

# SHARING THEIR PAST WITH THE NATION: REENACTMENT AND TESTIMONY ON BRITISH TELEVISION

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Analysis of the textual operations of non-fiction history television programmes, specifically the use of the “historical eyewitness” and testimony, gives fascinating insights into changes in representations of the past since the 1960s. Presenter and eyewitness are familiar televisual tropes crossing many genres, and particularly in history programmes testifiers may be seen to have auratic power as individuals who represent a form of authenticity: a direct link to a nation’s past. This is often underlined by the use of photographs to accompany testimony, dating from the time described, providing a form of Barthes’ “punctum”; they are poignant for the viewer (2000: 25-6). Marita Sturken (2008: 75) has alerted scholars to “the role that the photograph continues to play in concepts of memory” and this analysis considers the ways in which the photograph is used as a means to bridge the chronological gap between the Great War and later generations with no direct recollection of the conflict.

By comparing the use of testimony in history series considering the Great War, but also televised coverage of a “weblog”, developments in such representations of the past since the 1960s will be considered. This is a particularly significant period in which to consider representations of the conflict; the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its end approaches and the number of survivors is rapidly diminishing, posing new challenges and opening new opportunities for media professionals and historians alike. Partly in response to these challenges, the BBC2 “reality history” series *The Trench* (2002) allowed British, specifically northern English, reenactors to participate in a “layering” of testimonies.<sup>1</sup> These reflected an identifiably British, but also regional, historical identity. As Katie King writes, public history today is influenced by, and appropriates, “national and personal identities... multiple chronologies in layers of locals and globals” (2004). Therefore, some comparison with representations of the conflict in other nations will be attempted. In Canada, for example, the 2007 CBC representation of the conflict depicted it as key to the making of a national identity (Cole 2007), whereas in Britain its “profound effect on Britain’s national consciousness” is apparent because it “has been commemorated and memorialized more than any other” (Hanna 2007a: 89 citing Robb 2002).

## The Great War as International Experience

Factual history programming has been broadcast in the UK since the 1950s. The televised lectures of Oxford historian A.J.P. Taylor ran from the 1950s and included *The First World War*, broadcast on ITV in 1961 (Hanna 2007a: 95; Oliver 2003-6). In the 1960s, documentaries using footage and oral testimony, including *The Great War*, joined those using footage alone. Emma Hanna asserts that *The Great War* established “a new benchmark for history programmes with its technological advances” (2007a: 91). Developments in historical methodology, including the use of oral history, led the series’ researchers to believe they were “recording people for history” (2007a: 96); continuing accessibility was preserved when the series was made available on VHS and DVD. The series was also multinational in character; although made by the BBC, 1200 people from six nations were interviewed, significant when compared to later representations of the war on British TV (Hanna 2007a: 91). This is demonstrated when, for example, in the third episode of the series, an unnamed German veteran describes the French army’s retreat near the Franco-German border in August 1914 (episode 3 19:30–20:30). However, it was not the only large-scale series about the conflict to be broadcast in 1964. The Franco-German *La Grande Guerre/Der Erste Weltkrieg*, directed by Marc Ferro, was multinational in content and production, although unlike *The Great*

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “reality history” and “reenactment” refer to a broad genre of programmes relying on modern individuals attempting to live as if in an earlier historical period. See Agnew 2004 and de Groot 2006, *inter alia*.

*War* it avoided eyewitness testimony as too familiar a television trope, even in the 1960s, and aimed instead for “cinema” aesthetics (Steinle 2006).

In the following decades several series about the conflict were broadcast. One of the most significant was *1914-1918*, an Emmy-award-winning co-production by the BBC and US-based public television station KCET, that aired in 1996 to mark the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. Despite these accolades it was criticised by Corelli Barnett, one of the *Great War* historians, who alleged that it was Britannocentric, censured the use of historians rather than eyewitnesses, and criticised its reliance upon “the downbeat view of the war cherished by the ‘progressive’ intelligentsia ever since the 1920s” (Barnett 1997; Bond 2002: 81).<sup>2</sup> Whilst the series does eschew eyewitnesses in favour of footage and scholarly comment, it gives, though, equal attention to France, Germany and Britain. Attention to the experiences of women and of African soldiers allows alternative voices to be heard: for example, the testimony of Kande Kamara allows a soldier from outside Europe to describe the prejudice he faced (PBS n.d.).

