**‘The new *Downton Abbey*’?:**

***Poldark* and the Presentation and Perception of an Eighteenth-Century Past**

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**Abstract:**

As soon as it was commissioned, *Poldark,*like a number of other recent historical dramas, was labelled as the ‘new Downton Abbey’ and the comparison has persisted. Given *Downton Abbey’s* hit status such comparisons are surely welcomed by production companies. For historians, however, such associations highlight an important phenomenon: the grouping of diverse period dramas as broadly similar, all perceived as being ‘like’ *Downton*. In what ways, though, are such dramas part of the same genre? And what implications do such associations have for how we should approach and analyse period dramas as a form of public history? This article uses a case study of *Poldark*as a starting point for addressing these questions, exploring the history foregrounded in the *Poldark*narratives and examining what happens to audience perceptions of that history as the story moves from novel to screen. It argues that although Winston Graham created a deeply-researched, revisionist historical world in his fiction, his historical innovation is rarely acknowledged when his stories are consumed. Whilst this goes some way to explaining why it is that a drama set in the eighteenth-century can be regarded as being ‘like’ *Downton Abbey,* this apparent lack of engagement with a drama’s specific historical content raises important, if difficult, questions for historians keen to analyse historical drama as a form of public history.

**Key words:** *Downton Abbey*; eighteenth century; historical drama; historical fiction; public history; *Poldark* Winston Graham.

Even before the first episode was broadcast onBBC1, *Poldark* (2015-)was being discussed in newspapers and online as ‘the new *Downton Abbey*’. The news that the BBC was commissioning an adaptation of Winston Graham’s *Poldark* novels (1945-2002) was widely perceived as a strategy to ‘claw back’ ratings from ITV, and re-establish itself as a leading broadcaster of period dramas.[[1]](#endnote-1) Set in late eighteenth-century Cornwall, against a backdrop of the American and French revolutionary wars and accompanying economic, social and political turmoil, Graham’s *Poldark* novels (originally known as the *Cornwall* novels) follow the life of a brooding, fictitious hero, Ross Poldark and his family, friends and rivals. The BBC had previously drawn on some of the sequence’s early novels for a successful adaptation that ran across two series in 1975 and 1977 with around 15 million viewers per episode and distribution across more than 40 countries (indeed, if we project back to the 1970s series, then *Downton Abbey* (2010-15) was in fact the ‘new *Poldark*’ rather than vice versa).

The more recent *Poldark* adaptation has enjoyed comparable success. The first series, broadcast in 2015, turned out to be a rapid hit. A second series was swiftly commissioned (filmed at the same time as the final series of *Downton Abbey*) and, at the time of writing, a fifth is now in production. The comparison with *Downton* haslingered across the years. In 2015 and 2016, the stars of *Poldark* were routinely asked by interviewers what it was like to be in ‘the new *Downton Abbey*’ (Radish 2015). Once the final series of *Downton Abbey* was broadcast, *Poldark* was touted by American newspapers and magazines in particular as the show that would ‘fill the *Downton Abbey* sized hole in your heart’ (Hallman 2016; Koslin 2016). Such comparisons were made rapidly and across different media contexts. What, though, should we make of such persistent associations between these two different dramas?

As an academic historian of eighteenth-century British history, and the historical consultant to the current *Poldark* adaptation, I have watched with interest how the production, and more particularly the historical content, has been reviewed and received both by critics and a wider audience. As this article will explore, Winston Graham’s original novels are richly detailed with historical specificity. Arguably they foreground certain aspects of the eighteenth century (such as the customary rule of law and the evolution of a working-class identity) which were not yet widely explored in non-fiction work at the time Graham wrote his early novels. In this regard, the fiction Graham developed, based on his own extensive research, was innovative and original, and notably pre-dated the emergence of social history as a field of academic historical enquiry. But is the content of the novels considered ‘innovative’ today, and to what extent does the broader historical context used by Graham in the novels translate to the screen? The coupling of *Poldark* with *Downton Abbey* is especially suggestive in this regard. Does *Poldark* actually bear any resemblance to *Downton Abbey*, or is this supposed similarity entirely manufactured?

