Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

History and the Media

Review Number:
409
Publish date:
Tuesday, 31 August, 2004
ISBN:
1403920370
Date of Publication:
2004
Price:
£19.99
Pages:
184pp.
Publisher:
Palgrave
Place of Publication:
London
Reviewer:
Marc Morris

In December 2002, 400 people assembled at the Institute of Historical Research in London to attend a conference called ?History and the media?. Its purpose was to investigate the recent and phenomenal rise of popular history, and as such it drew delegates not only from colleges, libraries and museums, but also from television studios, newsdesks and film production companies. As David Cannadine explains in his introduction, the result was ?very much a conversation rather than a confrontation? (p. 2). Between the two camps, common ground was sought out. Possibilities and pitfalls of continued interaction were explored. And, by implication, attempts were made to understand the reasons behind the history boom: was it New Labour?s 1997 election victory? The death of the Queen Mother? The Millennium? The Internet? In this book, we have the considered thoughts of some of the leading lights who were in attendance; eleven chapters, arranged to alternate between the worlds of academic history and the media.

By far the best of the academic chapters is that by Roger Smither, keeper of the Film and Video Archive at the Imperial War Museum. His piece, ?Why is so much television history about war??, is excellent ? clear, compelling, intelligent and well argued. He begins with a brisk overview of the landmark series that have shaped history on television. By this stage in the proceedings (Chapter 4) readers are already well acquainted with the canon ? *The Great War* (first broadcast 1964), *The World at War* (1974), *The Civil War* (1990), *The Second World War in Colour* (1999) ? so it is much to Smither?s credit that his discussion, as well as being engaging, also feels fresh. When he moves on to consider the question of his title, his overview provides an obvious answer: programmes about war have been hugely successful, and for many producers

that alone is reason enough to make more. But where Smither?s conclusions might seem at first to be obvious ones, they are offered on the basis of proper reflection, explanation and analysis. For instance, it is a commonly known and often repeated fact that archive footage is cheap footage. But why exactly is this? An archivist well versed in the history of archives, Smither guides us through the historical reasons ? the legislation governing freedom of information, the founding-philosophies of film archives. Similarly, while it might seem obvious that we have a lot of archive film of war because the twentieth century offered a lot of war to film, Smither again tackles the root causes: the reasons that newsreel was shot, the tastes and concerns of early cinema-goers and cinema-managers, the prevailing xenophobia and nostalgia of the Great British Public. Only once does he venture a personal opinion, and is careful to precede it with a cautious disclaimer (?the mechanics of human memory are an area in which I have no expertise whatsoever?). It serves to reinforce the impression that, by the end of this chapter, not only have we learned a lot, but we have done so in the company of an author who is highly informed as opposed to merely highly opinionated.

Max Hastings is both, and his chapter is the other outstanding contribution to this volume. ?Hacks and scholars: allies of a kind? is an exceedingly well written piece, essentially arguing in favour of the pseudo-alliance of his title. There is plenty of anecdote: for instance, having heard so much about *The Great War*, it is amusing to discover that young Max, 17, was a researcher for the series, and that he learnt more about the ?manic intrigues and serial bonking which characterize life in television? (p. 105) than he did about the war itself. Where anecdote is used, however, it is used judiciously, and illuminates rather than clouds his wider argument (in the above instance, Max also learnt that television is a visual medium, that the words must follow the pictures and not vice versa). Beyond this, the chapter contains many home truths that other academics and media types would do well to take on board. It is refreshing to be reminded, after all the grand claims made elsewhere in the volume about the power of television to educate and democratise, that programmes should not be overloaded with information, visual or otherwise, since they are mostly watched in the evening, after work, when the audience?s ?receptivity to complex intellectual signals is at its lowest ebb? (p. 106). Of course, television can usefully stimulate public debate but, as Hastings points out, such debate is never exclusively in the public?s interest: it also stimulates what might be otherwise unimpressive book sales. Hastings?s aim is especially true when he discusses and finds wanting the media?s declared love of novelty: ?It is very seldom that an article or a programme unveils information genuinely unknown to scholars. What happens is that a new generation of editors or television producers rediscover facts hitherto unknown not to science or academe, but to themselves.? (p. 109) In fact, in spite of its professed neophilia, says Hastings, the media is extremely reluctant to reverse old verdicts ? a point he illustrates to good effect with examples about the First World War (bad) and the Second World War (good).