## **The Great War, National and Regional Identities**

Despite excoriating reviews that described it as “the past for the gnat’s-attention-span MTV generation” (Everett 2002), a very different type of history series, intended by producer Dick Colthurst to be “accessible to a new generation”, received a warm reception from some viewers (BBC 2002b). The BBC2 series *The Trench*, which aired in March 2002 to 2.8 million viewers (BARB 2002), a respectable although not large audience, was the first “reality” history series about the war. It took 24 male volunteers from Hull, trained them and placed them in a trench in France for a fortnight, as if they were the 1916 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion East Yorkshire Regiment, the Hull Pals. Such series have met a great deal of criticism, and were recently described by one British presenter-historian as a “bastard genre” marking the demise of social history on television, in part for their emphasis on the material nature of life in the past (Hunt 2006: 852-856). *The Trench* was even described by one media professional as a “locus classicus” of reenactment failure.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, the Canadian reenactment series *The Great War* (CBC 2006) earned director Brian McKenna the Pierre Berton award, a national prize for achievement in popularising the nation’s history (Canada’s National History Society: 2007). Described as “a revolutionary approach to historical documentary television”, the favourable reception of the Canadian series underlines the extent to which, globally, opinion of “reality history” and its potential to tell national histories varies greatly. Furthermore, as two anonymous respondents involved with the series, interviewed in 2008, asserted, substantial editing of *The Trench*, effectively removing the introductory episode, made the series much more difficult for an audience to appreciate and understand fully, although both the BBC’s *The Trench* and CBC’s *The Great War* enjoyed relatively high levels of funding by their respective Broadcasting Corporations. As Hanna (2007a: 107) outlines, *The Trench* was also criticised as being in bad taste before it was aired, making a positive audience reception less likely.

Certainly, scholarly interest in reenactment in all its forms is increasing, and some welcome its “enfranchising agenda” (de Groot 2006: 399) whilst others applaud its attempts to “bring to life [...] basic everyday realities” unknown to a wider audience (Hanna 2007a: 107-8). *The Trench* has even been described as a “televisual memorial in a 21<sup>st</sup> century format”, challenging “grand narrative” documentary (2007a: 107-8). However, its regional and familial representation of the conflict is little considered. Although British identity is invoked, East Yorkshire and Hull identity are also apparent, reflecting the desire of the programme makers to select a “Pals Battalion” (one of a number of groups of men from the same British area who voluntarily enlisted together) that survived Autumn 1916, the period depicted in the series, relatively unscathed. This was in order to be able to focus to a greater extent upon the minutiae of day-to-day living in the trenches but additionally allowed the significance of regional memories of the conflict to be recognised by a national audience. Although, then, the men stood for all British soldiers, the selection of a particular group meant that regional identity was intrinsic to this particular representation of the war. Indeed, in the Hull area special additional material was broadcast on BBCi Hull, a now defunct interactive channel available only in the East Yorkshire area, to viewers with a regional link to the battalion

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<sup>2</sup> Great War historian Brian Bond largely concurs with this analysis of the series. This representation was, though, predated by the attempts of Tony Essex, one of the *Great War* producers, to commission war poet Siegfried Sassoon to write a poem for the series: see Hanna 2007a: 100-1.

<sup>3</sup> Wall to Wall Chief Executive Alex Graham at the Televising History symposium, University of Lincoln, 29 February 2008.

depicted. Reenactors' motivations were similar: one became involved as "I had a grandfather who I never knew fought in the First World War" and "it was a project to do with people from Hull and the surrounding area" (Robinson 2002). Another explained that:

My grandfather and great-grandfather both fought in the First World War and my motive for coming here was to see if I could put up with a little bit of what my relatives went through. (van Emden 2002: 269)

