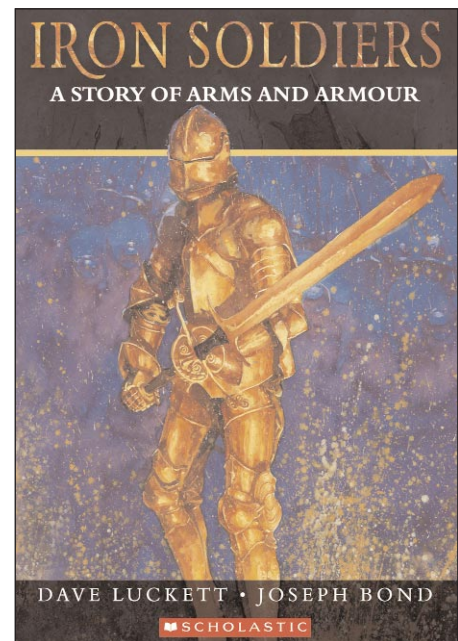


Iron Soldiers

Written by Dave Lockett

Illustrated by Joseph Bond



◀ The Back Story ▶ with Dave Lockett

When did you first become interested in military history? Did you play Battleships in primary school?

I certainly did, and formal figure-based war games as soon as I realised that there was a local group. I started wondering, in early secondary school, why we were told at length about the build-up to wars and about their outcomes, but never about how they were fought, nor by whom, using what methods, supplies and equipment, or precisely where, and under what conditions. We learned the names of some of the battles, but never where they occurred, or why they happened there and not somewhere else. I could never understand why the politics leading to and from the battlefield was so important, but that the means by which a decision was reached weren't.

Why did you choose to write *Iron Soldiers* as fiction?

Because that makes it into a story, with people in it. Stories with people in them are far and away the best way of remembering anything, which is to say, of learning.

Did that choice make the job harder? What scenes did you need to use your novelist's imagination for?

No, it made the job easier. And a novelist's imagination isn't a tool that I can pick up to do this job, or put away for this other one. It's always with me, and I can't help using it.

What sort of source material is available for this subject? Do we have any relevant material in Australian museums?

I know of no more than a few individual pieces of medieval armour in Australia, and a great many replicas of varying degrees of authenticity. There is a large collection of medieval armour in the Tower and in Warwick Castle in England, and the European collection of excellence is in Augsburg in Germany; but nearly all of it is post-1450. Very few examples of early medieval armour still exist.

On the other hand, there's a huge literature about it, and field archaeology has contributed a great deal in the past few decades. The steel weapons re-creation groups have a good deal to contribute, too. They actually make close copies of armours and then wear them in what is at least vigorous field sport, if not actual combat, and this gives clues as to the merits (or otherwise) of various types of armour.

Which part of *Iron Soldiers* was the most fun to write? Which scene was the most challenging?

The most fun were the bits where the knights explain why they want particular pieces of armour. My favourite line in the whole book is where one of them remarks, 'If your face hangs out all bare, you'll get an arrow in it, sure as you're alive. Only you won't be, if you get my drift.'

BEHIND THE BOOK TEACHER'S NOTES

The most difficult bit was where Tom Smith hits on the idea for the rolling-mill. I've no idea whether that was how it happened, but it had to be something like that.

How heavy was a man in armour?

A typical suit of late-medieval field plate weighed about thirty to thirty-five kilos, and to this must be added the weight of the weapons. This is still less than what a modern soldier is expected to carry on his back. SAS troops operated in Afghanistan carrying between forty and fifty kilos each. Royal Marines humped more still from Carlos Water to Port Stanley in the 1983 South Atlantic War. And those loads are carried in one place, not spread over the whole body, and they are carried by men on foot, not on horses.

How did a suited man use the toilet?

He didn't. If you had to go, you had to go, and you got your squire to clean the armour later.

◀ with Joseph Bond

How did you learn to draw?

Well, I didn't have anyone around to teach me, so I pretty much taught myself early on. I really loved drawing the superheroes: the Hulk, Spiderman, Captain America. My brother, who is nine years older than me, drew them all the time and I wanted to do them too. I saw a picture of Batman and I wanted to draw Batman, so I just did. Anyone can draw, really, but it takes a lot of application and time and effort, and I guess some people don't put the time in.

Did you get busted for drawing at school?

