

KAZUO ISHIGURO'S THE BURIED GIANT: THE DRAGON OF FALSE MEMORY

Tracey Leary on Reconciliation

Kazuo Ishiguro's 2016 novel *The Buried Giant* is a departure from his usual modern or dystopian settings and looks back in time to post-Arthurian Britain. It is classified as a fantasy novel, but rather than a world that is purely imaginative, Ishiguro sets his story in a world that takes the early medieval accounts of Dark Ages Britain at face value. Ishiguro uses this setting to consider the question of whether the temporary elimination of painful memories, whether national or personal, is sufficient to repair a relationship. Ishiguro further proceeds to ask, if the attempted cancellation of difficult memories does not produce lasting peace, what then does? The novel encourages the reader to consider the idea that the redemption of memories based on the practice of the Christian faith provides the best hope for lasting peace.

Ishiguro uses as the background of his novel the early historical accounts of the time period after the fall of Rome, when the Saxons were beginning to settle in the British Isles, just as it is described in such works as

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. The Arthurian knight Sir Gawain is an important character, and Arthur and Merlin have played an important role in the conditions of the British inhabitants as the novel opens. Both dragons and giants are significant in the story as well: the memories of atrocities between the native Britons and the Saxons and the forced removal of those memories from both public and individual awareness are symbolized in the novel by the giant of the title, one whose burial ground has been obscured by the breath of a now elderly dragon for a number of years, but which cannot remain hidden for much longer. The action of the story explores what is likely to happen when the dragon dies and the giant awakes, and whether the burial of those memories, though transient, will ensure continued reconciliation for the characters in the story and the groups they represent.

The story centers around Axl and Beatrice, an elderly British couple, who embark on a journey to their grown son's village. They have a vague memory of him, but no actual direction to where he lives, or any clear memory of their past life together at all. Axl and Beatrice are aware that the reason that neither they nor any of their fellow villagers can remember much of the past with any clarity is the mysterious mist that hangs about the landscape. The Britons know that the mist is responsible for their inability to call their personal memories to mind, often including events as recent as a few hours past, but they do not know the origin of the mist. Over the course of their travels, Axl and Beatrice encounter a Saxon warrior, Wistan, who joins them on their journey. He identifies himself as "a warrior from

the east visiting this country.”¹ Wistan eventually reveals that his purpose in England is to rid the land of the source of the anesthetizing mist, the dragon Querig. Querig is a dying dragon, taking her last breaths even as she is finally brought to her end by Wistan.

Sir Gawain, who joins them on their journey, eventually confesses that Arthur and his knights, along with Merlin, imprisoned Querig in a pit from which she could not escape, and it is from this pit that her breath infects the land. Arthur’s motive in forming this plan was to bring about a truce between the Britons and the Saxons, after a particularly bloody incident that involved atrocities against the Saxons. He chose to erase the memory of national enmity between the two peoples, even at the price of personal memory loss as well, in hopes that a temporary respite from the battles might bring a permanent peace.

Although Gawain claims to himself be on a mission to slay Querig, he is, in fact, the protector of both the dragon and the fragile peace. Once Querig finally dies and all memory returns, the question must be answered: will the peace last? Was the temporary respite from bitterness and conflict sufficient to achieve a permanent rest from war for Britain? The personal history of Axl and Beatrice gives us a possible answer, and it is not an encouraging one.

As Querig’s breath fails and Axl and Beatrice begin to remember their past, it becomes evident that one of their forgotten memories was of betrayal, an infidelity on the part of Beatrice. In the absence of this memory,

¹ Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 128.

Axl has been a loving and devoted husband, and continues to faithfully care for Beatrice even after he once again becomes aware of their past. After the betrayal, he had initially treated her with cruelty, but now they each appear to have forgiven the other.

The couple finally arrives at the place where they believe their son is waiting; it is not a village, but an island. They have learned that once they cross the water surrounding this island, they can only remain together if they have a devotion that surpasses that of most couples. When they are questioned privately by the ferryman as to their most precious remembrances of each other, they appear to pass the test by sharing some of their newly recovered memories with him, although Axl remains anxious about whether there might be some hidden requirement for their reunion. The ferryman assures Axl that nothing further is needed, but also tells him that only one of them can cross at a time, and Beatrice must go first. However, if Axl will patiently wait on the shore, he will return and take Axl to the far shore next, where Beatrice will be waiting for him.

Axl takes a tender leave of Beatrice, and watches her depart, but rather than waiting for the ferryman to return, Axl leaves. His confidence in their love is not enough to sustain him in the suspense of wondering when the ferryman will return and whether Beatrice will truly be waiting for him. The temporary respite from painful memories was not a lasting solution for them, as Axl has not fully healed from the pain of the past. Forgiveness may occur in a moment, but rebuilding of trust always takes time – time that Axl and Beatrice were denied.

At the end of the novel, it also becomes clear that the burial of memories was not a solution for the national enmities discussed in the novel either. We learn that the Saxon warrior Wistan is no benevolent St. George, intending to kill the dragon for the salvation of the British, but in order to remove any lack of motivation on the part of the Saxons to finally and completely subjugate Britain. He understands that to remove the dragon brings to life the true threat to peace: this giant of memory. Gawain cannot understand why he would do this, and questions Wistan as to his motives: “‘We may pray to different gods, yet surely yours will bless this dragon as does mine.’ Wistan turned away from the pit to look at the old knight. ‘What kind of god is it, sir, wishes wrongs to go forgotten and unpunished?’”² Wistan further tells Sir Gawain, as Querig’s death is imminent,

The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers. . . For you Britons, it’ll be as a ball of fire rolls toward you. You’ll flee or perish.³

The giant is a living thing which cannot be suffocated by forcible repression, or by a dragon’s breath which obscures the past. If forgetting does not necessarily bring about healing, what then does? The conclusion of the novel points the path forward to the redemption of

² Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, 324.