Indeed, it seems likely that such links formed part of the criteria for selecting the final twenty-four: six had a grandfather or great uncle in the East Yorkshire Regiment, and one was already a member of the Western Front Association (20-1). Similar family links are made in advertisements for battlefield tours: "Remembrance Travel" claim to have "brought Jill closer to her father", who died in combat in 1943, by taking her to visit his grave. After the initial visit, they suggest, Jill has "been able to build up precious memories of her father" (BBC History Magazine March 2007: 19). As Michel de Certeau asserts, in such situations "Memory produces [is produced] in a place that does not belong to it" (Landsberg 1997: 63). In response, Alison Landsberg has analysed the ways that the film *Schindler's List* attempts to transfer "authentic living memory from the body of a survivor to an individual who has no 'authentic' link to this particular historical past" (64). Whilst *The Trench* similarly "paired" reenactors with Great War soldiers, it also attempted to transfer the memory and experiences of those who died to reenactors with a known *familial* link to Great War soldiers. The 2007 CBC series *The Great War* also sought grandchildren of Canadian soldiers (Cole 2007) but the British volunteers shared regional identity; both of these links, familial and regional, motivated volunteers.

### Layers of Testimony

The variety of testimony in the series deserves further analysis, as some are common in history documentary, whilst others are more usually associated with "reality TV". Indeed, *The Trench* and other "reality history" inhabits the intersection between testimony, a significant source of documentary authenticity and authority since the 1960s, with reenactment, often linked to reconstruction and criticised as "cheap" or poorly done. Bearing this in mind, and taken in order of their appearance in the series, the first of four examples is the use of eyewitness accounts, a means of underlining historical authenticity since *The Great War*. Van Emden acknowledges his "deeply felt appreciation" for the veterans, whose support "has given *The Trench* genuine credibility" (2002: xi). The programme makers' desire for credibility is unsurprising, and the auratic power of the veterans, the last survivors of the conflict, was significant. Significantly, though, veteran Harry Patch expressed reservations about the series, as "you can imitate a shell burst by a thunderclap firework, but... you will never create the fear and apprehension" (4). This underlines an absence which underscores *The Trench's* national and regional nature: the Central Powers are represented by mock shell bursts and the veterans' occasional references to German soldiers, but are not granted a voice.

However, the use of veterans goes beyond the use of their testimony to legitimate the claims of the series. Their interviews are also transposed over footage of reenactors entering the trench for the first time, and this grants validity to the reenactment premise. At the same time, a *second* type of testimony, that of the reenactors, is interspersed among the eyewitnesses. In the first episode of the series a veteran, followed by a reenactor filmed at home after the event, then a second veteran, comment on their experience of entering the trench for the first time; all three emphasise what it was "really like". The sandwiching of a reenactor's account between the veterans' authenticates it. This also highlights, at an early point, attempts to mirror experiences of reenactors with those of men fighting in the conflict, despite Hanna's assertion that the testimony of Great War veterans is granted greater authority than the reenactors' (Hanna 2007b: 536). Authentic living memory has not been transferred; rather, 21<sup>st</sup>-century memory is used alongside veterans'.

As veteran Arthur Halestrap remarked, the series sought to be "a living illustration of what happened... to make people think" (van Emden 2002: 4). Yet despite this approval, when there are no, or few, people left to testify "responsible memory transmission becomes problematic" (Landsberg 1997: 64). This contrasts with *The Great War*, broadcast when the conflict was still within living memory for many viewers (Hanna 2007a: 92). One method Landsberg suggests is video archiving, and arguably this was achieved with the transference of such series onto VHS. However the Holocaust, the focal point of her work, cannot be a "bodily memory", for the dilemma of the Holocaust and its remembrance is that to "really" experience it in all its destructiveness one would have to have died. In such circumstances the only way, she believes,

it is possible to maintain memory is by “prosthetic memory”; “an alternative living memory... produced in those who did not live through the event” (1997: 65-6). This, she believes, has potential “to produce empathy and social responsibility” transcending race, class, and gender (2004: 21). Indeed, even scholars who do not entirely agree with Landsberg’s idea concur that it relates to empathy and knowledge (Berger 2007).

