

Counterpoint

“The Valour and the Horror”: *Hypertext as History?*

by HUGH A. TAYLOR

Archivists reared on the written and printed word are now beginning to realize that all media of record must be taken very seriously indeed, especially if they are to be broadcast. Ernie Dick, in his two excellent articles on “The Valour and the Horror” television series,¹ has helped to reveal the implications of documentaries dealing with painful events within the experience of those still living. He focuses on meaning as opposed to information, on impact and context rather than content, both of which have to be taken into consideration when dealing with archival appraisal and ultimate retention.

We are also becoming much more aware of personal tragedy than we used to be; TV more than any other medium has documented its extent around the world, so that, for instance, peace-keeping—both civil and military—is now recognized to be immensely complex and exacting. Ever since Vietnam, the reality of war and its aftermath has to some extent entered the human consciousness as a totally destructive occupation where extraordinary valour and sustained courage have ceased to provide an element of glory, even when the cause is considered just. It has not always been that way. National histories have treated wars not only as an extension of diplomacy, but also as the basis and ground of nationhood. It was sufficient to be victorious whatever the cost. Campaigns were perceived as well or poorly conducted; those who died paid the price together with their families, and generally received gratitude and respect—as well they should have. Those who survived the horror were often at the mercy of hard economic times, and the next generation—as in 1939—were glad of a war that would provide employment, though this was certainly not the only motive for enlisting. What so many combatants and civilians endured in the two world wars has been featured in specialized military historical literature, but for the most part those who survived did not discuss it for the best reasons. Government and people alike preferred to live with the myths created by the nature of war itself, and with the manufacturing of unquestioning assent should war break out again.

Those who produced “The Valour and the Horror” were prepared to look very closely at the experience of those who endured war at its most terrible with all its attendant stress, suffering, heroism, and death—sometimes in the face of incompetence and obstinacy. This standpoint (and it was only one aspect of the war) emphasized the valour of the combatants and the horror of the circumstances, removing all false elements of triumphalism. World War II is likely to be the last to be fought on such a scale by millions of individuals. A nuclear exchange, by technocrats pressing buttons and unleashing mutually assured holocausts, in effect renders global war obsolete, since those who take part will not survive. World War II has thus become a

major, multifaceted, and unique world event challenging the capacity of all information technologies—including and beyond the printed word—to reveal the many painful truths that have remained buried beneath politically correct interpretations appropriate to their day and age.

“Savage Christmas: Hong Kong 1941” was apparently the most generally acceptable in the series, and perhaps the most successful in that the defence of the area was set within the context of the Japanese invasion of China. It graphically illustrated a contempt for the enemy on absurd grounds, arising from stereotypical myths genuinely believed by both sides and propagated in the interest of morale building. The enemy must be seen as less than human and therefore, by implication, as weak opposition. The Hong Kong “Maginot Line” was no more effective than the Great Wall of China in repelling invasion, perhaps because of the complacency that it engendered. The high quality of information from oral interviews and other sources was evident from the start; a personal quote, however, even when kept firmly in context, testified to one personal experience from which generalizations may or may not be appropriate. The dramatized portions of the series will be discussed later. There was clearly no attempt to present a definitive account of the campaign, but only to show that from the decision to send in untrained Canadians to the refusal of Japanese firms to provide any compensation for their slave labour as POWs, those in authority exhibited a callous disregard for human life having everything to do with the myths that war itself creates.

Though there was some lack of context, “Death By Moonlight: Bomber Command” dealt quite well with the argument for precision-bombing of military targets (when technology finally made this possible). The war began with a vastly miscalculated estimation of the effectiveness of bombers to destroy small targets, making their attempts to do so look like indiscriminate destruction. Without a massive offensive, marshalling yards and factory districts could be quickly repaired in Germany by the surrounding civilians and slave labour. Precision-bombing could have made a significant impact from 1943 onwards, but instead both military targets and the surrounding cities were laid waste, culminating in the fire-storm of Dresden, which was devoid of any military significance.² There is no way that aircrews should be brought to account for aspects of the bomber offensive. They had a job to do at great risk to themselves, and up to 5,000 of them fought the Luftwaffe and ran the gauntlet of anti-aircraft fire and searchlights on their way into and out of the target area. German airmen recognized this, while at the same time seeking to down every allied plane they could. The film made this point very well. Such was the nature of the war in the air, which has produced in many not a sense of guilt but rather a deep sadness for the comrades and civilians who suffered and died as a result of war itself.³

