

'No one wants to be lectured at by a woman': Women and history on TV

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Although in some cases history on television has represented women's lives in the past, this remains an exception rather than a rule. Whilst the overall volume of programming has grown dramatically since the mid-1990s, with the launch of the History Channel and UKTV History, it is apparent that not only in terms of the individuals and events considered, but also in terms of those allowed to act as mediators between the past and the TV audience, there are marked gender differences. In the mid-2000s the vast majority of historians representing their profession on TV, especially as presenter-historians, are men. Although the majority of historians teaching in higher education are male, this imbalance is exaggerated further on screen. This article considers, then, the related issues of authority and appearance, visual material, perceptions of audience diversity and, briefly, women as television professionals, whilst giving an overview of the work being carried out on TV history programming.¹

The research discussed here forms part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)-funded 'Televising History 1995-2010' project based at the University of Lincoln and directed by Prof. Ann Gray.² This interdisciplinary project, running from 2004 and funded by the AHRC from 2006 to 2010, asks how we get the kinds of television histories we do, and why. Starting with the relationship between the academy and media professionals, through commissioning and programme making, it explores the—often competing—professional discourses about how to 'do' history. Focussing on 'non-fiction' programming it examines the different genres employed by producers and tracks their commissioning, production, marketing and distribution histories. Through a number of case studies, including interviews with academic and media professionals involved in history programming, Ann Gray and Erin Bell are analysing the role of the 'professional' historian and producer/directors as mediators of historical material and interpretations. In earlier publications some of the themes and issues raised in interviews have been considered. This article seeks to consider in greater depth the particular experiences of women and women's history.³

Although our research does not consider fictional representations of the past, there is still a remarkably wide range of genres which may be classed as TV history: these include documentaries, including commemorative 'event-television' such as *Auschwitz: the Nazis and the 'Final Solution'* (BBC2 11 January 2005) which marks specific anniversaries; drama-documentaries such as *The Relief of Belsen* (Channel 4 15 October 2007) and *Dunkirk* (BBC2 February 2004) which dramatize real events; 'reality history' series such as *Edwardian Country House* (Channel 4 April-May 2002), *The Trench* (BBC2 March 2002) and *Coal House* (BBC1 Wales and BBC October-November 2007); historical travelogues such as Michael Wood's *The*

Story of India (BBC2 August-September 2007); presenter-led series such as David Starkey's *Monarchy* (Channel 4 2004-7), Simon Schama's *A History of Britain* (BBC2, then moved to BBC1 2000-2002) or Bettany Hughes' *The Spartans* (Channel 4 November-December 2003), and the hugely successful celebrity genealogy series, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (BBC 2004-present).⁴

A great deal of the information collected in the course of this research comes from interview material: to date, twenty historians involved in history programming have been interviewed, including seven women. This represents a deliberate attempt to talk to female historians, whose experiences are of especial interest to the project. In doing so, we seek to discover how university scholars contributing to TV history interpret their experiences. Several interviewees are active in other areas of 'public history' such as museology, which has brought additional depth to their contributions. Thus the interviews are not only oral history, but also oral historiography.

The quotation used in the title of this article is from a published interview with Bettany Hughes, a British historian who has presented several programmes in the past five years. However, when she initially approached a TV executive with programme ideas in the early 1990s, his response was dismissive, and he assured her that 'no one wants to be lectured at by a woman.'⁵ Demonstrating the misogynistic opinions of one television professional, this response may also have stemmed in part from the origins of history programming in the UK. The first TV presenter-historian, A. J. P. Taylor, based several of his series, broadcast on the BBC and ITV from the 1950s to the 1980s, on his university lectures. A charismatic figure, he is named as a role model by many modern TV historians, including Controller of BBC4 Janice Hadlow and Simon Schama, the latter with the caveat of the limitations of basing series on lectures. But his role as presenter-historian seems to have been problematic for some TV executives considering female scholars.⁶

Arguably, the use of male voices in television perpetuates what the film historian Bill Nichols describes as 'a culturally constructed assumption that it is men who speak of the world and that they can do so in an authoritative manner.'⁷ As one female historian commented of her own experiences of presenting a history series, 'I also think that these were issues about authority because I was a woman, and again I expect these are unacknowledged issues, about who can be an authoritative voice.'⁸ This may also reflect John Fiske and John Hartley's idea of 'bardic television' which suggests that TV fulfils the role of soothsayer and priest in modern society, communicating to viewers 'a confirming, reinforcing version of themselves' and articulating 'the main lines of the established cultural consensus about the nature of reality'.⁹ Certainly, in *A History of Britain* the use of sweeping shots of the British

landscape and ethereal music underscore the sacred nature of the series and indeed of a specific version of national identity.¹⁰ However, to place a woman as an authority figure in this role may, by inference, undermine rather than reinforce viewers' perceptions of historical reality, at least in the opinion of TV executives such as the man described by Hughes. Furthermore, as television scholar John Corner has suggested, although TV has 'extended the pleasures which gaining knowledge involves', the type and range of knowledge is limited. This may, he suggests, be related to bureaucratic control, or a consequence of the commodification of TV.¹¹ The outcome, though, is often reliance upon tried and tested types of programming led by male presenters: content, form and authority confirm the political, including gender and racial status quo. This is suggested, but not made explicit, in Roger Smither's comments on commissioning editors' motivations, discussed shortly.¹²