Bearing this in mind, it may be possible to view the experiences of the reenactors, relying primarily upon the bodily sensations of sleep deprivation and noise, as a means to develop empathy. Certainly, Landsberg describes the acquiring of “sensually immersed knowledges” through “experiential relationships with events” (1997: 66; 82), although some historians reject the potential of bodily experience as a means of gaining insight (Rejack 2007: 412). Whether such knowledges were achieved by the reenactors is a moot point; de Groot is certainly critical of what he terms “the emptiness of the contemporary experience” (2008: 174). However, the use of reenactment points to aspirations on the part of the programme makers to find, as veterans die, a way to achieve insight and audience figures still: King’s alternate sites for productions of knowledge (2004). Certainly, shortly before its broadcast, Dick Colthurst commented that as the war would soon be “beyond living memory” there was a need to reenact the everyday experiences of soldiers.<sup>4</sup> Van Emden’s book also reiterates the reenactors’ sentiments: one said he was proud to have “done my best by my grandfather and my great-grandfather” and, possibly in response to suggestions that *The Trench* was a form of *Big Brother*, that:

I didn’t do it for money and I didn’t do it for fame and I didn’t do it for anything other than to prove to those people from my life [...] that given a go I could carry their name forward with pride. (van Emden 2002: 269)

Perhaps Maurice Halbwachs’ assertion that memories are intended to be shared with “persons from [an individual’s] past or present” includes ancestors one never met (Bourdon 2003: 8).

A third type of testimony is developed in the second episode. Alongside veterans describing their, and dead comrades’, experiences, the deceased are granted a voice: reenactor Steve Spivey comments on his frustration at the interminable waiting in the trench, and considers how those during the war must have felt. Shortly afterwards he is heard reading out a letter sent by his great grandfather, who died at the Front. Spivey testifies on behalf of his ancestor, underlining the familial and, speaking in the same Hull accent, the regional ties around which the series is based. It seems appropriate, then, to describe this as testimony: as Ann Gray (1997) and others have noted, testimony suggests one individual speaking for many more, and in this respect a letter from a soldier preserved and used in this manner may be counted as such.<sup>5</sup> Spivey is himself quoted by van Emden, as the experience of writing letters home to his family gave him insight into, and empathy for, his great-grandfather’s experiences:

I talked to one chap about my great-grandad’s letters and I said, how can he write about sending cigarette cards home to his son when he’s going through all this... I now know why he was writing that stuff... It’s a little fantasy: that when you’re writing it you are back there in Hull, and then you put your pencil away and realize “Oh God, I’m still here.” (van Emden 2002: 277)

As Sturken suggests, reenactment allows “the mourning process to proceed and the event to acquire meaning”, in this case for the reenactor (Blaney 2007: 132). When Spivey reads one of the letters, we see the soldier’s face in a photograph, and this allows a punctum, a point at which we feel a link to the dead man, and hear his words, although not his voice. Hanna’s work suggests that there were such reactions when *The Great War* was broadcast in 1964: a young man asked for a copy of a photograph used in the introductory sequence because he pitied the soldier in it and wanted to put him in his photo album “along with the rest of my friends”. Here, the punctum reached across generations (Hanna 2007a: 103-5).

This parallels photographer Didery Pazeret’s work commemorating French Great War veterans. *Derniers Combats*, published in 1996, was dedicated to the author’s grandfather, who is pictured alongside other veterans. Pazeret’s motivation is similar to that of the Hull reenactors; he comments in the book that he seeks to remember “[c]es grands-pères qui ont contribué à faire de nous ce que nous sommes

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/breakfast/1869026.stm> for a link to this (undated) interview in March 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Collingwood defines testimony as, more simply, “statements made by various people” (1992: 137). However, he adds that historical knowledge is a critical interpretation of testimony (ibid.: 138).

aujourd'hui" (Pazeret 1996: 11). Veterans' accounts are given alongside photographs, often with wives or children in shot, of them holding photographs of themselves during the war. The settings are personal and familial, yet the images reproduced are historic artefacts of broader significance.

A fourth layer of testimony is that of reenactors in the trenches talking about their experiences of "losing" a friend during the night and their sadness that those men did not make it to the end of the series. Clear parallels are made between the reenactors and soldiers in the real trench; the use of "pairing" means that a photograph is often shown of a dead member of the real Battalion of a similar age and sometimes also occupation, making the links obvious.<sup>6</sup> Televising the reenactment, then, offered an alternative to the opinions of the "handful of upper class British men" guiding many representations of the conflict (Hanna 2007b: 535). Participation in an Armistice service at Beverley Minster allowed the reenactors, albeit on camera, to reflect on the lives they had reenacted, including those of men in their own family.

