


**changgi**

ABOUT THE SERIES HISTORY PERSONS EPISODES FORUM REC SHOP

ABOUT THE SERIES

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John Doyle discusses the writing of 'Changi'



In 1996 during the second season of *Club Buggery* I had an idea for a situation comedy in the style of *Hogan's Heroes*.

In my mind it was tentatively titled 'Worn Out and Weary' and was to have a simple location of a barracks in which were six POWs and they would be regularly visited by Japanese guards who would show various aspects of cruelty, madness, stupidity, misguidedness and bungling ineptitude to which the POWs would react with jokes. This show I began writing.

To be fair, I was aware just the word *Changi* had a resonance that suggested



## MEDIATING MEMORY: HISTORY ON TELEVISION

When the 1995 Mel Gibson movie *Braveheart* – about the fourteenth-century hero William Wallace and the battle to overthrow the invading English – showed in Scottish cinemas, over and over again audiences stood up at the end of the film, cheering and clapping. Despite Gibson's bad accent and the Hollywood gloss, this movie still resonated with thousands of people who have a centuries-long memory of English injustice, if not the finer points of their history. If history matters, then it matters to people on screen as fictional entertainment as much as in history books as accurate representations of the past. But it matters in a range of very different ways. When 'ER', an anonymous participant in the 'Australians and the Past' project living on the NSW mid-north coast, hired a copy of *Braveheart* from his video store, it had a very different reception. 'ER', an ex-soldier who liked military history and was involved in local history, wanted reassurance that it was 'authentic'. He recalled sitting 'with a military history book [of the battle so he could] . . . watch the movie and say what was going to happen next.' In the end he was 'reasonably' satisfied with its accuracy.<sup>1</sup>

Although *Braveheart* was a narrative film and therefore 'art', there was still an expectation from some in its audiences that their emotional responses had some grounding in documented facts. It meant that their attempts to connect with the experience of those earlier centuries could be legitimised. Others want to separate their cognitive and emotional responses. 'KD', from the NSW New England region, for example, revelled in the process of creating the illusion:

*I'm a real Hornblower fan, and I love the critics saying what went right and what went wrong with making the movies . . . the fact that for the making of the movie the headroom below decks is really a lot more than it would have been on a real ship . . .<sup>2</sup>*

Authenticity and accuracy are often inseparable concepts associated with people's response to the past that is presented to them, or that they make for themselves. But one is not always necessary for the other.

Historical novelists, like film-makers, can re-imagine a past that might seem like its real but in fact has little or no factual accuracy. The world of historical re-enactors on the other hand, with little authority in the culture and no institutional framework, often has an obsession with accuracy – down to the correct underwear – to ensure their recreations are truly 'authentic.' This does not stop the historical 'policemen' among us who patrol the borders for historical accuracy both as amateurs and as professionals. Film and television histories are especially vulnerable to the shouts and clamour of those in the audience who accuse the makers of inaccuracy, or employing an unauthorised license to sacrifice fidelity for the sake of drama. It suggests that the tacit contract between film-makers and their audience is not quite as watertight as it may seem. For while critics often make no distinction between fiction and non-fiction, documentary and blockbuster film, documentary and film-makers respond by blurring the lines between them in order to shore up a film's authority. This is what Philip Noyce did in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* when he used black and white images of the film's Aboriginal subjects at the end (and in the opening screening in Sydney's State Theatre they appeared on the stage). And it can be seen in John Doyle's television mini-series *Changi*, when he employed a survivor of the Japanese POW camps to both advise on the script and appear in the films.

Film on television or in cinemas is a powerful medium of communication – not just as consumption but as a production process. Several times when film-makers are making movies on 'location' that are about historical events, in the place where they happened, people who witness this process see that art imitates life; they watch the past being recreated around them – the tanks rolling in, the sound of gunfire – and think it is

happening all over again. This was the case on the Greek island where they made the film *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and at European sites when film-makers shoot films set in World War II. Such orchestrated *déjà vu* is of course about the clash between past and present, when those who are survivors live on and the re-enactments of the past are now fast catching up to their original experience.