Although one female interviewee described her hope of seeing more women historians on TV, despite what she described as the 'deeply seated, innate sexism' of the industry, whilst others commented on the gendered nature of history on TV, few male interviewees commented on this. This seems to reflect an essentialising of white, male experience identified by feminist scholars. Tristram Hunt's brief reference to a lack of female presenters and of women's history on TV is one of the few published comments about this. However, his suggestion that social historians focus on 'accessible' aspects of the past infers a direct access to TV producers which many historians do not have, for the reasons discussed shortly.¹³

That is not to suggest that all female interviewees believed that television alone was responsible for the under-representation of women. An art historian interviewed recently described herself as belonging to an 'academic demimonde' because of gender bias in her discipline, meaning she could only find part-time employment.¹⁴ Interestingly, the same interviewee stressed the benefits of television in this respect, suggesting that for both female scholars and male students, who may have faced criticism when they chose to study art history, a tutor appearing on screen grants authority to both the discipline and the individual. The position of female art historians parallels Barbara Crowther's analysis of women working in natural history; she identifies the 'scarcity and marginalisation of women' in both the discipline of natural history, and on TV.¹⁵

However, marginalisation may only be avoided if those making programmes allow it. Reflecting one of the forms of control of knowledge identified by Corner, women appearing on TV are often represented in ways that limit their authority. Jeanie Attie's review of Ken Burns' 1992 PBS series *The Civil War* similarly refers to the limitations placed upon the historian Barbara Fields whose interview is edited in such a way that at times she is cut off in mid-sentence, unlike her male counterpart who is granted far more time to discuss topics raised.¹⁶ In another case, a series attempting to redress the apparent Anglocentrism of the epic millennial history series *A History of Britain*, which was fronted by the British-born, Columbia University Professor of History, Simon Schama, placed a female

historian in a less authoritative role than that enjoyed by presenter-historians such as Schama.¹⁷ Dr Fiona Watson, then Senior Lecturer in Environmental History at Stirling University, who continues to present *History File* on Radio Scotland, fronted BBC2 Scotland's ten-week history series *In Search of Scotland* (BBC2 Scotland February-April 2001). In an interview published in a Scottish newspaper shortly afterwards, she asserted that Schama's series had failed to consider recent debates about British identity.¹⁸ However, although her series aimed, in contrast, to explore the nuanced nature of Scottish identity, it arguably also perpetuated gendered stereotypes which position Watson, a professional historian, in the role of interviewer eliciting information from, predominantly, male experts, rather than as an authority figure in her own right. Whilst this may have stemmed from a desire not to replicate the format of *A History of Britain*, it had the result of limiting her authority.

The series began, in February 2002, with Watson's assertion to camera and then over footage of Scottish landscape, cityscape and crowds in a city, that 'History is about where we come from. It's about who we are. It's not about heroes and villains, not even much about kings and queens and states.'¹⁹ This declaration, that the series seeks to go beyond elites, seems a clear statement that it will not replicate Schama's *History*, the first part of which had been broadcast the previous year. Indeed, the statement continued: 'But history is really about people like us who lived and loved, worked and died, mostly leaving no record at all...but none of them died without contributing something.' This is indeed borne out when in the first thirty-minute episode she visited the Neolithic settlement of Skara Brae in the Orkney Islands, paralleling Schama's *History*. *In Search of Scotland*, though, emphasised community and human relationships, rather than archaeological finds of jewellery and other artefacts, the focus of much of the first episode of Schama's *History*. In Watson's series millennial concerns were also acknowledged, alongside 'new hopes' relating to the Scottish parliament. It would seem, then, that this was a particularly good opportunity to include women's history. However, although Watson was named in the title credits of each episode, the programme's format arguably diluted her authority as a historian. Her introduction to each episode was markedly shorter than, for example, Schama's, at only ten to twenty seconds in length, giving her the air of presenter rather than university scholar.

Furthermore, through the use of 'worthy interviews intercut with location filming', which coincidentally was the original planned format of *A History of Britain*, male figures rivalled Watson's authority.²⁰ Most of the historians, archaeologists and linguists interviewed were, unsurprisingly, based at Scottish universities (Edinburgh, Glasgow and St Andrews) or Scottish institutions of public history and heritage (Historic Scotland, the Scottish Trust for Underwater Archaeology and the National Museum of Scotland), but only around one in seven were women. Those appearing often discussed elements of women's history: Katherine Forsyth of the University of Glasgow on Pictish stone carving including its depiction of women; Jenny Wormald of the University of Oxford on Mary Queen

of Scots; broadcaster Lesley Riddoch on economic and political representations of women in contemporary Scotland.²¹ Apart from these rare examples, and faced with white and middle-aged men, the camera often focused more on their responses to Watson's questions than on Watson herself, who also fulfilled the role of narrator in the series; unseen and uncelebrated. As another female historian noted of her own experiences as a presenter-historian faced with predominantly male interviewees:

on the one hand they seemed to want someone who was an expert to present it, but then they wanted you to present yourself as a non-expert. You were going on a voyage of discovery ... I would be going to interview somebody who knew far less than I did about something, and doing it ... in the manner of a ... breathless ingénue.²²

Indeed, it seems almost ironic that the introduction to the final episode of *In Search of Scotland*, which considered the twentieth century, included references to the changing role of women. When considering suffragettes in Scotland and efforts to provide maternity care, Watson stated that 'women have always worked but their contribution has usually been undervalued and underpaid.'²³ Whilst Lesley Riddoch, currently pursuing her aim for 'big women of Scottish history' to be celebrated, was granted the opportunity to comment upon the representation of women in the Scottish parliament and reflect on the continuing tendency to deride or undervalue women's economic



