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**HEAVY METAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: HISTORICAL SUBJECT MATTER
IN THE MUSIC OF IRON MAIDEN**

A Thesis in

Music

by

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ABSTRACT

Since forming in 1975, British heavy metal band Iron Maiden have written and recorded a number of songs referencing historical events. This thesis investigates the use of historical subject matter in the music of Iron Maiden by examining nine songs, recorded between 1982 and 2006, that focus on specific moments in history, ranging from the life and conquests of Alexander the Great to World War II. Among the research questions this thesis aims to address are “How do Iron Maiden use historical subject matter in their music, and to what extent can their music be interpreted historiographically?”; “How are visual elements, such as album artwork, music videos, and live staging used to frame the historical content of these songs?”; and “How do certain themes, such as issues of British identity, appear in these songs, and how do these songs fit in with the larger context of Iron Maiden’s music?”

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“There is so much great stuff and so many great stories throughout history that you can make parallels with the modern day – particularly when history repeats itself as often as it does – that it makes for some very colourful subject matter. The way I look at it is that if you’re going to plunder something for the lyrical basis of a song then at least plunder something that has really happened rather than invent some crass, sword and dorkery epic, y’know?”

-Bruce Dickinson, in *Iron Maiden: Run to the Hills: The Authorised Biography*, 3rd ed., by Mick Wall

Introduction

The music of British heavy metal band Iron Maiden has had a profound influence on the history and development of the heavy metal genre. Formed in 1975 by Steve Harris, the band's bassist and principal songwriter, Iron Maiden were initially part of a trend in metal music in Great Britain during the late 1970s and early 1980s known as the New Wave of British Heavy Metal, or NWOBHM. Since then, Iron Maiden have established a unique and long-standing artistic identity within the larger context of heavy metal music; part of this unique identity is the frequency with which their music incorporates literary and historical topics. Although other heavy metal bands have addressed similar subjects in their lyrics, Iron Maiden differ from these bands in the extent to which these topics have permeated their music throughout much of the band's career. Indeed, most of Iron Maiden's sixteen studio albums contain songs that fall into one or both of these two categories.

This thesis will focus on the latter category, historical topics, and the ways in which Iron Maiden have used history as subject matter in their music. In particular, it will examine nine songs that engage with historical events. This set of songs spans a twenty-four-year period of the band's career, from 1982 to 2006, and encompasses tracks from six of Iron Maiden's studio albums. The nine songs that will be analyzed within this thesis are "Alexander the Great" (*Somewhere in Time*, 1986); "Invaders" (*The Number of the Beast*, 1982); "Montsegur" (*Dance of Death*, 2003); "Run to the Hills" (*The Number of the Beast*, 1982); "The Trooper" (*Piece of Mind*, 1983); "Paschendale" (*Dance of Death*, 2003); "Aces High" (*Powerslave*, 1984); "The Longest Day" (*A Matter of Life and Death*, 2006); and "Brighter Than a Thousand Suns" (*A Matter of Life and Death*, 2006).

The core of this thesis will be formed by analysis of these nine songs, as well as the visual and performance elements (including album artwork, music videos, and live staging) used to frame these songs and their historical content. By examining these songs and their accompanying media and staging, this thesis aims to address multiple questions, including “How do Iron Maiden use historical subjects in their music, and in what sense can their music be interpreted as a form of historiography in itself?” and “How do certain themes which appear in multiple songs under consideration – such as warfare and British history – fit in contextually with broader lyrical themes in the band’s overall musical output and their identity as a British band?”

In addition to spanning a significant portion of the band’s career, these songs deal with a diverse set of historical topics, ranging from the life and conquests of Alexander the Great and the Viking raids on the British Isles to the World Wars. Several of these songs deal specifically with events related to British history, and most of the songs describe instances of warfare, thereby interacting with issues of Iron Maiden’s identity as a British band and depictions of armed conflict in their music. Additionally, most of the songs are written in the first person, allowing the band to describe scenes or moments in a poetic, storytelling manner through the voice of fictionalized narrators, and making the style and structure of the lyrics themselves a point of interest. There are elements of the band members’ personalities that have likely contributed to this musical engagement with history, such as Steve Harris’s interest in historical topics, as well as lead singer Bruce Dickinson’s background as a college history major and aviation enthusiast (a point of particular note with regard to the song “Aces High,” as will be discussed later).

Due to the historical nature of the subject matter under discussion, this thesis will be organized chronologically according to the historical events being described in particular songs. This organizational scheme allows for analysis of individual songs, as well as discussion of overarching themes where they appear. Therefore, this thesis will be divided into three chapters, corresponding to three broad chronological periods. Chapter One will address songs that deal with topics related to ancient or medieval history (“Alexander the Great,” “Invaders,” and “Montsegur”); Chapter Two, with the long nineteenth century and World War I (“Run to the Hills,” “The Trooper,” and “Paschendale”); and Chapter Three, with World War II (“Aces High,” “The Longest Day,” and “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns”).

Chapter One: Ancient and Medieval History

This chapter will examine three songs from Iron Maiden's repertoire that, broadly speaking, deal with various facets of ancient and medieval history: the life and conquests of Alexander the Great, the Viking raids on the British Isles, and the Albigensian Crusade. Due to the fact that these songs are significantly varied in the specifics of their subject matter, the broad chronological categorization of "ancient and medieval history" is necessary to encompass them all. However, through these songs some themes which will appear multiple times throughout this thesis will begin to emerge, such as British identity, the ways in which Iron Maiden's historical songs relate to their repertoire more generally, and topic theory.

"Alexander the Great" (*Somewhere in Time*, 1986)

The first song under consideration addresses the earliest historical event chronologically out of any of Iron Maiden's historical songs: the life and conquests of Alexander the Great. Although the lyrics of this song make it, on the surface, appear to be a straightforward biographical account of Alexander's birth, military campaigns, and death, some of the language that is used to describe Alexander in this telling can be read as imparting a legendary or mythical quality to the song's depiction of its title figure.

The song begins with a wind-like sound effect and a spoken-word quote from Alexander the Great's father, Philip II of Macedon: "My son, ask for thyself another kingdom, for that which I leave is too small for thee."¹ The music then starts with a moderate-tempo, march-like snare drum – an instrument with strong military associations – underneath a melodic lead guitar

¹ Iron Maiden, *Powerslave/Somewhere in Time* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1987), 172-183.; Iron Maiden, "Alexander the Great," recorded 1986, on *Somewhere in Time* (Sanctuary Records, 538427092), CD.

part.² After an extended introduction, the music accelerates in tempo, with a more extensive percussion part, a faster, more upbeat guitar melody, and a galloping bass line.³ The vocals then enter, with the guitars dropping from a melodic lead part to an accompaniment that mimics the gallop of the bass line, as Bruce Dickinson sings the first verse of lyrics, which detail Alexander the Great's early life: "Near to the east, in a part of Ancient Greece/In an ancient land called Macedonia/Was born a son to Philip of Macedon/The legend his name was Alexander/At the age of nineteen, he became the Macedon king/And he swore to free all of Asia Minor/From the Aegean Sea, in 334 B.C./He utterly beat the armies of Persia."⁴

The instrumental parts then change texture, becoming more focused on long tones to accompany the soaring vocal melody of the chorus: "Alexander the Great/His name struck fear into hearts of men/Alexander the Great/Became a legend amongst mortal men."⁵ Already in this first verse and chorus there are elements of what will ultimately be a prominent theme within the lyrics of this song: the depiction of Alexander the Great as a mythic figure. The lyrics specifically call him "a legend," with the presentation of Alexander's early life reinforcing this through the mention of his birth and the circumstances of his upbringing as the son of a king, Philip of Macedon; this creates a sense of destiny as though the listener were being told the beginning of an epic tale whose central character is fated to achieve heroic deeds. This sense of heroic destiny is then furthered by the final part of the first verse, in which Alexander is said to have "[sworn] to free all of Asia Minor."⁶ This continues into the chorus, which proclaims that

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Alexander the Great," *Somewhere in Time*.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Alexander's "name struck fear into hearts of men" and again refers to him as "a legend," specifically "a legend amongst mortal men."⁷

Following a brief instrumental transition, the second verse functions as a catalogue of Alexander's accomplishments and military campaigns: "King Darius the Third, defeated, fled Persia/The Scythians fell by the River Jaxartes/Then Egypt fell to the Macedon king as well/And he founded the city called Alexandria/By the Tigris River, he met King Darius again/And crushed him again, at the Battle of Arbela/Entering Babylon and Susa, treasures he found/Took Persepolis, the capital of Persia."⁸ The chorus then repeats, with one variation: instead of "became a legend amongst mortal men," the final line of the chorus this time is sung "became a god amongst mortal men."⁹ This emphasizes further the mythic elements in the portrayal of Alexander the Great in this song, with the statement that he "became a god amongst mortal men" implying a unique, even superhuman status on Alexander's part that goes beyond that of a simple historical figure.

This is followed by an extended instrumental middle section, during which the guitar solos occur, before culminating in the final verse of lyrics. This final verse varies slightly from the previous two verses musically; although the gallop returns in the accompaniment, the pace of the lyrics is overall faster and Bruce Dickinson's delivery more staccato, creating a sense of urgency or anticipation as the song, and the story it tells, approaches its end: "A Phrygian king had bound a chariot yoke/And Alexander cut the Gordian Knot/And it was said that he who untied the knot/He would become the master of Asia/Hellenism he spread far and wide/The Macedonian learned mind/Their culture was a Western way of life/He paved the way for

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Christianity/Marching on, marching on/The battle-weary marching side by side/Alexander's army line by line/They wouldn't follow him to India/Tired of the combat, pain, the glory."¹⁰ The chorus is repeated a final time, again with a variation of the last line: "Alexander the Great/His name struck fear into hearts of men/Alexander the Great/He died of fever in Babylon."¹¹ Instrumental material from one of the song's opening sections then recurs, culminating in a *ritardando* and the song's final cadence. Once again, in these final lyrics, the mythic element is present, particularly in the mention of Alexander's cutting of the Gordian Knot, which reinforces the sense of destiny first presented in the opening verse.

The final lines of the first two choruses also present this mythologizing of Alexander the Great in an interesting and noteworthy way, by referring to him first as "a legend" and then as "a god amongst mortal men." By specifically comparing Alexander the Great in seemingly superhuman terms with "mortal men," the song seems to imply an aspect of immortality on Alexander the Great's part. Whether this is intended literally, as an assertion that those in Alexander the Great's time saw him as divine or godlike and were therefore inclined to question Alexander's human mortality, or figuratively, in the sense of Alexander the Great's prominence and legacy as a historical figure granting him a sort of posthumous immortality in the context of historical memory, is not clear in the song. However, it is worth noting that, in the latter case, Iron Maiden, by composing and recording a song detailing Alexander's life and conquests and portraying him as a legendary figure, would themselves be directly engaged in this process of historical immortalization with regard to Alexander the Great and his legacy. This engagement with Alexander the Great's legacy not only appears with regard to the song's mythologizing of him, but also in historical terms, especially in the assertion contained within the song's lyrics that

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Macedonian (i.e., Greek) culture “was a Western way of life” and that by spreading what the song refers to as “the Macedonian learned mind” beyond Greece, Alexander “paved the way for Christianity.”

