



BCMh Spring Conference

War and Television

Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford Saturday 24th May 2004

This fascinating event was a play in two, unequal, parts. Three speakers, Steve Badsey, Richard Holmes and Gordon Corrigan spoke about their experiences presenting military history on television. The final speaker, Simon Doughty, offered a useful corrective as he described his work with TV journalists covering the 2003 war in Iraq. We concluded with a panel discussion, Gary Sheffield standing in for Richard Holmes.

There was, perhaps, a surprising degree of consensus about the role of television programmes in presenting history to the public. Certainly there was no doubt of its importance – a serious academic book might sell 8,000 copies and reach maybe 30,000 people but any TV programme will reach at least 500,000 and up to 6m or even more. Further, many of the programmes are now available on video or DVD. Students use computers and the internet to prepare essays and dissertations; it will only be a matter of time before they incorporate substantial visual material in electronic form.

But all the presenters referred to substantial limitations with the television format, at least as it is currently structured. Because it is a visual medium it is not ideal for presenting ideas, concepts or analysis. If there is no film or other image to support the commentary it is unlikely that the programme will even be made. The large audiences present a challenge as much as an opportunity in that it must be assumed that most of the viewers will have very little familiarity with the subject. TV executives are also reluctant to present programmes about subjects with which audiences are not already familiar. Currently, therefore, television seems doomed to present an endless round of programmes set at an introductory level and supported by images of occasionally dubious relevance - given the vogue for dramatic reconstruction and computer generation - rather than discussions or ideas.

The TV world is a fast moving one, however. I do not think the subject of Richard Holmes's series on the American War of Independence will have been familiar to many people and it was shown, to strong audiences, on primetime TV. Steve Badsey explained that over the next decade or so the number of channels will increase with a rise in specialist programmes for niche audiences. There was also a debate as to whether audiences treated TV depictions, particularly in dramas, in the same way as a factual programme. The consensus seemed to be that audiences were aware of the difference between drama and documentary – as they may be with good and bad books. All the presenters emphasised the importance of getting the facts right, both in the spoken word and the image. Minor errors could seriously damage the credibility of the programme makers on the bigger issues.

I think the point that many of us found disturbing, but particularly in Simon Doughty's talk, was the widespread ignorance of military affairs or history amongst those making the programmes. Much of this ignorance extends beyond the specialist military sphere and many of us have witnessed atrociously superficial and misleading coverage of stories with which we have some personal knowledge. Given the breadth of subjects covered by TV this is perhaps not surprising. But I think many of us found it difficult to understand why some news



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journalists did not seem to feel it important to find out more about the subjects they were to discuss. During the 2003 Iraq War many of us saw minor incidents such as hit and run attacks on convoys (which was all a particular journalist could see) awarded a significance beyond any recognition of reality. It should be recognised that much of the comment is added by sub-editors back home but even so the picture of the media at work is not comforting. I remember myself that I found the Yugoslav Civil War of 1991-95 completely incomprehensible whilst it was being fought. It was only when I read a book afterwards that I understood what the (very simple) issues were; oceans of media coverage had completely failed to explain them. A film clip from Simon seemed to reveal that rather than seeking to inform themselves during the inevitable *longueurs* of a military operation several quite prominent journalists chose, instead, to sit around and complain.

As Gary Sheffield said during the panel discussion, the best medium for discussing ideas is radio. But Radio 4 did not have the appeal of television although, again, one suspects that it reaches many more people than books. The consensus seemed to be that TV was extremely important, particularly in generating an initial interest in a subject, and was likely to become more so. Poor TV programmes attract a lot of interest; the fact that poor – or good - books receive less is perhaps an indication that the print medium reaches fewer people. I certainly felt that media studies should form a part of the curriculum for all children - probably adults too.

So, what is a journalist? Someone who writes – or fills – a daily newspaper or TV programme – whatever that involves. To what end? Certainly a different one to a historian. Who says we do not need those courses on media studies?

This was a most thought-provoking and entertaining day. Christine and Duncan Anderson are to be thanked for enabling us to use the facilities at Lady Margaret Hall where we always get a high turnout. And, as ever, we not only enjoyed an excellent lunch but also basked in the warmest sunshine of the year.

Andy Grainger

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