Again underlining the importance of familial links in the series, perhaps the reenactors made, as Landsberg describes, "a memory triggered by the testimonial and yet intimately connected to one's own archive of experience" (Landsberg 1997: 84). However, the extent to which an audience receives meaningful information despite "entertainingly and authoritatively presented" spectacles on screen is another matter.<sup>7</sup> Her dismissal of "the mass media's engagement with history", "predigested messages that require no active engagement or thought" seems, though, excessive (Landsberg 1997: 67). *The Trench* was popular amongst history teachers, who in some cases arranged for children to dig trenches, and it was undoubtedly instructive for those involved (Fanning 2002). Further, in the last 30 years empathy has been frequently referred to as one of the goals of history teaching in British schools, although this was debated in the late 1990s, and many teachers lost confidence in referring to it (Phillips 2002: 45). The physicality of the series, its "sensually immersed knowledges", may have been a welcome release from these debates (Boddington 1980: 13; Harris and Foreman-Peck 2004).

After the series was aired, several volunteers commented on the effect on their lives of the experience. One wrote to one of the schools involved in a trench-making project, telling them that he works in the same Hull business as one of the other volunteers, and they "talk every day [...] about our times in France and when we will one day return to see our Trench" (Fanning 2002). It is perhaps useful to conceive of the trench as an ethnoscape: terrains which provide "the unique and indispensable setting for the events that shaped the community", and perhaps this explains in part this volunteers' desire to visit one of the sites of the Great War (Smith 1999: 150). Although in another country, its significance for national, regional and familial history is profound. In a similar manner, in 2000 a wood near Hull was named Oppy Wood as a memorial to East Yorkshire men who died in the Battle of Oppy Wood in France in 1917. After filming *The Trench*, volunteers erected a cross in the original Wood in memory of the men (BBC 2002a; Woodland Trust 2000: 7).

The physicality of the experience also provided a sustained sense of group identity. Learning to "throw grenades... puttee tying... [and] how to use our bayonets", alongside lessons on the history of the War, led, within a week, to a feeling of realism (although that is clearly not the same as historical accuracy). When the men visited a war memorial before going to the trench, one reflected that he had found it "moving, more than anything I have ever done before". Moreover, "[w]e (24 lads from Hull) were portraying to England the lives of millions of remembered and forgotten soldiers. Almost instantly the attitudes changed. We had a job to do" (Fanning 2002). Although the series attempted reenactment for the sake of historical experimentation, the editing of the series meant that viewers did not see most of the training undertaken. In historiographical terms this favoured an individualistic, affective turn: "the privileging of experiences [...] investigating the self in place of the political" (Agnew 2004). If, though, reenactment is a conversion narrative "from ignorance to knowledge, individualism to sociability [...] and present to past" (Agnew 2007: 299), then for the reenactors, if not the audience, *The Trench* also reflected a recognition of shared regional (Hull) and national (England) identity.

The reenactor's testimony also suggests that, in hindsight, he saw his role as that of living memorial, as Hanna suggests, but also as a symbol of lost men, as a photograph of an unknown soldier had been for *The Great War's* audience in the 1960s. Matthias Steinle has asserted that the 1990s saw "a shift in the

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<sup>6</sup> The 2007 visit by 3598 Canadian high school students to Vimy in France, site of the 1917 Battle of Vimy Ridge, some of whom were descendants of the 3598 Canadian soldiers who died there, makes an interesting comparison. See <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/vimy/student-writing.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Agnew mirroring Collingwood's view that "to accept testimony means making the thought of the witness one's own thought: reenacting that thought in one's own mind" (2004: 138).

understanding of the archive image [...] from history to memory”, so “the referential link to the represented past has ceased to be the iconographical quality of the image to become the memorial quality of the testimony” (2007: 2). Viewers’ responses to *The Great War* introductory sequence do indeed suggest the iconographical quality of one image; in contrast, *The Trench* reenacts archive images for memorial purposes, and the testimony given does not entirely supersede the image, but rather runs alongside it.

### **Collingwood and Mental Reenactment**

However, reenactment in some form is not new in historiographical terms. Oxford philosopher of history R.G. Collingwood asserted in the 1930s that to understand historical experience the historian should not conceive of the past as “a dead past”, but instead as a “living past”, which

because it was human thought and not merely natural event, [and so] can be reenacted in the present, and that reenactment known as past (Collingwood 1992: 158).