From the historian’s perspective, the two dramas are poles apart. They are set in different historical periods (the eighteenth century versus the twentieth century), in different parts of the country and with different structuring narratives (Cornish mining communities versus Yorkshire aristocrats). To be sure, both *Downton* and *Poldark* wrap up an image of the British past with lessons in social class and a healthy dose of romance. *Downton Abbey*, however,is unashamedly aristocratic, with ‘downstairs’ dramas bringing ‘upstairs’ dramas into sharper focus. *Poldark* has a very different social tone. Its hero, Ross Poldark, is the son of a second son of a local gentry family, drifting some distance below the heights of Downton. He is gentleman whose moral and political affiliations point down the social scale, motivating him to defend the rights of a community on the margins, in contrast to Lord Grantham who is more preoccupied with making minor adjustments to retain his status and lifestyle at the top of the social ladder. Moreover, in terms of film and television studies, the dramas are different production genres. *Downton Abbey* was conceived and written as an original multi-part drama for television. It is set within a single property and the stories evolve primarily inside its walls (an efficient strategy that facilitates the rapid filming of multiple hours of drama given that it mostly plays out within a single, easily managed location). *Poldark*, in contrast, is an adaptation that draws on a series of twelve historical novels by Winston Graham, written for the reader not the viewer, the first published in the 1940s. It uses multiple fictitious locations within Cornwall (including houses, market towns, ports, banks, taverns, churches and more) as well as extending beyond to France and London. Much of the action takes place outside: on beaches, fields, clifftops and even at sea. This creates a range of challenges regarding production requirements and filming that are not evident in *Downton Abbey*.

In terms of content, narrative, structure, production skills and administration, therefore, these two dramas hardly seem ‘like’ one another at all. The fundamental differences in period and context are made amply evident in their iconic title sequences: *Downton Abbey* is summarized by the shot of the vast house in isolation which dominates the image. Its grandeur, size and status are emphasized but it is unpopulated and devoid any distinguishing markers of the period of history in which the drama is set (see Fig. 1). *Poldark* starts with a silhouetted Ross Poldark, staring out over the open Cornish coastline, his eighteenth-century tricorn hat marking out the historical context but with the link to the novels made explicit. The turbulent Cornish coastline in the background roots the drama in its key location and our view is Ross’s view, just as the narrative that unfolds is the story of his engagement with his eighteenth-century world (see Fig. 2). Nonetheless, when *Poldark* was launched comparisons to Downton were incorporated in almost every press notice and critical review.

Insert Fig 1 [Downton opening credit image] here

Insert Fig 2 [Poldark opening credit image] here

Of course, the label of being ‘the new *Downton* *Abbey*’ is not unique to *Poldark.* Many television period dramas launched since 2010 have been similarly trailered, including *Upstairs, Downstairs* (2010-12); *Mr Selfridge* (2013-16); *The Durrells* (2016-); *The Crown* ( 2016-); *Victoria* (2016-); *The Paradise* (2012-13)*; Call the Midwife* (2012-) and *The Halcyon* (2017-). On the one hand, such associations might be commercially motivated. *Downton Abbey* was a huge ratings hit and a lucrative exported product. According to a report by *Forbes* magazine, the series has sold across 220 territories, gathering record viewer numbers, social media traffic and also industry awards, including the most Primetime Emmy nominations of any international television series (Cuccinello 2016). In this regard, to be pegged as ‘the new *Downton Abbey*’ is often shorthand for the hope that a British-made drama will become a money spinner. Yet such clustering also creates its own category of television drama: that of being ‘like’ *Downton Abbey*, an identity which owes primarily to being set in a period of British history that looks significantly different to today. A remarkable feature of this, the ‘new Downton Abbey’ genre, is that specific differences of historical content and narrative are rendered almost invisible, and the only link to history itself lies in being set in ‘the past’.

Historians have for some time been developing theoretical approaches to analyse period films, but it is only comparatively recently that period dramas made for television have come under scrutiny. Jerome de Groot and others have argued persuasively for approaching historical television drama as a pre-eminent form of ‘public history’ in modern society, a medium through which contemporary audiences engage with and consume certain ideas about the past. This is a hugely diverse genre and as such de Groot warns against seeing period productions as uniform, urging scholars to develop nuanced categories of analysis that pay closer attention to the diversity beneath the umbrella of ‘period drama’, ‘costume drama’, ‘historical fictional drama’, ‘historical television drama’ or whatever other label is applied. Moreover, rather than presupposing that a ‘popular’ drama must inevitably be ‘light’ in content or ‘conservative’ in tone, scholars have become more alert to the ways in which historical dramas might also challenge audience expectations and generate ‘newly iconoclastic and revisionist approaches to key historical genres’(de Groot 2016: 235).

Such calls for more subtle engagement certainly enrich academic analysis. However, if we are to consider such dramas as an expression of public engagement with ‘the historical as a cultural genre’ (as de Groot suggests) we must also remain attentive to the ways in which such dramas become flattened and packaged in a monolithic and generic way when advertised, reviewed and received. This tendency is brought into especially sharp focus by ‘the new *Downton Abbey*’ label, under which so many different dramas dealing with so many different historical periods, characters, narratives, contexts and formats have been swiftly and largely uncritically clustered. If historical specificity and nuance becomes blurred at the point when it is presented to a public audience, what does this suggest about how we should interrogate historical television drama as a form of public engagement with the past? How is the historical context of a period drama consumed?