Fiona Watson
Photo courtesy of the BBC

activity, this was one of very few examples in the series.²⁴

This also relates to the issue of appearance. Male historians' concerns over appearance were largely limited to a desire not to look too 'formal' or a humorous comment about having a 'face for radio'. However, this touches upon a more serious issue: given recent debates over the retirement of BBC news reader Moira Stuart, possibly on the grounds of age, the appearance of female historians clearly affects the nature of their TV work. As a female interviewee commented, 'You can be a young woman, you can be an old crotchety David Starkey, you know, opinionated and ugly, but you can only be Bettany Hughes.'²⁵ Although she did not seek to denigrate Hughes' achievements, it is certainly the case that the media prefer younger female presenters, but describe them in ways that do little to acknowledge their authority or historical knowledge. A. A. Gill's *Sunday Times* review of her series *Athens* (Channel 4 July 2007) reflected largely on Hughes' dress and figure: 'You do have a bum that makes the Gordian knot look like a telephone-wire tangle. But, don't worry ... We're really interested in what you have to say about the single transferable vote and committee decisions in 3rd-century-BC Greece.'²⁶

It is extremely difficult to imagine a male historian being described in such terms. Hughes has more formal qualifications than Simon Schama, with a postgraduate degree in her field. Although Schama and David Starkey have both been satirised in the UK comedy series *Dead Ringers* (BBC2 2000-date), this focused upon their style of presenting; it did not discuss their appearance in explicitly sexualised terms. Another female historian, who appeared in several series in the early 2000s, revealed that although her manager was originally contacted by the production team, she instead secured the role of 'resident historian' in one series after TV researchers found her picture on her university's website, underlining the importance of appearance. A second, who presented and appeared in several series in the same period, commented specifically that 'dress was a big issue. I got a lot of flack' because, due to the way in which the series was edited together, she was perceived to have 'a different outfit in every shot'. She concluded that 'if I ever did it again it had better be a jeans and jumper job' because the combination of a young female presenter stylishly dressed had proved a source of great comment, to the extent that 'a lot of the reviews mentioned the clothes, rather than the argument.'²⁷

The cultural historian Michelle Arrow has commented on the disproportionately high number of male, often middle-aged, presenter-historians, both in the UK and her native Australia.²⁸ However, Arrow is sanguine when considering her own position as presenter-historian in the Australian history series *Rewind* (ABC 2004). She comments that whilst riding a replica of Australian inventor Lawrence Hargrave's kite, which predated the Orwell brothers efforts by a decade, left her little room for gravitas, and that it was unlikely that an older man would have been asked to do the same, 'maybe the kite wouldn't have lifted an older man into the air, either.' However, she does consider it unlikely that the authoritative role of presenter-historian in a series such as *A History of Britain* would have been granted to a younger woman. It is my contention,

though, that for older women too, there is little chance to demonstrate gravitas on screen. Although, for example, the Cambridge classicist and self-declared 'media junkie' Mary Beard, celebrated for her controversial and 'wickedly subversive' comments, and Queen Mary's Renaissance scholar Lisa Jardine, write in broadsheet newspapers and appear on Radio 4, women of their generation are rarely granted sustained appearances in TV history.²⁹

A striking example of this imbalance in representation of women as professional historians is also apparent in a recent programme broadcast as part of the autumn 2007 BBC4 season on the eighteenth century. *The Age of Excess: When Britain went too far* (BBC4 24 October 2007), presented by broadcaster and literary scholar Matthew Sweet, was one of several in the series which also included *The Black Eighteenth Century* and a dramatisation of John Cleland's novel *Fanny Hill*.³⁰ Unsurprisingly, given its subject matter, *The Age of Excess* aimed to titillate. Introduced by Sweet with the statement 'History is a bit of a tart' and can be manipulated into doing what we want it to do, even the past was feminised and made passive. This assertion was accompanied by images of the naked body of a woman, on which film footage and print were projected, reminiscent of the opening sequence of a *James Bond* film. However, despite the obvious focus of the programme on heterosexual sex, there were no naked male bodies other than those depicted in eighteenth-century engravings, which raises important questions about the degree to which the naked female body has been normalised in the twentieth century, whilst the male has not, and which go unquestioned in the programme.

Furthermore, whilst the history of eighteenth-century prostitution was represented as a humorous affair, largely devoid of abuse or violence, the staging of interviews with historians was also significant. Literary scholar John Mullan appeared in an eighteenth-century style drawing room; historian Vic Gatrell in a dining room of the same period; Peter Ackroyd by a window. Matthew Sweet himself addressed the audience from a bed in the London streets, but in contrast, the rather younger historian Julie Peakman (identified, inexplicably, as 'author of *Lascivious Bodies*' rather than as an historian) was placed on a bed in a domestic setting; historian Jenny Skipp on a chair in a darkened room; and historian Hallie Rubenhold on a bed or *chaise longue*. Although it is difficult to determine the extent to which each scholar was aware of how their peers were filmed, in order to make an informed decision about how they were being depicted themselves, the selection of eroticised and eroticising sets for female but not male scholars is troubling. This limits the degree to which women can be taken seriously as historians, especially by an audience who in the main are not, as Jerry Kuehl famously asserted, history undergraduates, and at the very least are unlikely to have studied women's and gender history.³¹

Related to this is the use of visual material such as paintings or archive footage. They are key to history programming: as one interviewee commented, 'television is a visual medium, and you have to have a visual image behind you.'³² But even women's history dating from the

era of film may not be shown. When Imperial War Museum archivist Roger Smither attempted recently to answer the question 'Why is so much television history about war?' he identified the desire of TV producers to make the types of programming that have already been successful. Thus, he suggests that the 1964 BBC series *The Great War* (BBC2 May - October 1964) and the 1973 Thames series *The World at War* (ITV October 1973 - May 1974) led to a growing number of series based around similar footage. It remains a popular source of visual material, cheap in comparison to computer-generated imagery, and sometimes recycled by the same production company in later projects. This commercial imperative also has implications for the type of programmes made. As well as favouring those that consider the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the type of footage preserved in archives, Smither suggests, tends to reflect, even to over-represent, the high level of conflict in the past century. That is not by any means to suggest that all newsreel footage dating from the early twentieth century deals with warfare, but the material may be more easily formed into major series on conflict.³³ As independent production companies are increasingly forced to take economic factors into account, many use footage already freely or cheaply available.

