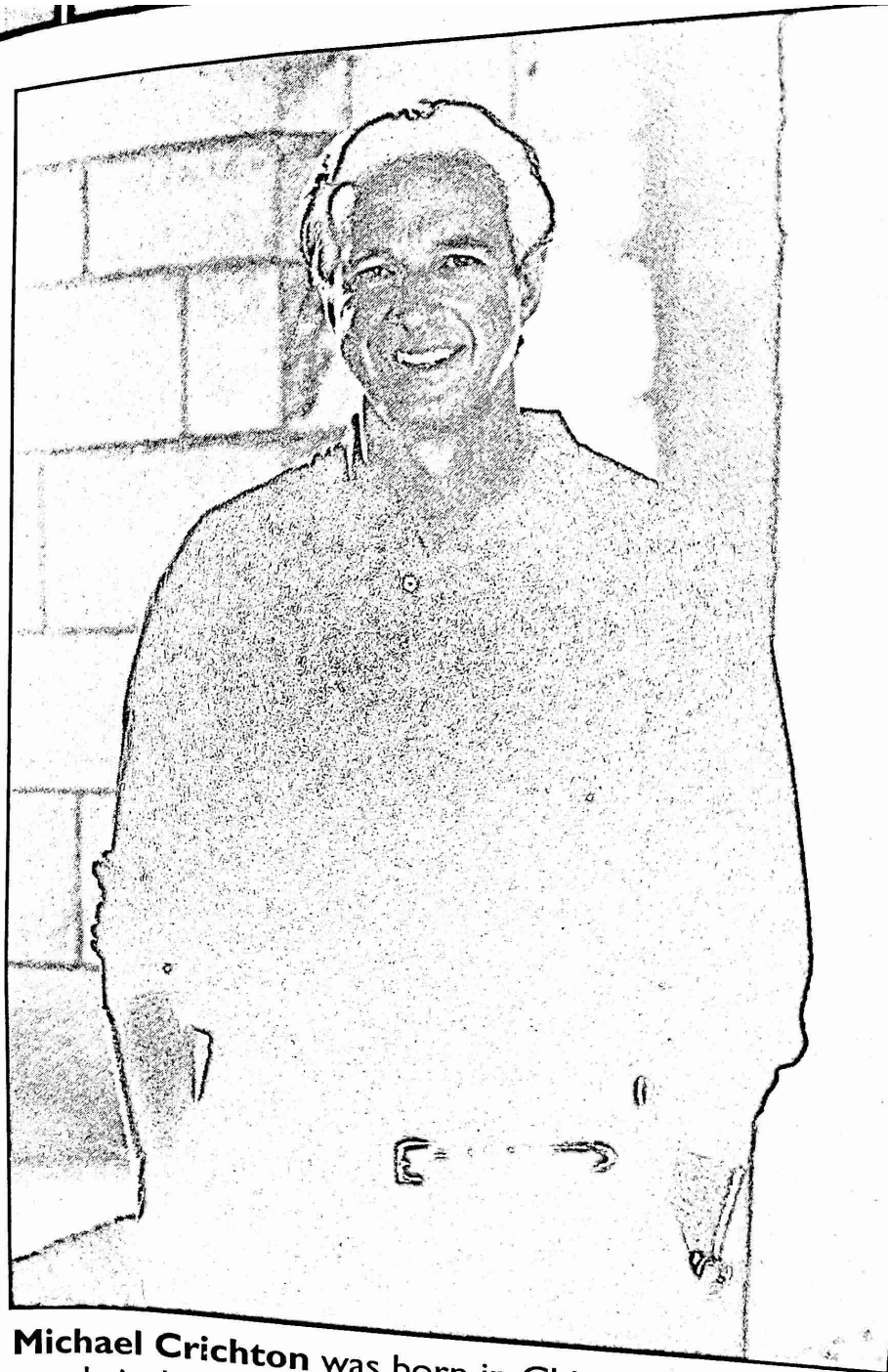


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**Michael Crichton** was born in Chicago, in 1942. His novels include *The Great Train Robbery*, *Congo*, *Jurassic Park*, *Rising Sun*, *Disclosure*, *The Lost World*, *Airframe*, and his newest novel, *Timeline*. He is also the creator of the television series *ER*.