At one point in his chapter, Hastings defends Simon Schama?s *A History of Britain* against its critics. As he correctly avers, this was unquestionably a tremendous achievement, and ?the trade of history is surely in Schama?s debt? (p. 109). The criticisms, however, evidently stung Schama, and he uses his own piece, ?Television and the trouble with history?, to rebut them. Nearly everything he has to say is sensible, to the point of being indisputable, and his comments attest to the thoughtfulness, at every level, that went into the making of *AHOB*. The problem here is that the chapter itself is far too messy. Schama sets out to disprove ?four interconnected assumptions? which, he contends, lead other academics to suppose that television history cannot get serious. But thereafter he gives the reader almost no clues as to which of these assumptions he is addressing. It is almost as if, with the constraints of writing for television now finally lifted, Schama is determined to be as opaque as possible ? an impression reinforced by his lengthy and seemingly wilfully obscure opening gambit involving the critic Walter Benjamin. With a more robust editor ? for example, *AHOB*?s Martin Davidson ? this could have been a great piece. Alternatively, perhaps Max Hastings, given his reported experience in rendering scholarly articles comprehensible (p. 115), might have been prevailed upon.

Ian Kershaw?s chapter, ?The past on the box: strengths and weaknesses?, is far more digestible. Regrettably, however, it is little more than an appetiser ? at under six pages, the shortest chapter in the book by some way. Moreover, it is, like Schama?s piece, a reprint of an earlier article and, whereas in its original context (the *Times Literary Supplement*) it must have sparkled, here it feels somewhat dusted down. The reader will

find much to agree with but, by this stage in the proceedings (as Chapter 8, it is buried near the back of the book), he or she will have heard most of it before: history has never been more popular; television can have a big impact; a picture is worth a thousand words. Apart from the quality of the writing, what really marks Kershaw?s piece out from the rest is his less-than-rosy opinion of TV companies. ?They are essentially exploitative?, he declares. What they want for their history programmes is academic legitimation, and thus ?without care it is easy to provide backing for a programme which might damage rather than enhance a reputation? (pp. 122-3).

Tristram Hunt learnt this lesson the hard way, as he himself admits at the end of his chapter ?How does television enhance history?? Such self-awareness, however, is fleeting, and serves to make his contribution a curious read. The essential point he wishes to make is that television history is great ? notice his title has no truck with those historians who contend that TV diminishes their discipline. Such historians, Hunt suggests, should get out more. Like the post-war generation of academics, they should go forth from the academy, into the wider world, and share the fruits of their labours. No sane historian, of course, would deny that sharing historical knowledge in this way is a good and necessary thing. The difficulty with Hunt?s piece is not his message, but his anxiety to let us know at every stage that, like Macaulay, Trevelyan and Schama, he is on the side of the angels. Thus, despite tacitly acknowledging the shortcomings of his series *Civil War*, he is at pains to remind us, on more than one occasion, of its public utility. After it was broadcast ?the Open University received an unprecedented number of enquiries and then take-up of courses on the history of the seventeenth century? (p. 94). In other words, never mind the quality: feel the width. If all historians were equally enlightened, they would be more grateful: ?For progressives, the capacity of television history to broaden learning, democratise knowledge and generate public discourse has to be regarded as a laudatory quality.? Hunt adopts a similar partisan view when he later concedes that television history has its faults. Thus Channel 5?s low-budget offering *The Most Evil Men in History* is dismissed as ?execrable?. Yet it is hard to see how, in conceptual terms, it differed from BBC2?s big-budget media event *Great Britons* ? another project in which Hunt was personally involved ? which is singled out as praiseworthy (again, for generating public engagement); both series worked from the same questionable assumption that it was useful and meaningful to judge long-dead individuals by moral absolutes (though only one attempted the meaningless task of inviting the public to place them in rank order). *Evil Men*, however, did interview leading historians in each case; *Great Britons* relied on the advocacy of experts whose qualifications were rather more mixed, including, as they did, Jeremy Clarkson, Michael Portillo and the comedian Alan Davies.