In addition, trends in programme-making affect the type of series produced. Whilst the BBC may continue to make well-funded commemorative documentaries such as *Auschwitz*, for a significant period in the early 2000s oral history series were less popular with commissioning editors than drama-documentaries, although there has been a slight upsurge very recently in the commissioning of oral history series.³⁴ In contrast, during the 1960s oral history exemplified the significant historiographical and methodological changes in representation of the past on TV. These were closely related to developments within the academic discipline of history, although some scholars, including A.J.P. Taylor, dismissed the method as 'old men drooling about their youth.'³⁵ However, many of those involved in oral history work in the 1970s have gone on to form their own production companies, such as Steve Humphries' 'Testimony Films'. That is not to suggest that oral history programmes do not manipulate the way the past is represented, as Myra MacDonald and others have identified. But such programmes do allow women a voice and to assert that they are entitled 'to speak for that past in the present.'³⁶ A minority, including 'Testimony Films', which seeks 'to be the first to reveal stories, to explode myths and to inspire change', continue this work. Humphries has been recognised for his groundbreaking work: in 2005 *Sex in a Cold Climate*, made for Channel 4 and broadcast in 1998, was voted eighth in *Broadcast Magazine's* top ten programmes of all time that have changed the world, for its account of the abuse of young women in Irish institutions for unmarried mothers.³⁷ However, this work is exceptional.

The limitations imposed by the factors described are reflected in a lack of well-researched women's history programming, with a few exceptions. That is not to suggest that historians involved in TV are unaware of this; far from it. One interviewee met a production company's interviewer, using her own money and in her own time, to make sure

their material was as thorough as possible. Another said that she did not mention payment when working with independent companies; she would rather they came to her, as an expert in the field, than make a programme without her help.³⁸ However, the BBC does not necessarily make more representative history programming, either in the sense of reflecting breadth of scholarship, or diversity of audience. Although the BBC's Council seek to assess 'the extent to which the BBC's network output and other activities reflect the diversity of the UK', arguably this is not achieved in history programming. Indeed, several recent series, including some of those mentioned already, have sought to construct a national identity around a selective, often male-centred, interpretation of British history.³⁹

Furthermore, although many commentators, including Simon Schama, suggest that TV history is predominantly watched by white middle-aged men, despite some successes in attracting a wider audience, Tony Bennett's analysis of audiences suggests those watching 'high legitimacy' programmes which reflect the audience's cultural capital, such as drama, documentary, news and arts, are balanced in terms of gender. This is broadly confirmed by Angela Piccini and Karol Kulik's recent analysis of heritage and archaeology programmes. Age does not seem to be a significant factor in determining history and natural history viewers, although Bennett's analysis does suggest that men are slightly more likely to prefer such programming.⁴⁰ However, despite considering the factors affecting individuals participating in cultural pursuits, the research outlined in Bennett's article does not consider the representation of gender (for example) and of female professionals, and how this may relate to the audience. Although Michael McKinnie has noted that a 'sentimental economy' for the arts has revived an eighteenth-century conception of art as a means to promote 'social sympathy', and to 'spread sympathetic social relationships', the inclusion of programming on women's history, for example, seem at odds with other pressures on broadcasters.⁴¹

Perhaps because the history documentary audience is perceived by many programme makers to be male, rendering female audience members invisible, whilst broadcasters' focus groups may 'lead' members to expected, gendered responses, the BBC has attempted to make women conspicuous in drama series such as the co-produced *Rome* (BBC, HBO and RAI 2005 and 2007). According to an interviewee involved in the series, it had inherited a largely male audience from a previous programme shown in the same timeslot, so 'they were trying not to make it man's stuff.'⁴² In her opinion, though, attempts at diversity did not benefit programme quality; as she stated, 'them trying not to make it man's stuff were the bits that I thought were really naff.' However, that is not to say that the efforts were not welcome; as a self-identified public and university historian, she concluded that the BBC's desire to broaden audience reach was laudable.

Other genres, such as reality programming, do attract female viewers.⁴³ Although, like the natural history genre described by Crowther, history documentaries are of high status and seem as a genre to be 'critically immune', series on the edges of the corpus are less safe.

Interestingly, they are also more likely to acknowledge women as audiences, presenters and subjects. Michelle Hilmes has identified similar criticism of pre-war radio soap operas as 'vulgar' or 'feminised' and it also seems significant that Germaine Greer described the reality series *Big Brother* as 'soap opera come to life'.⁴⁴ 'Reality history' series such as *Edwardian Country House*, which significantly was commissioned and broadcast not by the BBC but by Channel 4, have met with a great deal of criticism and were described collectively by Tristram Hunt as a 'bastard genre' marking the demise of social history on television, as much for emphasising the material nature of life in the past, chamber pots and corsets, as for the men and women dressing up as their forebears. It certainly seems that the book accompanying the series aims largely at a female readership, offering evocative nostalgia and crafts relating to the period such as jelly making (pineapple and mint), homemade sweets, beauty remedies and evening bags.⁴⁵ Juliet Gardiner has, though, convincingly defended the series and its usefulness as a historical and historiographical experiment.⁴⁶

