

*The Coronation* is my third novel. Like the other two, *The Genes of Isis* and *The Old Dragon's Head*, it's a historical fantasy. They are stand-alone novels, although they share similar themes – the individual's spiritual quest, the journey of self-discovery and the role of destiny in human affairs. My stories feature known events and real people from history which are re-told and examined through the lens of the supernatural – that's 'history with a supernatural twist'.

*The Coronation* takes place during the Great Enlightenment, that era of intellectual ferment in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Europe. The novel is set in East Prussia, a now-defunct state on the Baltic Sea. Historically, Prussia was the template for an embryonic Germany. At the time of the novel, in the 1760's, Prussia was governed by an enlightened despot, King Frederick the Great.

Sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania, the land of East Prussia is special because of the presence of amber – a semi-precious yellow fossilized tree resin – along its Samland Peninsula, where 95% of the world's amber is found.

I've walked along that coast, and it's quite magical to stoop and find a morsel of amber nestling on the sea shore. That's why, in the novel, I featured the famous Amber Room, which was housed in Catherine Palace near St. Petersburg, Russia.



Like my other novels, the plot of *The Coronation* unfolds against a backdrop of social and political upheaval, notably the Seven Years' War in mainland Europe between the burgeoning power of Prussia, and its more powerful Imperial neighbours, Austria and Russia.

As well as territorial acquisition, the war was also a continuation of the religious conflicts that had afflicted Western Europe since the Great Reformation. Prussia was Lutheran (Protestant) while Austria and Russia were Catholic.



In *The Coronation*, I wanted to explore the origins of our modern world and its social freedoms and constraints. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Prussian society, like the other societies of German kingdoms, was ordered according to the Medieval Law Book, the *Sachsenspiegel* (meaning the Saxon Mirror). Its idea, similar to that of the Great Chain of Being, was that society had to be structured according to the way the Creator had ordered the universe, in other words, its mirror image. The King occupied the first station, Ecclesiastic Princes the second, and so on down to the peasants in the seventh station. Wherever you were in the structure, you were not permitted to move from it.

During the Great Enlightenment, the previously-rigid shackles imposed by the Catholic Church were slowly being loosened, allowing the development of original philosophical and political ideas and the exploration of new scientific fields such as biology. Many of the seeds of our modern times were sown during the Great Enlightenment. The 1760's was a time when giants such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Voltaire, Adam Smith, Carl Linnaeus, Immanuel Kant, and James Watt bestrode the world.



Today we live in large urban conurbations with mass movements of people.

The 18<sup>th</sup> Century saw the shift from the agrarian-based feudal society built around peasant workers and landowners (or Junkers as they were called in Prussia) to an industrial factory-based one with huge anonymous cities. In those days, village people still retained a strong binding relationship with the land on which they lived, expressed through folk customs, song, dance, story and the like.

They conceived folk such as Til Eulenspiegel, a German peasant trickster, a character I explored in the novel (that's him in the picture). There was a love affair between the people and the land on which they lived – this was Arcadia. In Europe, this was the last time when this pastoral vision of harmony with nature was prevalent.

Using the folklore and heraldry of the land of Prussia, which is rich in the motif of the eagle, I conceived the idea of a supernatural entity, the Adler, and the part it would play in the development of the single most important event in modern times – the Industrial Revolution.



As well as telling the story of this exciting, changing time, I wanted to provide an alternative genesis for the Industrial Revolution, and suggest why we live in a world so reliant on technology.

Welcome to the world of *The Coronation*.

*The Coronation* is my third novel. Like the second, *The Old Dragon's Head*, it's a historical fantasy. My debut novel, *The Genes of Isis*, is an epic fantasy.

The main character of *The Coronation* is Marion, Countess von Adler. She is based on a real life personage, Marion, Countess von Dönhoff who lived at her Junker family estate at Castle Friedrichstein near Löwenhagen, East Prussia. For reasons of discretion, I changed the name of the estate in the novel to Castle Ludwigshain.



Much of the inner detail in the novel is derived from the real Countess' autobiography, *Before the Storm: Memories of My Youth in Old Prussia* (tr. by Jean Steinberg. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990). Although she lived during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, because of her book, I was able to add that rare touch of authenticity and flavour the story with unusual, subtle details. It allowed me to enter not only her pre-Second World War world and then imagine what it might have been like to live there during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when the novel is set.

