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'Back in the Trenches Again': the heirs of Captain Toby Shandy and Corporal Trim re-enact the Great War

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Theatrette, Old Canberra House, ANU

In 2002, the BBC broadcast a series of television documentaries which tried to recreate the experiences of a group of British soldiers serving in the trenches on the Western Front in the autumn of 1916. The Trench blended elements of the reality game show format with the techniques of historical re-enactment. The makers of the series claimed that it provided an opportunity to gain real insight into the experiences of men taking part in a key period of British military and social history. Critics were not persuaded, vilifying the producers for the 'bad taste' behind such an enterprise and ridiculing the absence from the investigation of the key element that distinguishes it from other forms of human experience - that people are trying to kill each other! It was nonetheless a popular series that spawned three further productions adopting a similar format (Lads Army, Bad Lads Army and Spitfire Ace). Superficially these programmes appear to be a variation of the hybrid historical documentary pioneered in the 'House' series and The Ship; the latter widely discussed by the hapless scholars who were taken on-board to validate the exercise. However, there are important differences between these two variants of the reality history genre, one of the most suggestive being the close ties between the 'battle documentaries' and the tradition of military re-enactment in the UK. A tradition, as the title of this paper suggests, that goes back at least as far in 'literary time' as the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1713), when Laurence Sterne's heroes were re-enacting the Duke of Marlborough's campaign on a bowling green in rural England.

This 'work in progress' paper examines these programmes as part of a broader study of military re-enactment in British society and culture. Thus I will place them within the historical context of British military re-enactment but also offer some ideas on the social and political function of these programmes. Finally, I will evaluate the historical utility of these documentaries and in doing so contribute to the growing debate on re-enactment as a historical methodology.

Biographical information

Toby Haggith is an historian who works in the Film and Video Archive of the Imperial War Museum. His thesis, which he undertook at the Centre for Social History at the University of Warwick, was about British films on slum clearance and town planning in the years 1918-1951. More recently, he has conducted work on the filming of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, the popular memory of the Second World War in the period 1945-1950 and a commentary on films recording the unveiling of British war memorials. He is the co-editor, with Joanna Newman, of *Holocaust and the Moving Image: representations in film and television since 1933* (Wallflower Press, 2005).

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