Further, unlike the majority of historical re-enactment, which both Hunt and Jerome de Groot identify as prefiguring reality history on TV, series such as *Edwardian Country House* give a large proportion of time to women, their lives and experiences, and offer re-enactors, often women, the opportunity to offer insights alongside the oral testimony and assistance of those who lived through the eras depicted: for those in *The 1940s House*, Marguerite Patten, a celebrated wartime cook; in *Edwardian Country House*, Mrs Whinney, a former housemaid, who visited the young women re-enacting her former role.⁴⁷ This particularly underscored generational differences; her account of physical and sexual abuse with no hope of redress prompted some female re-enactors to contrast women's experiences in previous centuries with their relative freedom in the twenty-first century. For some women, such as Lyn Hymers of *The 1940s House*, this meant deconstructing, in her words, the 'idealized Hollywood version of the 1940s housewife' that she and, notably, her husband had partially accepted before their involvement.⁴⁸

De Groot welcomes this 'enfranchising agenda'; as he suggests, 'for all Schama's celebration of the popularising potential of television for history, he still wants to be the man in charge of telling us how things were'. David Scott Diffrient too highlights the importance of gender in his analysis of *The 1940s House* which considers its reflection of changes in women's and men's roles since the Second World War and also the ways that ideals of beauty, both in the 1940s and the twenty-first century, reveal reality TV history's equation of 'lack of glamour with a truly "authentic" re-enactment of the past' in much the same way that the artifice of *Big Brother* contestants is linked to their 'perfect, young faces and bodies'.⁴⁹ Yet at the same time, he suggests, *The 1940s House* offered 'a critique of historically contextualized codes of beauty and duty' which allowed reflection upon the present. Analysis of *Frontier House* (PBS 2002) similarly suggests that female re-enactors' experiences affected their behaviour in their modern lives.⁵⁰ Indeed, of historians interviewed,

women were far more likely to be positive about such series' potential to demonstrate, in the words of one respondent, 'the way class relations have changed ... gender relations have changed, in a way that probably is much more powerful, I think, for non-professional, non-academic kind of people, than they would get from reading a book.'⁵¹ Significantly, of the five female historians who talked specifically about the various *House* series, four were positive about its potential to represent social and/or gender history to a mass audience. In contrast, of the six male historians who commented, only two were positive, and another responded, tellingly, that 'I don't watch them. I don't watch them but my wife does. She loves them, and she's a historian. She's a history graduate as well. She loves them, but she's very interested in family history anyway, and, um, I'm not particularly.'⁵² Although this interviewee is keen to assert his wife's status as a fellow historian, his statement also underscores the way that certain types of history programming have been 'gendered', if not downgraded to genealogy, by male historians.

However, re-enactment is hardly new in historiographical terms: Oxford philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood asserted in the 1930s that to understand historical experience the historian should conceive of the past as 'a living past... which... can be re-enacted in the present, and that re-enactment known as past' and warned of the perils of accepting testimony at face value.⁵³ Many scholars writing on re-enactment refer to Collingwood's work, at least in passing, and certainly for Alexander Cook, one of the historians involved in the BBC2 series which re-enacted Captain Cook's voyages, *The Ship* (BBC2 August-September 2002), the experience was a re-enactment in the present, although he warned that the benefits of the experience had not necessarily been successfully communicated to the programme's audience.⁵⁴ In addition, Stephen Gapps' analysis of the Australian re-enactment series *The Colony* (SBS 2005) strongly suggests that the degree to which individual re-enactors developed historical understanding depended very much on their existing historical knowledge.⁵⁵ Another Australian series, the eight-part *Outback House* (ABC June-July 2005) made, like *Edwardian Country House*, by Wall to Wall, did not represent all aspects of the past to the audience. Catriona Elder's research into representations of colonial history has highlighted that although two re-enactors in the series were native Australians, members of the Wiradjuri tribe, the experience was unrepresentative. Debate raged around whether, for example, Danielle Schaefer, one of the maids, should eat scraps outside the house as her foremothers would have been expected to do. Although her mother acted as an adviser to the series and urged that this should be shown, this aspect of Aboriginal history and experience of colonialism was omitted from the broadcast material.⁵⁶ Anja Schwarz suggests that such responses reflect 'a desire for the past to have happened differently'⁵⁷, and arguably they reveal as much about the present as they do about the past and may obfuscate events unacceptable in the present.

Despite this, the celebrity-led series *Who do you think you are?*, broadcast on the BBC since 2004, has proved in some ways to be the most surprising source



Bettany Hughes
Photo: Mark Passmore

of women's, and also Black and working-class history, on primetime BBC, although Tristram Hunt condemned the series as an 'amateur hobby... transposed to history in its entirety.'⁵⁸ The episode on Moira Stuart, the first black newsreader on British TV, for example, engaged with the subject of slavery, one of the key themes arising from investigation into her ancestors.⁵⁹ Achieving an audience of 5.35 million on a Tuesday night in November 2004, the largest for any programme on BBC2 that week, the series uses, even manipulates, the emotional responses of the celebrities in a way which some TV scholars have likened to other traditionally female programming such as reality TV and lifestyle programmes.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the series as a whole has allowed coverage, albeit brief and selective, of women's lives in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries and its coverage, albeit brief, of the enslavement of millions was far from Hunt's 'comforting warm soak'. Indeed, based on her appearance, Stuart was chosen to present BBC2's *In Search of Wilberforce* (BBC2 16 March 2007), part of a season marking the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. She combined celebrity with the 'authenticity' of her family background, now well known to many viewers. The programme itself included interviews with several experts, including the Caribbean historian of slavery Verene Shepherd of the University of the West Indies. Significantly, though, the programme was not the creation of the BBC's History department, but of Religion and Ethics, leading us to question the extent to which the History department fulfils the BBC's remit to represent diversity.