³ *Ibid.*, 324.

traumatic memories through the kindness of Axl and Beatrice to a young Saxon boy.

Wistan has as his companion a Saxon boy named Edwin, who shows tremendous promise as a warrior and a leader but is an outcast to his own community because of a wound he bears, which his people believe to be an ogre's bite. Wistan realizes that, because of the true nature of this bite, Edwin can guide him to Querig's location. After slaying the dragon, Wistan intends to train Edwin in the martial arts, but not only for Edwin's personal benefit. He envisions Edwin one day taking the lead in achieving final revenge against the Britons. Wistan says to Edwin, "Promise me this. That you'll carry in your heart a hatred of Britons."⁴ Edwin questions whether Wistan means all Britons, even those who have been kind to him, but does make the promise. Yet when Axl and Beatrice bid him farewell at the end of their journey together, and Beatrice begs him to remember their friendship in the future, Edwin is reminded of the promise. But he once again questions what he actually promised, "But surely Wistan had not meant to include this gentle couple."⁵ The seeds are planted for Edwin, in whatever future capacity he may lead the Saxons, to indeed remember the kindness of a British couple and to allow that kindness to influence his actions in the future.

However, Axl and Beatrice are not kind to Edwin out of a natural benevolence, but because they are Christians. It is clear that not every Christian in the novel is benevolent. Neither is the argument being made

⁴ Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*, 264.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 328.

that “random acts of kindness” can heal deep wounds. The Venerable Bede’s account of this historical period, which is largely a forgotten memory of the British people in and of itself, can help to clarify how then the novel is suggesting that the Christian faith is the best foundation for a lasting solution to both personal and national enmity.

It is well documented that the Saxons did fully claim the island of Britain, driving the native Britons into Wales or Cornwall. The Venerable Bede, in commenting on this period of subjugation, interestingly attributes the British inability to withstand the onslaught of the invasions to a failure to retain memories of previous conflict:

“When these [those who remembered previous strife and did not want to repeat it] died, and another generation succeeded, which knew nothing of these times, and was only acquainted with the present peaceable state of things, all the bonds of sincerity and justice were so entirely broken, that there was not only no trace of them remaining, but few persons seemed to be aware that such virtues had ever existed.”⁶

Bede’s analysis of the time period of *The Buried Giant* aligns with the novel’s demonstration that forgetting past atrocities is not a lasting solution for future peace.

⁶ *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People: An Introduction and Selection* by Rowan Williams and Benedicta Ward SLG (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 56.

Some memory of the past must be maintained in order to avoid repeating it. Ishiguro also depicts the dangers inherent to a generation of Britons and Saxons who have no memory of past conflict with each other, and the consequent breaking of the fragile bonds between the two groups when those memories are revived.

Bede goes on to further attribute the cause of the strife to another failure of the British people: “Among other most wicked actions, not to be expressed, . . . they added this – that they never preached the faith to the Saxons, or English, who dwelt amongst them.”⁷ Ishiguro likewise represents Axl and Beatrice’s British village as largely Christian and governed by a pastor, while the Saxon village they visit is clearly pagan and subject to superstition, and the physical and cultural distance between the two is significant. The Christians of the novel do engage with their Saxon neighbors, but are not actively bringing their faith to them because the false peace has lulled them into thinking there is no need to do so.

Bede’s point here, however, is not only to paint the hopelessness of the circumstances at that time, but also to remind his readers of what followed this season of despair. He goes on to say, “However, the goodness of God did not forsake his people whom He foreknew, but sent to the aforesaid nation much more worthy preachers, to bring it to the faith.”⁸ The rest of Bede’s history details the conversion of the Saxons through the efforts of missionaries such as Augustine of Kent, and the return of many of the British people to faithful

⁷ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Christian practice. Ishiguro's novel likewise shows, through the benevolence of Axl and Beatrice to Edwin, the kind of personal manifestation of faith on the part of believers that Bede says should have always characterized the interactions between Christians and Saxons, and the lack of which was a major factor in the continued hostility between the two groups.

The parallels between Ishiguro's novel and our own day are all too obvious. The question of how to address past cultural atrocities and national sins as well as uncomfortable differences in our society regarding how to consider these events and their place in history, is in hot contention. One of the answers that has been offered to us concerning how to reconcile the increasingly wide divisions of modern society is to bury certain viewpoints – in essence, to erase them by attempting to remove any idea, person, or work which we find uncomfortable from either our personal sphere or through public censorship, just as Arthur attempted to do. *The Buried Giant* shows that this sort of erasure robbed Axl and Beatrice personally of the opportunity to grieve their wounds and, if their forgiveness of each other was indeed genuine, to heal through small kindnesses offered daily in the years that followed their mutual betrayals, which could have built the trust necessary for them to weather their final crossing together. It likewise robbed both the Saxons and the native Britons of the chance to move gradually toward the kind of innate unity that can result from natural interactions between divergent groups, especially when the Gospel of Christ is a factor, and imposed a counterfeit peace on Britain which could not be maintained.

One lesson which the book intends for us to consider seems clear. The best hope for lasting reconciliation, whether between individuals or nations, comes when people carefully and intentionally live with benevolence and grace in their personal interactions with others. If we try to circumvent this process because it is too slow, the giant we bury will not long remain asleep. Dragons are poor guardians of peace.

Bibliography

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The Dragon of False Memory

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