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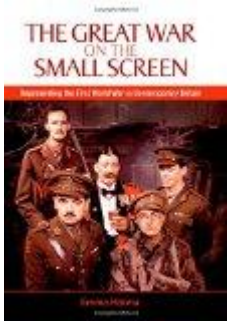
Emma Hanna. *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. viii + 190 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7486-3389-0.



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The Great War on the British Small Screen

World War I occupies a fundamental place in the public memory of Great Britain. Scholars and the general population have of course remembered the conflict through a multitude of sources in a variety of different media. Emma Hanna explores the impact of televisual interpretations of World War in I *The Great War on the Small Screen*. Hanna situates British television programs about World War I in the context of long-held interpretations of the war, which to a large extent were established in the decades before television's rise in popularity in the 1950s. She discusses the creation and broadcast of several successful television programs that tended to reinforce rather than challenge existing understandings of the war. Finally, she examines the often contentious relationship between television and historians, exploring important issues about the appropriate way to convey a historical lesson or message through a new and mass media technology. Throughout the study, Hanna consistently demonstrates the pervasive nature of pretelevision portrayals of the war, which were reinforced by new television programs that recreated many of the same themes for a new medium.

Hanna argues that programs about World War I designed for television were strongly influenced by existing attitudes about the war. By the second half of the twentieth century, the pessimism and disillusionment that characterized contemporary literature became firmly embedded in the national memory of World War I. Other forms of media added to this national memory, portraying the war as cruel and emphasizing the seemingly pointless slaughter of millions of soldiers. These early works also helped to establish the central importance of the western front, which would be the theater in which the majority of television programs about the war would take place. In addition, the pervasive notion that the soldiers were victims of the thoughtless actions of inept commanders became an established view and

would shape the portrayal of the First World War well into the television era.

Hanna examines how television programs about the war helped to maintain and reinforce existing attitudes about the conflict. She spends a significant amount of time on ***The Great War***, which was produced by the BBC and aired in 1964. Utilizing several prominent historians and a large budget, the series was a popular and critical success in Britain and around the world, becoming a benchmark for other documentaries. In many ways, the series offered a more balanced and accurate narrative than previous interpretations of the war. However, British national memory of the war, which emphasized poor leadership and mourned the lost generation of soldiers, influenced audience reception. Striking images of dead soldiers and trench warfare helped to maintain previously established interpretations of the war in the minds of audience members. While television's first grand documentary about World War I became a central element to public memory and would heavily influence future documentaries, Hanna argues that the BBC documentary did not alter popular perceptions of the war.

Hanna also discusses the roles of drama, comedy, and drama-documentary in the public memory of World War I. With few exceptions, producers have had little success interpreting World War I through these genres. The sacrosanct nature of the country's war memory, established by pretelevision narratives as well as such programs as ***The Great War***, meant that comedic and dramatic interpretations had to adhere to established attitudes about the conflict. Dramatic programs that sometimes challenged this memory, such as ***The Monocled Mutineer*** (1986), found limited success with audiences, who were unaccustomed to seeing soldiers display negative behavior and who found the program offensive. One significant exception in the comedy genre was ***Blackadder Goes Forth*** (1989), which became the most popular program about World War I on British television. The funny yet poignant portrayal of pitiable soldiers and inept commanders reflected many of the stereotypes established in the pretelevision era, and the program's overwhelming success made it central to the national memory of the war. The series won several awards and was a critical and popular success, but it remains an outlier, rather than a trend.

In addition to her discussions of programming, Hanna examines the larger issue of television's relationship to history. In one sense, television offers some unique tools through which history can be delivered to mass audiences. Interviews with soldiers who participated in the war can be powerful sources of historical knowledge, since television allows viewers to see facial and bodily expressions as well as to hear the words that are spoken. Hanna argues that television's unique ability to transmit the full range of physical and oral emotions gives viewers a more complete and moving historical experience than written accounts and that the rebroadcasts of these programs will help keep history alive for future audiences. She also discusses recent attempts to infuse the experiences of fighting in World War I into new genres, including reality television. In 2002, the BBC program ***The Trench*** placed modern participants in a recreated environment similar to that of the World War I trenches. The film's controversial treatment of a subject so firmly established in public memory raised a great deal of criticism, but the use of new genres unique to television allowed viewers to witness "the opening up of a world that was never about dry facts, dates, and academic squabbling, but about survival in extreme circumstances" (p. 146). While television offers some unique avenues through which history can be disseminated, its mass media nature also opens television to skepticism and derision from some historians. For example, debates over the production of ***The Great War*** reveal the contemptuous view of some historians for the medium at the time of production. Some historians continue to argue that historical programs designed

for television tend to mislead audiences with generalized information, but Hanna insists that the study of these programs is a crucial part of historical examination of national memory.

The Great War on the Small Screen is a well-executed study that offers significant value to historians of television, World War I, public memory, and twentieth-century culture. Hanna writes clearly and engages the reader with vivid descriptions of the programs being discussed. Her ability to incorporate both the production and consumption aspects of the programs ensures that the voices of both the creators and the audiences are heard. Hanna insists that although television has been underexplored by historians, "to repeatedly dismiss television as an inadequate and improper medium for the 'serious' business of scholars is to ignore a dominant cultural form" (p. 4). Hanna demonstrates television's unique value to public history; her discussions of the medium's relationship to history and historians are some of the most fascinating parts in the book. *The Great War on the Small Screen* is an excellent example of how historians can use television programs to further inform discussions of cultural history.