The power of the media during World War II, in order to influence hearts and minds, required a series of “media events” that formed at least a part of the purpose. The daily reports of the bomber offensive, when this alone was the only Allied activity in Europe, culminating in the first “1,000 bomber” raid in Cologne, had a considerable effect on readers and listeners of press and radio. To what extent this is also true of the destruction of Caen from the air, is apparently debatable; certainly the deaths of French civilians caught in the crossfire of the German and Allied forces were probably unavoidable, given the nature of the heavy fighting immediately following D-Day, and this is all too familiar in Bosnia today. Prisoners of war are also caught up in conditions of heavy fighting, which render the Geneva Convention virtually inoperable, although this should not be confused with unnecessary, premeditated, and cold-blooded murder of captives. Victors rarely see themselves as guilty of war crimes. Obviously, this again is a very painful issue, as is the whole Verrières Ridge operation at the centre of “In Desperate Battle: Normandy 1944.” Surely this is a microcosm of the lot of the infantry so familiar in World War I, as in fact in all wars bitterly fought. There is a strong compulsion for those in command after repeated attacks to try once more for the breakthrough, since victories sometimes come that way. General Jacques Dextraze spoke about the courage to decide *not* to go in again, which can be a very hard decision to make.

Now for my personal reactions to the three films. I found that, despite their errors—which I cannot comment on, since I am unfamiliar with the sources—they did what their makers set out to do: *reveal* to millions of Canadians aspects of the War that had received little attention from the media, for the reasons discussed above. By extension, the point was made that all war is tragic in the full sense of that word, and (by implication) we should, as a result, seek other solutions to our differences. Grave errors of fact should, of course, be avoided; absolute accuracy in every detail is almost impossible, and indeed is not necessary in order to support the arguments advanced.

The question has been raised whether these films can be considered as popular history. For the great majority, "history" means literate, textual accounts of past events narrated in history books. With the exception of maps, illustrations are something of an afterthought, if used at all. This is not the place to discuss whether history is the product and point of view of the dominant élite, or the lie generally agreed upon, or an account of "what actually happened"—which some believe. I am suggesting that history has, over the centuries, been captured by *writers* of history, whether we like it or not. Whatever the validity of other forms to portray past events in the present may be, they cannot be called "history" and be properly understood—yet they may be even more significant and important for society. Is there a term we can use? I do not at present think so, and I am not prepared to offer one. We must nevertheless examine what "The Valour and the Horror" presents us with in terms of form, because this requires careful study far beyond anything I can attempt.

First, the productions were designed for television, which has a very different effect on the viewer from film viewed on a large screen, in a public auditorium, in an experience shared jointly by "film-goers" (as they used to be called) leaving the privacy of their homes in order to enjoy comedy and tragedy through drama. Dramatic productions of this kind, if they are to draw any kind of audience, must have a strong linear narrative and preferably a catharsis and happy ending. War films, however "realistic," must generally abide by these rules explicitly or implicitly. ("All Quiet on the Western Front" is a major exception, which, on account of its age, appears in parts uncannily like a documentary.)

Television—especially programmes designed specifically for TV—is quite otherwise, and the differences have been discussed at length since the 1960s. It is, I think, generally agreed that the grainy TV image has a way of invading the human psyche to become more demanding and exhausting than a superficial view of the subject would suggest. We know this from the power of commercials to persuade through their (often apparently inane) presentations. It has been said recently that multi-channel remote control has caused us to browse through the programme menu as we would the offerings of a newspaper, and that videocassettes, through the VCR, are replacing books as popular sources of information and entertainment. Those who experienced the series under review, whether directly on TV or through the use of a cassette, were exposed to an intensive assault on their sensibilities probably without precedent in Canadian broadcasting. Each part is made up of a powerful collage of media: music, dramatized sequences, recorded interview, textual records, cartoons, newsreel film, video and film footage (including a feature film), still photographs, maps, diagrams, and documentary art—all of which need to be "read" differently within the context of the whole if their full meaning is to be understood. Dick points out that documentary-makers may use film footage for a predetermined effect that may ignore archival nuances and convey a mixed message. In any case, the cumulative effect of this barrage is so overwhelming that it may cause certain viewers to throw up defences against such a non-linear attack on the carefully prepared positions of a deep-seated point of view opposed to that of the documentaries—and in consequence provoke a counter-attack. This would be particularly true of those who had experienced the events portrayed, who were in fact "there."