A wonderful read, she paints a vivid picture about her upbringing, from the parlour games, the geese flying overhead, the smell of the forests, her dogs and horses, the names of the staff, to the layout of the rooms in the castle and the out-buildings, and beyond that, the rolling fields, the local villages, the lakes, and running through the valley, the River Pregel.

She describes the diet, the Christmas meal, the daily chores and the routines of Lutheran prayer and cleaning, right down to the colour and texture of the tunics worn by the housemaids.



Bordering the Baltic Sea, the land of East Prussia is special because of the presence of amber – a semi-precious yellow fossilized tree resin - along its Samland Peninsula. 95% of the world's amber is found there. This gave rise to a significant plot element featuring the famous Amber Room, which, at the time of the novel in the 1760's, was housed in The Catherine Palace near St. Petersburg, Russia.

Marion, Countess von Dönhoff, had much to say about life in Germany during the Second World War, and this extract is perhaps the summit of her humanity:

*"I also do not believe that hating those who have taken over one's homeland ... necessarily demonstrates love for the homeland. When I remember the woods and lakes of East Prussia, its wide meadows and old shaded avenues, I am convinced that they are still as incomparably lovely as they were when they were my home.*

*Perhaps the highest form of love is losing without possessing."*

With such a profound sentiment, added to her sparkling wit and sense of compassion, she was the ideal inspiration for the novel's lead character, Marion, Countess von Adler. Adler means eagle, and in *The Coronation*, I wanted to explore an alternative, spiritual genesis for the Industrial Revolution.

Using the folklore and heraldry of the land of Prussia, which is rich in the motif of the eagle, the double-headed eagle, I conceived the idea of a mysterious, supernatural entity, the Adler, and the part it would play in the development of the Industrial Revolution.



What, you may ask, is title of the novel, *The Coronation*, to do with the Adler? Well, to reveal that would be a spoiler. Enjoy the novel.



*Hello Justin and welcome to Passages to the Past! Thanks so much for stopping by today to talk about The Coronation!*

My pleasure, thanks for having me along, Amy.

*To begin, can you please tell us a little about yourself and your writing?*

I have a research degree. I get on with research, it's what I do, it's what I've always done. I enjoy discovery, especially of history and people whose works shed a light on the human condition i.e. how and why we have inherited the society we live in today.

I write secret histories, that's history with a supernatural twist. I take historical events and real historical personages, especially those that were seminal in shaping the human condition, and I examine them through a supernatural lens. This yields a different explanation for why those events happened, and why those people did what they did.

*What inspired you to write The Coronation?*

Today, it seems we are dominated by technology, and live in a technological post-industrial society. But why? How did we end up like this? Is this how it was meant to be? These were the questions I wanted to explore in my novel, and which inspired me to write *The Coronation*.

*What research did you undertake when writing The Coronation?*



The main character of *The Coronation* is Marion, Countess von Adler. She is based on a real-life personage, Marion, Countess von Dönhoff who lived at a Junker family estate at Castle Friedrichstein near Löwenhagen, East Prussia (see photograph). For reasons of discretion, I changed the name to Castle Ludwigshain.

Much of the inner detail in the novel is derived from the real Countess'

autobiography, *Before the Storm: Memories of My Youth in Old Prussia* (tr. by Jean Steinberg. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

Although she lived during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, I was able to add a rare touch of authenticity to my novel.

It allowed me to enter her pre-Second World War world and imagine what it might have been like to live on the Friedrichstein estate during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. That's her photograph.



*What would you like readers to take away from reading The Coronation?*

To ask themselves questions such as...

We are *Homo Sapiens Sapiens*, which is Latin for man-the-doubly-wise. If that's the case, then how came we are not displaying that wisdom in our society today?

If the Great Enlightenment was when we were meant to begin that spiritual journey, what happened to it? Where did the promise of that enlightenment go? Where did it end up?

And why are we so fascinated by and dependent on technology?

*What was your favorite scene to write?*



One scene I enjoyed writing was based around and inspired by the famous Hieronymus Bosch painting, Cutting the Stone. It's also called The Extraction of the Stone of Madness or The Cure of Folly.