It is then worth discussing here how Iron Maiden’s lyrics portray historical events and figures in a general sense, a concept of “heavy metal historiography” that will show up multiple times within this thesis. Although this first song is focused solely on a prominent historical figure and his accomplishments, Iron Maiden’s music overall does not seem to conform solely to the idea of “great man” history, as evidenced by their use in other songs of what, in this thesis, will be referred to as fictional narrators. These fictional narrators are invariably nameless and represent an average observer, usually, given the prominence of warfare in many of these songs, a soldier, rather than any specific historical figure; this allows Iron Maiden to present and describe historical events from a first-person perspective. The anonymous character of the fictional narrators makes it clear that they are not “great men” in the traditional historical sense of the term, yet their point of view is critical as a vehicle through which Iron Maiden present historical subject matter to their listeners; the device of the fictional narrator makes it seem as though the descriptions of history their audience receives come from someone who was actually there, as well as perhaps serving as a way of driving home the emotional impact of some events and inspiring empathy (this will be of particular note later when discussing the song “Paschendale”).

Although the song “Alexander the Great” is an exception to Iron Maiden’s overall avoidance of a focus solely on “great man” history, it is worth noting that Iron Maiden’s historical perspective in their lyrics is solely male-centered. Women rarely appear in Iron Maiden’s historical songs, and then only in passing, while the fictional narrators around which

many of these songs are focused are always presumably male. While not excusing the shortcomings that this exclusivity of perspective represents, this is perhaps not surprising, given that all of the current and former members of Iron Maiden are male and thus would likely be inclined to write from the points of view of men, if for no other reason than because this is the perspective with which the members of Iron Maiden could most closely identify on a personal level. In this regard, then, the song “Alexander the Great” is in some ways, namely its focus on a single historical figure, an exception to the rule within Iron Maiden’s music; in other ways – its focus on a central male character and on warfare – it fits in with their overall perspective with regard to addressing historical subject matter, their “heavy metal historiography.”

There is one final, specifically musical, consideration to examine related to “Alexander the Great”: the use of the gallop as a musical topic. Topic theory is a method of thinking about the associations between specific musical gestures and extramusical ideas or subject matter, which arose from the ideas of music theorist Leonard Ratner.¹² In terms of Leonard Ratner’s division of musical topics into three categories, the gallop is difficult to classify. While examples of galloping rhythms in the classical repertoire, particularly in instrumental music, would most likely be classified as an instance of style as a musical topic, in Iron Maiden’s music the use of the gallop and its association with the lyrical content of their songs takes on an element of another of Ratner’s categories, word painting.¹³ Indeed, Raymond Monelle, in his book *The Musical Topic*, proposes “[revising] Ratner’s three-fold classification of topics, in semiotic terms[...] for these figures are of many types.”¹⁴ He also suggests that a knowledge of musical topics and their significance is not only critical for fully understanding the meaning of works in

¹² Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military, Pastoral* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the classical canon, but may also be useful in the examination of pieces from more recent repertoires, including popular music.¹⁵ He then goes on to discuss the gallop as an instance of a musical topic acting as a semiotic signifier that “embraces all the associations of the literary horse, noble, active, virile, adventurous.”¹⁶

Within Iron Maiden’s music, the gallop is not only used to musically depict horses, but takes on a more specifically military connotation. Three of the songs under discussion in this thesis – “Alexander the Great,” “Run to the Hills,” and “The Trooper” – use the gallop as a musical topic. In the latter two cases, the gallop is meant to represent mounted cavalry; in “Alexander the Great,” however, the gallop represents Alexander in the position of a commander leading his soldiers from horseback. Although the gallop is not continuously present in this song, dropping out in the song’s extended instrumental middle section, it is largely present during sections containing lyrics, where it acts as an accompaniment to text that describes Alexander the Great’s life and military conquests. This implies that the specific image being evoked through the topical use of the gallop is Alexander leading his soldiers into battle over the course of his various campaigns while mounted on a horse. The association between the topical use of a particular musical gesture – in this case, a gallop rhythm – with specific imagery represents the relationship between what, in Monelle’s terminology, is deemed the “signifier” and the “signified.”¹⁷ In this case, the signifier is the gallop itself, while the militaristic images associated with the gallop in the context of Iron Maiden’s music are the signified.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

“Invaders” (*The Number of the Beast*, 1982)

Unlike the complex structure of “Alexander the Great,” “Invaders,” a song about the Viking raids on the British Isles, is a straightforward, fast heavy metal song. The song begins with a staccato sixteenth-note riff that alternates with a bass countermelody and repeats three times, before giving way to a unison guitar and bass melody that transitions into the first verse, itself accompanied by a series of sixteenth notes: “Longboats have been sighted/And the evidence of war has begun/Many Nordic fighting men/Their swords and shields gleam in the sun/Call to arms, defend yourselves/Get ready to stand and fight for your lives/Judgment day has come around/So be prepared, don’t run, stand your ground.”¹⁸

This immediately transitions into the pre-chorus and chorus, which in subsequent repetitions will be musically the same but with different lyrics: “They’re coming in from the sea/They’ve come the enemy/Beneath the blazing sun/The battle has to be won/Invaders, pillaging/Invaders, looting.”¹⁹ Following a second, transitional guitar and bass melody related to the first, the second verse begins: “Set ablaze the campfires/And alert the other men from inland/Warning must be given/Now they’re climbing up the hill for a stand/The Vikings are too many/Much too powerful to take on our own/We must have reinforcements/We cannot fight this battle alone.”²⁰ This leads into the second pre-chorus and chorus: “They’re coming over the hill/They’ve come to attack/They’re coming in for the kill/There’s no turning back/Invaders, fighting/Invaders, marauding.”²¹

¹⁸ Iron Maiden, *Iron Maiden: Guitar Tab Edition* (Miami, FL: Warner Bros. Publications, 1984), 121; Iron Maiden, “Invaders,” recorded 1982, on *The Number of the Beast* (Sanctuary Records, CK 86210), CD.

¹⁹ “Invaders,” *The Number of the Beast*.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

This is followed by an instrumental section during which the guitar solos occur, before the second guitar and bass melody appears again and transitions into the third verse: “Axes grind and maces clash/As wounded fighters fall to the ground/Severed limbs and fatal woundings/Bloody corpses lay all around/The smell of death and burning flesh/The battle where we fight to the end/The Saxons have been overpowered/Victims of the mighty Norsemen.”²² Once again, the pre-chorus and chorus happen immediately after this: “You better scatter and run/The battle is lost and not won/You better get away/To fight another day/Invaders, raping/Invaders, plundering.”²³ The song concludes with the same sixteenth-note riff with which it began.²⁴

“Invaders” is the first song under discussion in this thesis to use the device of the fictional narrator described above. In this case, a Viking raid is vividly described from the first-person perspective of a witness to the events, whom the lyrics imply is a Saxon warrior helping to fight off the incoming Viking forces threatening his coastal community. The song proceeds in a storytelling manner, beginning with the initial realization that the Vikings are coming (“Longboats have been sighted”) and concluding with the narrator and his fellow warriors being defeated in their attempt to repel the raid and resolving themselves to retreat as their town is overwhelmed (“You better scatter and run/The battle is lost and not won”). The emotional and psychological intensity of the events described in the song, particularly given this first-person point of view, is reinforced by the music itself: the fast, unrelenting pace of the music is reflective of the narrator’s frenzy and panic in the face of what is happening around him.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.; *Iron Maiden: Guitar Tab Edition*, 123.

Additionally, this song's description of an event in British history (and, indeed, the identification of the narrator in the lyrics as Saxon) also makes it the first instance of what will ultimately be a prominent and recurring theme in this thesis: British identity. Iron Maiden's historical songs frequently deal with events in British history from a British perspective (in this case broadly defined as from the point of view of an inhabitant of the British Isles).

With this song representing the first instance of Iron Maiden describing an event in British history from a "British" perspective, and thus the beginning of a thematization of British identity, it is perhaps worth discussing here how music such as Iron Maiden's can intersect with issues of identity. Simon Frith argues, with regard to the relationship between popular music and identity, that music "must not be understood to represent values but to embody them" and that identity is formed through one's interaction with external factors, that it is "something we try or put on, not something we reveal or discover."²⁵ In other words, music does not merely act as a medium through which one can express one's identity, but plays an active role in the construction of that identity.

Karl Spracklen goes further in applying ideas about the relationship between music and identity specifically to Iron Maiden's music. In a 2017 article, Spracklen argues that Iron Maiden's music is reflective of a "myth of British masculinity" to which the band members were exposed growing up in post-imperial Britain, in large part through the glorification and mythologizing of Britain's historical past.²⁶ Spracklen states that "in [the] years following the end of the Second World War, the British Empire declined as a global, hegemonic power. In the

²⁵ Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 302, 307.

²⁶ Karl Spracklen, "'Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, and – which is more – you'll be a man, my son': Myths of British Masculinity and Britishness in the Construction and Reception of Iron Maiden." *Metal Music Studies* 3, no. 3 (2017): 407.

years of this decline, from the 1940s to the 1980s, British children were still taught stirring tales and myths of British military might and British fair-play.”²⁷ Although not necessarily relevant to the current example, the mention of “British military might” here is noteworthy, given the extent to which these songs deal with warfare, especially wars in which Britain fought. Nevertheless, Iron Maiden’s music represents an expression or, in Frith’s terms, an embodiment of British identity through the thematization of British history and, by extension, Britishness itself; within these songs, this most obviously manifests in the presentation of events in British history from a specifically British perspective. This perspective, in turn, forms an important part of Iron Maiden’s “heavy metal historiography.” Within “Invaders,” this is represented through the event being portrayed and the use of the fictional narrator to describe it. Indeed the use of the fictional narrator can, in many of these songs, also be seen as related to these ideas of British identity and its construction and representation in Iron Maiden’s historical music, with Frith further arguing that “if narrative is the basis of musical pleasure[...], it is also central to our sense of identity.”²⁸

The song “Invaders” is also noteworthy in one final way: out of the nine songs that will be examined here, “Invaders” is the only one that had a specific precedent within Iron Maiden’s catalogue. In 1980, Iron Maiden, with then-lead singer Paul Di’Anno, recorded and released a standalone single, a cover of the song “Women in Uniform” by The Skyhooks; the B-side to this single was a short original track entitled “Invasion,” which dealt with the same topic as “Invaders,” released two years later on Bruce Dickinson’s first album with Iron Maiden, *The Number of the Beast*.²⁹ “Invasion,” although addressing the same subject matter as “Invaders,” did so with different music and lyrics, albeit with similarities to the latter song. “Invasion”

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Frith, 307.

