

MEMORY, TELEVISION AND THE MAKING OF THE BBC'S *THE STORY OF WALES*

Steve Blandford

Cardiff School of Creative & Cultural Industries,
ATRium,
University of South Wales,
Adam Street,
Cardiff,
Wales,
CF24 2FN
sblandfo@glam.ac.uk

Ruth McElroy

Cardiff School of Creative & Cultural Industries,
ATRium,
University of South Wales,
Adam Street,
Cardiff,
Wales,
CF24 2FN
rmcelroy@glam.ac.uk

Abstract: The production of television history programming is a rich site for examining the dynamic relationship between history and memory. This article approaches these dynamics through original, empirical research of a specific case study, BBC Wales' *The Story of Wales* (Green Bay for BBC Wales, 2012). It analyses the commissioning, production and presentation of a landmark national history programme within the specific context of a small nation (Wales) and provides insights into how television intervenes in the construction, revision and remembering of the national past. The role of national histories in the construction of memory and national identity is important at a time when the legitimacy of nations and states is under question and when governmental and political settlements are under construction as is the case in the post-devolutionary United Kingdom.

Keywords: BBC, television history, national memory, *Story of Wales*

1 Debates In The Making Of History For Television

What are the key issues for television programme makers when constructing a national history series? What role do history programmes play in (re) constructing national memory? We explore these questions here through empirical analyses of a specific case study of national television history-making, BBC Wales' *The Story of Wales* (Green Bay, 2012). This series recorded an exceptionally high audience approval rating of 92%, the second highest of the year for any series transmitted on BBC One.¹

This is only one measure of evaluation, of course, but it meant that one essential challenge of the original brief to the company had been met, namely to ensure large audiences for an accessible national history programme. This article seeks to examine some of the important issues for the programme makers in approaching such a task and some of the implications that this might have for the relationship between television and national memory. The mass media is now a powerful space for the preservation of memory and for memory-making and exchange. As Sonja de Leeuw has argued, '[television] productions are bridges between past and present; they help to construct the collective identity of a nation'.²

Our research draws upon a period of non-participant observation of the pre-production stage of this series' development together with semi-structured interviews with key production personnel.³ *The Story of Wales* was a six-part series broadcast in March 2012 in Wales alone, but with subsequent transmission in August/September 2012 on BBC 2 across the whole of the UK network. History documentary-making within the BBC, including its independent production suppliers, is closely tied to the corporation's specific public service ethos which is captured in its stated public purposes that include 'sustaining citizenship and civil society; promoting education and learning; representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities'. This latter purpose has been the subject of substantial public debate in recent years⁴ driven partly by the new constitutional arrangements within the United Kingdom which has seen powers devolved from the UK government at Westminster to national governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Making national history television at the point that the state itself is being re-made poses distinct challenges and opportunities for broadcasters, producers, and historians alike. In modern societies, the media is a privileged repository for history and memory; it is a diverse and ubiquitous place where our sense of the past may be found and inhabited. This is not an inherently new phenomenon as Tom O'Malley argues:

The Victorians' understanding of Oliver Cromwell was forged not only through the work of historians such as S.R. Gardiner, but through the medium of popular newspapers, paintings, fiction, stained glass windows and statues [...] history, since its development as a separate profession, has coexisted with the popularization of the past in a variety of media over which the historian has not, in general, been able to wield much direct influence.⁵

What is new and distinctive, however, is the sheer range of media platforms for not just the transmission of mediated representations of the past but for archiving memory and then both sharing it and making it available for a range of expert and non-expert users.⁶ Technological innovations give rise to new expectations of the availability of the past, as John Ellis argues:

1 For further information see BBC Wales Annual Review at http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/info/sites/management/documents/annualreview_figures_2012.pdf, Accessed 20 May 2013

2 Sonja de Leeuw, 'Television Fiction: A Domain of Memory' in: Erin Bell and Ann Gray, eds., *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 140

3 For series information, see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00mlrq9>, accessed 20 May 2013. A DVD of the series is commercially available. Episodes are available via iPlayer, the BBC's catch-up service. This is accessible only within the UK, so we refer our readers here to YouTube clips of the series. We gratefully acknowledge the Strategic Institutional Partnership award which supported our work at Green Bay.