This article explores these issues and looks in more detail at the ‘new *Downton Abbey*’ category of period dramas through a case study of *Poldark.* It follows the representation, consumption and interpretation of *Poldark’s* historical context from the page in the novels to the screen, and into a broader public domain of critical reception and audience review. In many ways the novels are strikingly revisionist, akin to the approach that de Groot has suggested we might be more alert to within television drama. Yet, despite the source material on which they are based, the subsequent adaptations would not be widely regarded as ‘iconoclastic’ or ‘genre-defining’ in terms of historical content, production values, narrative or aesthetic. Indeed, the lack of academic study into either the novels or the two series (despite their popularity and status as ‘cult’ productions) is itself evidence of how *Poldark* is more widely regarded as uncomplicatedly mainstream and never as a ‘classic’ worthy of further scrutiny. What happens to the historical content in this process of moving from page to screen, which renders the novels’ revisionist content invisible? As this article explores, it is not simply that the historical content is somehow lost in translation. Indeed, some of the first adaptation and much of the most recent adaptation draws very closely on Graham’s original novels. Instead, the issue is more of how audiences consume the history – or not – while engaging with the drama. Much as we might want to celebrate the diversity and popularity of historical drama on television, analysing this as a form of public history requires us to look not just at the content of the production, but also at the less tangible processes of consumption.

*The image of the eighteenth century in the Poldark novels*

In order to explore the representation of eighteenth-century history in *Poldark* we must start with the historical content of the novels themselves. Winston Graham’s first Poldark novel was published in 1945, by which date he was a well-established, if publicity-averse, author - or, as he was already being described, ‘the most successful unknown novelist in England’ (Graham 2013; first published 2003: 98). His debut novel, *The House with the Stained Glass Windows,* had been published in 1934 and he had seen another eleven into print (mostly modern thrillers), alongside numerous short stories and plays for screen and stage, before the first Poldark story arrived. Some of his previous work had already been adapted for screen. *Take My Life* (1947)*, Night Without Stars* (1950), *Fortune is a Woman* (1952) and *The Walking Stick* (1967) were all made into films in 1947, 1951, 1957 and 1970 respectively; while *The Sleeping Partner* (1956) was adapted for television in 1967, starring Angharad Rees (later Demelza in the 1970s Poldark adaptation). His novel *Marnie* (1961) became a Hitchcock film in 1964, starring Tippi Hedren and Sean Connery (Moral 2002). Across his long career, Graham wrote successfully in a range of genres, but Poldark was his first historical fiction, and the only story that he ran across a long series of books.

On the page Graham wears his knowledge of the historical context lightly and deploys it with care. Lengthy paragraphs of scene-setting historical description are rare but are used at moments to contextualize his characters’ motivations within eighteenth-century mentalities. For example, in the following passage from the first book in the series – *Ross Poldark: A Novel of Cornwall, 1783–1787* (1945) *–* a brief summary of the political and economic climate, along with reference to its repercussions in Cornwall (such as the reliance in Fowey on limpets for food), is deployed to distinguish Ross’s ideals from those of his social peers:

The whole nation felt down in the mouth after the unequal struggle against France and Holland and Spain, the perverse unbrotherly war with America, and the threat of further enemies in the north. It was a spiritual as well as material slough. Twenty-five years ago she [Britain] had been leader of the world, and the fall had been all the greater…A tenacious prime minister, at 27, was holding his uneasy position in the face of all the coalitions to upset him…taxes had gone up 20 per cent in five years and the new ones were dangerously unpopular. Land tax, house tax, servants’ tax, window tax. Horses and hats, bricks and tiles, linen and calicoes. Another impost on candles hit directly at the poor. Last winter the fishermen of Fowey had saved their families from starvation by feeding them on limpets…In two years Ross had seen little of his own family and class. What he had overheard in the library on the day of Geoffrey Charles’s christening had filled him with contempt for them…his conversation didn’t touch on the popular subjects. He was not as concerned as they about the return of Maria Fitzherbert from the Continent or the scandal of the Queen of France’s necklace. There were families in the district without enough bread and potatoes to keep them alive and he wanted these families to be given gifts in kind. (Graham 2015; 1945: 263-4)