Furthermore, “history is nothing but the reenactment of past thought in the historian’s mind” (Collingwood 1992: 228).<sup>8</sup> His “fundamentally knowable” past makes the use of his work by scholars of reenactment unsurprising: in contrast, Hayden White’s unrepresentable past is the antithesis of television history; certainly of “reality” history (Corner 2003: 274; Megill 1998: 52-53).

In addition, criticism of reality history as only materially based is not entirely warranted. Taff Gillingham, *The Trench*’s military adviser, is a member of The Association for Military Remembrance, or “The Khaki Chums”, “a group of historians, authors and collectors who study the life of the British soldier”, living “as the soldiers of the period would have on active service” during trips to former battlefields (Gillingham n.d.). In so doing they seek to encourage the public to “stop, just for one minute, and spare a thought for all those who fought here and died here” (Gillingham 2000). That said, other historians have criticised the programme makers’ belief that the Chums’ “spiritual understanding of how people behaved in the front lines” was correct (MacCallum-Stewart n.d.: 8). Certainly, when considering soldiers’ experiences, Gillingham writes:

Bruce Bairnsfather wrote a book in 1916 called “Bullets and Billets”. Pages 44 to 49 could have been written by any of the Chums last Christmas (Bairnsfather was in exactly the same muddy field). (Gillingham 2000)

The primacy of the reenactors’ experiences is key: the soldiers were in the same field as the reenactors, who apparently could have written the same account. This is an inversion of the experience, which poses ethical problems as well as offering solutions. Indeed, posters marketing *The Trench*, designed to be seen in schools, claimed, controversially: “LIVE the Experience and watch *The Trench*” (Hanna 2007b: 533).

However, as contentious as these claims were, *The Trench* sought to have a longer-term effect on participants, and largely succeeded. Perhaps, as well as the conversion narrative identified by Agnew, it included an act of pilgrimage, a religious rite underlining the distinction between the profane (everyday life) and the sacred (Durkheim 1995: 34). Visiting the memorial completed the conversion and was also sacramental: an outward sign of an inward state. In other arenas of public history, fascination with “dark tourism” and the meaningful experiences of remembrance, education or entertainment gained by visiting sites of “death, disaster and man’s inhumanity toward man”, including visits to war memorials and travels for reenactment (Ryan 2005: 187; Sharpley 2005: 219) have been analysed by scholars since the 1990s and are to some extent reflected in *The Trench*.

### **Conclusion: Representations beyond Television**

These programmes illustrate broader historiographical changes, from the use of oral testimony in the 1960s to the “affective turn” recently identified by Agnew. In the case of *The Trench* this links to familial and regional identity as a form of public history, more than Landsberg’s prosthetic memory grafted onto strangers. Also apparent is a move from an international representation of, in this case, the Great War in the 1960s to a more recent emphasis in television history upon regional identity. The significance of spatiality, “the affective and social experience of space”, as identified by cultural geographers since the 1980s, is

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<sup>8</sup> Dray (2001) provides an overview of responses to Collingwood’s assertions.

evident (Blair 1998: 544-545). Those involved in *The Trench* experienced an “affective terrain” which offered an embodied experience with the opportunity to negotiate social relationships, including those between past and present. It provided a model of a British soldier’s experience flavoured with the authenticity of regional identity in a period when devolution in Wales and Scotland, and proposals for English regional assemblies, reiterated historical senses of identity throughout Britain. In 1998, the Government of Wales Act created the Welsh Assembly; the Scotland Act the Scottish Parliament; and the Good Friday Agreement allowed for a Northern Ireland Assembly. In the wake of this, interest groups in England called for regional representation, supported by, amongst others, former Labour Party minister Roy Hattersley, who predicted: “given the chance, Yorkshire and Hotspur country from the Tyne to the Tees will do the same” (Hattersley 2001). Indeed, in 2001 the BBC reported upon Yorkshire Pride Day, described by one organiser as being “about identity and getting people to think about where they come from” (BBC 2001), although as the 2004 referendum demonstrated, English identity proved stronger and plans for a regional parliament were set aside. Arguably, *The Trench* both reflected and contributed to such debates by selecting volunteers with strong links to the area, underlining the significance of its history to those living in the region, as well as their potential to stand in for, and testify on behalf of, the rest of the nation. Hanna has written of war memorials that “individual and family experiences were collectivized”, and she argues that this is reflected in the BBC series *The Great War* (Hanna 2007a: 108). Regional identities are collectivised in a similar way in *The Trench*, allowing the Hull reenactors represent all British soldiers.