No, I didn't get into trouble *for* drawing. When I *got* into trouble, I drew, though. It made me feel better.

Where do you draw now? Is there one special place?

A few years ago my mum built an extension onto the back of the house as a studio for me – 4-metres square, so it was pretty big. And I used to work and sleep in there. But it got too crowded, so I asked her if we could knock a doorway through into the bedroom next to it. It took me a while to talk her into it, because I think she imagined me taking a hammer to the wall and just leaving some big rough hole there. But when I'd done it, she looked at the doorway and said it was the best doorway in the house. So now I've got a bedroom separate from the studio, and that's good.

What do you like to draw best?

I love people. I love trying to make the anatomy accurate, and the clothes. The arm bends and all the wrinkles in the sleeve have to follow the logic of the muscles, so I enjoy trying to get them right.

What do you find hardest to draw?

The back, actually. I studied anatomy and I love it, but getting the musculature of the back to look right is pretty hard.

Who decided which scenes in *Iron Soldiers* would be illustrated?

I did, basically. I wanted to start each chapter with a house, and as time went on and the family became more successful, I wanted to show that the house became more impressive. Then I wanted to finish each chapter with the man in his armour; to show the result of the new style of armour the smiths had been working on. Originally those illustrations of the houses were quite big, but they had to be reduced because there were so many words in the text, and it wouldn't all fit.

What was the biggest challenge in the book?

Well, I can't stand to look at the man on page 19 – it took three days to draw that head. It doesn't look so bad to you, maybe, but it took so long it felt like I'd never drawn in my life before. I had bad dreams about that face! The head and pose on page 20 were hard too.

BEHIND THE BOOK TEACHER'S NOTES

What were the sources of information you used?

My brother and I went to several libraries, but it was quite hard to find the right references. Then the author Dave Luckett was fantastic and sent me a box of books with lots of notes about the kind of clothes, the details of the armour and so on. I also got some ideas from videos. I was scared to do the double page spread on pages 40-41 so I left it till last, but it turned out to be the easiest picture because by then I had a plan. I loved the spooky scene in the movie 'Excalibur' with a dead-looking forest and an evil kid in it, and I knew that was the kind of background I wanted. I enjoyed painting it because it was a sort of fantasy scene. Then I just put the man on his horse against it.

The cover painting: it just leaps off the bookshelf.

That was easy. Fire's always easy because you know the colours – yellow, red and orange. Daytime pictures are harder – the subtle greens and blues and the softer lighting.

How long does a picture take you? The title page picture, say.

The drawing took the longest with that one [rather than the referencing or painting]. I don't use models for my characters. I'd rather make them up, because you can waste days looking for the right reference and still not get it. If you make the character up, you can get it to do anything you like. The muscles and wrinkles in the clothing take a while. It took three days to draw that picture, but only one day to paint it. That's because I often use watercolour and it's a very unforgiving medium. You have to get it right in one go if you can.

If you don't use models, do you use yourself sometimes? Did you check that arm on page 20 in the mirror, for example?

I'd check arms in the mirror and maybe the angle of the head – but I'd never use the rest of my body to check anything. Wouldn't be a very fit-looking soldier if I did!

The painting on page 45 was hard for a different reason. Drawing it was fine because I referred to a scene in a TV documentary that was just what I wanted, but painting it was a nightmare. It must be something about the way I use browns, I think. I would try to layer the paint, but it all just mixed in. I painted this three times before I got it right.

If you could draw anything right now, what would it be?

A warrior – something like Conan the Barbarian. Lots of people know the anatomy technically, but they don't give their characters the right feeling. Hogarth does the body too tight, but I like to try and get the loose feeling of Kent Williams. That's what I'm always aiming at.

About the writer:

Dave Luckett

I was born February 1951, in Sydney, NSW, and moved to Perth in 1963. I took up with science fiction and fantasy about the time I moved to Perth, to the scandal and despair of my teachers. I'm still unrepentant about it, though. I came into SF fandom about 1980, married another fan, Sally Beasley, and have one son, who also qualifies. I began writing long before I knew how to do it, and learned on the job.

About the illustrator:

Joseph Bond

I grew up in Adelaide and loved soccer and drawing. I played for the South Australian state league soccer team, then studied drawing full-time at Elizabeth College of TAFE and in the graphic arts school at Croydon College of TAFE.

