



S. P. MacKenzie. *Bomber Boys on Screen: RAF Bomber Command in Film and Television Drama.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Illustrations. 216 pp. \$35.95, e-book, ISBN 978-1-350-02487-8.

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During the 1940s, the confluence of film as a cultural medium, flight as a means of transportation, and fighting among the world's great military powers led to the creation of cinema in the Anglo-American world that focused on depicting national war efforts in the Second World War. These films were initially conceived of as propaganda—a word not yet cynically used—in wartime. However, they later became arenas of commemoration, celebration, and condemnation that expanded to smaller screens with the adoption of television in households after the 1950s, the proliferation of home video in the 1970s and 1980s, and the current streaming services that make nearly any film accessible to consumers on ever-smaller screens.

In *Bomber Boys on Screen: RAF Bomber Command in Film and Television Drama*, S. P. MacKenzie charts the portrayals of Britain's Bomber Command on both the big and small screens from the onset of the Second World War to the 2010s. These films became (and remain) a place of conflict over different interpretations of the area bombing campaign conducted by Bomber Command, especially among veterans, who were (and remain) protective of their legacy, and critical filmmakers and scholars, some of whom suggest that the bombings were both ineffective and costly (in both resources and lives). MacKenzie is careful not to declare a

winner, but his study suggests that the diminishing number of veterans will lead to more critical approaches to Bomber Command. He does not, however, anticipate a lack of interest in the Second World War as a topic of debate and believes that the night bombing of Germany will remain a matter of public interest in the wake of Brexit.

MacKenzie's study is divided into seven chapters, each covering a decade, though the final chapter merges the aughts and 2010s. Much of the author's focus is on the 1940s—which runs for 37 of the book's 168 pages of text—and the preceding chapters are shorter. The study can be divided into three primary sections, with the first covering films made during the Second World War that attempted to sanitize the bombing campaigns for domestic (and international) audiences by depicting them as precise and effective. The next three chapters—covering the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s—emphasize the attempts by films and the new medium of television to confront the psychological and destructive impact of Bomber Command's wartime actions, and the final three chapters stress the growing divergences between war veterans and their critics over the Bomber Command's legacy. These narrative threads can be difficult to discern at times, but they are effectively highlighted in the conclusion. While the United

States questions its use of the atomic bomb on Japan, MacKenzie indicates that area bombing, especially of Dresden, haunts Britain's—and to some extent, Canada's—historical memory of the Second World War.

Each chapter follows a similar format: several films and television programs receive ample attention, with their production histories, plots, and receptions—both by the press and general audiences—discussed in detail. The benefit of this approach is that each chapter can be read as an individual essay, and the endnotes are full of useful information for scholars and researchers. MacKenzie has done an admirable job of consulting a wide range of sources across three continents, using materials based in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. This approach is reflected in his chapters on the 1940s and 1950s, where Australian characters are discussed in British films to emphasize the war as a Dominion-wide effort, and in his chapter on the 1990s, which mainly focuses on films and television programs produced in Canada. He also incorporates printed materials, such as comics and novels, while considering statues and other forms of commemoration.

Yet this structure has its limitations and ultimately inhibits the study. Since it marches through the decades, it often reads like a catalogue or an encyclopedia of each film and television program, making it difficult to focus on a specific thread of argumentation. Some of the chapters, such as the one on the 1950s and especially those on the 1980s and 2000s, could have expanded on the political and cultural context instead of briefly mentioning them or setting them aside. For example, a political shift from Labour collectivism to Tory consumerism during the 1950s affecting the tenor of films in this period is identified, but this discussion is limited to one paragraph. There is no mention of Margaret Thatcher, the Falklands War, or Britain's involvement in the Iraqi invasion in 2003. At times, the study can seal off the production of the films and television shows from the

surrounding culture, and it would have been useful to offer some explanation of why Canada becomes an integral battleground for interpreting Bomber Command in the 1990s. It may have been beneficial to have used a more thematic structure, such as focusing on the films as propaganda and celebration in the 1940s and 1950s, the ethical debates from the 1960s onward, the conflicts between veterans and the producers of critical media, and the depictions of class and region on screen. All of these are present throughout the study, but there is not a sustained focus on any aside from the ethical debates and conflicts over Bomber Command's legacy. A more substantial introduction would have helped with the study's framing, especially a literature review of the existing scholarship and some background information on both the film industry and the historical context leading to the creation of the Bomber Command. Readers will need to consult other works, such as James Chapman's *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945* (1998) and Jeffrey Richards's *Age of the Dream Palace: Cinema and Society in 1930s Britain* (1984), to understand the historical background, state of the film industry up to the 1940s, and the academic debates to which MacKenzie is responding.

Despite its limitations, *Bomber Boys on Screen* is an essential resource for scholars of film and depictions of warfare in popular media. General readers may find this work difficult to follow, and MacKenzie assumes his readers enter with substantial amounts of background knowledge, but researchers will find his bibliography immensely useful and some of the questions posed in the study as worthy of continuing pursuit. As future generations revisit the Second World War, consider the impact of aerial power, and contemplate humanity's potential in space, Bomber Command will continue to be an object of scholarly interest. Representations of Bomber Command in video games and board games await a historian.

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