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Matthew's Legs and Thomas's Hand:
Watching *Downton Abbey* as a First World War Historian

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Abstract: From its first series in 2010, the ITV television drama *Downton Abbey* laid claim to representing early twentieth-century British society with great historical accuracy while being lambasted by critics for presenting a sanitized version of modern British social history. This article looks at how the programme was drawn, over the course of its broadcast between 2010 and 2015, into a wider discussion of the representation and commemoration of the First World War and debates about accuracy and authenticity in fictional depictions of the war which date back at least to 1915. Locating the discussion in the historiography of the cultural commemoration of the war in Britain, it will examine three particular military medical storylines - Matthew's paralysis, Thomas's self-mutilation of his hand, and the servants' reactions to Archie's psychological trauma - to examine how the drama reflects both the historic reality of the war's impact and the myths of war experience which have developed within British culture over the past century. In doing so, it will argue that *Downton* demonstrates both the advantages and drawbacks of invoking historical accuracy and authenticity to locate representations within historic narratives of the First World War in Britain.

Keywords: authenticity in historical drama; *Downton Abbey*; representation of First World War; history and memory

From its first series in 2010, the ITV television drama *Downton Abbey* (2010-15) laid claim to representing early twentieth-century British society with great historical accuracy. However, despite the claims of its creator, Julian Fellowes, and historical advisor, Alastair Bruce, it was lambasted for presenting a sanitized version of modern British social history, while also being criticized for plot lines which were deemed far-fetched and melodramatic. *Downton* is by no means alone in begging the question, 'Does historical accuracy really matter in period dramas?' However, the timing of the broadcast of the programme in Britain between 2010 and 2015, combined with the historic period which it covers, drew it into a wider discussion of the representation and commemoration of the First World War and its aftermath in British popular culture. The consistent use of the war as framing device for the drama locates it in debates about accuracy and authenticity in fictional depictions of the war which date back at least to 1915.

In September 2011, shortly after the first episode of the second series of *Downton Abbey* was broadcast on ITV in Britain, I posted a warning on Facebook that I was 'liable to spend the next couple of months grumbling about Downton Abbey, starting with the tactical error of setting the series in 1916, thereby forcing characters to say all sets [*sic*] of things that would have been a year out of date' (Meyer 2011). Over the course of the series, I would indeed post erratically, commenting on everything from the inappropriateness of the way Lady Sybil (Jessica Brown Finlay), while in nurse's uniform, addressed a medical officer who was her military, if not social, superior, to the plagiarism of plot points from interwar middlebrow fiction and detective novels. I would later go on to write a number of blog posts about the series and its representations of war, particularly in relation to other dramas produced by British television as part of the First World War centenary.[1]

Social media and accessible blog sites have enabled me, as a social and cultural historian of the First World War in Britain, to engage critically with popular cultural

representations during the centenary period in a far less formal way than previous generations of scholars. The questions that I was primarily engaging with in my commentary on *Downton*, however, have long been articulated by such scholars, namely who has the authority to represent the war, particularly in cases where such representations are fictional, and, by extension, what elements mark such fictional representations as authentic. From the critiques of the 'war books boom' in the 1930s through debates over retrospective representations in the mid-twentieth century to contemporary criticisms of literary, filmic and televisual output on social media, questions of authority and authenticity have profoundly shaped both popular and academic responses to cultural representations of the war in Britain.

Through such debates, a robust historiographic discussion has developed around which individuals and types of source material have the requisite authenticity to authoritatively commemorate the war. Most commonly articulated as the 'two Western fronts' debate, this has developed

> in the last quarter of the 20th Century into two distinct views … of the Western Front and its experience for the British. One view, which is based chiefly on analysis of cultural artefacts and literature, tends to support the stereotype of the Western Front which is manifest in late 20th Century popular culture, and which is also still evoked by more traditionalist British military historians. The other view … is based on extensive research into the political and military history of the Western Front … and questions many of the assumptions of this stereotype. (Badsey 2001: 113)

Both these approaches have, during the course of the debate, laid claim to authority for their particular methodologies, shaping the historiography of the memory and the cultural legacy of the war in the process. In considering *Downton Abbey* in this context, this article argues that questions of authority and authenticity remain as important to our understanding of

contemporary televisual dramatizations of the war as they do to interpretations of historic texts. Locating the discussion in the historiography of the cultural commemoration of the war in Britain, I examine three particular military medical storylines, Matthew's paralysis, Thomas's self-mutilation of his hand, and the servants' reactions to Archie's psychological trauma, to explore how the drama reflects both the historic reality of the war's impact and the myths of war experience which have developed within British culture over the past century. In doing so, I will argue that *Downton* demonstrates both the advantages and drawbacks of invoking historical accuracy and authenticity to locate representations within historic narratives of the First World War in Britain.