This combination of broad context and Cornish specificity locates Ross Poldark in a ‘real’ time and place but it can only be achieved by a mastery of the historical information. Such lengthy historical expositions are comparatively rare. More often Graham’s knowledge of the eighteenth-century context is revealed through innumerable smaller details, such as references to food, contemporary newspapers, novels, ship names and symptoms of disease. To give a few examples, in *The Black Moon* (the fifth in the series, published in 1973), on his return from his imprisonment by the French at Quimper, Graham’s fictitious doctor, Dwight Enys, recalls ‘the invaluable small aids’ given to him and his fellow prisons by ‘a Lady Ann Fitzroy’. Though her story is little known even now to historians, Lady Ann Fitzroy had been held at Quimper, along with female relatives, and by virtue of her rank and sex had been able to purchase food and medical supplies, which she distributed to the starving and sick prisoners. In *The Angry Tide: A Novel of Cornwall 1798-1799* (published in 1977), Ross and Demelza use the eighteenth-century equivalent of a water taxi, a waterman to take them on sixpence journeys. In *The Twisted Sword* (published in 1990), Graham reveals his knowledge of early nineteenth-century newspapers when George shifts his allegiance from *The Times* (known as such since 1788)*,* to *The Morning Post* (established in 1772), and also notes the local paper the *Royal Cornwall Gazette* (established in 1801). Such integrated references of obscure details are as revealing (if not more revealing) of Graham’s research and command of period as his lengthier descriptions.

Acknowledging the range and depth of Graham’s subtle historical contextualization is not to suggest that he was note perfect. In places, a mix of historical research and modern presumption creates scenarios that do not entirely fit with the world in which they are set. In the first book, for instance, a key moment in Ross and Demelza’s relationship is established when Ross unfastens her dress (which formerly belonged to his mother):

He turned. It was Demelza, carrying a candle. She did not speak. The door swung to behind her. She had not changed and her eyes were like lamps.

“What is it?” he said.

“This frock”

“Well?”

“The bodice unfastens down the back.”

“Well?”

“I can’t reach the hooks”

He frowned at her a moment.

She came slowly up to him, turned, set the candle clumsily upon the table. “I’m sorry.”

He began to undo the dress. She felt his breath on her neck. (Graham 1945; 2015: 322)

Here we find a fleeting anachronism because all eighteenth-century women’s clothing fastened at the front. Other examples are easily found, from small details such as a reference to a boy colouring in a book in *Warleggan* (Graham 1953; 2015), to Ross Poldark at liberty (instead of in prison as would have been the norm) while awaiting trial at the Bodmin Assizes in *Demelza*. Although seeking out anachronisms is the main way in which the content of many dramas, novels and other forms of historical narratives come to be judged, to me this often seems an analytical dead end. Arguably more significant than the balance of what Graham got ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ is the place the author gives to historical content and the broader characterisation of the period against which the narrative unfolds.

Graham later reflected on the novels’ historical content and revealed the primary research he undertook to inspire stories. ‘I take my hat off to historical fact, for without it I could never have written the Poldarks’, he acknowledged in *Poldark’s Cornwall* before running through myriad examples of how original sources from newspapers to autobiographies sparked storylines and provided points of details (Graham 2015; 1983: 138). For Graham, extensive research was essential to ensure that his characters were not ‘simply modern people in fancy dress’ but were fully part of the ‘warp and woof of eighteenth-century life’. ‘I do not know how near the truth of life in the eighteenth century these novels are’, Graham acknowledged, ‘all I know is that they are as near to the truth as I can make them’ (Graham 2015; 1983: 138-9).

As historical adviser to the recent production, I have often found myself retracing Graham’s steps through various historical documents. Indeed, the innumerable references to specific eighteenth-century details operate in Graham’s novels like footnotes, revealing the historical information marshalled beneath the surface. He described this effect as ‘a bit like the iceberg: the nine tenths under the water is necessary to support the one tenth on show’. [[2]](#endnote-2) Through my role as a historical consultant I have had the opportunity to examine more of the hidden nine tenths, following the details seeded by Graham in the novels back to original sources.

I am all too aware, however, of our different starting points. I have a wealth of keyword searchable electronic resources available at my fingertips. I also have a PhD and the best part of twenty years of research into eighteenth-century social, cultural and political history. Equally, I am informed by new and landmark histories which have shaped the field since Graham wrote his novels. These explore in detail many of the themes that underpinned Graham’s Poldark fictions but, significantly, they were not available to him when the earliest books in the series were written.

A strong case can be made for the novels as ground-breaking in terms of their engagement with history. In particular, Graham foregrounds the hopes, hardships, risks, challenges and inequities experienced by ordinary people within a regional community. The uneven application of law, pre-reform political representation, local protest and riot, smuggling, access to common goods (whether through harvesting of wrecks or the use of common land), the rise of Methodism, agricultural and technological innovation, and the impact of economic and political upheavals routinely structure the novels.