²⁹ Iron Maiden, *Best of the B-sides*, released 2002 (EMI, 7243 5 41277 2 4), CD.

begins with drums, followed by the entrance of the bass and guitars with a recurring riff that is similar to the two unison guitar and bass melodies in the song “Invaders.”³⁰ The lyrics also enter at this point: “Vikings coming/You better get ready for a hell of a fight/Longboats coming/Looking like dragons in the dead of the night/Muster the men from all the villages/You better get ready to fight with your enemies/Beaches burning/Giving the word to get ready to fight/The battle is nearing/You better get ready to fight for your life/Muster the men from all the villages/You better get ready to fight with your enemies.”³¹ This is followed by a pre-chorus and chorus that, after an instrumental interlude, repeats to close out the song, and thus forms the remainder of the lyrics: “Norsemen coming, Norsemen coming/The warning’s been given, the Norsemen are coming/Norsemen coming, Norsemen coming/The warning’s been given, the Norsemen are coming/Raping and pillaging/Robbing and looting the land/Raping and pillaging/Robbing and looting the land/The Viking raiders from afar.”³² There are readily apparent similarities between the lyrics to “Invasion” and “Invaders,” beyond the overall subject matter itself: certain details appear in both songs, such as the mention of longboats, the use of fires to signal for help and the frenzied attempt to call for assistance in fighting off the raid, and the emphasis on the actions of the Vikings as they come ashore, including the use of some of the same terms in both songs (“raping,” “pillaging,” and “looting”). Indeed, one could view the song “Invaders,” with its inclusion on an album as opposed to a single, its greater overall length and more developed verse-pre-chorus-chorus structure, and more detailed lyrics, as representing a polished, revised final version of “Invasion.” It is also worth noting that the trend within Iron

³⁰ Iron Maiden, “Invasion,” recorded 1980, on *Best of the B-sides* (EMI, 7243 5 41277 2 4), CD.

³¹ “Invasion,” *Best of the B-sides*. Due to the rarity of the single on which this song was included as the B-side, as well as the lack of lyrics in the liner notes of the compilation *Best of the B-sides*, which also contained this track, the author did not have access to an “official” printed copy of the lyrics for this song. Therefore, unlike the other songs discussed in this thesis, where lyrics were verified against the liner notes of the relevant albums, this rendering of the lyrics to “Invasion” was, by necessity, based solely on the author’s own hearing of them.

³² “Invasion,” *Best of the B-sides*.

Maiden's music which this thesis focuses on started with "Invasion," with Iron Maiden's longtime manager Rod Smallwood referring to this song as "one of Steve's [Steve Harris's] first songs about history."³³

"Montsegur" (*Dance of Death*, 2003)

The final song that will be examined in this chapter is "Montsegur," a song about the massacre of Cathars which occurred at the fortress of Montsegur, in what is now southern France, in 1244 during the Albigensian Crusades.³⁴ In 1209, Pope Innocent III called for a crusade in the Languedoc region of France to eliminate Catharism, a movement viewed by the Catholic Church as heretical; the result was the Albigensian Crusade, a series of campaigns by soldiers from northern France against the Cathars, including Montsegur.³⁵ The song is a moderately quick tempo track whose lyrics employ a shifting perspective, beginning with a modern-day observer visiting Montsegur and then rapidly switching back and forth between this observer, the soldiers committing the massacre, and a Cathar; at some points in the song the perspective changes almost line-by-line.

The song begins with a driving, distorted guitar riff that repeats before giving way to the first verse, from the perspective of the modern-day observer: "I stand alone in this desolate space/In death they are truly alive/Massacred innocents, evil took place/The angels were burning inside/Centuries later, I wonder why/What secret they took to the grave/Still burning heretics under our skies/Religion still burning inside."³⁶ This immediately transitions into the chorus, likely from the perspective of the modern narrator imagining the events that took place within

³³ *Best of the B-sides*.

³⁴ Aubrey Burl, *God's Heretics: The Albigensian Crusade* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2002), 202-07.

³⁵ Burl, xi.

³⁶ Iron Maiden, "Montsegur," recorded 2003, on *Dance of Death* (Sanctuary Records, 538442312), CD.

the place he is in: “At the gates and the walls of Montsegur/Blood on the stones of the citadel.”³⁷

These lines are sung a total of four times, before switching to a section of lyrics that will be repeated later in the song, what will be referred to as the second chorus, which seems to begin from the perspective of one of the soldiers participating in the massacre but then changes back to what appears to be the perspective of the modern observer: “As we kill them all so God will know his own/The innocents died for the pope on his throne/Catholic greed and its paranoid zeal/Curse of the grail and the blood of the cross/Templar believers with blood on their hands/Joining the chorus to kill on command/Burned at the stake for your soul’s liberty/To stand with the Cathars, to die and be free.”³⁸

The second verse then occurs, beginning with what appears to be the perspective of a Cathar before once again switching back to the modern observer: “The book of Old Testament crippled and black/Satan his weapon is lust/Living this evil damnation of flesh/Back to the torture of life/The perfect ones willingly died at the stake/And all of their followers slain/As for the knowledge of God they have claimed/Religion still burning inside.”³⁹ This is followed by a repetition of both choruses, with one variation: the last line of the second chorus is changed from “To stand with the Cathars, to die and be free,” to “Still burning heretics under our skies.”⁴⁰

This is followed by an instrumental interlude containing the guitar solo, before the lyrics reenter with a variation on the second chorus: “As we kill them all so God will know his own/Laugh at the darkness and in God we trust/The eye in the triangle smiling with sin/No Passover feast for the cursed within/Facing the sun as they went to their grave/Burn like a dog or

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

you live like a slave/Death is the price for your soul's liberty/To stand with the Cathars, to die and be free.”⁴¹ The song then concludes with a final repetition of the first chorus.⁴²

Although the lyrics of the song make reference to the occult mythology surrounding Catharism and the Albigensian Crusade, that aspect of this event and its modern interpretation will not be discussed here. Instead, this section will focus on the historical event, and Iron Maiden's referencing of it in a song, in the broader context of their music. It is also worth noting at this point a historical inaccuracy within the lyrics of this particular song: although the mention of “Templar believers” implies that the Knights Templar committed the massacre at Montsegur, it was in fact perpetrated by an army of French soldiers.⁴³ Indeed, in Mick Wall's biography of Iron Maiden, this fact is mentioned in passing, albeit without pointing out the inaccuracy that the conflation of the Knights Templar with the French army that actually committed the massacre creates within the song.⁴⁴ This is the only instance within the songs under discussion in this thesis in which the lyrics contain this type of factual error.

Unlike other instances in Iron Maiden's music of lyrics written from a first-person perspective, the modern-day observer in “Montsegur” is not a fictional narrator, but instead can be solidly identified with Bruce Dickinson himself. In his autobiography, and specifically within the section in which he discusses the writing of the album *Dance of Death*, Dickinson describes the trip to southern France which inspired him to compose this song: “My interest in the occult had led to a trip to the ruined fortress of Montsegur in France. Climbing to this castle in the clouds was jaw-dropping in itself, but wandering inside its quite small remaining walls led to my

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Burl, 202-207.

⁴⁴ Mick Wall, *Iron Maiden: Run to the Hills: The Authorised Biography*, 3rd ed. (London: Sanctuary Publishing, 2004), 373.

imagination running riot. *Game of Thrones* is nothing compared to the slaughter that took place in Montsegur, and the extinction of Catharism that precipitated it.”⁴⁵

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this song is the way in which it fits in with a larger theme in Iron Maiden’s music, the criticism of organized religion. Steve Harris, in a 2006 interview, stated “I’m not anti-religion, but I’m not pro-religion either.”⁴⁶ However, Iron Maiden have used their music as a medium to criticize the abuse of religion for harmful or destructive ends on multiple occasions, with just two examples being “Holy Smoke” from their 1990 album *No Prayer for the Dying*, and “For the Greater Good of God,” from their 2006 album *A Matter of Life and Death*.⁴⁷ “For the Greater Good of God” is a particularly illustrative example here; it is a condemnation of religious warfare and religiously-motivated violence.⁴⁸ The song begins with the narrator, presumably speaking to God, asking “Are you a man of peace, a man of holy war/Too many sides to you, don’t know which anymore/So many full of life, but also filled with pain.”⁴⁹ Through this use of the first person, Iron Maiden are able to present a line of probing questioning that draws attention to the abuse of religion by those who use it as a justification for violence, a theme which continues throughout the song. Indeed, the song’s concluding lyrics similarly demand to know the reason for this type of abuse, by framing the question in terms of Christian theology and the Christian belief in redemption: “He gave his life for us/He fell upon the cross/To die for all of those who never mourn his loss/It wasn’t meant for us to feel the pain again/Tell me why, tell me why?”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Bruce Dickinson, *What Does This Button Do?: An Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017), 289.

⁴⁶ Iron Maiden, *A Matter of Life and Death*, recorded 2006 (EMI, 0946 372324 2 2), CD/DVD.

⁴⁷ Iron Maiden, “Holy Smoke,” recorded 1990, on *No Prayer for the Dying* (Sanctuary Records, 538442192), CD; Iron Maiden, “For the Greater Good of God,” recorded 2006, on *A Matter of Life and Death* (EMI, 0946 372324 2 2), CD/DVD.

⁴⁸ “For the Greater Good of God,” *A Matter of Life and Death*.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Similarly, “Montsegur” can be seen as a condemnation of religiously-motivated violence, using a historical event as a real-life example. This is particularly apparent in some of the lines which are repeated multiple times in the song, as though to continually reiterate the song’s message: “Catholic greed and its paranoid zeal” and “Still burning heretics under our skies.”⁵¹ In the former case, the line conveys a fairly straightforward assertion that medieval Catholicism’s paranoia over heresy was wrongly used as a justification for killing heretics, including the massacre which took place at Montsegur. In the latter case, the line is likely not meant literally, but rather uses the image of “burning heretics” as a metaphor for the continued existence of religious intolerance, in the face of historical examples of the horrors to which this type of hatred can lead. In this regard, “Montsegur” represents an instance of Iron Maiden using historical subject matter to address a topic that is also commented on, in more general terms, elsewhere in their musical repertoire.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored songs based on a wide range of historical subjects, from the life and conquests of Alexander the Great, to the Viking raids on the British Isles, to the Albigensian Crusade. However, even within this variety of subject matter, themes which will be important throughout this thesis have begun to emerge, including topic theory and British identity. The next two chapters will continue to explore these themes in the context of Iron Maiden’s other historical songs.

⁵¹ “Montsegur,” *Dance of Death*.

Chapter Two: The Long Nineteenth Century and World War I

This chapter will examine three songs that, chronologically, can be broadly defined as addressing events within the long nineteenth century and World War I: “Run to the Hills,” “The Trooper,” and “Paschendale.” Like the previous chapter, this type of wide-ranging classification is necessary to encompass all three songs under discussion here, which range in subject matter from conflicts between Native Americans and U.S. soldiers in the American West, to the Crimean War, to the Battle of Paschendale in World War I. The concept of the long nineteenth century is frequently used by historians to define the nineteenth century not only in strict numeric terms (i.e., 1800-1899), but as a historical era that extends into the first decades of the twentieth century, specifically including the years leading up to World War I; it is in this sense, for the sake of chronological continuity, that the term long nineteenth century is used here.

Some of the same issues with regard to Iron Maiden’s “heavy metal historiography” and musical framing of historical content which were discussed in the first chapter will also appear in the context of the songs in this chapter, specifically topic theory, British identity, and the use of the fictional narrator. However, the songs under discussion in this chapter will also introduce additional important themes, such as the use of visual imagery in the form of music videos and album artwork as a framing device.