For the majority of the four million viewers of the CBC TV presentation, however, the experience must have been rather different. For many, World War II and in particular the authentic experience of the combatants, would have been remote and beyond their horizon of knowledge. Consequently, they approached it with a more open mind and responded positively to what they saw and heard. It must be admitted that the documentary-makers were on this account vulnerable to errors, and I am glad that the controversy brought some such errors to light. The series provided television of a very high standard, however, based on authentic statements and images, and a storyline contributed by historians as perceived (and inevitably simplified in production) by the makers of the series. It resulted in a voice-over commentary supported by a kind of hypertext resource of primary archival material, which critics will argue over for some time to come. That the series stimulated discussion and differences of opinion is as it should be. That members of the Senate should attempt to have the series banned was deplorable. Discourse on the reality of war should continue unfettered if it leads to the rule of the law through the World Court and the United Nations, as a substitute for diplomacy by other means, which this planet can no longer tolerate if life is to survive in its present form.

As for the dramatized sequences which were at the centre of much criticism, they created a popularly acceptable treatment of text and recorded interviews for a very wide audience. There is here an element of fiction, a whiff of the feature film, since the actors in no way resembled the authors and their characterizations were presumably the creation of actors. In the case of the Marshal of the RAF, Sir Arthur ("Bomber") Harris, the effect was disastrous, since his image and personality were well-known to those who served under him, to the public of the period, and through contemporary newsreels. He only appears as a disagreeable "talking head" in order to make controversial statements apparently taken out of context, which unfairly diminishes him, whatever one's views.⁴ Hindsight from a vantage-point far removed from the stress of high command in war can make for some rather self-righteous attitudes.

In general, the actors performed well as the impersonators of servicemen otherwise invisible on paper and magnetic tape. Reviewer Dick, who spend some time directing the Sound Archives Programme in the National Archives of Canada, rightly praised the sensitive use of these sources and discussed some of the problems encountered.

I should like to end with two quotations from Dick's second article which challenge us, as archivists, who must now move in unfamiliar and controversial territory. He urges us to become "media wise and very shrewd in acquiring and appraising the records of television."⁵ Later, when giving his conclusions on the historical understanding of the series, he offers the following advice: "We archivists should neither exploit nor evade potential controversies, but should instead find ways to ensure that the provenancial contexts of archival records are known and understood."⁶ I could not agree more.

Notes

- 1 Ernest J. Dick, "History on Television: A Critical Archival Examination of 'The Valour and the Horror,'" *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), pp. 199-216; and "'The Valour and the Horror' Continued: Do We Still Want Our History on Television?," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), pp. 253-69.
- 2 C.G. "Giff" Gifford, DFC, in his submission to the Senate Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs, of the Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, quoted Albert Speer, Hitler's Minister of War Production, who said of this decision: "Thus the Allies threw away success when it was already in their hands ... Had they continued their attacks [on oil and railways] of March and April [1944] with the same energy, we would quickly have been at our last gasp": Subcommittee Hearing 6.11.1992, [Hansard] vol. 9, p. 109.
- 3 Gifford, who completed forty-nine operations as a navigator on Pathfinders, told how he came to realize that "city blasting" was the official intention when the briefing officer for the Dresden raid remarked, "Well, we have a juicy one tonight, boys," and described how the city was full of refugees. Giff was quite changed by the Dresden experience, and he became very active in the peace movement after the war. In 1982 (with myself and two others) he founded and became the inspiration of Veterans

Against Nuclear Arms (VANA). Later, he became the central figure in the NFB film, "Return to Dresden," where he met survivors of the raid. One member of VANA was a Canadian POW in Dresden at the time of the raid and was lucky to have survived it.

- 4 Gifford described Harris as "an aggressive, tough, blunt, single-minded chief with a great capacity for inspiring loyalty in his associates. Among his gifts was a strong sense of the dramatic which he used effectively, both to boost his crews' morale and to support Bomber Command politically." Harris opposed the creation of the Pathfinder force, which greatly increased the accuracy of bombing. "His strength was his weakness": "Subcommittee Hearing," vol. 9, p. 109.
Gifford's submission, carefully argued from personal experience and with help from historian Max Hastings's *Bomber Command*, is a good example of sympathy towards the film. For Gifford, "The errors and objections in the film are slight compared with the evidence presented for the main point which is that in war, both those in uniform and non-combatants pay the price of the errors, illusions and personal tragedies of political and military chiefs": *Ibid.*, vol. 9, p. 106.
- 5 Dick, "'The Valour and the Horror' Continued," p. 263.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 266.