As historian Justin Champion (2016) has similarly noted, the themes driving the Poldark narratives are comparable to those prioritized in formative social histories, particularly the work of E. P. Thompson, widely regarded as a founding historian of the ‘history from below’ of working-class communities. Much of Thompson’s work focused on the same decades of social and political upheaval (the 1780s to 1820s) selected by Graham. In the oft-quoted preface to his major work, *The Making of the English Working Class*, first published in 1963, Thompson declared, ‘I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the “obsolete” handloom weaver, the “Utopian” artist and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott from the enormous condescension of posterity’. (1991:12) Moreover, one of the major theoretical innovations of Thompson’s work was a desire to recover individual experience and the impact of human agency, to use autobiographical recollections and life writing alongside scraps of information from parish records and newspaper reports to write social history from the ground up rather than from the top down.

While there are some very evident affinities between the histories created by Graham and the themes of the social history movement, these were not contemporaneous literary moments. Graham’s first Poldark novel was written in the 1940s, almost two decades before the publication of Thompson’s pioneering work. While there were a handful of trail-blazing non-fiction works which pre-figured some themes later analysed by Thompson, the field remained narrow. Far more expansive in terms of eighteenth-century histories were innumerable publications in the 1930s and 1940s focusing on aristocratic life which presented Georgian Britain as a golden age of glittering titled power. Books examining these themes were readily available to Graham, but this was not the world of Poldark and Graham’s extensive use of primary sources is evidence of the lack of textbooks on which he could lean.

Arguably, then, Graham’s novels provided a blueprint for the ‘history from below’. Yet, tempting as it might be for the historian to highlight the seemingly iconoclastic aspects of Graham’s work, the benefits of historiographical hindsight need to be applied with some care. While the historian reader might salute Graham’s research and note the prescient social history threads interwoven in the plots, the test of whether or not the novels broke new historical ground at the time of their writing lies in their impact on the non-specialist reader. To what extent were Graham’s novels perceived as painting a ‘different’ eighteenth century when published?

Establishing how the historical content was initially received is not easy. From the outset, the Poldark novels were regarded as mainstream, popular romances – good quality and well written by an esteemed author, but not genre-defining or ‘a classic’. As such, they have never been subject to much published comment. Early reviews emphasized the author’s success in capturing historical period: ‘It re-creates the period, and all the colour of the period, with rare success’, declared one review of *Ross Poldark* published in *The Observer* in 1945.[[3]](#endnote-3) *Warleggan*, was said to have demonstrated a ‘warm understanding and intimate knowledge that distinguished its predecessors’ (but whether that understanding and knowledge was of period or place is unclear).[[4]](#endnote-4) But specific references to a ‘new’ take on Cornwall’s eighteenth-century past are rare. There was no trumpeting of the unexpected imagery of an eighteenth-century past, no obvious commentary on the ‘other’ eighteenth century contained within its pages, a century not of glamorous Duchesses and rakish Dukes but a century of hardship, economic fluctuation, innovation, new technology and shifting social mores. Where the historical context is specifically singled out in early reviews, it is usually described as ‘fascinating’, ‘carefully researched’ or ‘authentic’. These are appreciative nods to the author’s storytelling skill but hardly suggest a readership taken aback by a radical take on the past. Even though a ‘new’ eighteenth century was deftly written into the novels, it is apparent that this ‘new’ history was not necessarily perceived as such at the point of consumption.

*The image of the eighteenth century and Poldark on TV*

In his landmark essay on history and film, Robert Rosenstone reflected that ‘this history that finally appears on the screen can never fully satisfy the historian … something happens on the way from page to screen that changes the meaning of the past’ (1988: p. 1173). He then went on to argue that although the histories are not quite the ‘same’ many of the same problems of narrative selection and fictionalization required by the screen were also problems faced by text-based histories. But Rosenstone’s framing point that historical imagery on screen is fundamentally different to how history is written is one that is presumed by many theorists in the field. The issue of difference is not a question of being ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but more a question of how a reader or a viewer’s imagination is engaged. Visualizing the past on screen requires what historians refer to as ‘thick description’, a complex building up of a material world that ensures every shot retains the viewer’s suspension of disbelief. For some, this means that a filmed image might offer a richer portrayal of the past than a book. As David Herlihy argued, in an essay next to next to Rosenstone’s, ‘films are superb in representing the visual styles and textures of the past – values almost impossible to convey in written words’. ‘Let the visual serve the visual’ he urged (1988: p. 1191). Stanley Kubrick put forward the same argument when discussing his epic, *Barry Lyndon*. For Kubrick, films ‘offer the opportunity to do things that movies can do better than any other art form, and that is to present historical subject matter. Description is not one of the things that novels do best, but it is something that movies do effortlessly’ (Cosgrove 2002: p 21). What happened to the image of the eighteenth century presented in *Poldark* as it moved from page to screen? Is the historical content consumed differently by the audience of the television programmes than it was by the readership of the novels?