Women in television history are not limited to historians appearing on screen or women whose lives are the focus of programming. Although this has been the case since at least the 1960s, Mary Irwin's research into the history of BBC documentary making in that decade suggests that women working on documentary making

were often as well qualified as their male counterparts, although they received less encouragement to progress to directorial or production roles and were often recalled in 'official' histories, by male colleagues, as primarily administrative or secretarial figures.⁶¹ However, Janice Hadlow has been a significant figure in TV history production since the 1990s. Behind *A History of Britain*, Niall Ferguson's *Empire: How Britain made the Modern World* (Channel 4 January-February 2003) and *Edwardian Country House*, Hadlow is Controller of BBC4 and was Head of History at both the BBC and Channel 4. She is a relative rarity; the current Head of History at Channel 5 is Alex Sutherland, and there are a few women in senior positions in independent production companies such as Silver River, headed by former BBC Arts Producer Daisy Goodwin, which made, amongst other productions, *Edwardian Supersize Me* (BBC4 16 April 2007), part of the 'The Edwardians: The Birth of Now' season, under Hadlow's leadership.⁶²

Motivated by a desire to broadcast commercially successful series at Channel 4, and to bring 'big, ambitious, authoritative' series to BBC4, including the *Protestant Revolution* series (September-October 2007) presented by Tristram Hunt, it remains to be seen if BBC4 will regularly broadcast history of, or by, women.⁶³ The BBC claimed that *Protestant Revolution* would include an episode about the role of Protestantism in transforming 'experiences of sex, love, family life and the relationship between men and women.' However, this was also a Whiggist account which sought to uncover, the BBC claimed, 'how straight-laced Victorian mothers became the sexually liberated women of today.'⁶⁴ The episode itself little recognised the role of the Reformation in limiting, for example, women's access to education, as some feminist scholars suggest, in favour of a progressive account.⁶⁵ The Reformation 'brought the family a long way' between 1500 and 1650, we are told by Hunt as he drives through the English countryside, giving a similar sense of speed and destination.⁶⁶ More recently the six-part series *In Search of Medieval Britain* (April-May 2008), part of BBC4's Medieval Season, allowed historian Alixe Bovey to recreate journeys through Britain as it was in the Middle Ages, but like Fiona Watson she spent a large proportion of time discussing key points with male experts. *The Independent's* Hermione Eyre described the season as 'smart...but predictable' before predictably referring to Bovey's appearance.⁶⁷ Granting a female historian this opportunity was laudable, but her positioning as presenter rather than as an authority in her own right contrasted with Robert Bartlett's four-part series *Inside the Medieval Mind* (April-May 2008), in which, excepting very occasional discussions with other historians, he was the sole historical authority on screen. Professor Bartlett's series was certainly significant in granting a voice to medieval women through the sources selected, but it may also be argued that, in contrast to his appearance, Dr Bovey's authority was limited by her portrayal as a presenter rather than an authority.⁶⁸ In the same season, Michael Wood's *Christina: A Medieval life* (May 2008) considered Christina Cok, a fourteenth-century woman from Hertfordshire, and using the quest model common to his other series, pursued her life through extant archival references. Although *The*

Guardian's Sam Wollaston asserted that '[t]he Christina device doesn't really work, because there simply isn't enough about her in the court book', the sparse references highlighted the limitations imposed upon historians of the Middle Ages, especially of non-elite groups.⁶⁹ Moreover, *Christina* explicitly aimed to grant a voice to women, 'the forgotten half of our ancestors', as Wood describes them. Unlike *The Protestant Revolution* it was not a narrative of progress; it sought to identify the traces of the medieval past in the 'thought and speech' of the present, with social and economic changes beneficial to the peasantry ascribed more to the ravages of pestilence upon the nation than to human intervention.

In many ways *The Protestant Revolution* is similar to another series commissioned by Hadlow, Niall Ferguson's *Empire*; both seek proof of progress, based around religious or national traits, which are also almost exclusively white and male in outlook. Whilst that is not to suggest that either series should have had a specific episode to consider women's experiences, this is symptomatic of the wider desire of programme makers to offer closed narratives, often those of progress.⁷⁰ Arguably, aspects of women's history that do not fit into this straightforward story of advancement are often ignored: the experiences of English and Welsh women in the early nineteenth century, explicitly excepted from political representation by the 1832 Reform Act's designation that it should apply only to 'male persons', have been considered by scholars but rarely appear in televised histories, particularly those with a Whiggist sense of historical progression.⁷¹ Almost a century after Virginia Woolf's comments, in 1928, on the lack of historical research into women's lives, especially those lived before the eighteenth century, with a few notable exceptions I find myself looking about the TV listings for programmes that are not there.

In conclusion, as one interviewee suggested, 'There is something here about gender that is important, and more complicated issues than saying 'add some women in'. As another added, 'there is a downgrading of female authority', even of female historians with tenured posts in prestigious universities, for whom appearance and dress is likely to be commented on at greater length than the substance of the programme. Although television is a visual medium, it is perhaps significant that much of this is led not by audiences distressed by the sound and sight of a female authority on ancient Sparta or early modern India, but by TV reviewers, often male, protecting TV's bardic role in reinforcing cultural consensus, whose first response to a history series fronted by a woman may be to objectify her. As one feminist scholar noted of reality TV's reproduction of dominant ideology, 'the effect is especially dangerous for women.'⁷² 'Televising History 1995-2010' aims, then, to continue to unpick and identify some of these issues because, unlike much TV history, we believe the experiences and opinions of women as professional historians, media professionals, and as historical actors to be crucial.