Authority and the memory of the First World War

Questions of authenticity in the remembering and representation of historical events on television are not, of course, confined to representations of the First World War. Indeed, they appear to have increasingly become part of the public discussion of most historical dramas, whether written as film, television or literature. Hilary Mantel recently reflected on precisely these questions in relation to *Wolf Hall*, both her novel (2009) and the television adaptation (BBC2, 2015), in her 2017 Reith Lecture series (BBC, Radio 4), making the case for the value of imaginative engagement with the past as a way of accessing 'emotional history', a version of the past which goes beyond representations relying solely on historically accurate details. Debates over *Jamestown* (Sky 1, 2017-18) have, inversely, articulated criticism about the extent to which historical dramas impose modern sensibilities upon the historic past. Responses to such criticisms have included analyses of the ways in which popular understandings of the past may occlude its actual nuance and diversity (Lawson 2017; Cutterham 2017).

Nor is it only retrospective fictions which give rise to questions of authorial authority and the authenticity of representations. In relation to the First World War, the question of

who has the right to represent the conflict and claim authenticity for particular narratives based on the perceived authority of the author/creator, dates back to the war itself. A review of 'Sapper's' short fiction collection *Men, Women and Guns*, published by Hodder & Stoughton in 1915, argued that

> it is one thing to write from the heart and actuality of war, and another to write from outside. "Sapper" had been in it in every sense. He has been with his men, and can describe every detail. But he can do more than this. He has read their hearts deeply (Clear 1915).

The Spectator similarly wrote of *No Man's Land* (1917):

> The war correspondents give us selected facts, anecdotes, and topography. "Sapper" prefers to present what he knows in the guise of fiction, and yet he often seems to come nearer the truth than the precise reporter with his field-glasses and his notebook. (*The Spectator* 1917: 169)

By contrast, after the war, Cyril Falls (1930) focussed his critique of the literature of futility that emerged during the late 1920s on the accuracy of the depictions of the war. In 'telling the story of the war not in the traditional way … but through the stories of individuals, and obscure ones at that' (Hynes 1990: 455), Falls argued that the writers of often semi-fictional memoirs and entirely fictional novels of futility, which dominated the 'war books boom' of the late 1920s and early 1930s, distorted the memory of the war

> by closing up scenes and events which in themselves may be true. Every sector becomes a bad one, every working-party is shot to pieces; if a man is killed or wounded his brains or his entrails always protrude from his body; no one ever seems to have a rest. (1930: x-xi).

Yet both the positive assessment of war-time fiction and the negative assessment of post-war memoirs built on the same assumption: 'About war, men who were there make absolute

claims for their authority…: war cannot be comprehended at second-hand…; it is not accessible to analogy or logic.' (Hynes 1997: 1).

As representations of the First World War in British culture moved from experience-based narratives towards entirely imagined depictions as the war moved out of living memory, contested claims to the authority of witness became ever more intense. The 1960s saw both the production of fictional representations such as *Oh! What a Lovely War* (Littlewood 1963), devised by artists with no personal memory of the war, and a rise in the number of memoirs published by ex-servicemen:

> Across Britain, the generation of men who had fought the First World War reached an age where they retired from their jobs; in practical terms, this gave them more time to write their memoirs. Being older meant that there was a social expectation that they would remember in public: it had become their role to tell stories about the past. (Todman 2005: 192-3)

These books, like those of the interwar period, reflected a range of experiences and attitudes towards the war. They all, however, continued to draw on the authority of (remembered) first-hand experience and the significance of the eyewitness to war to justify their perspective.