The BBC’s first *Poldark* adaptation was broadcast from 5 October 1975, covering the first four novels in sixteen episodes. A subsequent series of thirteen episodes was broadcast in 1977. It was a huge hit, drawing millions of viewers and making cult stars out of the lead cast. In the summer of 1975, Judith Cook, a journalist for *The Guardian* visited the production on location in Cornwall. Her piece gives some insight into how the *Poldark* stories were perceived before being forever stamped by the legacy of their television success. Cook opened her article noting that the saga of the novels, ‘is more than an everyday story of smuggling and pillaging West Country folk. It gives an idea of what life was like for men who tributed for tin 200 years ago; of the squirearchy fighting a losing battle against the mine owners making a fortune out of the beginnings of the industrial revolution’. Here there is a suggestion of a ‘different’ history, challenging the stereotypes of Cornwall’s history as defined by ‘smuggling and pillaging’ (as foregrounded in the fictions of *Jamaica Inn*)with a focus on the industry and industriousness of a Cornish mining community. Nonetheless, Cook’s article hinted that this context was not the pre-eminent concern of the production, quoting the series producer, Morris Barry’s summary of the story: ‘it’s a good yarn, and it has everything: romance, plenty of action, smuggling, wrecking, a gaol break’. Far from challenging stereotypes, the producer actively invoked them as the headline message.

As with the novels, recovering evidence of audience response to the original series, and by extension how the historical content was consumed, is difficult. Despite its cult status there have only been a handful of studies focusing on the adaptation. For Nickianne Moody, one explanation for the success of the 1970s adaptation is the centrality of mining within the storylines, a theme primed to hit a chord with a television audience in the mid to late 1970s when the long-term future of mining as a British industry and way of life was a ubiquitous concern. The mining industry had been declining since the 1960s. 1972 and 1974 saw major strikes by miners over pay – the first formal and coordinated industrial action by miners since the 1920s. The *Poldark* drama, coming only a year after major industrial protests, offered an idealized alternative view, ‘an earlier mining industry at the cutting edge of technology, an industry with roots and traditions predating the industrial revolution that it could be proud of’ (Moody 1997: 133).

In this context, there seems to be meaningful transfer of historical content from novel to screen to viewer, with the audience engaging with a presentation of the past that was on the one hand relevant and familiar (mining was a major social and political issue for the 1970s) but at the same time different (mining in Poldark reminding viewers of a lost ‘golden age’). We need to exercise some caution, however, because although Judith Cook spotted the contemporary relevance of mining, it is hard to find evidence of such links being strategically foregrounded by the production, or immediately acknowledged by the audience. This is not to say that from the perspective of cultural history and armed with the huge benefits of hindsight the hot political issues of mining did not contribute to the success of the series. However, if we focus more on audience recollections and production priorities, a different set of concerns appear more significant in propelling the popularity of the 1970s series: namely sexual tension and the idealization of Ross Poldark as the ultimate hero.

In an interview for the 2015 series *TV That Made Me*, breakfast television presenter Penny Smith recalled the first series of *Poldark* as a formative memory (BBC 2, Series 1: Episode 17, tx 25 August 2015). Her recollections are suggestive. ‘Look. Very manly . . . a proper bloke’, she comments on seeing a clip of Robin Ellis as Ross Poldark. When asked what the story involved, Smith is unable to remember any content beyond ‘love stories and intrigue’ and confessed to not having read any of the books. Despite acknowledging the influence of Poldark as a viewing experience in her teenage years, her recollection is almost entirely of an emotional engagement with the romantic drama devoid of any historical context. As Julie Anne Taddeo (2014) has revealed, the key to Poldark’s original appeal lay primarily in the identification of a predominantly female audience with Ross Poldark as a romantic hero. Reflecting later on *Poldark*’s success, in the TV documentary *The Cult of Poldark* (BBC4, tx 9 June 2009,*)* those responsible for the first and second series emphasise their strategic decision to downplay the historical contexts contained in the novels and elevate the sexual tensions: ‘You didn’t really want to know if a bank was going to foreclose more than you wanted to know if Ross and Demelza were going to get it on.’ Therefore, when the drama was broadcast – and effectively consumed - it was the emotional pull of the lead characters and strong attachments to the romantic narrative that was of principal significance to the audience. Or, as noted in *Cult of Poldark,* ‘there was a bit of history but it was a romp’.