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Notes

1. Information on the Institute of Historical Research website suggests that around a third of university history teachers are women, although this does not include the 'academic demimonde' of short-term workers, postgraduate students and research staff who also teach. A sample of 200 individuals from the IHR's 2007 list of teaching staff (www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Resources/Teachers) suggests c.14% of Professors of History are women: roughly the same percentage as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) suggested for all disciplines in 2006/7: see Anthea Lipsett, 'More female academics working in universities', *Education Guardian*, February 28 2008.
2. See www.tvhistory.lincoln.ac.uk for further details.
3. See Erin Bell and Ann Gray 'History on television: charisma, narrative and knowledge', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.1 (2007), 113-33 and Erin Bell and Ann Gray 'History on television: charisma, narrative and knowledge', in *Re-viewing Television History*, ed. Helen Wheatley (London, I B. Tauris, 2007) for development of other aspects of gender and television history.
4. For 'event-television' see Tobias Ebbrecht 'Docudramatizing history on TV: German and British docudrama and historical event television in the memorial year 2005', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10.1 (2007), 35-53, for use of this term by German media professional and historian Guido Knopp.
5. Bettany Hughes, a member of the project panel, has verified this: see David Meadows, 'Rogue Classicism': www.atrium-media.com/roguclassicism/Posts/00003154.html (2006).
6. See Paul Addison, 'Troublemaker: The Life and History of A.J.P. Taylor' (review article): www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/addisonPaul.html (2001); Janice Hadlow cited in Tristram Hunt, 'The Time Bandits', *The Guardian*, September 10 2007; Simon Schama, 'You ask the questions: Simon Schama', *The Independent* June 6 2002.
7. Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), 55.
8. Interview W.
9. John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London, Routledge, 2003 [1978]), 65-6; see ch. 6 'Bardic television' *passim*.
10. See Bell and Gray, 'History on television' *passim* for further comments on the use of music in the series.
11. John Corner, *Critical ideas in Television Studies* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999), 96-7.
12. See Roger Smither, 'Why is so much television history about war?' in *History and the Media*, ed. David Cannadine (London, Palgrave, 2004), 51.
13. Ann Gray, 'Learning from experience' in *Cultural Methodologies* ed. Jim McGuigan (London, Sage, 1997); Tristram Hunt, 'Reality, identity and empathy', *Journal of Social History* 39.3 (2006).
14. See Paul Laity, 'The dangerous don' *The Guardian* November 10 2007 for a parallel example: Mary Beard's comments on her male peers' surprise when she received a first-class degree in Classics from Cambridge in the 1970s.
15. Barbara Crowther, 'Viewing what comes naturally: a feminist approach to television natural history', *Women's Studies International Forum* 20.2 (1997), 289.
16. Jeanie Attie, 'Illusions of history', *Radical History Review* 52 (1992), 98.
17. My thanks to Silke Strickrodt of Humboldt University, Berlin, for her suggestions.
18. Stephen Naysmith, 'Schama: "my Scots critics are whingers"', *The Sunday Herald* November 17 2002.
19. *In Search of Scotland* Episode 1 (19 February 2002)
20. Ian Bremner, 'History without archives: Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*' in *The Historian, Television and Television History*, ed. Graham Roberts and Philip M. Taylor (Luton: University of Luton Press, 2001), 64, 70.
21. Based on a sample of episodes 1, 2 and 5, two of fourteen individuals interviewed were women.
22. Interview W.
23. *In Search of Scotland* Episode 10 (23 April 2002)
24. See www.lesleyriddoch.com for details.
25. Interview A; Interview E; Interview T.
26. A. A. Gill, 'Does my brain look big in this?', *Sunday Times* July 22 2007.
27. Fieldnotes A; Interview W.
28. Michelle Arrow, "'I want to be a TV historian when I grow up!' On being a *Rewind* historian", *Public History Review* 12 (2006), 86.
29. Laity, 'The Dangerous Don'; for a summary of Jardine's work see www.open2.net/worldinabox/presenter_profile.htm and Beard's *Times* blog, 'A Don's Life': www.timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life
30. The season ran September-October 2007; some programmes were repeated later in the year.
31. Jerry Kuehl, 'History on the public screen II' in *New Challenges for Documentary second edition*, ed. John Corner and Alan Rosenthal (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2005).
32. Interview K.
33. Smither, 'Why is so much television history about war?', 59.
34. Helen Weinstein, 'Narrative strategies and emotional engagement: how genre and format deliver audience in UK history TV products 2000-2007' lecture at 'Televising History' conference, University of Lincoln, June 15 2007; Steve Humphries, 'Sex, love and the British' paper given at the 'Televising History' symposium, University of Lincoln, UK 29 February 2008.
35. See Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press 1992 [1978]), 70.
36. Myra MacDonald, 'Performing memory on television: documentary in the 1960s', *Screen* 47.3 (2006); see also Soo-Young Nam 'Recounting "history": documentary as women's cinema' *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 7.1 (2001); Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, *Contested Pasts* (London, Routledge, 2003), 1.
37. See www.testimonyfilms.com/index.htm and www.testimonyfilms.com/our-pedigree.html
38. Interview M; Interview L.
39. www.bbc.co.uk/foi/docs/bbc_trust/audience_councils/audience_council_for_wales/ACW_Roles_Responsibilities.htm (2004-7); see Bell and Gray 'History on Television'.
40. Simon Schama, 'Fine-cutting Clio', *Public Historian*