“Run to the Hills” (*The Number of the Beast*, 1982)

The first song under discussion in this chapter is “Run to the Hills,” a song about the historical conflicts between Native Americans and U.S. soldiers that occurred during the nineteenth century. Similarly to “Montsegur,” the song’s lyrics employ a shifting perspective that presents the events from multiple points of view over the course of the song; however, unlike the

near-constant shifting of “Montsegur,” in “Run to the Hills” the sections of lyrics from the point of view of each “character” occur in much more clearly defined sections, with each verse corresponding to a different narrator. The first verse is told from the perspective of a Native American and the second verse from the point of view of a soldier, while the third verse appears to be from the perspective of a third-party observer witnessing the events.⁵²

The song begins with a drum introduction over which a high-pitched lead guitar part and the vocals enter as the first verse begins, with the lyrics from the point of view of a Native American lamenting the destruction to their people and way of life caused by white settlers: “White man came across the sea/He brought us pain and misery/He killed our tribes/He killed our creed/He took our game for his own need/We fought him hard/We fought him well/Out on the plains, we gave him hell/But many came/Too much for Cree/Oh, will we ever be set free?”⁵³

The song then shifts musically, taking on a much more driving feel emphasized by a galloping bass line and quick tempo, as the second verse occurs, this time from the perspective of a U.S. soldier: “Running through dust clouds and barren wastes/Galloping hard on the plains/Chasing the redskins back to their holes/Fighting them at their own game/Murder for freedom, a stab in the back/Women and children and cowards attack.”⁵⁴ This is followed by the chorus: “Run to the hills/Run for your lives/Run to the hills/Run for your lives.”⁵⁵

The driving, percussive musical style continues into the third and final verse, which appears to be from the point of view of a third-party observer witnessing and commenting on the events being described in the song: “Soldier blue in the barren wastes/Hunting and killing the

⁵² Iron Maiden, *Classic Albums: The Number of the Beast* (No location specified: Eagle Eye Media, 2001), DVD; *Iron Maiden: Guitar Tab Edition*, 163.

⁵³ Iron Maiden, “Run to the Hills,” recorded 1982, on *The Number of the Beast* (Sanctuary Records, CK 86210), CD.

⁵⁴ “Run to the Hills,” *The Number of the Beast*; Iron Maiden, *Iron Maiden Guitar Tab* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, no date specified), 206-214.

⁵⁵ “Run to the Hills,” *The Number of the Beast*.

game/Raping the women and wasting the men/The only good Indians are tame/Selling them whiskey and taking their gold/Enslaving the young and destroying the old.”⁵⁶ The chorus then repeats, followed by the guitar solos and a buildup into the final repetition of the chorus that concludes the song.⁵⁷

According to Steve Harris, the shifting perspective used in the song’s lyrics was intentional and meant to convey the song’s subject matter from multiple relevant points of view.⁵⁸ However, there are several indicators within the lyrics that show that the song’s intention is to portray the events in a manner empathetic to the Native Americans and critical of the violence perpetrated against them. These indicators include the lamenting nature of the first verse; the aggressive tone of the second verse, including the soldier’s use of term “redskins” to describe the Native Americans he is pursuing; and the third verse’s emphasis on the violence being committed against the Native Americans (“raping the women and wasting the men[...] enslaving the young and destroying the old”).

Like the previous example “Alexander the Great,” the gallop also appears in “Run to the Hills” as a musical topic. There are two notable differences, however, between the use of the topical gallop in “Alexander the Great” and in “Run to the Hills.” Whereas in “Alexander the Great” the gallop is meant to represent a lone leader riding on horseback, in “Run to the Hills” the gallop is meant to represent mounted cavalry. Also, unlike in “Alexander the Great,” where the gallop drops out during the song’s extended instrumental middle section, once the gallop enters in “Run to the Hills” it is almost continuously present for the remainder of the song.⁵⁹ The point in the song at which the gallop enters is also important, with the gallop beginning at the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *Classic Albums; Guitar Tab Edition*, 163.

⁵⁹ “Run to the Hills,” *The Number of the Beast; Iron Maiden Guitar Tab*, 206-14.

start of the soldier's lyrics in the second verse, just before Bruce Dickinson sings the lines "Running through dust clouds and barren wastes/Galloping hard on the plains." The gallop, therefore, marks both the lyrical and literal entrance of the soldier into the song.⁶⁰

This song also represents the first instance of the use of visual framing, in this case a music video, to emphasize the lyrical content by presenting the listener with images related to the song's subject matter. It must be noted upfront that the visual framing associated with "Run to the Hills" differs from that attached to any of the other songs under discussion in this thesis in problematic ways. Unlike the music videos for songs such as "The Trooper," discussed below, which present and frame the relevant song's lyrical content in serious, straightforward terms, the music video for "Run to the Hills" does not, instead presenting the viewer with a series of farcical images, interspersed with clips of the band playing the song. These images include clips that appear to be from silent films, portraying Native Americans in ways that are inaccurate and anachronistic, though apparently intended to be funny.⁶¹ As stated above, none of the other music videos that will be discussed in this thesis are problematic in this way. It is not entirely clear why Iron Maiden chose to construct the music video for this particular song in this manner; while not excusing the problems with this video, given that this was early in the band's career, perhaps this represented an attempt at introducing an element of humor or comic relief into an otherwise serious song that was later abandoned in subsequent music videos. Nevertheless, the lack of historical content in the music video for "Run to the Hills," as well as its dramatically different tone and relationship to its song's subject matter compared to the other examples of visual framing in this thesis, lead one to question whether this could be considered visual framing in the same sense as the other examples at all.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Iron Maiden, *Visions of the Beast* (New York: Columbia Music Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

“The Trooper” (*Piece of Mind*, 1983)

The next song this chapter will examine is “The Trooper,” about the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War, fought between Britain and Russia from 1854-1856.⁶² During this battle, a British cavalry charge toward a Russian artillery position resulted in a large number of casualties on the British side, an event that subsequently became the subject of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade.”⁶³ The song begins with a guitar riff accompanied by drum fills, before the bass enters and the music transitions to much more driving feel consisting of a harmonized lead guitar part over a galloping bass line.⁶⁴ This leads into the first verse: “You’ll take my life but I’ll take yours too/You’ll fire your musket but I’ll run you through/So when you’re waiting for the next attack/You better stand, there’s no turning back/The bugle sounds, the charge begins/But on this battlefield no one wins/The smell of acrid smoke and horses’ breath/As we plunge on into certain death.”⁶⁵

During the first verse, the guitars join in with the gallop; after the verse, the guitars repeat their lead part from the introduction, with the bass line continuing the gallop underneath until the beginning of the second verse, when the guitars rejoin the gallop: “The horse he sweats with fear, we break to run/The mighty roar of the Russian guns/And as we race towards the human wall/The screams of pain as my comrades fall/We hurdle bodies that lay on the ground/And the Russians fire another round/We get so near yet so far away/We won’t live to fight another day.”⁶⁶

⁶² *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, 9th edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 681.

⁶³ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 681-82.

⁶⁴ Iron Maiden, “The Trooper,” recorded 1983, on *Piece of Mind* (Sanctuary Records, CK 86211), CD; Iron Maiden, *Iron Maiden Bass Anthology* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, no date specified), 180-185; Iron Maiden, *Iron Maiden Anthology* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, no date specified), 150-160.

⁶⁵ “The Trooper,” *Piece of Mind*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

This is followed by the guitar solos and one final repetition of the guitar lead before transitioning into the final verse: “We get so close, near enough to fight/When a Russian gets me in his sights/He pulls the trigger and I feel the blow/A burst of rounds takes my horse below/And as I lay there gazing at the sky/My body’s numb and my throat is dry/And as I lay forgotten in the road/Without a tear I draw my parting groan.”⁶⁷ The song concludes with the same guitar riff and drum fills with which it began.⁶⁸

As with the previous example, “Run to the Hills,” “The Trooper” uses the gallop as a musical topic signifying mounted cavalry, with the gallop almost continuously present throughout the song once it enters. It is in the context of this song that Steve Harris stated that his use of the gallop as a musical topic was an intentional compositional choice: “The opening is meant to try and recreate the galloping horses in the charge of the light brigade [sic]. It’s an atmospheric song.”⁶⁹ The use of entrances and texture is also important to the use of the topical gallop in “The Trooper,” with the ensemble gallop, consisting of both the bass and the guitars, appearing for the first time in the second half of the first verse, corresponding to the following lyrics: “The bugle sounds, the charge begins/But on this battlefield no one wins/The smell of acrid smoke and horses’ breath/As I plunge on into certain death.”⁷⁰ The entrance of the ensemble gallop at this point can then be interpreted as a musical representation of the mounted cavalry charge surging forward, as described by the narrator in the lyrics.

Indeed, this song, like some of the previous examples, uses the device of the fictional narrator, in this case by describing events from the perspective of a British cavalryman participating in the charge. By portraying an event in British history from a specifically British

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.; *Iron Maiden Anthology*, 150-60.

⁶⁹ *Iron Maiden: Guitar Tab Edition*, 163.

⁷⁰ “The Trooper,” *Piece of Mind*; *Iron Maiden Anthology*, 150-60.

perspective, “The Trooper” also represents another instance of British identity and its role in Iron Maiden’s “heavy metal historiography,” as well as the relationship of British identity in Iron Maiden’s historical music to their use of fictional narrators.

This also relates to the use of the song’s music video as a visual framing device emphasizing the historical content of the lyrics. The music video for “The Trooper” consists of black-and-white clips from what appears to be a filmic portrayal of a nineteenth-century cavalry charge, alternating with footage of the band performing the song on a stage.⁷¹ In addition, the first and final frames of the music video are laid over with text taken from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” about the Battle of Balaclava.⁷² Iron Maiden’s use of this poem is significant with regard to the issue of identity in this song, particularly in light of the connection, discussed above, between literary portrayals of British military history and the construction of post-imperial British identity.

The music video is not the only visual framing device related to this song and its subject matter. When “The Trooper” was released as a single, its cover artwork consisted of an image of Eddie, Iron Maiden’s mascot, running across a corpse-strewn battlefield, while wearing a nineteenth-century British military uniform and carrying a British flag in one hand and a sword in the other. Variations of this image have been repeatedly used as backdrops when the band have played this song in concert; additionally, Bruce Dickinson has, for the band’s last several tours, worn a red military coat similar to that worn by Eddie on the single cover and waved a British flag during performances of the song.⁷³ Given the common themes across all of these

⁷¹ *Visions of the Beast*.

⁷² Ibid.; Alfred Lord Tennyson, “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*, 9th edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2013), 681-682.

⁷³ This can be seen in the live DVDs the band have done of several of their recent tours, such as the *Somewhere Back in Time* tour in 2008-2009 as well as *The Final Frontier* tour in 2010-2011.

images, it is apparent that the multifaceted visual framing associated with “The Trooper,” and its links in turn with the theme of British identity present in this song, represents a larger conceptual whole.⁷⁴

“Paschendale” (*Dance of Death*, 2003)

The final song this chapter will examine is “Paschendale,” about the Third Battle of Ypres, also known as the Battle of Paschendale, during World War I.⁷⁵ This battle, fought during the summer and autumn of 1917, was a British offensive on the western front that resulted in massive casualties on both the British and German sides.⁷⁶ The song’s lyrics once again employ the device of the fictional narrator to vividly describe the experience of trench warfare from the perspective of a soldier.