4 See, for example, 'The BBC Trust Impartiality Report: BBC Network News and Current Affairs Coverage of the Four UK Nations', 2008, http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/impartiality/uk_nations_impartiality.pdf, accessed 20 May 2013 and (2010) 'Screening the Nation: Wales and Landmark Television', 2010, <http://culture.research.glam.ac.uk/screeningthenation/>, accessed 20 May 2013.

5 Tom O'Malley, 'Introduction', *Media History*, 13, 2, 2007, p.121-126

6 The BBC's position as both an archive and archivist of national history is well documented in James Bennett, 'Interfacing the Nation: Remediating Public Service Broadcasting in the Digital Television Age', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14, 3, p.277-294

Every TV viewer is used to storing and retrieving programmes at home [...] This is generating an increasing presumption that 'old stuff is available somewhere'. This in turn provokes a level of (normally unrequited) desire to see or to 'get hold of' that material once it is called back to mind. Entire TV channels are built on the assumption that archival material can find an audience well after its original broadcast. DVD releases of old shows continue to grow.⁷

Not all series make it to DVD; there are noticeable exclusions from this particular form of television memory-making. Regional programming (including that made in the UK nations) geared as it often is to smaller audiences, is particularly susceptible to being forgotten because it is not deemed economically efficient to invest in its continued availability. Yet in the 'Landmark Series – History of Wales' commissioning call issued by BBC Cymru Wales in May 2011, it was striking how the broadcaster called upon pitching production companies to remember television programmes from the recent Welsh past even though they are not publically available in their entirety nor can they be purchased on DVD:

BBC Wales is seeking to commission a landmark series on the History of Wales, provisionally scheduled for BBC One Wales in peak time in the first few months of 2012.

There hasn't been a major History of Wales television series for over twenty five years and there have been many important developments in the story of our nation since then.

In June 2011, our research centre⁸ convened a symposium⁹ of television commissioners, producers, media scholars and historians to discuss the challenges of making a new series of the nation's history. Almost all participants, regardless of profession, remembered the two key programmes: *Wales? Wales!* (BBC, 1984) and *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* (HTV/Channel 4, 1985) both of which can be said to have had a role in shaping the contemporary landscape of television history programme-making in Wales.

Video 1.

Unlike *Wales? Wales!*, *Dragon* was transmitted UK-wide by Channel 4 so its reach was not limited to Wales alone. This was, and is, quite exceptional. More commonly, programmes made about the regions and nations are either first transmitted in those regions and nations or else are transmitted solely within them by the BBC, the UK's largest public service broadcaster. Channel 4, just 3 years old at the point of *Dragon*'s transmission, was ambitious in assuming that a series about the history of one of the UK's four nations could be justified by a UK-wide broadcaster. Furthermore, the very style of the series was ambitious and it is for this that it is often remembered. As John Corner explains:

This series on the history of Wales [...] stands as a landmark in the styling of the past for television. It was most notable for the ambitious way in which it directly engages with the nature of history as contentious knowledge, subject to variations in interpretative framework and selected detail....¹⁰

Video 2.

7 John Ellis, 'Why Digitise Historical Television?', *VIEW Journal of European History and Culture*, 1, 1, 2012, URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-112800

8 [The Centre for the Study of Media and Culture in Small Nations at the University of Glamorgan](http://culture.research.glam.ac.uk/bbchistorywales/)

9 For more information on the event, see <http://culture.research.glam.ac.uk/bbchistorywales/>, accessed 20 May 2013

10 John Corner, 'Once Upon a Time...Visual Design and Documentary Openings', in: Erin Bell and Ann Gray, eds. *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p. 22

2 Television Producers And Their Memories

Colin Thomas, one of the attendees at our symposium had particular cause to remember *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* because he was series director. He emphasised the importance of programme-makers engaging with historiography noting how, when making *Dragon*, he had asked the question 'What is history?' and made sure that debates about that issue were reflected in every episode of the series. The text of BBC Wales' commission call points to how powerful and memorable was the dramatic historiographic debate in *Dragon* when it demands that all pitches 'should include, where necessary, differing interpretations of the history of Wales'. In doing so, it also explicitly acknowledges the contingency of a nation's history.