The result did not impress critics, and initial reviews were scathing. Alan Coren (1975) dismissed it wholesale as ‘historical codswallop’ and ‘a step further into the cultural abyss’. Such commentary can have done little to reassure Winston Graham who, as is now well documented, was initially irate with the liberties taken by the first series. It is important to note, however, that Graham’s irritation was with the changes made to the arc of the relationship between Demelza and Ross, and not due to a loss of historical content. Significantly, in Graham’s own account, history was excessively privileged, with the production pursing an expensive quest for ‘authenticity’ whilst riding roughshod over his original narrative. For example, the production was prepared to reshoot an entire half day for the sake of correcting the position of a hat, a choice that irked Graham who was struggling to defend the use of language and some fundamental elements of plot. A complex, contradictory picture of how the eighteenth-century past was presented in the initial adaptation, and perceived by the 1970s audience, therefore begins to emerge. The series sought historical ‘authenticity’ but at the same time purposefully elevated the romantic narrative and downplayed the interwoven historical storylines. On set Graham felt he witnessed a slavish preoccupation with historical material details alongside a disregard for his original storyline, characters and motivations. And, if Penny Smith was a typical 1970s viewer, then to the audience the historical context mattered not a jot. The key concern was Ross Poldark, a timeless hero, who like Mr Darcy, Rhett Butler, Rochester and Heathcliff was flawed yet perfect.

Exploring how Poldark’s history is consumed remains similarly complex as we turn to the current *Poldark* series. Given that the adaptation is still evolving, and not least because I remain professionally invested in the production, it is too early to develop a thorough, objective analysis. However, some key points are perhaps already evident. Most strikingly there has been a pronounced identification of the audience with Ross Poldark as a hero, and by extension a huge amount of public attention given to the actor, Aidan Turner. This has been flagged as a ‘new’ objectification of a male lead, a form of reverse sexism. While it is certainly the case that the attention focused on Turner has been marked, it is noteworthy that (despite the different press and publicity culture) a comparable public gaze turned on Robin Ellis thirty years before.

The audience investment in Ross Poldark as a hero has inevitably made it difficult for some viewers to become as committed to the current drama as to the 1970s adaptation. In a review for *Front Row (*BBC Radio 4, 2 March 2015), Sarah Dunnant criticised the 2015 version as lacking the ‘pure power’ of romance in the original, suggesting that in opting for a ‘grittier and grimier’ visual language ‘like *Jamaica Inn*’, the current version would fail to create the ‘joyful romance’ she recalled from the 1970s. When asked whether it was worth revisiting ‘a very interesting historical period for Britain’, Dunnant replied again with a reference to the pre-eminence of the romantic plot, and what she regarded as a comparative lack of romantic appeal in the recent television version. Evidently drawing on her own recollection of the previous version, Dunnant’s emphasis on personal emotional engagement, along with a brushing aside of historical context, is striking. Notably, Penny Smith was similarly dismissive of the recent version as somehow failing to deliver a sufficiently masculine Ross and a heady enough romance. Clearly, however, the spotlight put on Aidan Turner, the large audiences and commission of multiple series, suggests that the 2015 version has achieved a similar popular appeal.

In the publicity around Ross Poldark/Aidan Turner and the romantic drama, there has been little sustained engagement with *Poldark’*s historical themes. Before its release, the scriptwriter Debbie Horsfield noted that the centrality of banking to the Poldark plot might resonate with modern audiences (BBC radio 4, *Woman’s Hour* tx 3 March 2015). However, like mining in the 1970s, since its release there has been little discussion of George Warleggan as a representative ‘banker’ villain or of parallels with modern banking culture or crises. It is unsurprising but still worth noting that much mainstream media discussion of *Poldark*’s historical content is directly linked to Aidan Turner. For instance, *The Daily Mail, Sunday Express* and *The Telegraph* all ran articles questioning whether a famous scene of Aidan Turner as Ross Poldark scything shirtless (the predominant image circulated by the press from the first series) was ‘historically accurate’.

Within a wider field of discussion, consideration of the historical content has been limited. Much of what has been published has been written by specialist historians, not by viewers or critics with a more lay knowledge of history. This is significant. Given its mainstream success and popularity, why *does* the historical content of *Poldark* receive so little public comment? The same storyline elements that make Winston Graham’s novels so original in their portrayal of an eighteenth-century past are retained within the current adaptation. Yet it seems that very few in an audience respond to these elements or ‘see’ Poldark’s eighteenth century in these terms.

Of course, unpacking an audience response to a period drama is far more involved than this brief survey suggests. In a bid to dig deeper into audience perceptions I initiated a brief Twitter discussion on 2 July 2017 by posing the question “Does Poldark teach you anything about the eighteenth century?”. I received mixed responses from fifty-two commentators, a number suggesting that the historical content was more evident in the novels than on screen. Three recalled that the first adaptation took them to the novels and then to a greater interest in eighteenth-century history. One said that the Poldark stories made him/her realize that the past was ‘nuanced’ and that the history was more ‘complex’ than textbooks had suggested, sending them to the library where they found E. P. Thompson’s work. Another explained that the Poldark novels had been the starting point of an interest in the period which led to a PhD. This sample is likely to be unrepresentative given that those who responded are probably self-selecting as people interested in Poldark’s historical content.[[5]](#endnote-5) However, if nothing else this range of response and its difference in tone to how *Poldark* is generally discussed in other media (particularly the mainstream press) is a reminder of how difficult it is to assess exactly what an audience ‘gets’ from watching a period drama, and how its historical content is consumed.