The song begins with the tapping of a lone cymbal, over which a mournful-sounding solo guitar lead enters.⁷⁷ The bass and vocals then enter, as Bruce Dickinson sings the first verse: “In a foreign field he lay/Lonely soldier, unknown grave/On his dying words he prays/‘Tell the world of Paschendale.’”⁷⁸ The music suddenly erupts into a distorted guitar riff, before settling back down to the *piano* dynamic of just the cymbal and solo guitar as the second verse is sung:

⁷⁴ In the broader context of Iron Maiden’s career, this is perhaps not particularly surprising. Since the mid-1980s, beginning with the tour supporting the album *Powerslave* in 1984-1985, Iron Maiden have made it a point to create visual concepts around each album, largely based on album artwork. For each successive studio album/live tour cycle, this means that the cover art for the album will be expanded upon to create a series of images that then form the basis for the promotional materials for that album and tour, as well as the stage set for that tour. This is why the idea that the visual images surrounding “The Trooper” form a larger conceptual whole, albeit an early one in the band’s career, actually wouldn’t be out of character for Iron Maiden, who routinely create comprehensive visual concepts with every new studio album.

⁷⁵ A note on spelling: there are multiple spellings of Paschendale, including Passchendaele; the spelling used by Iron Maiden in the title of this song is used throughout for the sake of consistency.

⁷⁶ David Stevenson, *1917: War, Peace, and Revolution* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 197-204.

⁷⁷ Iron Maiden, “Paschendale,” recorded 2003, on *Dance of Death* (Sanctuary Records, 538442312), CD; Iron Maiden, *Dance of Death* (London: Wise Publications, 2003), 106-21.

⁷⁸ “Paschendale,” *Dance of Death* CD.

“Relive all that he’s been through/Last communion of his soul/Rust your bullets with his tears/Let me tell you ‘bout his years.”⁷⁹

The music then becomes heavier and slightly faster in tempo, with a repetition of the first distorted riff, as the next section of lyrics is sung, now having switched to the point of view of the fictional narrator, the soldier to whom Dickinson has introduced the listener in the first two verses: “Laying low in a blood-filled trench/Killing time ‘til my very own death/On my face I can feel the falling rain/Never see my friends again/In the smoke, in the mud and lead/Smell of fear and the feeling of dread/Soon be time to go over the wall/Rapid fire and the end of us all.”⁸⁰

A brief, almost orchestral-sounding transition in the guitars leads into the next section of lyrics: “Whistles, shouts, and more gunfire/Lifeless bodies hang on barbed wire/Battlefield nothing but a bloody tomb/Be reunited with my dead friends soon/Many soldiers, eighteen years/Drown in mud, no more tears/Surely a war no one can win/Killing time about to begin.”⁸¹ This is followed by the chorus: “Home, far away/From the war, a chance to live again/Home, far away/But the war, no chance to live again.”⁸²

A new guitar melody is introduced at this point, leading into the next section of lyrics: “The bodies of ours and our foes/The sea of dead it overflows/In no man’s land, God only knows/Into the jaws of death we go.”⁸³ The distorted riff repeats again, forming a transition into another verse: “Crucified as if on a cross/Allied troops, they mourn their loss/German war propaganda machine/Such before has never been seen/Swear I heard the angels cry/Pray to God no more men die/So that people know the truth/Tell the tale of Paschendale.”⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

The music suddenly returns to the cymbal tapping; this time a different guitar lead enters, which is then progressively built upon in an imitative texture as the song begins moving toward its musical and dramatic climax.⁸⁵ This is followed by another heavy guitar riff, leading to the next sung section: “Cruelty has a human heart/Every man does play his part/Terror of the men we kill/The human heart is hungry still/I stand my ground for the very last time/Gun is ready as I stand in line/Nervous wait for the whistle to blow/Rush of blood and over we go.”⁸⁶

After a brief recurrence of the cymbal tapping, another distorted guitar riff enters, transitioning into a section of intense, overdriven guitar parts and increasingly frenzied and dramatic guitar solos.⁸⁷ This reflects the increasing emotional intensity of the song’s lyrical content, in which this section is preceded by the narrator describing “going over the wall” and therefore can be interpreted as representing, through musical intensity, the experience of the narrator running through the battlefield. This section culminates in the next verse of lyrics, which provide further evidence of this correlation between the dramatic content of the music and the emotional content of the words: “Blood is falling like the rain/Its crimson cloak unveils again/The sound of guns can’t hide the shame/And so we die at Paschendale.”⁸⁸

This is followed by another guitar solo, before a repetition of the first guitar riff transitions into the next section of lyrics as the song reaches its narrative climax: “Dodging shrapnel and barbed wire/Running straight at cannon fire/Running blind as I hold my breath/Say a prayer, symphony of death/As we charge the enemy lines/Amongst the fire we go down/I choke a cry but no one hears/Feel the blood run down my throat.”⁸⁹ It is worth noting here that

⁸⁵ Ibid.; *Dance of Death*, 106-121.

⁸⁶ “Paschendale,” *Dance of Death* CD.

⁸⁷ Ibid.; *Dance of Death*, 106-21.

⁸⁸ “Paschendale,” *Dance of Death* CD.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

the live performance of this song, which was included on the 2004 concert album *Death on the Road*, contains a brief moment of text painting during this passage; although in the studio recording, Bruce Dickinson sings the word “down” straight, in the live recording he places a slight downward glissando on this word, creating a sense of falling pitch that reflects the narrator’s literal fall at this moment in the lyrics.⁹⁰

The chorus then repeats twice, before the music falls back down to its initial *piano* dynamic. The song concludes with the cymbal and guitar lead texture that characterized the song’s opening, as Dickinson sings the final, somber verse: “See my spirit on the wind/Across the lines, beyond the hill/Friend and foe will meet again/Those who died at Paschendale.”⁹¹

Although the above analysis was based on the studio recording of the song, it is important to consider the live performance of “Paschendale” from Iron Maiden’s 2004 live album *Death on the Road*, which framed the song’s historical content through not only visual imagery, but also poetry and sound effects. The live performance began with the stage darkened, lit only occasionally by a series of flashing lights, as sounds of gunfire and explosions were played, simulating the auditory landscape of a World War I-era battlefield. Bruce Dickinson, with the lights still dimmed and the sound effects still playing in the background, then prefaced the song by reciting the following lines from Wilfred Owen’s poem “Anthem for Doomed Youth”: “What passing bells for these who die as cattle/Only the monstrous anger of the guns/Only the stuttering rifle’s rapid rattle/No mockeries for them, from prayers or bells/Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs/The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells.”⁹² The lights then brightened as the song

⁹⁰ Ibid.; Iron Maiden, *Death on the Road* (New York: Columbia Music Video, 2006), DVD.

⁹¹ “Paschendale,” *Dance of Death* CD.

⁹² Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” in *Poetry of the First World War: An Anthology*, ed. Tim Kendall (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), 153. This is not the only instance of poetry appearing in this song; the line “cruelty has a human heart” is a direct quote from William Blake’s poem “A Divine Image.” Adrian Smith, the primary composer of this particular song had, prior to him and Bruce Dickinson rejoining Iron Maiden in 1999, appeared on two of Bruce Dickinson’s solo albums, including the 1998 album *The Chemical Wedding*, which was

began, showing the stage temporarily decorated with barbed wire and Bruce Dickinson dressed in a trench coat and helmet, which he then wore for the duration of the song.⁹³

Once again, the theme of British identity appears in this song through the use of a fictional narrator to present an event related to British history from a specifically British perspective. Like the use of the Tennyson poem as a framing device in “The Trooper,” the use of the Owen poem to frame “Paschendale” also relates to and helps emphasize this concept of British identity. In the anthology *Poetry of the First World War*, which contains “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” editor Tim Kendall argues that the associations between British literature and British identity led, during World War I, to “the identification of war poetry with a British national character” and “the belief that the writing of verse was a patriotic act because it celebrated and (at least potentially) enhanced the nation’s cultural ascendancy.”⁹⁴

There is a potentially useful parallel that can be drawn here between Iron Maiden’s “Paschendale” and a work which actually sets the text of “Anthem for Doomed Youth” to music, Benjamin Britten’s *War Requiem*, which both expressed a sense of sadness and mournfulness with regard to wartime loss of life while simultaneously acting as an anti-war work.⁹⁵ Like the *War Requiem*, “Paschendale” can be read as a work that is critical of war while also speaking to the loss of those who died in war, in this case World War I. This is not to argue that the *War Requiem* influenced Iron Maiden, but rather to point out that both works use music to express similar sentiments with regard to warfare, albeit in different ways.⁹⁶

largely centered around the poetry and imagery of William Blake. It is likely, then, that Smith was familiar with Blake’s work from having worked with Dickinson on that album, which might explain Smith’s inclusion of the Blake quote in his lyrics.

⁹³ *Death on the Road*.

⁹⁴ Tim Kendall, ed., *Poetry of the First World War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), xv.

⁹⁵ My ideas regarding Britten’s *War Requiem* are indebted to Dr. Vincent Benitez, who taught this piece in a seminar on music post-1945 at Pennsylvania State University and who called it “a denunciation of war.”

⁹⁶ It should be pointed out, however, that Benjamin Britten was a British composer and that the *War Requiem* premiered in Britain in 1960, within the lifetimes of all six members of Iron Maiden.

The mournfulness of “Paschendale” can be seen from the beginning of the song, with the sad sound of the solo guitar lead in the song’s opening section as well as the opening lyrics, describing the recently deceased soldier and imploring the listener to “rust your bullets with his tears.” This is also seen in the chorus, in which the soldier, now acting as the fictional narrator, laments the fact that he has “no chance to live again,” and finally in the somber tone of the song’s final verse.

However, some of these same moments can also be seen as expressing anti-war sentiments, such as the line “rust your bullets with his tears,” which not only asks the listener to consider the fate of the soldier whom Dickinson has just introduced to them, but to let this lead them to action. The song’s heavy emphasis on death, including the death of the fictional narrator, can also be seen as both mournful and anti-war, as can the line “tell the world of Paschendale,” which is repeated, with a slight variation (as “tell the tale of Paschendale”) later in the song; by presenting the listener with the horrors of war, in this case through vividly describing historical events, Iron Maiden convey a message to the effect of “remember history so that young people don’t have to die repeating it.”

Conclusion

This chapter, although slightly less chronologically varied than the first, nevertheless also covered a range of historical topics. In doing so, it showed how certain themes which were introduced in the first chapter, such as topic theory and British identity, are important, recurring considerations in examining Iron Maiden’s historical songs. In addition, it introduced the importance of visual and performative framing with regard to some of these songs. Some of

these ideas, especially British identity and visual framing, will continue to be important in the third and final chapter.