We will return to the narrative of national history in the commissioned series later in this essay. For now, we note how both industry and academic participants at our symposium assumed that for those viewers who had been watching television in the mid 1980s, *Wales? Wales!* and *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* would cast a long shadow as they watched the new series being commissioned, aided perhaps by the educational materials that circulated, particularly in relation to *Dragon*. Empirical audience research alone can provide evidence of whether this working assumption is true. However, it is precisely as a shared understanding of a national media history that this assumption reveals to us how forcefully television history's own past informs contemporary producers' creative practices. Even when the makers of history programmes are not themselves historians (few are), they both bring to history programme-making their own sense of the past, including how it has previously been presented for television, and also they bring their own aspirations for making something that will matter and be memorable for the audiences they aim to educate and entertain. This historical, mediated consciousness merits attention because much of the literature on television history programming works from the premise that 'television' and 'history' are opposite, even antithetical, domains. Brian Winston puts this succinctly when he says, 'the problem with televising history is that it is television first and history second. It is television that demands compression, which is necessitated by assumed audience tolerance and an inexorably intertwined need for illustration, for images television's visual imperative'.¹¹

Analysis of the making of a national television history series from commission to transmission allows insight into the process by which new and revised narratives of nation are produced by people who have both personal and professional commitments to the project. Adopting such a holistic approach allows us to understand better the particular constraints, investments, and desires that producers, commissioners, professional historians and audiences bring to such narratives.

3 Presenting National History For Television

As already indicated through the reference to the programme's popular success, central to the commissioning and production of *The Story of Wales* was its scheduling by BBC Cymru Wales. Even in an age where viewing is becoming increasingly fragmented through the time-shifting devices alluded to by Ellis above, the original broadcast slot retains considerable significance for producers and broadcasters. In the planning meetings we observed, the invocation to 'remember that it is 9pm on BBC One' was frequently repeated. This mantra of 'the BBC One 9pm audience' evidences the kind of tacit understandings that shape media production cultures and the shared values and understandings of those who work within them.¹² However it would be wrong to think that the producers considered the question of broad appeal in any crude sense. This point matters because, as Bell and Gray argue, one of the most powerful critiques made of television history programmes is that 'the pressures to produce watchable television which will attract a reasonably sized audience, often within limited budgets, militate against the kind of history programming of which many historians would approve'.¹³

¹¹ Brian Winston, 'Combating "A Message Without a Code": Writing the "History" Documentary', in: Erin Bell and Ann Gray, eds., *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010, p.45

¹² See John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, Duke University Press, 2008

¹³ Erin Bell and Ann Gray, 'History on Television: Charisma, narrative and knowledge', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 1, p. 117

What then were the key mechanisms through which the producers sought to connect with as large a section of its popular audience as possible? Firstly, the choice of presenter was crucial and, as we learnt, the production schedule frequently made difficult compromises in order to accommodate its central figure, Huw Edwards. Edwards is one of BBC's highest profile presenters. He anchors the main BBC One evening news programme and is therefore recognisable to the majority of the UK audience. The fact that he is also Welsh makes Edwards something of an iconic figure in Wales, a nation that is historically sensitive to its marginality in terms of mainstream television representation. The presence of a Welsh accent on the main BBC One UK news programme is of no little significance and made Edwards an obvious choice to present *The Story of Wales* should he be available.

Video 3.