Authority and the First World War on television

Similar claims to authority were deployed in the representation of war in other media in the 1960s, most notably in the emerging medium of television. The documentary *The Great War* (BBC 1, 1964) used a combination of archive footage and eye-witness accounts to lay claim to 'realism' and 'authenticity' of representation. While historians have demonstrated how the show's creators used words and images to structure a coherent narrative which supported dominant popular understandings of the war (Todman 2005; Danchev 1991), the strategy was

nonetheless effective, with at least one viewer identifying the film 'as being the visual record of what *actually* happened.' (Quoted in Todman 2005: 34).

More problematic, as time went on, were the number of fictional dramas which depicted the war, particularly those produced in the 1980s. Some programmes, such as *The Monocled Mutineer* (BBC 1, 1986) which found itself at the centre of political debates over its historical accuracy (Hanna 2009: 116-24), were directly implicated in arguments over the authenticity of their representation of the war at the time of broadcast. Others, such as the final series of *Blackadder* (BBC 1, 1989), would become increasingly central to such discussions as they became absorbed into longer-term cultural commemorations of the war. In 2014, for example, the UK education secretary, Michael Gove, attacked the use of *Blackadder* as a teaching tool in the classroom for feeding a 'myth' of the First World War as a 'misbegotten shambles', rather than portraying the conflict as a 'just war'. (Shipman 2014).[2] At the heart of the debates around both dramas, however, lies the question of whether perceived distortions of historical accuracy – be it the invention of specific incidents or the exaggeration of particular narratives for comic or dramatic effect – is justified in the pursuit of a 'greater truth' (Hanna 2009: 117).

The Monocled Mutineer was a one-off drama set in wartime. The underlying premise of the *Blackadder* series, the recurrence of a set of archetypes across four distinct eras of British history, isolates *Blackadder Goes Forth* as a narrative from the three seasons which preceded it. The fourth season of *Upstairs, Downstairs* (LWT, 1974), however, took a different approach by integrating a season set against the background of the war into a longer dramatic narrative of the Bellamy family and their servants across five seasons, covering a total period of 27 years (1903-1930). As Hanna points out, this approach 'did not set out to challenge the conflict's memory in 1970s Britain', but '[i]t is also clear that the writers and actors involved in the making of *Upstairs, Downstairs* series 4 did feel that they had to do

justice to the period' (2009: 129). By reinforcing dominant historical narratives through the inclusion of plot lines on war enthusiasm, shell shock and courts martial in relation to fictional characters who were already familiar to many viewers from previous seasons, the programme sought to lay claim to authenticity at both historical and dramatic levels. As the actress Meg Wyn Owen commented, the season 'gave people, the viewer, . . . new ideas about what happened without ever lecturing them' (quoted in Hanna 2009, 127). With dramatic authority already established by viewers' loyalty to the characters, authenticity had to be positioned between historical fact and dramatic verisimilitude.

Downton Abbey: *accuracy v. authenticity*

Season Two of *Downton Abbey*, which covered the period 1916-19, clearly sought to work within this narrative tradition.[3] Season One, which used the sinking of the *Titanic* as both a backdrop and a plot device, had already drawn attention to what the programme makers claimed to be unusually high levels of historical accuracy in its representation of the era. Alastair Bruce, Royal Herald at the College of Arms, gave a number of interviews about his work as 'historical advisor', providing details of correct protocol, dress, posture, decoration and vocabulary. Indeed, so much attention was paid to these details that 'Asparagusgate', an incident in filming involving a misunderstanding of how the upper classes would eat different types of vegetables, became a significant item of news in the British tabloid press. (Millar 2011). Julian Fellowes, the programme's creator, meanwhile, fiercely defended himself against criticism that the death of Kemal Pamuk in Lady Mary's bed was anachronistic and salacious by claiming that it was based on a true story of a great aunt of a friend of his. (Bloxham 2011).

Despite such claims, *Downton* has long been dogged by accusations of historical inaccuracy, with A.N. Wilson most notably declaring the programme 'sheer fantasy and a sanitised version of the past' (quoted in Singh 2011). Bruce himself pointed out:

> I am the historical adviser and the emphasis I have to remember is on the second word. … We're making something to entertain so if it gets too laborious … then a decision has to be taken to entertain first and put everything else to one side. (Quoted in Wyllie 2011).

Bruce points to the balance that all historical dramas seek to strike between perceived accuracy of detail and what might be termed the emotional truths of well-constructed drama, a tension which has shaped cultural representations of the war from 1914 onwards.