### Television and Memory

Television is a major medium by which people come to know the past for a number of reasons. Historian Simon Schama claims that television has been an important contributor to the shifts in hierarchies of authority and knowledge about the past and had a major role in making historical knowledge more democratically accessible.<sup>3</sup> While he made this claim in 2003 before the explosion of History internet sites, and the rise of YouTube over the last few years, his point is nevertheless an important one particularly for older generations. In any one population there will be different kinds of historical understanding that is generationally shaped; indeed, the generation narrative itself – Boomers, X and Y – helps to organise a set of differing historical experiences and render those experiences more broadly understood. Sometimes there is a slippage between the age groups which is exploited by television shows such as *Talkin' About my Generation*, where members from three separate generations compete in a quiz on popular culture. The majority of people also feel very connected to the past while watching television.<sup>4</sup> Television, which takes a much less deliberate effort of engagement than many activities, has become as strong a medium for connecting with the past as reading books, learning history at school or going to museums.

Given today's diverse populations and the range of recreational activities available, the only activity more of us might be doing together *at the same time* is watching television. We won't all be watching in the same context (favourite chairs, darkened rooms, eating, on our own or with other people), the same stations or respond in the same ways to the same programs, though our various written guides will have given the thumbs up to certain programs and not others. Moreover, we very well may discuss it next day with our peers, its content, style, how well people performed in the roles, what might happen next, before deciding on its overall impact. On some rare occasions we will have all seen the same images, because they will have been repeated over and over again over time by all stations. The planes ploughing into the World Trade Centre towers is one example. At that moment we are experiencing what many call 'collective witnessing.' We become part of a virtual community (of billions) who have all experienced this event at one remove from it, in

another place, and we will probably remember those images for the rest of our lives, though the meaning of them will change over time.<sup>5</sup>

Television is both ubiquitous and powerful, has deeply penetrated our cultural imaginations, is the substance of daily conversations and structures our daily lives temporally so that the real time now is often a referent to the art. Many people, for example, said that the images of the World Trade Centre towers burning on was 'just like a movie'. But, like the internet, television has much greater intimacy as a medium than film – it is experienced in very different contexts – and is centrally situated in the everyday, the mundane, part of the daily routine, that is often outside the experience of history.

Despite observations from both scholars and the media industry that the web is fast overtaking television's dominance for the younger generations, it still remains the dominant form in western social leisure and technology has provided the means to reinforce its impact through enhanced digital re-enactment and other new techniques. As well, the web has been incorporated into programming and acts as an additional tool for giving feedback and response to programs. There are now further possibilities for following up additional historical information on which a TV program was based through related websites. And films provide background and interviews on DVD. (Even so, the more conventional means of follow up still attest to film's stimulus to historical interest. After the screening and distribution of George Clooney's film *Good Night and Good Luck*, about McCarthyism in 1950s America, for example, there was a significant rise in the number of books sold about Joseph McCarthy and that period.) These innovations place TV and film in a web of inter-related or converging media presenting the past to the public. The press too reviews programs, provides feedback, and interviews those who are still alive when historical events are portrayed and generally creates a frame through which we view these stories.<sup>6</sup>

As many have recognised, the purpose of much history on television, irrespective of its genre and form, is to connect with an audience through emotion and empathy like historical presentation in popular culture generally. But there are several different means by which this is achieved. For example, Gwenda, aged 46 from St Mary's in Sydney, relived the experience of her own past through two documentaries:

*One was the first 40 years of television and the other one was 50 years since the end of the war. And we taped them and kept them because I wanted my children to see them. Because I said: 'look I have been there, I've been there. They're the toys I had. That's what I played with. That's what we had in our kitchen. And I went through all that with them. But they weren't very interested then. But I fell apart and cried all the way through it... Yes. That's*

*what I grew up with. Everything I connected with everything... So I connected with every single thing. The fashions. You know, the food. The labels, they showed the old labels of things we used to buy. Like Sunlight soap and all that. I connected with everything.*

Gwenda has kept the recordings because hers was a response specific to her generational life history and she hoped the children would be interested in her past later in their lives. Similarly a woman born in the 1920s from Western Australia made the same identification with her life trajectory: 'The ABC on Wednesday night was showing *The 100 Years*. I've been alive for 80 years so it was like reliving it.'<sup>8</sup> A young Sydney student was also able to feel empathy: 'When you watch it you visualise what's happening and you feel part of it,' she commented.<sup>9</sup>

But not everyone connects in the same way. Some felt that teaching about the past removed beyond a single lifespan was an important aim:

*It's good for other people to watch 1815 in the sense that I think its good that they get what I think of as a sense of continuity. There were their forebears, had to put up with a hell of a lot of things that we didn't, getting around, horses before motor vehicles and the like.*<sup>10</sup>

A fifty year old female teacher from Victoria went even further to link all these uses of the past:

*On a monthly basis I can see documentaries of the Second World War. I was born during the Second World War. I was alive when some of these things happened. It happened in my lifetime and my parent's lifetime. History has come out of the little box it was in primary school. I feel connected to the past all the time... some things are hard to do as individuals such as the National Day of Mourning. For me I need to listen, watch and then join the big marches. The more people doing it the more significant it becomes. The media then broadcasts it and it helps to teach people its importance.*<sup>11</sup>

This woman has seen the capacity for history on TV to democratise knowledge, and to help to place both her and her family's experience in the context of change over time, and even has potential to mediate fault-lines in uncomfortable areas of the past such as the historical treatment of Australian Aborigines.

Women often felt more connection to the past through television than men, and with less qualification, since they referred to fictional drama like Jane Austen as much as narrative film based on 'true' stories. Male choices tend to focus largely on documentaries as 'information', such as a carpenter from Melbourne who watched 'mostly documentaries, historical documentaries about Greek and Roman civilisations, World Wars,

American Civil War, indigenous Australian programs as well as fictional programs.' He said they gave him 'more knowledge of history' but not just that; they also gave him 'a sense of my place in the world. An objective account of things.' So television helps to locate people spatially as well as through time.<sup>12</sup>

Television often gets a particularly bad rap when it comes to the role it plays in our memories. Many theorists claim that television is principally responsible for a current wave of cultural amnesia, of images insinuating into our memories of the past and colonising it, so that we no longer remember whether we experienced an event or saw it on 'the box'. Yet, it is nearly impossible to think about how we understand what are 'significant' events of the western world from the middle of twentieth century without a television image of them. And it is no accident that last century is termed 'the American century' for this is the time when American media came to dominate the western world through images in the media. The Vietnam War, assassination of J F Kennedy, American civil rights movement, space travel, the Gulf war and other major events were brought immediately into the public sphere by television. The emphasis on the present - 'liveness' based on technology - has led some to conclude that TV plays a central role in erasing historical consciousness and eliminating a common, linear sense of history. At the very least some such as Andrew Hoskins argue that our sense of a collective past has been transformed by the technology which has not produced a more durable form of collective memory but has instead fractured our past.<sup>13</sup>

Although television, like film and other media, has a large role in shaping historical consciousness or forms of historical understanding and memory, this doesn't mean that people passively consume everything they watch or uncritically accept the versions of the past placed before them. Television and film co-exists with familiar ideas about how and what we know of the past. And the value of such knowledge co-exists with rather than supplants more formal sources of cultural knowledge such as school and tertiary education. In the process media produces everyday forms of historical understanding. Television offers forms of history that are more personal and idiosyncratic which engage viewers in diverse ways. Thus Jay Winter observed that 'the individual viewer of a film brings to that film personal memories and historical narratives. We are touched by film, sometimes powerfully evoked, so that our responses to film help restructure and fortify our notions of history and our personal memories.'<sup>14</sup> In fact television and the internet, as increasingly interdependent cultural forms, have an important role in mediating between the personal experience and the public memory of events and also between genders and generations. However, we are well aware

that media representations of the past have substantial limitations, strengths and weaknesses as do all other cultural forms. For instance TV is intimately bound up with the history of the medium itself and with its abilities to record, preserve or circulate images. It is highly dependent on events that have been recorded and the availability of still photography and audio recordings. As Roger Smitherer notes, a hugely disproportionate amount of it favours the twentieth century, particularly the two World Wars and the Nazis.<sup>15</sup>

It was clear from our survey that while there was overwhelming evidence of connection with historical television, there was an equally strong awareness of its lack of trustworthiness as a medium for history. This could range from fear and mistrust of bias and lack of control over the interpretation to anger at misrepresentation. Some genres, such as historical documentaries, were regarded as more reliable than others. A woman in the process of compiling her family history declared:

*I want the grandchildren to see history, not just how it is presented in film. The media is obsessed with itself. When I was young I was just me, I didn't fit into the media stereotype. History seemed to be based on old advertisements - women happily standing next to washing machines when really they were just going to work. Women have always worked, it's untrue that they were always at home, particularly during wartime... Nobody was ever like the Brady Bunch in the 1960s.<sup>16</sup>*