BBC Cymru Wales' decision to have Edwards present the series was integral to its strategic aim of connecting with the BBC One audience, familiar as it would be with such a figure, one who possessed a 'natural' authority and trustworthiness from reading the news. In addition Edwards has taken on a status within the British broadcasting landscape that has tended to endow him with similar qualities around the guardianship of national celebration and memory that have long been the property of the Dimpleby family.¹⁴ Edwards was, for example, one of the central voices in the BBC's coverage of both the marriage of Prince William, heir to the British throne, and of the Queen of England's diamond jubilee celebrations in 2011 and 2012 respectively. Edwards has thus become one of the key establishment voices of the wider British nation. Crucially, though, he also carries another set of associations that are more specific to Wales and to the Welsh audience. One of these is the fact that he is a Welsh speaker.¹⁵ *The Story of Wales* is an English-language programme but it draws heavily on the credible narration of a Welsh past that involves an engagement with the process by which Wales became a colonised¹⁶ English-speaking nation. Moreover, Edwards' own family history matters here. His late father, Hywel Teifi Edwards, was an academic who played a significant part in constructing the recent cultural history of Wales. His death in 2010 played a part in Edwards' desire to think seriously about the legacy of *The Story of Wales* and the role it would come to play in the contemporary view of Welsh history. A non-expert, in the sense of not being a historian, Huw Edwards nonetheless brings to *The Story of Wales* particularly rich symbolic and cultural capital.

4 Reconstructing The Past: How Producers Negotiate Televisual Techniques

A strong theme in the pre-production meetings that we observed was the role to be played by both reconstructions using actors and by computer generated images (CGI). Debra Beattie argues that 're-enactments are necessary risks in producing history documentaries.'¹⁷ For the producers of *The Story of Wales*, televisual reconstructions offered both risks (the danger of looking cheap or amateurishly theatrical) and opportunities. Specifically they allow the story-arc to unfold before the viewers' eyes in ways that establish an immediate affinity with the history they see on screen. In a survey of the increased consumption of television concerned with 'heritage' Angela Piccini asserts that: 'viewers want the people putting back into the past, and a human story to bring the past to life . . . the immediacy of the spectacle . . . makes heritage something to welcome into their living rooms.'¹⁸

For the makers of *The Story of Wales* the challenge of Piccini's assertion was particularly acute. Not only were they tasked with making a history programme for a prime-time audience as discussed above, they were also faced with the difficulty of 'putting people back into the past' over a time frame in which credible evidence about the material

14 David and Jonathan Dimpleby are among the best known faces in television news and current affairs. David in particular has historically been a key figure in the coverage of UK general elections and important state occasions. In the latter respect he followed in his father Richard's footsteps.

15 According to the 2001 census, just over 20% of the population of Wales is able to speak Welsh. The language is an important element in debates about Welsh identity.

16 There are extensive historical debates on Wales' status as a colony. See Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: the Celtic Fringe in British national Development, 1536-1966*, Routledge, 1975, and Jane Aaron and Chris Williams, eds., *Postcolonial Wales*, University of Wales Press, 2005

17 Debra Beattie, 'Documentary Expression Online', *Studies in Documentary Film*, 2, 1, 2008, p.62

18 Angela Piccini 'Survey of Heritage Television Viewing 2005-6', 2008, http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/eh_tvcounts_report_final.pdf, accessed 20 May 2013

ordinariness of day-to-day life is very scarce indeed. This challenge is especially striking in the series' opening episode where the producers chose to focus on the 34,000 year-old skeletal remains of the so-called Red Lady of Paviland, the oldest modern human skeleton, found in Britain in 1823 by William Buckland.

[Video 4](#). (see specifically 1:40-5:59)

The Red Lady does important symbolic and narrative work for the series. By taking us to the cave where the remains were found *The Story of Wales* instantly starts to feel epic in its historical sweep. As Huw Edwards says in the programme's first moments (and thereafter in the introduction to all six episodes) 'this is a story that has been 30,000 years in the making'. This is not, in other words, a history of a 'new' nation but rather one that reaches back into the very beginning of what is known about human beings.