It is worth exploring these tensions in more depth in the case of *Downton* not only because of the programme's immense popularity but also because of the place it occupies within the trajectory of cultural commemorations of the First World War in Britain. This place is not necessarily obvious. Like *Upstairs, Downstairs*, only one of *Downton*'s six seasons was actually set in the war years. Unlike *Upstairs, Downstairs*, that season did not coincide directly with an anniversary year, falling instead in 2012, two years before the start of official commemorations. Yet the entire series can be seen to be framed by the war and historical understandings of it as an event which profoundly shaped British culture and society. Season One ends with the announcement of the outbreak of the war, and the repercussions of the conflict are still being explicitly felt in Season Five, set in 1924 and broadcast in 2014. Season Six is less explicit, but the war remains a theme, with Daisy ultimately returning to the farm that she will inherit through her short war-time marriage to William. Additionally, the fact that *Downton's* broadcast between 2010 and 2015 overlapped with the centenary years meant that it was often compared to one-off period dramas, such as *The Crimson Field* (2014) and Tom Stoppard's adaptation of *Parade's End* (2014), broadcast as part of the BBC's official commemorative programming. (Leeds 2015; Gilbert 2012).

Accuracy, authenticity and medical plot lines in Downton

With the war as a recurring framing device, *Downton* consistently attempted to position itself as an authentic representation of the conflict both emotionally and historically. Three narrative strands specifically related to the war years – a major and much discussed plot line, a more minor device which raises issues of continuity as much as plot, and a season-long theme – demonstrate, however, that its success in doing so varied. Dominant contemporary myths of the war were reinforced more often than authentic resonances were depicted. The programme's ability to locate itself in the cultural trajectory of representations of the war nonetheless enables greater understanding of how myths of the war, defined by Samuel Hynes as 'not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative inversion of it, the story of the war that has evolved, and has come to be accepted as true' (1990: xi) interact with historical details to shape popular perceptions of representations of the conflict as authentic.

The major plot line involves Matthew Crawley's (Dan Stevens) paralysis and recovery in Season Two. At the start of the series, dated as November 1916, Matthew is serving as an officer in the final days of the Battle of the Somme. The season, which covers the second longest time frame of the series, then moves swiftly through 1917 in two episodes, with Matthew returning twice to England, first on leave and then to contribute to a recruitment drive.[4] It is not until Episode Five, set in mid-1918, that Matthew is wounded, suffering spinal paralysis. This apparently leaves him impotent, a key plot point in a series centring on the inheritance of a landed estate, and one which bears striking resemblance to the plot of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928). He returns to the Abbey, where he is cared for by Lady Mary for an episode before, in Episode Seven, beginning to feel a 'tingling' in his legs. At the culmination of the episode, his fiancée, Lavinia Swire, trips while carrying a heavy tray and Matthew leaps to his feet to rescue her, paralysed no longer.

There was a good deal of comment about this episode when first broadcast, most of it sceptical. Viv Groskop (2011) described Matthew's recovery as 'the Downton equivalent of

Bobby Ewing in the shower in Dallas,' while the *Huffington Post* called the sequence 'a pool of 70-year-old soap opera tropes' (Tom & Lorenzo 2012). In fact, the themes of inheritance, loss due to medical illness and miraculous recovery are not only those of soap opera but also of melodrama, a genre associated with the theatre and literature of the nineteenth century (Hays and Nickolopolou 1999). By the end of the First World War, melodrama was a central element of the middlebrow literature which formed a large part of the commemorative cultural practice in Britain in the interwar period (Bracco 1993).

The significance of this can be seen in the direct comparison to be drawn between Matthew's miraculous recovery and that of Alex St. George, the hero of Warwick Deeping's best-selling novel, *Kitty* (1927). Buried by a wall in France, Alex's trauma initially manifests itself as infantile regression, until a picture falling off the wall in his nursery, where his overbearing mother has kept him imprisoned through her devoted care, shocks him into partial recovery. He continues, however, to suffer from hysterical paralysis of his legs and is only cured when he is forcibly removed from his mother's care by his wife, Kitty, and required to help her earn a living running a tea room by a river. At the novel's climax, Kitty stages an accident on the river and Alex leaps from his wheelchair to save her from drowning, demonstrating his ability to move his legs when he fully wills to do so (Deeping 1927: 368-9). In *Downton* Matthew's injury is attributed to the physical bruising of his spinal column, side-stepping direct engagement with the issues of psychological damage raised by Deeping's novel (Meyer 2010a: 102-3). This narrative does, however, echo the theories around 'commotional shock' which formed a significant part of the diagnostic narrative of functional disorders, including hysterical paralysis, throughout the war (Shephard 2002). More significantly, the similarity of the plot device in both the novel and the television drama, which sees the hero's mobility (and by extension his procreativity) restored by the perceived minor peril of a beloved woman, indicates that Matthew's recovery would have