How, then, might the war be represented in coming years? In the latter months of 2007 and early 2008 several series were broadcast on British television, although one of the most significant sites of testimony and reenactment has originated not from television but from the internet. In a recent advertisement, genealogical website ancestry.co.uk suggested that through research in their archives, a descendent of a Great War soldier might be able to give testimony on behalf of an ancestor: although “he never got the chance to tell his story... now you can” (*BBC History Magazine* March 2008: 15). In a similar vein, in early 2007 Bill Lamin began to put his grandfather Harry’s letters from France and Italy in 1917-18 into a blog, available in chronological order 90 years after they were written (<http://www.wwar1.blogspot.com>). With global media coverage, the blog featured in, amongst others, a CBC news programme, in which reporter Adrienne Arsenault asserts, reinforcing Steinle’s interpretation of the increased authenticity granted to testimony:

Grainy images do eventually embed themselves, but to really relate to the average soldiers slogging through World War One has been tough. But then came Private Harry Lamin, an Englishman, ordinary in the extreme.<sup>9</sup>

The significance of the blog is discussed; Bill Lamin suggests “we can pretend that we’re the family, waiting for the next letter”; he is re-enacting his own ancestors’ experiences. The international “internet sensation” is contrasted to its insignificant national source, “a tiny house on the remote English coast”. Jeremy Rowe, a teacher, is then shown introducing Bill in a school history lesson. Bill explains the physicality of letter writing (“he doesn’t have a ball point pen, he has a pencil”); the minutiae of experience that *The Trench* too relied upon for its claims to authenticity. The report ends, unsurprisingly, with the photograph of Harry used in the blog (Picture 1).

Although those visiting the site know that the war ended in 1918, the focus upon an individual reenacts, as Bill Lamin asserts, a degree of the uncertainty of families awaiting news. This keeps Harry “alive” in the liminal and transitory space afforded by the blog, which includes his photograph, of which one visitor commented “I think Harry looks like a lovely, kind person and I hope the war didn’t change that. It makes me sad to look at him”. As in the introductory sequence to *The Great War*, the significance of an individual, standing in for many more, has emotional and emotive appeal. His letters, when read 90 years later, are testimony, and in some ways the blog encourages empathy, similar to Collingwood’s mental reenactment, and like the letters read out by soldiers’ descendents in *The Trench*, this grants a voice to the deceased.<sup>10</sup> It is also, certainly, international in nature; more global than local. The antithesis of regional history in the years following the rejection of regional assemblies by English regions, the site’s comments

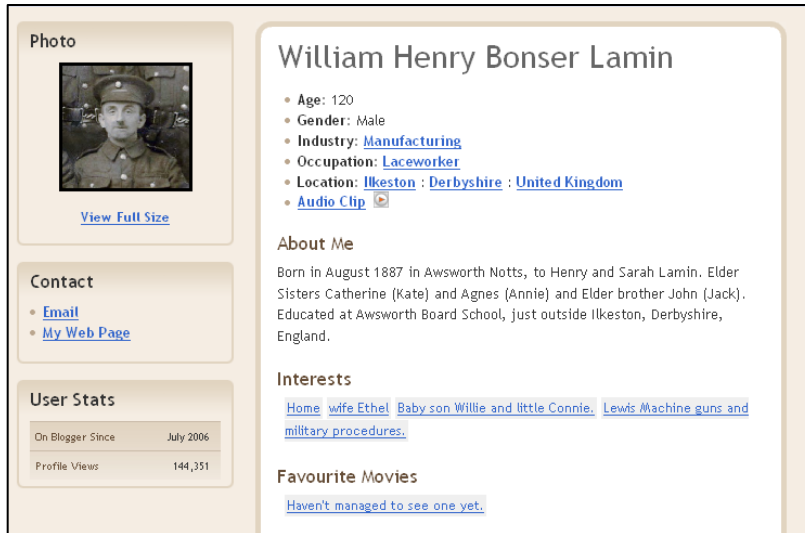
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<sup>9</sup> For the clip, dated 12 January 2008, see <http://www.cbc.ca/video/popup.html?http://www.cbc.ca/mrl3/8752/news/features/arsenault-soldierblog-080111.wmv>


<sup>10</sup> See Munslow 2007 for a discussion of the relation of Collingwood to Landsberg.

board allows people from many nations to reflect upon their family's experiences in this or other conflicts and share global responses to national conflicts.<sup>11</sup>

Picture 1: Harry Lamin's profile in "WW1: Experiences of an English Soldier".