Chapter Three: World War II

The last three songs which this thesis will address all engage with various facets of a single historical moment: World War II. The first, “Aces High,” deals with the Battle of Britain; the second, “The Longest Day,” with D-Day; and the third and final song, “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” with the Manhattan Project. World War II appears more frequently in the music of Iron Maiden, as well as in music that the band members have made outside of Iron Maiden, than any other single historical topic; in addition to the songs which will be discussed in this chapter, examples include “Silver Wings,” a song which Bruce Dickinson recorded during his solo career that contains references to Allied bombing campaigns over Germany, and “Spit Fire” by British Lion, Steve Harris’s other band, which is written from the perspective of a wartime evacuee.⁹⁷

As has been shown in the preceding chapters, issues of identity play a prominent role in Iron Maiden’s engagement with historical topics, particularly given that many of the topics they address in their lyrics are related to British history. In the case of World War II, the issues of identity surrounding Iron Maiden’s discussion of the war in their songs are reflective of not only their national identity as a British band, but the manner in which their identity has been shaped by historical time and the particular period in which the band members have lived. Therefore, it is worth noting here, more so than with any of the other songs or events discussed in this thesis, the context of the band members’ own lives, and the extent to which the historical era that coincided with their formative years may have had an impact on their engagement with this particular set of historical topics.

⁹⁷ Bruce Dickinson, “Silver Wings,” released 2001, on *The Best of Bruce Dickinson*, Metal-Is Records CD MISCD014; British Lion, “Spit Fire,” released 2020, on *The Burning*, Explorer Music CD EIM20001-2.

All six members of Iron Maiden were born in the United Kingdom in the 1950s, at a time when Britain was still dealing with the after-effects of World War II. Due to the heavy losses that Britain suffered during the war, including the massive damage inflicted on several major British cities during the series of German bombing campaigns known as “The Blitz,” some of the so-called “austerity measures” that had been implemented as part of the war effort continued for years after the war was over, in some cases only being lifted in the early 1950s.⁹⁸ The close historical proximity between the band members’ childhoods and the immediate postwar era means that the social, cultural, economic and physical consequences of the war would have been part of the society in which they grew up, and may have had an impact on their lives at a young age.

Additionally, the band members were among the first generation of British children born after World War II, into families where their parents and grandparents would have all lived through the war. Indeed, Bruce Dickinson’s family provides an example of the potential immediacy of this type of living memory: Dickinson’s godfather had served in the Royal Air Force during World War II (a fact that will be of particular note when discussing “Aces High”), and Dickinson’s grandfather was exempted from military deployment due to his job as a coal miner being designated as a “reserved occupation,” a profession necessary on the home front in Britain, a fact which Dickinson claims kept his grandfather from being deployed to France and killed in action like many of the men his grandfather knew.⁹⁹ Dickinson, in his 2017 autobiography *What Does This Button Do?*, also speaks to the lingering psychological effects of the war which continued to persist among his family into at least the early 1960s, a full decade

⁹⁸ See, for example, the discussion of the continuation of food rationing until the early 1950s in David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-1951* (New York: Walker and Company, 2008), 510.

⁹⁹ Dickinson, 3, 6.

and a half after the war was over: in describing Sunday lunches at his grandparents' house, he recalls being lectured about the importance of not wasting food because "no one could comprehend" that food was no longer subject to wartime rationing, and that "the same post-war hangover restricted you to three inches of bathwater, anxiety over the use of electricity and a morbid fear of psychological dissipation caused by speaking on the telephone excessively."¹⁰⁰ Dickinson is not the only member of Iron Maiden whose family was directly impacted by the war: Steve Harris, in an interview about British Lion's song "Spit Fire," stated that the song's lyrics were inspired by his father's experiences in World War II, Harris's father having been among a number of young people who were evacuated out of London and sent to live in rural areas of England during the war to protect them from the Blitz.¹⁰¹

Given this context, then, it is possible to interpret Iron Maiden's musical engagement with World War II as an exercise in cultural memory, one that, due to this memory's mediation through the band members' experiences growing up in postwar England and the immediacy of their country's collective memory, relates to the larger theme of British identity which has appeared elsewhere in this thesis, and will appear once again in these songs.

"Aces High" (*Powerslave*, 1984)

"Aces High," the opening track of Iron Maiden's 1984 album *Powerslave*, is the band's first song to reference World War II. The song's lyrics describe the Battle of Britain from, as with some of the other songs addressed in this thesis, the perspective of a fictional narrator, in this case a British Spitfire pilot flying into combat.

¹⁰⁰ Dickinson, 9.

¹⁰¹ Steve Harris, interview by Paulie Walnuts, HardDrive Radio, January 15, 2020, accessed February 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqUnZgw69B0>

The music of “Aces High” is not, as with some of the other examples in this thesis such as “The Trooper,” topical in the theoretical sense of the word; however, some of the musical gestures used, as well as the song’s overall affect and narrative structure, give the impression that the listener is hearing a sonic representation of World War II-era aerial combat. The song begins at a moderate tempo, with two harmonized guitar parts playing over a bass and drum texture consisting of long tones in the bass and cymbals cut off by short, staccato notes, creating a bursting sound reminiscent of artillery: enemy bombers have been sighted and have triggered a response of anti-aircraft fire (the extent to which the music video for this song backs up this particular interpretation will be addressed more later).¹⁰² After this initial introductory section, there is a *subito accelerando*, and the music takes on the much faster, driving pace it will retain for much of the remainder of the song. Following another instrumental section, Bruce Dickinson begins singing the first verse of lyrics: “There goes the siren that warns of the air raid/Then comes the sound of the guns sending flak/Out for the scramble, we’ve got to get airborne/Got to get up for the coming attack.”¹⁰³ These opening lyrics reinforce the musical impression provided by the instrumental introduction, and show the narrator in the middle of the action in which the listener has already been immersed.

The lyrics then continue: “Jump in the cockpit and start up the engines/Remove all the wheel blocks, there’s no time to waste/Gathering speed as we head down the runway/Got to get airborne before it’s too late.”¹⁰⁴ This second half of the verse is accompanied by a shift in tonal area, with the sequence of chords being played underneath in the guitars falling by a fifth to imply an A-minor area within the song’s overall key of E minor, creating a heightened sense of

¹⁰² Iron Maiden, “Aces High,” recorded 1984, on *Powerslave* (Sanctuary Records, CK 86212), CD.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

tension: the frantic narrator is preparing to fly into battle. This is immediately followed by a pre-chorus in which the E-minor harmonies return and the music becomes syncopated, further adding to the sense of urgency and frenzy, punctuated by short, accented, single-word lyrics:

“Rolling/turning/diving.”¹⁰⁵ This last word, “diving,” is followed by a harmonized descending scalar figure in the guitars, creating a musical sound that seems to “roll” in much the same way as the narrator’s plane and sonically reinforces the acrobatic imagery of fighter planes in the midst of battle.¹⁰⁶ This section is repeated before immediately transitioning into the chorus, consisting of the lines “Run/Live to fly/Fly to live/Do or die/Won’t you/Run/Live to fly/Fly to live/Aces high.” The use of the term “ace” in this context is a play on words, referring to idea of a fighter pilot as a “flying ace.”

This is followed by a brief, staccato transitional section, giving way to a long instrumental interlude during which the guitar solos occur. The frequent use of staccato or accented notes in this song also serves the song’s overall frantic affect, depicting the narrator’s emotions as he flies into combat. In this regard, the long instrumental middle section also functions as part of the song’s overall narrative structure, with the percussion continuing to drive the song forward as both Dave Murray and Adrian Smith play fast-paced guitar solos, before the staccato transition returns and leads into the second verse of lyrics: “Move in to fire at the main stream of bombers/Let off a shell burst and then turn away/Roll over, spin ’round to come in behind them/Move to their blind sides and fire it again.”¹⁰⁷

Within the strophic form of the music accompanying the lyrics, the tonal shift which occurred in the first verse is repeated in this second verse, again representing an increase in

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

musical and dramatic tension, followed by four more lines of lyrics: “Bandits at eight o’clock move in behind us/Ten ME-109s out of the sun/Ascending and turning our Spitfires to face them/Panic-strick, burning, I press down my guns.”¹⁰⁸ These four lines contain the most explicit historical detail in the song, with the narrator describing the landscape of the ongoing battle down to specific types of planes (an ME-109 being a type of fighter plane used by the German Luftwaffe during this period, and the Spitfire being the fighter plane used the by British Royal Air Force).¹⁰⁹ These lines also form the dramatic climax of the song, in which it is implied, as with some of the other songs written by Iron Maiden about warfare from the perspective of these types of fictional narrators, that the narrator has died or will die in action: having turned his Spitfire to face an incoming squadron of enemy fighter planes, the narrator suddenly finds himself “panic-strick [sic]” and “burning,” implying that his plane has been hit and is in imminent danger of going down.¹¹⁰ The pre-chorus and chorus are repeated, with one variation: on the final line of the song, “Aces high,” Bruce Dickinson, in an instance of text painting, sings his highest note on the word “high.”¹¹¹ The song then ends with an instrumental concluding section.

This song provides yet another example of the recurring theme of British identity in Iron Maiden’s music. As with several of the other songs under discussion in this thesis, Iron Maiden, in writing this song from the point of view of a British fighter pilot, chose not only to write about a significant event in British history, one which, in this case, formed an important part of British cultural memory of World War II, but to portray the event from a specifically British

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ James Holland, *The Battle of Britain: Five Months That Changed History; May-October 1940* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2011), xix, xxi.

¹¹⁰ “Aces High,” *Powerslave*.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

perspective.¹¹² In addition to the overall cultural influence of World War II on the band members' upbringings discussed above, there is also another aspect of one particular band member's life that is noteworthy in light of this association with identity and postwar memory: Bruce Dickinson's lifelong interest in aviation.

Dickinson's fascination with airplanes began when he was a child, and was at least partly the result of his godfather's influence. Dickinson's godfather had served as a flight engineer in the Royal Air Force during World War II; during his time in the RAF, he was stationed on Malta and witnessed the siege of the island firsthand.¹¹³ Dickinson's first experiences with aviation consisted of his godfather's taking him to air shows.¹¹⁴ Dickinson's subsequent fascination with aviation eventually led to his becoming a pilot himself, albeit after "Aces High" was recorded and released.¹¹⁵ However, references to aircraft and flight also appear in several other Iron Maiden songs, such as "Where Eagles Dare" (*Piece of Mind*, 1983); "Tailgunner" (*No Prayer for the Dying*, 1990); "Coming Home" (*The Final Frontier*, 2010); and "Empire of the Clouds" (*The Book of Souls*, 2015), as well as the song "Silver Wings," recorded by Bruce Dickinson as a solo artist. Additionally, in 2014 Dickinson flew with the Great War Display Team, a group that specializes in historical reenactment-type air shows featuring replicas of World War I aircraft.¹¹⁶ In the context of Bruce Dickinson's life experiences, then, "Aces High" can be interpreted as a reflection of the living memory of World War II with which Dickinson engaged through his

¹¹² See Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War* (Harlow, UK: Pearson-Longman, 2004), Chapter 3, "The Fewest of the Few: The Battle of Britain, June-September 1940."

¹¹³ Dickinson, 6.

¹¹⁴ Dickinson, 7.