This painting aptly summarised one of the novel's main themes, notably the blurred line between sanity and madness in human affairs. The painting was also a launch pad to explore the meaning and significance of the Medieval medical practice of trepanning.

*What was the most difficult scene to write?*

The ending. I think I must have written three or four versions before I was content that it tied up the threads of the plot in a satisfactory way, and which brought the main character arcs to a successful completion.

*When did you know you wanted to be a writer?*

I wrote a novel and some short stories when I was a young man, a student in my 20's. Then in my middle years, I wrote up a lot of my historical researches. Then, 15 years ago, I decided to return to writing fiction.

*What does your daily writing routine look like?*

Edit the previous day's work, which helps clue me into the plot and the characters. Then find a space in which to write for as long as I can before the next interruption.

*What has been your greatest challenge as a writer? Have you been able to overcome it?*

I grew up reading classic novels, like *Crime and Punishment*, *Metamorphosis* and *The Plague*, all of which were written from an omniscient point of view. Then I spent a lot of time writing up my non-fiction historical researches. Most modern historical novels are written in the third person point of view. These two features became engrained habits. My greatest challenges for me as a writer were to overcome these habits.

*Who are your writing inspirations?*

A mix of two influences.

First, the Greek tragedians – Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus – who taught me that there is only one thing worth writing about – and that's the human condition.

And second, the existentialists – Kafka, Camus, Dostoyevsky – who taught me that the only real way to examine the human condition is by removing your characters from their comfort zone, and by jettisoning them into situations that are far bigger than they are, and about which they have no prior experience.

*What was the first historical novel you read?*

I can't remember, but Frank Herbert's *Dune* (which is more historical fantasy) had a huge influence on me when I was a young man. Its evocative descriptions of the desert inspired me to go to the Sahara to experience one for myself.

*What is the last historical novel you read?*

I'm currently reading Tim Powers' *On Stranger Tides*.

*What appeals to you most about your chosen genre?*

Because I write secret histories, in a sense it gives me the opportunity to re-write history, not what happened, but why it happened, what unseen forces were at play that motivated and influenced the decisions of the men and women of the time, and how those events and people fitted into the zeitgeist – the spirit of the times. A wise person once said, 'It's not history that's important, it's the interpretation of history that's important'.

*What historical time period do you gravitate towards the most with your personal reading?*

## Passages to the Past Interview with Justin Newland

It varies. I tend to read the historical period about which I'm writing. But I'd say that the most revealing, enigmatic, obscure and misunderstood historical period is – by far – Ancient Egypt.

*What do you like to do when you aren't writing?*

Reading. Walking. Good conversation.

*Lastly, what are you working on next?*

A novel set in England in 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada. Like my other novels, it's a weave of history, fiction and supernatural. Its working title should give a good sense of its curious nature: *The Shoes That Don't Wear Out*.

# THE CORONATION: An Interview with Justin Newland

**J&H:** We frequently say that we love books which tell a story through a different lens and make us look at a situation in a way we may not have done before. In *The Coronation*, how do you examine the Great Enlightenment in a way that makes history fresh and interesting?

**JN:** Good question. Let me try and give my answer some context.

The Great Enlightenment was a ferment of intellectual ideas that occurred across Northern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. It spawned advancements in the practice of medicine, mathematics, and physics; it led to the development of biological taxonomy and laid the foundations of modern chemistry. These were great achievements that brought the light of reason to the dark superstitions of Medieval times.

So, whatever happened to all this huge, purposeful advance in human affairs? Why didn't it continue and flourish into an enlightened modern world in which, for example, the scourges of war, disease, famine and crime were no more? Why did it result in the Industrial Revolution and its outplay in modern technology? These questions provided the framework with which I examined the Great Enlightenment.

**J&H:** When did you become interested in history and what was it about this period and place that intrigued you enough to write about it?

**JN:** I've always been an avid reader, not just of literature, but philosophy, as well as history. I've always wanted to understand why the world we live in is as it is. I found one way to do so is to examine the origins of our world by peering into the mirror of history.

**J&H:** While digging into your research for this book, did you get to travel to any exotic locations? If so, which were your favorites and why?

