

The Ever-Present Past: A Redux

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Abstract

In 2026, looking back, the 2017/2019 special issue of ESTRO: University of Essex Student Research Online marked an important milestone in the journal's history. That edition, developed in partnership with the History Department, was the result of the successful October 2017 conference The Ever-Present Past: How Public History Informs the Present. It was the first collaboration of its kind between ESTRO and another University department, and it set the stage for the interdisciplinary ethos that continues to shape the journal today.

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AI Statement

Editorial

This special issue reflected the vibrant intellectual energy of its time. It drew together the work of PhD students, Early Career Researchers, and scholars from other institutions who had contributed to the 2017 conference. Together, they helped expand ESTRO's network of contributors and offered insights into how the past continues to shape modern society. The sessions also questioned the role of academics as interpreters and communicators of history in public discourse. As Dr. Alix Green (2019) wrote then in the foreword, "The conference and the papers presented here show the value of historians giving serious attention to the ways in which the past appears to intrude on, make demands of and claim authority over the present." The original conference had sought to examine how history permeates contemporary life; through media, commemorations,

literature, film, and television; and how narratives of the past have been enlisted to serve political or cultural agendas. The 2017/2019 ESTRO issue captured much of that conversation, exploring history's representation across mediums: from cinema and cultural artefacts to school textbooks, museums, and memorials. With hindsight, that collaboration stands as a formative example of how ESTRO bridged research within and beyond the university, affirming the lasting value of engaging the public with the many dimensions of the past.

Nostalgia and simplification often make historical narratives accessible to a wider public, but these forces also can distort the complexity of historical experience. This nostalgic longing for a simpler, more connected past is perfectly captured by the entertainer Joyce Grenfell (1976), who compared playing to an audience to "like a really long rally in tennis, feeding off each other, a tricky bit, a lob, then a point to me". Grenfell's metaphor highlights a yearning for a slow, reciprocal, and communal dialogue that is easy to savour. Yet, as her quote subtly reveals, this exchange is never truly equal: no matter how collaborative the 'rally' feels, the performer, or the curator of history, ultimately controls the narrative, sets the agenda, and wins the final point. In our fast-paced modern world, the slow rally of community is frequently replaced by rapid, fragmented communication, making this unequal curation of history even more powerful. Rather than relying on abstract theories to understand this phenomenon, the articles in this issue demonstrate practically how public history acts as a conduit for present-day experiences. By examining specific case studies, the contributors highlight the tension between historical complexity and popular narrative, demonstrating how memories are frequently curated by modern "performers" and weaponised to sustain modern ideological divides.

The Cinematic Public Sphere: Framing Trauma and Identity

This tension between historical complexity and popular narrative is most strikingly demonstrated when comparing Steven Bishop's (2019) exploration of the US Civil War in Hollywood and Mona Becker's (2019) analysis of German representation in film and television. Both authors tackle the fraught nature of contested histories on screen, revealing how popular cinema frequently simplifies profound trauma into consumable moral tales for present-day audiences. The role of the film director as a public historian is crucial here; as the public learns an increasing amount of history within the cinema, the decisions directors make regarding which parts of history to remember, and which parts to forget, actively shape public consciousness.

In the German context, Becker scrutinises the Americanisation of the Holocaust in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), noting how the film relies on a neat dichotomy of good versus evil (Rosenfeld, 1997). Spielberg's aesthetic of redemption aestheticises guilt through individual exceptionality. Oskar Schindler is presented as a humanitarian intercessor of systemic evil, transforming from a flawed, womanising capitalist into a universal saviour. Consequently, the Jewish characters are largely relegated to the role of a silent, cowering mob, functioning merely as a catalyst for Christian redemption. The little girl in the red dress, for instance, has no history and no function beyond being the agent of Schindler's moral transformation. Becker contrasts this

Americanisation with the German miniseries *Generation War* (2013), which domesticates atrocity by focusing on ordinary German victimhood. The narrative of *Generation War* suggests its protagonists are un-ideological victims of a brutal system, caught up in the machinations of World War Two without actively supporting National Socialism. The film conveniently kills off its most morally compromised characters, such as the opportunistic singer Greta and the brutalised soldier Friedhelm, allowing the surviving characters to serve as a redeemed national genealogy. Becker links this cinematic narrative shift to the resurgence of right-wing movements in modern Germany, noting how politicians from the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) have co-opted the rhetoric of German victimhood and suffering to protest modern refugee crises and memory culture.

Similarly, Bishop examines how films like *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Free State of Jones* (2016), and *Django Unchained* (2012) act as ideological condensations. Bishop shows that the horrors of slavery are often framed through individual heroics or stylised violence that speak directly to contemporary American anxieties about race and retribution. For instance, Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* deliberately omitted the more nuanced, "bright" aspects of Solomon Northup's original historical narrative, such as his admiration for certain fair-minded slave owners, in order to withhold any outlet of hope or sympathy from the modern audience, forcing them to confront the unrelenting brutality of the institution. Gary Ross's *Free State of Jones* goes even further in manipulating the historical record. To make the Confederate deserter Newton Knight more palatable to modern audiences, Ross invents the fictional runaway slave Moses to create a noble, egalitarian myth of white and black solidarity, while simultaneously ignoring Knight's highly problematic post-war bigamy and the fact that his lover, Rachel, had been enslaved by Knight's own grandfather. Meanwhile, Quentin Tarantino openly admits that *Django Unchained* is "history without the capital H," utilizing the hyper-violent aesthetics of the Spaghetti Western to speak to the contemporary era of Black power rather than striving for empirical authenticity (Bonilla, 2013). Together, Bishop and Becker illustrate how the cinematic public sphere actively shapes the public's perception of both the past and the present, utilizing the emotional weight of history to win the metaphorical "tennis rally" of modern identity politics.