¹¹⁵ Dickinson, 224. Indeed, Bruce Dickinson has become known within Iron Maiden's fan base as serving not only as the band's vocalist, but as their pilot. In recent years Iron Maiden have toured using a jet airliner, nicknamed "Ed Force One," specially modified for extra cargo capacity to allow the band to transport themselves, their crew, and their stage equipment on a single plane; from 2008-2016, Dickinson, who is certified to fly commercial passenger jets, was one of the pilots who flew the plane on tour. This unique transportation arrangement was the subject of a 2009 documentary, *Flight 666*.

¹¹⁶ Dickinson, 337-338.

godfather, the extent to which his interests in aviation and history are intertwined, and the ways in which these facets of his personality have appeared in his music.

The visual elements accompanying “Aces High,” including the cover artwork from when the song was released as a single in 1984, the song’s music video, and the live staging of the song in the band’s concerts, are particularly striking; as with the other songs under discussion in this thesis which have had one or more of these types of visual elements attached to them, these images explicitly frame the song’s historical content and make the subject matter of the lyrics particularly apparent. It is worth examining each of these visual and performative elements, and how they relate to and underscore the song’s historical content, in turn.

The single artwork for “Aces High,” like all of Iron Maiden’s album covers, features a depiction of the band’s mascot Eddie. In this particular image Eddie, wearing a period pilot’s helmet and glasses, is seated in what appears to be the cockpit of a World War II-era fighter plane, gazing at the viewer through a windshield with visible crosshatching of the type used to sight weapons – in this case, presumably, the guns affixed to the front of the plane. In the background of the image, the viewer can see that the plane is in the air, with other fighter planes visible in the sky near it, leading the viewer to believe that Eddie is sitting, if not in the place of the song’s fictional narrator, then in a position similar to the narrator’s during the second half of the song, when he is in the midst of the ongoing air battle.

The music video also confronts the viewer with the imagery of World War II aerial combat, to an even greater degree than the single artwork. The music video begins with a montage of black-and-white film clips of World War II Britain and British soldiers accompanied by an audio recording of a famous wartime speech by then-prime minister Winston Churchill: “We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in the seas and oceans; we shall fight with growing

confidence and growing strength in the air. We shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight in the fields, and in the streets; we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender!”¹¹⁷ The song begins immediately after the word “surrender,” accompanied by more black-and-white footage; many of the accented bass notes and staccato drum hits in the song’s opening instrumental section are juxtaposed against images of the firing of anti-aircraft guns, providing further reinforcement of the song’s sonic depiction of aerial warfare discussed above.¹¹⁸

The remainder of the music video consists of footage of the band performing the song on a stage interspersed with more black-and-white World War II footage, with abrupt cuts back and forth between the two. The fast-paced, frenzied nature of some of the footage, including the speed of the planes flying through the air, the rapid turning of propellers, and the quick maneuvering of planes in battle, all juxtaposed against the driving pace of the music itself, creates a mutually reinforcing relationship between the images and the music.¹¹⁹ In addition, during the second verse, the lyrics describing the narrator’s engagement with enemy planes during the battle are accompanied by what appears to be a wartime cartoon showing large numbers of planes flying over a map of England.¹²⁰

Elements of the music video have also appeared in the live staging of this song whenever Iron Maiden have performed it in concert, allowing these live performances to further frame the song’s historical content. During the three tours in which “Aces High” has been played (the “World Slavery Tour” of 1984-1985, documented on the live album *Live After Death*; the “Somewhere Back in Time World Tour” of 2008-2009, documented in the film *Flight 666*; and

¹¹⁷ *Visions of the Beast*.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

the “Legacy of the Beast Tour” of 2018-2020), the song has always opened the concert, with the audio clip of Churchill’s speech used as an intro tape.¹²¹ In addition, during the 2019 leg of Iron Maiden’s “Legacy of the Beast Tour,” video screens located near the stage were used to play a montage of black-and-white clips, like the clips that appear in the music video, simultaneously with the Churchill recording. During the song itself, Bruce Dickinson performed the song wearing a pilot’s helmet like that worn by Eddie on the single cover, and a large model of a World War II-era fighter plane was suspended above the stage.¹²²

Of the three songs under discussion in this chapter, “Aces High” is the only one to be accompanied by these types of visual media. However, the other two songs also contain themes that appear elsewhere in this thesis; in addition, these songs are both from the same album, 2006’s *A Matter of Life and Death*: “The Longest Day” and “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns.”

“The Longest Day” (*A Matter of Life and Death*, 2006)

“The Longest Day,” the first of these two songs, describes the D-Day landings. However, unlike “Aces High,” which describes a battle solely from the perspective of a participant, “The Longest Day” employs a shifting perspective, with some of the lyrics in the third person and others in the first person of a fictional narrator, a soldier participating in the landings.

The song begins in a moderate tempo with a chugging bass line, over which the guitars, and then the vocals, enter, creating a growing texture. Bruce Dickinson begins the lyrics in a relatively low vocal register, setting the scene poetically as well as musically: “In the gloom, the gathering storm abates/In the ship’s gimlet, eyes await/A call to arms, to hammer at the gates/To

¹²¹ Iron Maiden, *Live After Death* (New York: Columbia Music Video, 2008), DVD; Iron Maiden, *Flight 666* (New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 2009), DVD.

¹²² All references to the band’s “Legacy of the Beast Tour” are based on the author having seen them live on this particular tour, on July 24, 2019, in Bristow, Virginia.

throw them wide, throw evil to its fate.”¹²³ This is followed by a musical shift, in which the pitch of the guitar melodies, as well as Dickinson’s vocal tessitura, become higher, creating a heightening of musical tension; as Dickinson continues to describe the events leading up to the landing, the listener, through the overall mood of the music, is made to feel the increasing anxiety of the soldiers approaching the shores through the song’s slow musical buildup. The first verse continues following this increase in tension: “All summer’s long, the drills to build the machine/To turn men from flesh and blood to steel/From paper soldiers, to bodies on the beach/From summer sands, to Armageddon’s reach.”¹²⁴ The buildup becomes more intense, and the tension is increased yet again, with the entrance of the percussion, beneath the next section of lyrics: “Overlord, your master, not your god/The enemy cost, dawning gray with scud/These wretched souls, puking, shaking fear/To take a bullet, for those who sent them here/The world’s alight, the cliffs erupt in flame/No escape, remorseless shrapnel reigns/Drowning men, no chance for a warrior’s fate/A choking death, enter Hell’s gate!”¹²⁵

At this point, the song reaches a crescendo, both literally and dramatically; the musical texture shifts abruptly from the slow buildup of the opening section to a much more driving feel, with Dickinson’s vocals soaring over the top: “Sliding we go/Only fear on our side/To the edge of the wire/And we rush with the tide/Oh, the water is red/With the blood of the dead/Oh, but I’m still alive/Pray to God I survive.”¹²⁶ This is the first instance in the song of the shifting perspective mentioned earlier; the sudden change in the music is accompanied by a shift from the point of view of a third-person observer describing events from the outside to that of one of the

¹²³ Iron Maiden, “The Longest Day,” recorded 2006, on *A Matter of Life and Death* (EMI, 0946 372324 2 2), CD/DVD.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

soldiers landing on the beach at Normandy. However, despite this shift in perspective, there is still an element of narrative continuity: the change to the soldier's voice occurs immediately following the third-person observer's description of the initial fighting as soldiers begin arriving at the beach, with the lyrics thereby lending themselves to the interpretation that the fictional narrator is among those who have reached the shore and is now in the midst of the battle. The first-person point of view is continued through the chorus, in which the lines "How long on this longest day/'Til we finally make it through?" are repeated four times before the transition to the second verse.¹²⁷

The second verse then shifts back to the third-person perspective, with the observer describing the ongoing fighting in stark terms before transitioning back to the first person, this time mid-verse: "The rising dead, faces bloated, torn/They are relieved, the living wait their turn/Your number's up, the bullet's got your name/You still go on, to Hell and back again/Valhalla waits, Valkyries rise and fall/The warrior tombs lie open for us all/A ghostly hand reaches through the veil/Blood and sand, we will prevail!"¹²⁸ A crescendo similar to that at the end of the first verse, albeit without the slow buildup, occurs as the song transitions back into a repetition of the pre-chorus and chorus. This is followed by a long instrumental interlude, during which the guitar solos occur, before the final repetition of the chorus and an instrumental concluding section in which the chugging bass line and melodic guitar parts of the opening return.¹²⁹

Once again, the song's lyrics broadly reflect an element of British identity in their relation to an event in British military history, with the first-person lyrics sung from the

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

perspective of an Allied, possibly British, soldier acting as part of a landing force that embarked on its mission from England. In addition, there seems to be an emphasis on the simultaneous heroism and tragedy of the events of D-Day, including the fear experienced by the soldiers. Bruce Dickinson, in discussing this song, stated that “if you read accounts of that day, it was absolutely terrifying,” giving insight into the song’s narrative and dramatic structure, particularly the slow buildup in the song’s opening sections.¹³⁰ The music and lyrics are meant to make the listener feel the fear associated with the ever-closer approach to the shore, and the fighting on the beach, in a near-visceral manner, as evidenced both by Dickinson’s quote and by the language used in the lyrics, such as the multiple uses of the word fear itself and the graphic descriptors used in the second verse.

This fear is connected not only to the tragic aspect of the D-Day landings and the deaths of the soldiers who were killed in action during the fighting, but also to the heroic aspect of the same events, such as during the pre-chorus when the fictional narrator says that the soldiers are going into battle with “only fear on [their] side.”¹³¹ Dickinson, speaking about another song on the album *A Matter of Life and Death*, “These Colours Don’t Run,” said in reference to soldiers that “all these people are heroes, whether they wanted to be or not.”¹³² Although he was not speaking about the song “The Longest Day” in this particular quote, if one reads the lyrics of this song through the lens of this latter statement, evidence of a similar emphasis on heroism emerges, such as through the multiple uses of word “warrior,” as well as the reference in the second verse to Valhalla, the mythological heaven for warriors who had died in battle.¹³³ All of

¹³⁰ *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD.

¹³¹ “The Longest Day,” *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD.

¹³² *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD.

¹³³ “The Longest Day,” *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD.

this, in turn, connects back to the larger theme of British identity, via the heroic depiction of Allied (including British) soldiers.