been understood as an emotionally recognisable story by interwar consumers of popular culture. It is this continuity in the emotional dramatization across the century that enables the episode to lay claim to a form of authenticity even if it is not one necessarily based on historic or scientific truths.

More problematic than the believability of Matthew's recovery, however, is another, apparently more minor, medical drama which plays out throughout the season. This involves Thomas Barrow (Rob James-Collier), the footman who, in Episode One, is shown serving as a Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) stretcher bearer. At the end of the episode, he gets a 'Blighty' wound [5] by encouraging a sniper to shoot him through the hand. As Joanna Bourke has pointed out, self-mutilations, including those that involved courting danger as well as more direct self-harm, were not uncommon as a way to malinger in wartime (1996: 83-7). However, while malingering could be viewed as an acceptable practice in certain contexts, 'attempting to remove [one]self *permanently* from the war' was viewed as a form of cowardice by military authorities and servicemen alike (McCartney 2005: 172). Thomas's actions, building on his characterisation as duplicitous and conniving in Season One, appears to place his actions firmly in the negative category of cowardice.

The association that is thus drawn between medical service and implicit cowardice is historically problematic, conflicting as it does with contemporary understandings of medical service personnel as ambiguous figures of heroism. RAMC servicemen were, upon occasion, abused with epithets such as 'Rob All My Comrades' and suffered from problematic associations between medical service and conscientious objection to war through the work of units such as the Friends' Ambulance Unit. However, the unit was not necessarily understood as a refuge for cowards. Medical servicemen were equally likely to be represented as good comrades in service or even as a 'Knight of the Red Cross', a particularly heroic figure because of his willingness to risk his own life for the sake of others by serving under fire

while unarmed (Meyer 2018). The decision to associate male medical caregiving in *Downton* at least in part with a character identified within the series as unsympathetic, even villainous, creates a dissonance with the historic reality of how such men would have been perceived and represented at the time.

Further problems with Thomas's storyline develop as the series progresses. The injury is not identified by medical or military authorities as a self-inflicted wound (SIW), although medical officers in 1916 would have been highly suspicious of such a wound (Bourke 1996: 89-94). Thomas is thus able to return to his position as footman at the Abbey, a role that would have involved a great deal of dexterous manual labour. Indeed, this aspect of male domestic service would become a significant plot point in the climax of Season Six, when Carson's hand tremors force his retirement from active duties as a butler and his replacement by Thomas. But the return of Thomas to service in Season Two is problematic because of the particular disabling qualities of being shot through the hand. Part of what made such an injury particularly attractive as an SIW was that, while unlikely to be fatal, it had a strong chance of leading to a full discharge from the armed services on the grounds of long-term physical impairment. In the worst-case scenario, the wound would become infected, potentially leading to amputation, while at best, the small bones of the hand, which would be shattered by the bullet, would be difficult to re-set accurately in the context of battlefield medicine. The injury would thus be likely to lead to a clawing effect and lack of mobility in the healed hand. (Hallett 2009: 50; Bourke 1999: 82). Such a long-term impairment would be almost as much of a disadvantage to a footman holding a tray as to a stretcher bearer grasping the handle of a stretcher. Yet Thomas appears to suffer no such impairment. The storyline which deals with his attempts at medical (self-)rehabilitation in Season Five focuses not on his war wounds but rather on his attempts to self-medicate to combat his homosexual impulses, portrayed accurately for the period as a medicolegal problem (Crozier 2001). Indeed, after Season

Three, in which he wears a cast-like bandage which is never commented upon, his hand appears completely healed.