My brothers and I used to watch the TV program 'Starsky and Hutch' and liked to draw police cars. I also loved drawing superheroes, like the Hulk, Spiderman and Captain America.

Teaching Ideas ✓

Before Reading ✓

- Ask students to think about the large format of *Iron Soldiers*. What kind of story does it lead students to expect?
- Before students open the book and find out what kind of story it is, ask them what meaning the title conveys to them. What meaning does it convey once they read beyond it?
- Why do you think the publisher added the subtitle, 'A Story of Arms and Armour'?
- Joseph Bond's brilliant use of colour makes the soldier on the cover glow. What do the colour and light suggest to students?
- How effective is the back-cover blurb in enticing you to open the book?
- Ask students why human beings go to war. Have those reasons changed over the centuries? (Perhaps use a few examples of wars your students are familiar with.)
- Ask students whether they are interested in books about war and what makes these books interesting. If they are not interested personally, why do they think other readers are? Why would a reader today watching the news from Iraq on a suburban television screen take an interest in medieval warfare?

Activity

Draw your weapon

Before you start reading *Iron Soldiers*, make a list of all the items of armour and the weapons that you can think of. They could be from any period in history. Have a go at drawing the one that interests you most.

During reading ✓

- Discuss the composition of the first picture in *Iron Soldiers*, on the title page. What does it tell us before the main part of the story begins?
- Ask students to look briefly through the whole book. Ask them how they would describe the style of the illustrations. Ask them what they think is conveyed by the design of the book – the placement of the illustrations; the proportion of illustrations to written text; the function of the borders and breakout boxes.
- Read the Introduction, then read the first few pages of Chapter 1. Ask students to describe some of the differences. Discuss the purpose of these differences. Ask students to consider whether the Introduction was necessary.
- Ask students to make a list of the most important changes in the suit of armour during the centuries covered by *Iron Soldiers*. Ask them what they think was the point of each of these changes.

Activities

Map it out

Make a large map of medieval Europe, locating the main battles referred to in *Iron Soldiers* with the dates they were fought, and illustrating it with drawings and models of some of the arms and armour used there.

Make a helmet

Take some recycled materials – cardboard and foil or other paper that looks like metal – and following the instructions in Chapter 1, make Tom's helmet.

Armour around the world

Iron Soldiers focuses on arms and armour in medieval Britain and western Europe. Divide the class into groups and go to the library to research arms and armour in other societies.

Each group should then give an illustrated presentation on their findings to the rest of the class. You could look at arms and armour in contemporary Australia and among indigenous Australians before colonisation, among Maoris, the warriors of Ancient Japan, Native Americans; in China, the British Empire and Nazi Germany, and in the United States today. How have they met the challenge to protect the individual while attacking the group?

After reading ✓

- Ask students whether they think the fictional story of Tom Smith's family and descendants was useful in getting information across, or did it get in the way?
- Ask those who were not initially interested in the subject matter of war whether reading *Iron Soldiers* changed their minds.

Activity

Chain mail

Take some recycled wire and a pen or pencil. Cut as many short lengths of wire – each about 5cm long – as you can. You'll need to ask your teacher to bring an old pair of scissors or tin snips to class for this. Make sure the scissors are not good sharp ones – wire will blunt them.

Wrap each piece of wire around the pencil to make a ring. Now as a class, join all the rings you have made into a small piece of chain mail. It probably won't be big enough to protect more than one hand, so you can easily see how many it must have taken to cover a whole body!

Literature study

To encourage students to read, and to increase their enjoyment and understanding of this book, discuss the following questions. Students might like to add some questions of their own.

- *Iron Soldiers* is written as fiction, but which parts of the book's design make it look like a non-fiction book?
- Look at the Glossary. Does it leave out any terms that you were not familiar with as you read the book? Which ones would you add? Check their meaning in the dictionary.
- Have a look at the breakout boxes on such pages as 9, 10, 15, 18. Which text type are they? As you read through the story of Tom and his descendants, did you stop to read them? Or did you come back to read them later? Do you think they were helpful or could you have enjoyed the book without them?
- Brainstorm the design of *Iron Soldiers*. Look at the breakout boxes on page 21. Why do you think the designer put colour and texture behind the type? Where else have you seen this done? What do you think of this design element?
- Which type is the text on page 47? What did this page add to your understanding of the story?