Most of Chapter 10, ?Writing the history of broadcasting?, carries a similar BBC bias. This is understandable, and partially excusable, given that its author, Jean Seaton, is the Corporation?s official historian. A greater problem *vis-à-vis* the chapter?s title and its content is that much of the latter is devoted to answering questions about broadcasting itself, rather than how one goes about writing its history. True, we are initially treated to an overview of earlier attempts to approach the subject. (The outstanding figure is Asa Briggs, who between 1961 and 1995 produced a five-volume history of the BBC; more than two pages here are an encomium of praise for Briggs, his style and his work.) Thereafter, however, we are invited to consider what seem to be tangential questions: ?how good broadcasting gets made?; how technological changes ?set programmes going?. We are told that the people involved matter and, almost as an aside, we learn that to construct a history of these people, one talks to them. Hence the underwhelming conclusion that ?you do broadcasting history just like any other kind, by talking with individuals and groups together?. Mischievous medievalists might protest here that, even if we were able to get our individuals together, they would have little to say for themselves. Yet there are more serious objections, or at least question marks, to raise in regard to Seaton?s methodology, as set out in her final pages. Unlike Briggs, who did not have the ability to watch or listen to programmes again, Seaton has access to the biggest and best-kept television and radio archive in the world. How does she approach such a mountain? The answer seems to be that she relies primarily on her own memory ? recalling, for example, those programmes she watched in the 1980s as a consequence of becoming ?surrounded by an increasing tribe of small boys?. The fact that she admits to the shortcomings of such a methodology (?of course what I watched was heavily biased; I did not do it then as a researcher but just as a person?; ?none of this is systematic, and I do not think it can be?) does not make it seem, to this reviewer, any less questionable or unhistorical. Nor does the example she chooses to illustrate

its merits: ?I had christenings where all the small children in sight had plastic swords down the back of their jumpers ? a strange accessory ? but one directly derived from a cartoon called *Thunderbirds*.? (p. 156) As even the most closeted historian will recall, *Thunderbirds* was first broadcast in the 1960s, not the 1980s. It was not a cartoon; its protagonists did not carry swords, nor wear them down their jumpers. The children in question may have been watching *Thundercats*, a less enduring cultural artefact but undeniably a cartoon made in the 80s and featuring swords. Then again, perhaps they were fans of *Masters of the Universe*, also from the 80s, with characters who did indeed strap their swords to their backs. The point is, of course, that I don?t know: my memory is imperfect. In order to be certain, I?d have to research the subject properly.

And so to the remaining non-academics. Taylor Downing, a writer and independent television producer with more than 200 historical documentaries to his credit, gets the book off to reasonably good start with his ?Bringing the past to the small screen?. There is much to agree with: that history and reality TV are two categories best kept separate; that dramatic reconstruction works for the vignette, but not the broad canvas; that television should bring new historical understanding to a wider audience. There?s no real coherent argument as such, and the main weakness is that the chapter was evidently converted from an audio-visual presentation, where video clips at one time provided the evidence; reduced to very short written synopses, these become less than clinching. But for all that the piece is a little unfocused, it is a passionate and at times even polemical opening chapter.

Downing?s main conclusion is that television history needs to have a strong visual core and a strong narrative. Most of his fellow contributors agree (e.g. pp. 9, 19, 42-3, 95, 121). On television, if you must do analysis or argument, the advice is: keep it short, and get on with your story. A good, commonsensical rule for one medium, however, does not necessarily hold true for another, as Lord Bragg proceeds to demonstrate in his chapter ?The adventure of making *The Adventure of English*?, wherein we learn almost nothing but facts about his most recent television series: how long it took to shoot, and how long to edit; how long the part breaks were, how great the music was. The team he assembled were experienced old hands; the locations they chose with care. The few general points Bragg has to offer are made at excruciating length with extended examples and quotes from the series. One extract, for example, is used to suggest that interviews can work well for conveying complex arguments. (One could easily marshal evidence, of course, to show occasions where they do not.) Other sections of the series are discussed at length ? for instance, a whole page on the origins of the expression ?OK? ? but with no discernible purpose. What fresh insights, one constantly wonders, is one supposed to take away from this excursus? That television has limitations of length, so one has to generalise? That later periods of history have archive footage, whereas earlier ones do not? That Lord Bragg doesn?t like dramatic reconstruction much, but that he used it a bit? In a book such as this, from an academic press, the emphasis should be on analysis, not narrative. That the tantalising array of complex questions set out in the editor?s introduction have been ducked in this adventure story is made plain by its banal conclusion: the series was the hardest thing Melvyn has ever done, but it was worth it because people liked it, ?And now I have had the chance to describe the process for this book!? (p. 87)

Another chapter almost devoid of analysis is Jeremy Isaacs?s ?All our yesterdays? ? the title being borrowed from a programme that the experienced documentary-maker worked on early in his career. This was essentially a nostalgia show, and this is essentially a nostalgia chapter. It reads like the first stab at a memoir, and at times clippings from other peoples?. Thus, for example, having learned that *The World at War* (arguably the most groundbreaking of Isaacs?s many magisterial series) was made possible due to tax cuts on the ITV companies, we are treated to a gripping blow-by-blow account of who agreed what with whom, when, and in whose office. There are many other similar nuggets of equal value.