The producers were determined to make the sequence around Paviland the springboard for the series because of its powerful symbolic value in re-shaping our sense of pre-history, but the question was how to present this startling evidence in television terms, when all that really remains of the burial site is a less than remarkable cave on the Gower peninsula in the west of Wales. For much of the series a key representational strategy is to have Edwards encounter key objects from Welsh history and help to convey their true significance through his own sense of wonder and respect. In the case of Paviland this is difficult because the cave itself is not especially visually arresting and the bones are long gone to museums (English ones, but that is another story). We are therefore shown a reconstruction of this first known European burial. As is evident from the clip above, the actors are held in close-up, anxious, probably grieving, whilst objects are buried with the corpse. The latter is sprinkled with red ochre, a pigment that will stain the bones and which gave rise to the epithet 'Red Lady'.¹⁹ This is the 'Stone Age' being reconstructed by actors and the detail in the mise-en-scène is guesswork to some extent, but that is not the point as Edwards is about to make clear: 'Wales has always been home to people who take their chances at the cutting edge of change. People who are open to new ideas and find ways to move forward, without forgetting to honour those who have gone before.' This becomes the series' keynote and the use of actors is central to it being established, as Edwards goes on to say, 'The story of Wales is the experience of each and every one of us in Wales, of anyone who has ever lived in this country. From the Red Lady of Paviland buried in this cave to you and me today'. Without the actors, the reasoning goes, the audience will find it difficult to 'connect' or, as one of the production team put it: 'It's not enough [the facts and the scenery] because [...] we need to get that dynamic and to draw the BBC One audience in, in a way that shows it being very relevant to their lives now.'

5 Historical Revelation: Making A Spectacle Of The Past

Ian Kershaw suggests that 'the plasticity and immediacy of the visual images' in television history programming, 'make an impact more vivid than that of even the most majestic of prose passages.'²⁰ One answer to the problem of how to make complex historical processes (and competing interpretations of them) more televisual, is to use historical artefacts. Such objects were used as arresting visual material that was brought to life or dramatised through Edwards' encounter with them. It is this combination of both visual and affective appeal which makes the third episode of the series, focussed on the Tudor dynasty (1485-1603), so striking.

The episode deals with the ascendancy of Henry Tudor to the English throne (as Henry VII) and entails Edwards encouraging the audience to pause a little with him and consider just how Welsh Henry Tudor was. 'There are those all over Wales who are happy to portray the Tudor triumph at Bosworth as a Welsh triumph' he says, but goes on to raise key questions about Henry's Welshness, concluding that his ascendancy 'is not some great act of liberation for the Welsh people. In effect he becomes just another English king.' Welshness appears contestable and ethereal – it may appear and disappear in *The Story of Wales*.

¹⁹ The Red Lady of Paviland is actually male but is still named thus, though the original error has long since been rectified in historical records.

²⁰ Ian Kershaw, 'The Past on the Box: Strengths and Weaknesses', in: David Cannadine, eds., *History and the Media*, 2007, Palgrave, p.118-123

Video 5. (see specifically 9:18-18:13)

Such contingency shifts within just a few minutes, however, when we find Edwards sitting in a darkened room wearing white gloves to protect the ancient manuscript that lies in front of him. This is the first Act of Union, dating from 1536, which sets out the conditions of the union (or annexation) between Wales and England. Edwards is visibly moved in the encounter with the materiality of history, all the more so when he announces that this is the first time for the document to be 'on Welsh soil'. This manuscript, he tells us, is the 'most important document in the entire story of Wales' not least given its harsh prohibition of the Welsh language for anyone in positions of power. The moment successfully conveys the significance of the manuscript for anyone who has defined themselves as Welsh right up until the present day. It harnesses the power of historical document - its very fabric and materiality - to a highly staged, affective encounter that was itself carefully managed to ensure that this establishment figure expressed wonder but not political critique at this highly charged piece of national legislation. Whilst *The Story of Wales* does not aim for the formal radicalism of *The Dragon Has Two Tongues*, it does offer some sense of the contested nature of both history and collective national memory, and the story of Henry Tudor is just one example. Even at the episode's end, Edward's offers us more questions through the intimacy of objects: the house on Anglesey from where Henry Tudor's ancestors came, the bed of one of Henry's allies on which is carved the story of battles and the royal crests and their relationship to how central Wales was to Henry's thinking. Such an approach is of particular significance in a televisual landscape in which, Bell and Gray suggest, programmes 'rarely purport to be anything other than authoritative.'²¹