It seems that if groups of people fall outside the mainstream representation of them and their past, then they have a much sharper sense of television's weaknesses. There is obviously a significant level of mistrust amongst Australia's indigenous people towards history in the media. An Aboriginal man from Broome says:

*they show television shows... I've seen one lately, they bring back shows... like The Power of One [Bryce Courtney] or something where the white people get control of the Aboriginals, we know all that but they are still bringing it out on video. And that's like, that hurts us to get it displayed in front of us. And you've got to go over and see that happening again, so sometimes we don't like watching movies like that. We'd like to see it the other way around maybe one day... But some people they got different points of view.<sup>17</sup>*

This is a very effective statement often mentioned by Aboriginal people that it is not only the original misrepresentation of them and their past which is the problem but the continuing nature of the repetition and the circulation through media which gives it power to influence people's knowledge and understanding. More recent productions by Aboriginal film-makers and presenters, such as the ABC's *Message Stick* and the film

*Samson and Delilah*, are slowly helping to broaden public perception. However, television and film is popular precisely because it satisfies a considerable range of constituencies. Some Aboriginal people did feel a connection with the television histories if they or their family had participated in past events. Reggie Stanton, an 84-year-old Aboriginal man from Queensland, declared that: 'My step-father was in the war, and I think it's a big thing for me to think about what he went through. And how he... oh, how he survived it'.<sup>18</sup> He feels connected to Anzac day and so did Sandra Davis, an Aboriginal woman born in Collarenebri, who was studying to be a nurse at Toowoomba base hospital. She watched movies like Gallipoli or TV programs about the war and feels especially linked to the past on Anzac day.<sup>19</sup>

Others who mistrusted history on television made important distinctions between genres or components and sources. One Canberra woman said that: 'It depends. The media is open to distortion. It is bad to rely on re-enactments such as the movie of the Granville train disaster rather than remembering the actual event... Actual footage makes me feel more connected but dramatised re-enactments do not.' This person was suspicious of TV's tendency to colonise our memories and felt film taken at the time of an event was more reliable than the interpretive device of re-enacting.<sup>20</sup> Another had a sophisticated understanding of its limitations as a form:

*Because historical movies... focus on a really good presentation... [as well as] ratings and popularity, historical accuracy suffers for good presentation. Some programs do try to set out information but there are still certain amounts of bias in the presenter and the way a person can weave it into a watchable program; there are often gaps in what's presented; they only present the most interesting things.<sup>21</sup>*

Jerome de Groot comments that 'the very act' of watching documentaries makes people aware of the serendipitous nature of historical knowledge. In general, he argues that 'epistemology of television history is de facto, incomplete, biased, influenced by narrative and storytelling, biographical or mythmaking; it demonstrates the ability of an audience to deal with complexity.'<sup>22</sup>

#### Television and War

A case study on television and war illustrates some further points about how Australians responded to television as well as film history. First, as might be expected, there are some important gender differences in preferred historical content. These featured in a range of historical activities

that requires further investigation of the way men and women have differing culturally constructed historical understandings, but it is particularly evident in relation to visual representation of war and the military. Many men discussed their love of war films, some preferring battle strategy, others the drama of conflict. An army officer from Canberra had a broad interest in a range of military histories, not necessarily based on his experience but he specified that they should be authentic. 'I like positive and historically accurate histories', he said. 'I saw a series on the Napoleonic wars, I watched something about the American Civil War on video recently and I have read the book and then saw the movie *Gettysburg*.'<sup>23</sup> Another man from Brighton in Melbourne also had diverse war interests and liked *Saving Private Ryan*: 'I thought it was fantastic. Everything I watch is related to the past or history, but I'm a big war buff.'<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Ian Johnstone from Armidale liked engaging with war. He watched the film *1915* on television because it was a vehicle for older values. He liked to contrast an implicitly unsatisfactory present with a more 'noble past':

*Really I just can't stop watching World War One... it was different era wasn't it really? It was unspoilt, somehow it was a nobler sort of era really. They wrote poetry, they didn't watch TV, they were interested, there was a lot of vigour and there's something about World War One, I think.'*<sup>25</sup>