**JN:** The novel is set in the defunct Baltic state of East Prussia, which is now the Russian province of Kaliningrad. In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, its capital city was Königsberg, which was home to the enlightened despot, King Frederick the Great, and the philosopher, Immanuel Kant. In 2001 when I went there, it was a sad, gloomy place, which had suffered from a dearth of investment by its Soviet masters. A leaflet from the tourist agency said "It's more fun than you





think,” which betrayed a wicked sense of irony. Another time, travelling on a train in Kaliningrad, I was fined for having an oversize suitcase.



The compensations, though, were many – although the people were poor, they were spirited, and the landscape was rich in history.

The highlight of the visit was the Samland Coast, where most of the world’s supply of amber is found. It’s the promontory that juts out to the west of Königsberg in the map above.

You walk along the beach, and pick up these glistening pebbles of amber! It’s quite magical.

**J&H:** Tell us about Marion von Adler and Ian Fermor. What traits did you admire about them, and how did they challenge you?

**JN:** Marion von Adler was a pleasure to discover. Her character was based on a real-life German Countess, Marion von Donhoff. She was brought up in a Junker family on the Friedrichstein estate in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. N.B. I changed the name of the estate in the novel for reasons of discretion. I found her memoirs, *Before the Storm; Memories of My Youth in Old Prussia* to be a rich trove of detail and a personal insight into a way of life that had hardly changed for centuries. In my novel, the character’s faith and belief is tested to breaking point, and she ... well, to tell would be a spoiler.



Ian Fermor was another fascinating character. For reasons that I can’t divulge (for fear of a spoiler), I needed to unearth a real historical connection between Russia, East Prussia and Scotland. And I found it in the real-life personage of General William Fermor, a Scottish immigrant who had settled in Russia. And he was also the Governor of Königsberg when the Russians invaded it in the 1760’s, the time when my novel was set. His fictional relation, Ian Fermor, fought in the Russian army of occupation. The trait I admired about Ian Fermor was that he negotiated the seemingly-awkward transition from soldier to priest.

**J&H:** How would you categorize your writing? Do you consider it religious fiction? What types of readers do you think it will most appeal to?

**JN:** To frame my stories, I use the genre called a secret history thriller.

The 'history' bit is that I take real historical events and actual historical personages and examine them through a supernatural, spiritual lens – that's the 'secret' bit. Then I add tension and intrigue – and that's the 'thriller' bit.

Because my novels deal with what you might call higher entities or numinous beings, and look at the trace of human life as a deliberate and purposeful progression, then I guess this mix of ingredients could be seen as appealing to a religious readership.

My MC's - my main characters - are often young men or women, in their teens or twenties, who are naturally exploring life and its meaning, which dove-tails well with the broad, encompassing themes that I explore.

In this sense, I would hope to appeal to readers both young and old, those looking for a thrilling, historically accurate story with a supernatural twist.

**J&H:** If Fermor could step off the page and chat with us today, how would he want us to remember him?

**JN:** In part, I based Ian Fermor on Colonel Nicholson, the main character of David Lean's *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*. The character of Nicholson intrigued me, because at the finale, you don't know what you think of him. That was the kind of ambiguous ending I wanted to configure for Ian Fermor, and to allow the reader to decide on the rights and wrongs of his actions.

Ian Fermor would want us remember him as a genuine person who tried his best to respond to a spiritual quest but was overtaken by force of circumstance.

**J&H:** The pandemic changed everyone's lives over the past year. Did you learn anything about yourself during this time?

**JN:** The pandemic might have temporarily disrupted our daily routines, but there's still a yellow sun, blue sky, four seasons, a lunar cycle, gravity and so on, meaning that these fundamentals haven't changed, and nor have the profound questions that face us as individuals: Who am I? What am I? What are my values? What are my foundations? What do I want and why?

Apart from these considerations, I guess over the past year that I have developed the art of conversation and learned to be a little more patient.

**J&H:** What can readers look forward to next from you?

**JN:** I have a new novel coming out called *The Abdication*. This one is a light fantasy with supernatural and philosophical undertones. It's a modern re-interpretation of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve and their departure from the Garden of Eden.

Its primary theme is to explore the role of free will within the human condition. It features a young woman, Tula, who embarks on a spiritual journey of redemption and self-discovery.

Watch out for it, it's due out in July, 2021.