John Tusa?s chapter is entitled ?A deep and continuing use of history?. In it the author explains how, despite enjoying his time reading history at Cambridge, he couldn?t see how his studies would prove useful later in life. How wrong he was: as it turned out, history was profoundly useful throughout his entire career. The analytical skills he acquired (at the feet of Walter Ullmann, no less) could be applied to obtain a better understanding of global politics during the 1960s, 70s and 80s ? useful for a graduate who went on to hold various news production and editorial roles at the BBC. Similarly, when in 1986 Tusa became head of the BBC?s World Service, the importance of being able to construct a coherent historical narrative was soon

readily apparent. ?Management?, he tells us, ?involves telling an organization a story which it recognizes as being a true account of itself; and then telling the outside world the same story? (p. 134). John Birt?s mistake, we learn, was ignoring and disparaging the Beeb?s history. And when, in 1995, Tusa left the Corporation to become MD of the Barbican Centre, he was able, with Clio as his assistant, to work the same magic, albeit with some sleight of hand. (The received wisdom at the time was that the Barbican?s history was nothing to shout about. ?It was more a question of retro-fitting the history to the place?, Tusa confesses.) Moreover, Tusa is not alone in finding history useful in the world of work. His son, ?also a product of Cambridge history?, now a city-analyst, found that the best way to understand the Westland Affair was to establish the exact details of what had happened ? just like a historian would. So the moral of this chapter is: all those essays are worth it. As such it is exactly the kind of piece that an editor of an alumni magazine or departmental prospectus would welcome. In this volume, however, it deserves no place.

?Has Hollywood stolen our history?? screamed the title of a session of the ?History and the media? conference, thereby successfully engaging the interest of that day?s newspapers. Here it becomes the title of the last chapter, a short offering by the filmmaker David Puttnam: inappropriately, since Puttnam makes clear from the start that he has absolutely no interest in the question whatsoever. Instead, he accuses Hollywood of what he sees as the more serious crime of simplifying the past. ?The tyranny of the bottom line? means that producers of big-budget pictures avoid complexity and reduce everything to ?a simple struggle between good and evil?. (Strange, then, that Hollywood is held in such low regard by the Republican party, since it appears to view the world in similar absolute terms.) Beyond this, however, Puttnam does not have much to say. Filmmakers should avoid simplicity and get more complex. Here, one cannot help thinking, would have been a good place to start.

Considering the repeated mantra that great television history is all about well-constructed narrative, and that clarity, concision and structure are all highly desirable qualities, it comes as a surprise to find so much of the writing on display is faulty, repetitious and downright slapdash. Several sections of certain chapters read like first drafts. Jeremy Isaacs refers allusively to something called *History at War* before proceeding to reintroduce it to us on two further occasions (it turns out to be a book). ?Although I disagreed with much of Professor Ferguson?s utilitarian critique of empire, the series attracted millions of viewers? (p. 98), says Tristram Hunt, seemingly unaware that the size of a particular programme?s audience is not contingent upon whether he personally agrees with its ideological content. And what is the reader to make of Jean Seaton?s question ?But what do you do with what you make of programmes when you see them again?? or her sentence ?One aspect of considering programming is scheduling, the ways in which putting together the stream of programmes that will call, attract and hold audiences over an evening, a week, a year is thought of?? (pp. 156-7)

Like the writing, the editorial standards vary enormously from one chapter to the next, leading to the suspicion that they were never very rigorously imposed in the first place. Some chapters come with endnotes, some without; some endnotes come with pagination, some do not. Each to his own, one might say: Max Hastings?s piece has no notes, and loses nothing by their absence. But the same inconsistencies carry over into the main text. Thus, while Roger Smither identifies Simon Schama?s *magnum opus* as ?*A History of Britain* (three series, the first broadcast in autumn 2000)?, it is elsewhere called ?*A History of Britain*?, ?*History of Britain*?, and even ?Simon Schama?s history of Britain series?. Similarly, Ken Burns?s film on the American Civil War is referred to variously as *The Civil War* and *Civil War*. Channel 4?s 2002 series *The Spartans* is mistakenly called *Sparta*; television historian Michael Wood is called ?Michael Woods?.

But, questions of style aside, the crucial failing here is that there is too much anecdote and too little analysis. In several cases what is being offered is under- or un-substantiated opinion based on personal experience alone. Having set out in his introduction an exciting list of questions, concerning, as they do, the nature of not only academic history and the media, but also the society that produces both, David Cannadine remarks that ?these questions are easily posed, but have yet to be convincingly answered, and assigned their appropriate (and relative) significance. Moreover, they rest on assumptions which have themselves not yet been tested or proven? (p. 1). Sadly, these sentences are as true now as they were before *History and the Media* was published.

The author is happy to accept this review, and does not wish to comment further.

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