The final plot line which raises the question of historical versus emotional authenticity of representation is that of the establishment of the Downton Village war memorial in Series Five. Set in 1924, the timing and politics, with Carson (Jim Carter) chairing the memorial committee and Robert, Lord Grantham (Hugh Bonneville) as patron, represents a reasonable reflection of the process of local war memorialisation in this period (King 1998). More problematic, however, is the sub-plot which begins in Episode Three, when Mrs Patmore (Lesley Nicol) attempts to get her nephew Archie's name included on the memorial. Archie was not a resident of Downton and his name is not to be included on his local memorial because he was shot for cowardice, a fact revealed in Season Two, Episode Two. The debates around whether Archie's name should be included culminate in the unveiling of the memorial in the season finale, broadcast in Britain on Remembrance Sunday 2014,[6] with an additional stone being unveiled to commemorate Archie in a scene described by *The Telegraph* as 'well played, perfectly pitched and a timely tribute' (Hogan 2014).

As satisfying as this compromise may feel to modern sensibilities, which, like Mrs Hughes (Phyllis Logan), tend to view all those shot for cowardice as suffering from 'shell shock' and therefore worthy more of pity than censure, this scene is unrepresentative of historical reality on two levels. First, as Alex King (1998) and Mark Connelly (2001) have both argued, the emotional significance of war memorials and the nation-wide movement to erect them lay in their geographic localism. The listing of names in local, familiar spaces – village greens, local churches, school halls, university cloisters – served as a way of accommodating the memory of the dead with the homes and institutions they had sought to defend. In Britain, the practice drew particular significance from the decision by the government to not repatriate the bodies of men who died overseas. This was reinforced by the

fact that war memorials were funded locally, their erection overseen by a local committee whose members were drawn from the local population (King 1998). The reason given for Archie's exclusion from the memorial in his home town is that it was forbidden by the War Office; in fact, it was the local committees which decided who should be included on the war memorial. Men without direct connections to a place, such as the husband of a woman who had returned to live with her family after his death, might be considered for inclusion on a memorial ('How did local communities decide' 2014). The connection through Mrs Patmore, however, is a tenuous one. In choosing to remember Archie in Downton, the narrative undercuts the symbolism of his memorialisation by taking him from his own local community and imposing him on another, suggesting, in so doing, that his death would have been understood as a valid sacrifice across Britain.

This points to the second problem presented by this plot line: the position taken by Mrs Hughes, that cowardly actions were always the result of psychological trauma and could, therefore, be seen as understandable, was not a widespread one in the war's aftermath. The opinion voiced by Carson, that it was not fair to equate the sacrifice of a man who abandoned his post with that of those who endured and died, was far more common (McCartney 2014), reflecting what King has termed the 'canonisation of the common people' in memorial narratives (1998, Chapter 7). While the unveiling of Archie's stone may feel satisfying to a twenty-first century audience familiar with evolving narratives of war trauma, not least the 2006 pardoning of 306 British First World War servicemen shot for cowardice following a long-running campaign, Carson's stance would have had far more emotional resonance in the years after the war. If there 'was such a thing as shell shock' (G. Fisher quoted in MacDonald 1993) in the minds of many soldiers who had lived through the war, then there was also such a thing as cowardice, and the welcome given to those who had displayed it, whether living or dead, would have been ambiguous at best (Meyer 2010b). While not as obviously historically

problematic as Thomas's wound, therefore, the plot line's emotional resonance is, unlike in the case of Matthew's recovery, contemporary rather than historic.

We have, then, three storylines relating to the First World War with varying levels of dramatic resonance and effectiveness of authentic representation of the past. I would suggest that the differences between them lie in the authority derived from the origins of each storyline in popular cultural representations of the war, rather than in any claims they lay to historical accuracy. In cleaving to a plot device that would have been familiar to consumers of popular culture at the time in which it is set, Matthew's storyline successfully positions itself within the longer process of cultural commemoration of the war from 1914 onwards that relied as much on emotional authenticity as absolute accuracy. Matthew's miraculous recovery, by utilising a melodramatic plot device familiar from popular fiction of the 1930s, helps to locate *Downton* within the trajectory of dramatic representations of the war in a way that lends it emotional authenticity as a dramatic representation. The story it tells, through its invocation of familiar melodramatic tropes that can be traced in contemporaneous fictional representations of war paralysis and recovery, is recognisable across as well as in time. Thomas's equally dramatic recovery draws attention to its lack of historic accuracy without providing any countervailing emotional ballast through drama. It has no equivalent cultural precursor to identify it as emotionally believable either at the time or today; indeed, it appears to fly in the face of military and medical reality in both 1916 and 2011. The story of the commemoration of Archie's sacrifice, meanwhile, imposes twenty-first century understandings of medicine and morality on the past. While drawing on established ideas about the relationship between psychological trauma and the appearance of cowardice, it bases its narrative on contemporary rather than historic understandings of these relationships. The plot is thus detached from the longer cultural history of commemorative war representation that gives Matthew's story its emotional resonance.