Though such approaches to history and memory are not unique to BBC Cymru Wales, it has become particularly well-embedded in this part of the organisation. Speaking at a symposium examining the approach of another BBC Cymru Wales history series, *Coal House*, Clare Hudson, then Head of English Language Programmes commented:

...history has been a genre that has always been very successful on BBC Wales and there's always been a huge interest in history... but rather limited in the sense that they would sit there as quite traditional programmes...skewed slightly to middle-class people, and not really cutting through to younger audiences and audiences across Wales. ... in our more cynical moments we'd say do we really want another series of men going round pointing at things? ²²

Whilst in *The Story of Wales* Huw Edwards does indeed point at a number of things, there is also the constant sense of a determination to do more than that, to involve the audience in the power of the objects that Edwards encounters and to use that power not only to explore the narrative of Welsh history, but to raise questions as to its construction. If the 1536 Act of Union is the most emotionally charged object in the series, then one of the most visually potent is the extraordinary Mold Cape fashioned from a gold ingot and dating from 1900-1600 BC.

Video 6. (see specifically 16.54-17:42)

As is evident here, the camera work and lighting hold up the object to the audience for spectatorial wonder as Edwards asserts that 'North Wales has riches to rival the Pharaohs', an opening up of a revisionist line of Welsh history that resonates throughout the series. Undoubtedly there is something of the sound bite about such an assertion but, coupled with the image of the cape itself on our screen, it does much to reveal the importance of the wealth created by trade from the copper mines underneath the Great Orme at Llandudno four millennia before the Romans came to Britain. If the televisual style of the series makes such a perspective on the Welsh past *seen* and known, it also stems from the personal encounter one of the series' directors had with the object itself:

I've recently been in the British Museum to see the Mold Cape and I am overwhelmed by this notion that this is an object that betokens as much wealth as Egypt had in 1900 BC. The notion that North Wales was

21 Erin Bell and Ann Gray, 'History on Television: Charisma, narrative and knowledge', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10, 1, p. 116

22 Peter Jachimiak and Ruth McElroy, eds., 'Coal House: Fictions of the Past on the Small Screen', *Critical Studies in Television*, 3, 2, p.83

as wealthy as Egypt in 1900 BC is one of the series' gobsmacking moments, and the Mold Cape is the gobsmacking Bronze Age object in the whole of Britain.

6 Conclusion

This article has drawn upon existing work on history, television, and memory, together with non-participant observation of production planning (for which they would like to thank the BBC and Green Bay Media), to tease out some of the complex forces at play in the construction of a national history. This series comes at a particular historical moment when Wales has undergone significant political changes to the story it tells of itself and its relations to the United Kingdom and the rest of the world. It is this story of change, the development of a more confident and dynamic nation that structures the narrative discourse of the series, as one of the series' directors put it:

Our big theme is seeing the Welsh as engaged, as up and at it, as internationally connected, as changing, as on the move. That's been our big theme, that's how we sold this series originally.

As we have already mentioned the programme was highly successful in terms of audience approval. In the longer term, it will be fascinating to see just how memorable the series proves to be in comparison with the predecessors discussed above and the kind of relationship with a wider audience that the programme makers managed to achieve in comparison with programmes such as *The Dragon Has Two Tongues* which we discussed above.

Biography

Steve Blandford is Professor of Theatre, Film and Television and Glamorgan and Director of the Centre for the Study of Media and Culture in Small Nations, University of South Wales. He has recently completed an edited collection on *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations* (Intellect, 2012) and a critical study of the television writer, *Jimmy McGovern* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

Dr Ruth McElroy is Reader in Media and Cultural Studies, and Co-Director of the Centre for Gender Studies in Wales, University of South Wales. She co-edited *Life on Mars: From Manchester to New York* (University of Wales Press, 2012) with Stephen Lacey and has published on television in journals such as *Critical Studies in Television*, *Media History*, *Television and New Media*, and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*