- 25.3 (2003); Angela Piccini and Karol Kulik, 'Who watches archaeology on TV?', *British Archaeology* 94 (2007); Tony Bennett, 'Distinction on the box', *Cultural Trends* 15.2 (2006), 203.
41. Tony Bennett and Elizabeth B. Silva, 'Introduction: cultural capital and inequality: policy issues and context', *Cultural Trends* 15.2 (2006), 95.
42. Interview T.
43. Anna Everett, 'Trading private and public spaces', *Journal of Visual Culture* 3.2 (2004).
44. Michele Hilmes, 'Front line family: 'Women's culture' comes to the BBC' *Media, Culture & Society* 29.1 (2007), 5; Greer quoted in Richard Kilborn, *Staging the Real: Factual TV Programming in the Age of Big Brother* (Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2003), 82.
45. Hunt, 'Reality, identity and empathy', pp 852, 856; Juliet Gardiner, *The Edwardian Country House* (London, Macmillan, 2002), *passim*.
46. Juliet Gardiner, 'The Edwardian Country House', *History Today* July (2002), 20.
47. Jerome de Groot, 'Empathy and enfranchisement', *Rethinking History* 10.3 (2006), 396.
48. David Scott Diffrient, 'History as mystery and beauty as duty in *The 1940s House*' *Film & History* 37.1 (2007), 47-50; Julie Anne Taddeo and Ken Dvorak, 'The PBS historical house series: where historical reality succumbs to reel reality', *Film & History* 37.1 (2007), 20. That is not, though, to suggest that all women were glad to return to the 21st century; Anna Olliff-Cooper, lady of the *Edwardian Country House*, changed, in Taddeo and Dvorak's description, from 'a woman very much the product of 20th century feminism' to be disenchanted with the responsibilities of equality.
49. de Groot, 'Empathy and enfranchisement', 399; Julie Anne Taddeo and Ken Dvorak, 'Introduction: reality television as film and history', *Film & History* 37.1 (2007), 16.
50. Diffrient, 'History as mystery', p.51. Elizabeth Johnston has similarly sought to compare reality TV with 18th century fiction: E. Johnston, 'How women really are: Disturbing parallels between reality television and 18th century fiction' in *How real is reality TV? Essays on Representation and Truth*, ed. David S. Escoffery (NC and London, McFarland and Co., 2006), 115; Leigh H. Edwards, 'The endless end of frontier mythology: PBS's *Frontier House* 2002', *Film & History* 37.1 (2007), 31.
51. Interview W.
52. Interview U.
53. R[obin] G[eorge] Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 [1946]), 158, 256. Further, 'history is nothing but the re-enactment of past thought in the historian's mind'. (228).
54. Alexander Cook, 'The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History', *Criticism* 46.3 (2004), 487.
55. See Stephen Gapps, 'Adventures in *The Colony: Big Brother* meets *Survivor* in period costume', *Film & History* 37.1 (2007), 69 on the different levels of knowledge, with the Aboriginal family showing 'a deep contextual understanding' of the early nineteenth-century events depicted, in contrast to the European or Australian families.
56. See Catriona Elder, 'Settling the colonizer: narratives of national belonging and re-enactment television' paper given at 'Narrating the Nation' conference, Reus, Spain 4-5 October 2007.
57. Anja Schwarz, '"Not this year!" re-enacting contested pasts aboard *The Ship*', *Rethinking History* 11.3 (2007), 428; Michelle Arrow too comments on related issues: see "'That history should not have ever been how it was": *The Colony, Outback House, and Australian History*', *Film & History* 37.1 (2007), 61. Gapps, 'Adventures in *The Colony*' p.71, considers the tensions that arose in Australia in 1988 over reenactments commemorating the 200th anniversary of the arrival of British colonisers.
58. Hunt, 'The Time Bandits'.
59. 16 November 2004, BBC2.
60. For audience figures see www.barb.co.uk week ending 21/11/04. James Bennett and Amy Holdsworth 'Performing personality as emotion and authenticity in *Who do you think you are?*': www.criticalstudiesintelelevision.com/tvshorts/bennet_whodoyouthink.shtml (2006).
61. See Mary Irwin, 'BBC Television Documentary 1960-70: A History' PhD thesis, Glasgow Caledonian University (forthcoming)
62. www.silverriver.tv. See www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/edwardians/highlights.shtml for details.
63. Jason Deans, 'New BBC4 boss reveals big ambition', *Media Guardian* June 15 2004.
64. See the BBC's Press Office release on the series, including a synopsis: www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/08_august/21/protestant_episode.shtml
65. Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness* (New York and London, Oxford University Press 1993), 33
66. *The Protestant Revolution* Episode 2 (12 September 2007)
67. Hermione Eyre, 'TV and Radio Reviews', *The Independent* 20 April 2008.
68. See www.open2.net/medievalmind/audio.html for his discussion of aspects of the series.
69. Sam Wollaston, 'Christina on BBC4', *The Guardian* May 6 2008.
70. See Bell and Gray, 'History on television', *passim*.
71. See e.g. Catherine Hall, *White, Male, and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (London, Routledge, 1992), 152; and Philip Harling, 'Reading the fine print of reform: Review of Philip Salmon, *Electoral Reform at Work: Local Politics and National Parties, 1832-1841*', H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, June: www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=299891095252420 (2004). Work such as that of Testimony Films does, of course, offer some alternatives.
72. Interview T; Interview W; Johnston, 'How women really are', 122.