When women do declare an interest in war on television it is often for very different reasons. One thought that documentaries on war 'show what a waste of time war is and a waste of human life. Very senseless.'<sup>26</sup> Several men, however, agreed. One thought 'the politics of conflict was important to understand. The futility of it. Those history lessons we never seem to learn.'<sup>27</sup> Another woman who was a teacher appreciated both the drama of war on television but saw it as an event that gave us the opportunity to explore different viewpoints. She found them 'absolutely thrilling. They are topical or controversial. I'm interested in World War II with the voices of the Japanese, American and Australian'.<sup>28</sup> Apart from those who were general war history 'buffs' the majority of men sought connection either through reliving their own war experience or those of their relations. While a few referred to participation in Vietnam,<sup>29</sup> this primarily meant that the interest in war in television was heavily weighted to the Second World War.

For the last ten years the memory of World War II has been largely an intergenerational phenomenon removed from the eyewitnesses, – veterans now aged in their eighties and nineties – and memories are assuming different shapes in our generational imaginations through

media. Yet the war memories in any one population, whether winner or loser, often remain unsettled, a feeling that whatever has taken place in the time since still leaves both the participants and generations immediately following feeling angry or uneasy, unable to 'come to terms' as an oft-repeated expression puts it. The popular novelist Leon Uris remarked that 'World War Two is the biggest thing that ever happened to anybody that fought in it. For most people – lets say 95% – it was the biggest thing that happened in their life, and it happened when they were very young.' Moreover, it involved a complete rupture of the population and was one of the few occasions when personal history intersected with the public ones. Invariably, then, some spoke of the need to teach other generations about 'the sacrifice that was made'.<sup>30</sup> However, not everyone wanted to relive those experiences and it was often with ambivalent feelings that they watched war on television. Some, particularly prisoners of war of the Japanese refused to engage with films such as *Bridge over the River Kwai* or the ABC series *Changi*. These were often considered more useful for the generation that came afterwards. One man bitterly reflected on his father's experience: 'He had a fine World War One record and he was interned by the Japanese in World War Two. He came back a wreck. It was difficult for my mother and myself. We had no help'.<sup>31</sup> Another said his father refused to talk about war experiences; when he was a child, he said, 'I couldn't give a shit about documentaries or why my dad was the way he was, but as I get older I do.'<sup>32</sup>

How families use the memories portrayed on screen in the intimacy of their homes is a matter for continued investigation. Roger Smitherer has suggested that 'there is a complex interaction that means that the recollection of major world events in television history connects with the explorations of personal histories within families and communities.' The veteran or survivor telling his story on the screen acts as a stimulus to memories. In the final analysis, he says, it is difficult to answer the question: 'to what extent does television history either stimulate or respond to an atmosphere of more general sharing of memories?'<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

Exploring responses to History in various media and its relationship to our memories is a complex process that has to take account of both how it is produced and in what context as well as factors affecting audience responses, including the role of other sources in our communities of memory. All of these are involved in working out what to remember and what to forget collectively. And there are always some people, as there have been with our exploration of other historical activities, who see that

the past has an integral relationship to a future: 'I like documentaries that reveal the past as a mirror of the future', said one woman: 'Some people look at themselves and don't look at where they have originated from.'<sup>34</sup>

Since recent figures suggest that over eighty per cent of Australian teenagers play computer games, many of them historically based and about war or conflict, and the average age of players is now twenty-eight, it is probable that electronic games will have a significant impact on shaping historical understanding for the next generations.<sup>35</sup> As well as film and television, it is likely that these image based cultural expressions will be the arenas where negotiation over history and memory is played out in the future.

## CHAPTER 11



### THE NEW PROFESSIONALS: PUBLIC HISTORY

Public history can be broadly defined as a diverse set of practices that communicate and engage with historical meanings in public arenas. But to gain an understanding of public history it is as important to ask what specifically do public historians do?

In some ways, public historians perform much the same activities as academics. Unless extremely privileged, they are invariably involved in administration and workplace politics. Heritage practitioners often find themselves involved in debates over legitimate uses of history in heritage practice or in outright battles with bureaucrats or other professionals; major projects can be as administratively demanding as running a history department. Some public historians also teach, which is a highly public form of historical work.

A comprehensive cultural geography of public history practice is yet to be written. But an outline is possible. Various areas of state and also local government are employers but in Australia private enterprise is a much less important employer of historians than in the USA. A few major corporations engage historians on a full-time basis. These positions are primarily located in archives and special historical collections or in