Conclusion

The plot lines of Matthew's legs, Thomas's hand and Archie's trauma allow insight not only into the history of British society at war through the reconstruction of events in an imagined past but also into the history of representations of the war through the invocation of familiar narrative tropes. In doing so, they complicate understandings of the nature of historical 'truth' in dramatic representations of the war and its aftermath by blurring the lines between accuracy and authenticity in the tradition of interwar novels and memoirs.

If, as Hanna suggests, 'television programmes are building blocks in Britain's national memory of 1914-18,' (2009: 4) then analysing the place of *Downton* in that national memory is important for our understanding of the war as

> a powerful imaginative force, perhaps the most powerful force, in the shaping not only of our conceptions of what war is, but of the world we live in – a world in which that war, and all the wars that have followed it, were possible human acts. (Hynes 1990: 469).

At its most basic, locating the plots and subplots that draw on representations of the war and our cultural memory of it provides historians like myself with a platform to communicate our research and passion for our subject to an engaged audience, a process made easier by the prevalence of increasingly diverse platforms for public engagement. But beyond that, identifying how the drama fits into not only the history of the period represented but also the history of cultural representation, commemoration and memory across time allows us to unpack our own assumptions about authenticity, authority and truth in historical narratives. Understanding how the plot of Matthew's miraculous recovery uses its cultural lineage of melodrama to lay claim to dramatic authenticity as Thomas's and Archie's do not produces insight into how post-war British culture helped negotiate the traumas of war as they became memory. But it also provides a space in which the range of disciplines engaged with the two

Western fronts debate can speak productively to each other. In considering the range of meanings of historical authenticity evident in *Downton Abbey*, scholars working at the intersections of war studies, cultural studies and the history of medicine are able to articulate the nuanced narratives of our subject in ways which speak to both popular and academic audiences.

A century on, the First World War has moved, with the deaths of the last of the generation who lived through the conflict, from living memory into history. At the same time, the centenary years have seen a proliferation of imaginative engagements, with the conflict as both subject and framing device. Understanding the ways in which such historical dramas succeed and fail in utilising narrative tropes as tools in laying claim to authentic representation thus becomes increasingly important for historians of the war, both military and cultural. If we fail to engage with why and how such hugely popular cultural forms attempt to exploit emotion in the search for dramatic authority, we will be left with little to do except grumble erratically on our Facebook feeds.

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[1] These primarily include *The Crimson Field* (BBC1 2014), *Parade's End* (BBC1 2014) and *Peaky Blinders* (BBC2 2013-). See www.armsandthemedicalman.wordpress.com and Evan Smith, 'Underground Lives: *Peaky Blinders* and Popular Histories of Inter-war Britain' in this volume.

[2] The series, as Hanna points out, has been consistently popular since its first broadcast (Hanna 2009, 133-4) though it has always been the subject of historical criticism (Badsey). Gove's intervention prompted a war of words with the actor Tony Robinson, who played Baldrick in the series, and the presenter Jeremy Paxman (BBC 2014; Gallagher 2014).

[3] In Britain, this parallel was made explicit by the fact that the BBC attempted to relaunch *Upstairs, Downstairs* in competition with the launch of *Downton Abbey* in 2010, moving the drama on a generation and setting the action exclusively during the Second World War.

[4] Here we can start to see some of the problems with the historical framing of this season. The introduction of conscription in 1916 would have made this sort of recruitment drive obsolete by the time it is supposed to have occurred.

[5] A 'Blighty' wound was one which was serious enough to get a patient evacuated to Britain ('Blighty'). Although generally perceived as desirable because they were unlikely to be fatal, they often led to long-term physical impairments.

[6] Remembrance Sunday is an annual commemorative event held on the Sunday closest to Armistice Day, 11th November. While Remembrance Sunday ceremonies commemorate military servicemen of all conflicts, it is inextricably associated with the First World War by the association of the date.