*Conclusion*

When Aidan Turner was asked what it was like to be the ‘next Downton Abbey’ he gave a frank reply:

it makes you nervous . . . but then you realize it is really nothing like *Downton*. Whether the press want to hear it or not . . . it’s a very different time. We’re dealing with eighteenth-century Cornwall . . . *Downton Abbey* is early twentieth-century and it’s just a very different show. . . . It’s nice that people put you in the same category. . . *Downton Abbey* was a precedent for that kind of success. (Radish 2015).

His reply points to the key issue with which this article began, of *Poldark* being regarded as ‘like’ *Downton Abbey* but also not being ‘like’ *Downton Abbey* at all.

The perception of similarity between very different historical dramas is an issue that historians need to confront in order to make the case for such dramas being a ‘tool in our tool box’. It might seem like a self-defeating question, but in watching a drama like *Downton Abbey* or *Poldark* is the audience actually *engaging* with the past? Ideas of historical difference and distance become blurred and muted when historical dramas are reviewed and received. The ‘new *Downton Abbey’* label brings this into sharp focus, not least because what is often meant by the label is that it will be very recognizable to an audience and therefore probably not ‘new’ at all.

This article has contended that this emphasis on the similarity of different dramas should make us think far more carefully about how the historical content of these dramas is packaged and consumed. *Poldark* is a rich case study because while the novels might be regarded (by this historian at least) as revisionist, for whatever reason that innovation does not translate easily either to a reader or viewer. The lingering question is ‘why?’. This is not an issue of a production failing to respect historical content – particularly in the more recent series, Graham’s plot lines and key themes of mining, economics, banking and death are all retained. Rather than looking for flaws in the production process (which is effectively what we do when we scrutinize the ‘accuracy’ or otherwise of a drama) we need to think about the consumption of particular genres more broadly.

A lack of public engagement with aspects of eighteenth-century history is unquestionably a fundamental barrier to what an audience will or will not ‘see’ on screen when they watch *Poldark*. As Peter Cosgrove (2002) has noted, there is a limit to how much ‘strangeness’ the audience can tolerate, leading viewers to filter out elements they do not recognize and instead interpret the drama through references with which they are more comfortable. While Edwardian-themed dramas like *Downton* lack the ‘remoteness of other moments in history’ (Byrne 2015: 155), in the case of eighteenth-century British history, the absence of any significant related content on the national curriculum (especially for American viewers) has a profound impact on public understanding. While just about all viewers are familiar with the Titanic, the First World War, and the Roaring ‘Twenties (all covered by *Downton*), few readers or viewers of *Poldark* would have prior knowledge about many of the issues that Graham highlights. Instead, frequent points of reference will be other period dramas which, in terms of eighteenth-century imagery, are shaped predominantly by Austen adaptations (clean, genteel and romantic) or by ‘darker’ portrayals (such as *Moll Flanders, Sharpe, Tom Jones*). For the historian as a viewer, *Poldark* might be nothing ‘like’ these other dramas, but for the non-historian viewer the narrative might resemble an Austen romance, with a flawed hero (Darcy/Ross Poldark), a feisty heroine (Elizabeth Bennett/Demelza Carne), a path strewn with obstacles, and a romance challenging social convention. Notably, the same comparisons between *Downton* and Austen have been made, particularly with the Crawley parents’ search for suitable husbands for their daughters and the contentious Matthew-Mary romance plot—underscoring how these dramas, set in distinctly different eras, risk becoming monolithic.

This complexity is important for historians to recall when exploring drama as a form of public engagement with the past. What a historian ‘sees’ in a drama is not necessarily what a wider audience will retain. Establishing whether or not a drama is ‘innovative’ or ‘derivative’ in its presentation of particular elements of the past can only be done in tandem with considering how that drama is ‘consumed’. Historians can play a role in that process of consumption, by generating and awareness of historical concerns. But the relationship between audiences and the historical content of a drama is not defined by the drama itself. Moreover, as *Poldark* may suggest, this discourse can become substantially decoupled from the historical framework within which the drama is set.

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1. **Notes**

   See for example, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10046866/BBC-to-challenge-Downton-with-Poldark-remake.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Quotation from Graham in his preface to Jean Graham, *The Poldark Cookery Book,* first published in 1981 with a new edition forthcoming from Macmillan in September 2017. I am grateful to Macmillan for sharing an advance proof copy. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Anon, *The Observer*, 16 December 1945. pn. or available on line? [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Anon, *The Manchester Guardian,* 1953. pn. or available on line? [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://twitter.com/Hannah_Greig/status/> @Hannah\_Greig: see feed for 4-6th July 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)