“Brighter Than a Thousand Suns” (*A Matter of Life and Death*, 2006)

The final song under discussion in this chapter, and in this thesis, is “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” also from the album *A Matter of Life and Death*. Of the three songs in this chapter, “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns” is the longest and most complex, both musically and lyrically. The song’s lyrics discuss the Manhattan Project; however, unlike the other songs in this thesis, this song also addresses the aftermath of the events which it describes, and contains a greater element of commentary and hindsight.¹³⁴

The introduction of this chapter demonstrated how World War II and its after-effects in Great Britain affected the members of Iron Maiden’s lives as they were growing up. Another aspect of World War II’s aftermath that had an impact on the band members’ childhoods was the Cold War, which was partly a result of the development of the first nuclear weapons by the United States during World War II. This is particularly noteworthy with regard to the song “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” which not only discusses the Manhattan Project but also poses questions and criticism about the postwar historical impact of the Atomic Age. Dickinson, in a 2006 interview, stated that the song’s lyrics were partly inspired by the band members’ experiences growing up during the Cold War, particularly the widespread fear of nuclear warfare during this period that resulted from the proliferation of nuclear weapons, going so far as to say

¹³⁴ Iron Maiden, “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” recorded 2006, on *A Matter of Life and Death* (EMI, 0946 372324 2 2), CD/DVD.

that as children his generation were led to believe that “we were all going to die in a radioactive cinder.”¹³⁵

As stated above, the song is musically complex, with multiple time changes and alternation between several different sections of music, and without the verse-chorus structure typical of a heavy metal song. The song begins in 7/4 time, with a clean-tone guitar riff, over which another guitar, harmonizing the riff played by the first, enters. Dickinson then sings the first verse of lyrics: “We are not the sons of God/We are not his chosen people now/We have crossed the path he trod/We will feel the pain of his beginning.”¹³⁶

The 7/4 riff is repeated, this time with an overdriven tone, before a change to a second, distorted 7/4 time riff that then leads into the second verse.¹³⁷ The first riff returns beneath the second verse: “Shadow fingers rise above/Iron fingers stab the desert sky/Oh, behold the power of man/On its tower ready for the fall.”¹³⁸ This is followed by a repetition of the distorted second riff and another repetition of the first riff in the third verse: “Knocking heads together we’ll/Raise a city, build a living Hell/Join a race to suicide/Listen for the tolling of the bell.”¹³⁹

The next section, a pre-chorus, features an abrupt metrical change to 4/4 time, with Dickinson’s vocals soaring over the top of a series of sustained guitar chords: “Out of the universe/A strange love is born/Unholy union/Trinity reformed.”¹⁴⁰ A fourth verse, musically identical to verses two and three with a change back to 7/4 time, is then sung: “Yellow sun, its evil twin/In the black, the winds deliver him/We will split our souls within/Atom seed to nuclear

¹³⁵ *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD.

¹³⁶ “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD; Iron Maiden, *A Matter of Life and Death* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 2006), 22-40.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; *A Matter of Life and Death*, 22-40.

dust is riven.”¹⁴¹ The pre-chorus returns, with an accompanying shift to 4/4, this time leading into a buildup to the chorus, in which the line “out of the darkness, brighter than a thousand suns” is sung six times.¹⁴² This is followed by an instrumental section in which the first guitar solo is played.

The music then shifts to a double-time, distorted riff over which the next section of vocals is sung in a polyrhythmic texture, with triplets juxtaposed against the driving 4/4 meter of the music: “Bury your morals and bury your dead/Bury your head in the sand/E equals mc squared you can relate/How we made God with our hands.”¹⁴³ After a brief respite, the double-time riff resumes, and the section continues: “Whatever would Robert have said to his god/About how we made war with the sun?/E equals mc squared you can relate/How we made God with our hands.”¹⁴⁴ The double-time riff ends and the music transitions to an *a tempo* section: “All nations are rising/Through acid veils of love and hate/Chain letters of Satan/Uncertainty led us all to this/All nations are rising/Through acid veils of love and hate/Cold fusion and fury.”¹⁴⁵ The second guitar solo occurs, before returning to the original 7/4 time riffs as the song transitions into the final two verses: “Divide and conquer while ye may/Others preach and others fall and pray/In the bunkers where we’ll die/There the executioners they lie/Bombers launch with no recall/Minute warning of the missile fall/Take a look at your last sky/Guessing you won’t have the time to cry.”¹⁴⁶ This is followed by a return of the pre-chorus and chorus, before a conclusion, musically similar to the introduction, over which Bruce Dickinson somberly sings the song’s final line: “Holy father, we have sinned.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” *A Matter of Life and Death*, CD/DVD.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.; *A Matter of Life and Death*, 22-40.

¹⁴⁴ “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” *A Matter of Life and Death*, CD/DVD.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.; *A Matter of Life and Death*, 22-40.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Peter Elliott, in his article on *A Matter of Life and Death*, refers to the album as a “religio-political critique.”¹⁴⁸ Without arguing that the album, as Elliott asserts, is a “concept album” in the usual sense of the term, it is clear that war and religion are both prevalent themes within *A Matter of Life and Death*, an assertion supported by the previous example of “The Longest Day” discussed above, as well as several of the album’s other tracks and its cover art, which features a militaristic image of Iron Maiden’s mascot, Eddie, in the position of a tank commander leading an army of skeletons.¹⁴⁹ This characterization of *A Matter of Life and Death* as a “religio-political critique” is particularly apt when referring to the song “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” which interweaves images of both warfare and religion in order to raise pointed questions and criticism with regard to the consequences of the Manhattan Project.

As stated earlier, “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns” was, according to Bruce Dickinson, partly inspired by the band members’ experiences growing up during the Cold War. In the same interview, Dickinson describes the Manhattan Project as an instance of human beings “playing God.”¹⁵⁰ This choice of words both provides insight into the religious wordplay within the song’s lyrics, and alludes to the criticism and questions implicit in some of those lyrics regarding the long-term historical and moral consequences of the development of nuclear weapons, an aspect of the Manhattan Project and its aftermath of which the members of Iron Maiden, having lived through the Cold War, would likely have been particularly aware. It is therefore worth exploring some of the poetic elements of the song’s lyrics, including the use of religious terminology in ways that carry multiple meanings within the song, through the lens of Dickinson’s comment; this will be with the understanding that, given the multifaceted and often subjective nature of

¹⁴⁸ Peter Elliott, “A Matter of Life and Death: Iron Maiden’s Religio-Political Critique,” in *Metal Music Studies* 4, no. 2 (2018), 293, 295.

¹⁴⁹ Elliott, 295; *A Matter of Life and Death*, CD/DVD.

¹⁵⁰ *A Matter of Life and Death*, CD/DVD.

song lyrics, this analysis will be largely interpretive. The objective here is to examine the lyrics of “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns” in such a way as to provide a plausible reading of Iron Maiden’s likely intentions in writing the lyrics.

The religious imagery begins in the first lines of the song: “We are not the sons of God/We are not his chosen people now/We have crossed the path he trod/We will feel the pain of his beginning.”¹⁵¹ These lines can be read metaphorically as setting up both the numerous references to religion in the lyrics and the moral critique this imagery is used to effect: the act of creation that the Manhattan Project entailed – the act of “playing God,” as Dickinson described it – is thereby portrayed from the outset as a transgression.

Another significant instance of religious imagery, this time with a double meaning, is the line “unholy union, Trinity reformed,” which both literally refers to the Trinity test in 1945, and also to the Christian idea of the Trinity; the idea that the Trinity has been reformed again heartens back to Dickinson’s assertion about “playing God.”¹⁵² Religion is further invoked as part of the song’s critical and moral questioning during the double-time section, which begins with the lines “Bury your morals and bury your dead/Bury your head in the sand/ $E = mc^2$, you can relate/How we made God with our hands.” The mention of the equation $E = mc^2$ is a reference to Albert Einstein and his role in the Manhattan Project, thereby implicating him in the project’s outcome of humankind “[making] God with [its] hands.”¹⁵³ This is followed by the lines “Whatever would Robert have said to his god/About how we made war with the sun?”¹⁵⁴ The use of the name Robert here is a reference to J. Robert Oppenheimer, the project’s lead scientist, thereby posing a pointed question about the morality of nuclear weapons,

¹⁵¹ “Brighter Than a Thousand Suns,” *A Matter of Life and Death* CD/DVD.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

and Oppenheimer's actions in helping to develop the first of them, framed in terms of his interactions with a higher power.

The word "sun" here is also noteworthy, being one of multiple references to the sun in this song; another is the line "Yellow sun, its evil twin," the evil twin being the atomic bomb.¹⁵⁵ The mention of the sun provides a visual image with which to frame the idea of a nuclear reaction and its power, but also implies an element of contrast that could be read as emphasizing the difference between the naturally occurring nuclear reaction of the sun and the artificial nuclear reactions produced by the atomic bomb. This is in addition to the reference to the sun in the chorus and title of the song, itself a description of the magnitude of a nuclear detonation: the title is a reference to the intensity of the light produced by the Trinity test explosion, which was said to have been "many times brighter than the midday sun."¹⁵⁶

Finally, Iron Maiden choose to conclude this song with a line that acts as a sort of culmination of the rest of the religious references in the song's lyrics: "Holy father, we have sinned."¹⁵⁷ The repentant tone of this line, and the somber tone with which it is sung, acts as a final moment of contemplation and critique with regard to the aftermath of the Manhattan Project. If one interprets the unnamed "we" as implying humankind, the essential message that the listener is left with is that the development of nuclear weapons was a mistake that humankind should regret, thereby returning full circle to the idea of transgression implied in the opening lyrics of the song.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Bruce Cameron Reed, *The History and Science of the Manhattan Project* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2014), 331.

¹⁵⁷ "Brighter Than a Thousand Suns," *A Matter of Life and Death*, CD/DVD.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the repeated appearance of World War II in Iron Maiden's music, including the role of cultural memory in possibly explaining why this war has been referenced more frequently in the band's work more than any other historical topic. In doing so, it has shown the differences in how three specific events within the war have been addressed lyrically, as well as the variation in how the songs have been framed. In particular, the context of the band members' lives, as well as the critical-historical hindsight demonstrated in the song "Brighter Than a Thousand Suns," demonstrate the extent to which the close geographic and historical proximity of the war to their own time has influenced their treatment of it as a subject. Of all the historical topics which Iron Maiden have chosen to describe in their music, World War II is the most immediate and real.

Conclusion

Although, at first glance, the wide variety of historical topics which Iron Maiden have chosen to address in their music might seem to make it difficult to examine them as a whole, this thesis has demonstrated that there are overarching similarities that make this type of analysis possible. Chapter One examined songs that described the life and conquests of Alexander the Great, the Viking raids on the British Isles, and the Albigensian Crusade, while also introducing the concepts of topic theory and British identity. Chapter Two analyzed songs on the historical conflicts between Native Americans and U.S. soldiers, and the violence perpetrated against the former by the latter, the Crimean War, and World War I, and also included the first examples under discussion in this thesis of the use of visual and performative elements to frame lyrics and their historical content. Chapter Three was the most thematically unified chapter of the three, dealing exclusively with songs about World War II, while continuing to demonstrate the importance of the concepts introduced in the first two chapters.

Indeed, the presence of recurring themes across several of these songs not only allows for this sort of examination, but makes such a “big picture” analysis fruitful in terms of pinpointing how Iron Maiden approach this category of subject matter, and how this is in turn reflective of their artistic and cultural identity. This type of analysis also shows the extent to which Iron Maiden, whose importance in the history of heavy metal makes their music an understudied repertoire within the genre, are unique in their frequent and longstanding inclusion of historical topics in their music.

The work presented here is, by no means, exhaustive. In addition to the fact that Iron Maiden are still, as of the time of writing, actively performing and may very well continue to compose and record new music, their repertoire is rich in other topics worth examining,

including literary subject matter. Therefore, it is the author's hope that this thesis, and its general overview of Iron Maiden's "heavy metal historiography," represents a base upon which to potentially build through additional future research.

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