**Photo**



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**User Stats**

On Blogger Since	July 2006
Profile Views	144,351

### William Henry Bonser Lamin

- Age: 120
- Gender: Male
- Industry: [Manufacturing](#)
- Occupation: [Laceworker](#)
- Location: [Ilkeston](#) : [Derbyshire](#) : [United Kingdom](#)
- [Audio Clip](#)

**About Me**

Born in August 1887 in Awsworth Notts, to Henry and Sarah Lamin. Elder Sisters Catherine (Kate) and Agnes (Annie) and Elder brother John (Jack). Educated at Awsworth Board School, just outside Ilkeston, Derbyshire, England.

**Interests**

[Home](#) [wife Ethel](#) [Baby son Willie and little Connie.](#) [Lewis Machine guns and military procedures.](#)

**Favourite Movies**

[Haven't managed to see one yet.](#)

Source:  
<http://www.blogger.com/profile/04673086195442900581>

On British television, commemoration has been similar in some respects. In November 2007 BBC4 broadcast Testimony Films' *What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?* Based on the accounts of those British children whose fathers did not return, it showed letters, the last form of communication between their fathers and their family, underlining the growing importance of family to televised depictions of the

war. This was developed further in the 2008 commemoration. The primetime BBC1 series *My Family at War* followed the Great War experiences of celebrities' ancestors. In the final episode, broadcast on 11 November, well-known TV celebrity Rolf Harris mentally, and to some extent physically, reenacted the journey of his father and uncle from Australia, where they had only recently emigrated from Wales, to train in England and then to fight in battlefields in North-West Europe, where his uncle died. The importance of spatiality in the series was complemented by embodied experience, as in *The Trench*: when visiting a museum near one of the battlefields, Rolf recognises the significance of a damaged helmet preserved by his father when he reads of the head injury his father received, which without the helmet may have been fatal. He places it on his own head, commenting that he had previously thought it went on the other way round, but now, with the benefit of additional information, he sees the insignia should be at the front. The helmet, like letters in *The Trench*, represents a tangible link to a familial, a national and a global past.<sup>12</sup> It also points to the possibility that his father might not have survived: the past in the subjunctive. This underscores, through the use of individual case studies, that aspects of well-known historical events such as the Great War were not inevitable, although commemoration in the present may make them appear "sacred", even preordained.

Whether familial or regional; national or international; military or cultural; such portrayals continue to be useful in analysing changes in the representation of the past on television and in other media, and also developments in wider historiography, whilst the internet in particular may offer increasing opportunities to identify viewers' responses to those changes, often in terms of the experiences of their own families rather than through more explicitly nationalistic assertions. For example, there were similar responses to the BBC series *The Great War in Colour* in May 2007, which used images from the collections of the French philanthropist Albert Kahn, largely of French troops. Despite this, some viewers reflected on the colour photographs using familial references, such as:

when the shot is in colour... you see the faces more clearly, a coat which is the same colour as yours, a bucket like one your grandmother used to have, a blanket the colour of the one your grandfather had...

<sup>11</sup> See <http://wwar1comments.blogspot.com/> for responses: "Antonio" wrote that his Italian father told "never ending tales about his experiences as a soldier in WW1... [I] later realised how traumatic that experience had been—in fact, he never fully recovered".

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.rolfharris.com/events.htm> for further details of the episode, including an image of the helmet, and Harris' career.



The question of whether a desire to seek familial links to the Great War reflects the success of celebrity genealogy series such as *Who do you think you are?* (BBC 2004-date), or the increasing use of the internet as a means to share global experiences, lies beyond the immediate scope of this contribution. However, viewers' and participants' responses to history programming suggest that in recent years the experiences of one's ancestors at a regional and even global level may be used as a means to understand national histories better, and this has been reflected and encouraged in recent history programming on British television.

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