Material Culture and the Commodification of Memory

This desire to curate the past to suit contemporary sensibilities is not limited to the grand narratives of cinema; it is equally prevalent in the everyday material culture and ephemera that permeate modern British life. The way historical artefacts are repurposed to serve modern needs is powerfully explored in Katherine Howells's (2019) study of British wartime posters. The Ministry of Information's propaganda campaigns during the Second World War, such as "Dig for Victory," "Make Do and Mend," and "Careless Talk Costs Lives", were originally designed as ephemeral tools to manage public morale and disseminate government instructions. However, as Howells demonstrates through public surveys and interviews, these posters have transcended their original context to become enduring mythological symbols of British national identity.

Howells elucidates how wartime mnemonic artefacts are recontextualised, commodifying resilience and stoicism while simultaneously obscuring the nuanced complexities of the wartime experience (Noakes and Pattinson, 2013). Her research reveals that when modern British citizens view these posters, they rarely engage with the actual historical realities of rationing, state censorship, or the genuine terror of the Blitz. Instead, they interpret the images through the lens of established national myths, such as the "People's War" and the "Dunkirk Spirit." For many respondents, the "Dig for Victory" poster is an emblem of hard work and an egalitarian society pulling together, while the "Make Do and Mend" campaign is frequently divorced entirely from its wartime roots and applied to contemporary concerns like hipster vintage fashion, environmental sustainability, and charity shops.

This phenomenon is most acute in the afterlife of the "Keep Calm and Carry On" poster. Originally designed in 1939 but never officially displayed due to fears that the public would find it patronising, the poster was rediscovered decades later and has since become one of the most ubiquitous symbols of modern "Britishness." For many of Howells's respondents, the poster serves as a comforting reminder of innate British stoicism in the face of modern challenges, from economic recessions to terrorist attacks. However, Howells demonstrates that while this imagery acts as a reassuring emblem of unity for some, it has become a profound source of irritation for others. For a growing number of cynical observers, the "Keep Calm" cliché masks underlying societal fractures and lingering imperial legacies. One respondent explicitly connected their distaste for the poster to a broader fatigue with the "nostalgia for the Empire" and "Rule Britannia stuff" that surged in the wake of the Brexit referendum. Thus, Howells's work proves that physical artefacts become active sites of modern ideological contestation, reflecting present-day identity crises and generational divides rather than offering an objective window into historical realities.

Contested Geographies: The Physical Landscape of Selective Amnesia

Just as Howells demonstrates how printed artefacts are continually reinterpreted, Michael Sewell (2019) and Mark Stoddart (2019) show how the physical landscape and the built environment serve as powerful, yet highly selective, repositories of public memory. Stoddart's analysis of the 1887 Royal Jubilee Exhibition in Newcastle highlights the transience of public history when it fails to align with enduring regional narratives. In 1887, Newcastle hosted an enormous exhibition on the Town Moor to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee and stimulate the local economy during a severe depression. It was a staggering success, attracting over two million visitors, generating a profit of £4,388, and featuring spectacular attractions ranging from a full-size replica of the Old Tyne Bridge to fully operational, electrically-lit coal mines. Excursion trains brought visitors from as far as London, and the event successfully fused high industrial culture with popular amusements like toboggan runs and performing elephants.

Yet, as Stoddart notes, this monumental event has almost entirely vanished from local memory. Today, only the name "Exhibition Park" and a single architectural tower remain. Stoddart argues

that the 1887 Exhibition has been forgotten because it contradicts the dominant modern narrative of the North-East of England. The region's cultural memory is heavily invested in a romanticised vision of heavy industry, coal, and shipbuilding, often framed through the lens of eventual industrial decline and the narrative of the 'noble worker' struggling against 'uncaring elites.' The 1887 Exhibition, which was a triumphant, pragmatic, and unashamedly capitalist business venture organised by the civic elite to market regional products, simply does not fit comfortably into this melancholic narrative of loss. Consequently, this vibrant piece of public history has been discarded.

Contrastingly, Michael Sewell's micro-historical study of the 1648 Siege of Colchester reflects the enduring dialectic between local and national memory economies. The Siege of Colchester was one of the most brutal episodes of the English Civil Wars, resulting in widespread starvation, the destruction of thousands of homes, and the controversial execution of Royalist commanders Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle by the Parliamentarian General Sir Thomas Fairfax. Sewell notes how the physical landscape of Colchester still bears the deep scars of this conflict. Landmarks such as the ruined St Botolph's Priory, the musket-pocked timber framing of the 'Siege House' restaurant, and the repaired brickwork of St Mary at the Walls stand as silent witnesses to the town's trauma.

However, Sewell demonstrates how this memory has been aggressively curated and manipulated over the centuries. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Tory historians like Philip Morant and John Horace Round actively shaped the town's history to portray the Parliamentarians as villains and the Royalist commanders as martyrs, culminating in the construction of a Victorian obelisk marking the exact site of Lucas and Lisle's execution. Yet, in the modern era, the civic authorities of Colchester show a marked indifference to this bloody chapter of their past. Modern tourism marketing heavily prioritises the safety and antiquity of Colchester's Roman and Norman heritage, focusing on Boudicca and the grand Norman Castle, allowing the politically messy and traumatic memory of the Civil War to fade into the background (Sweet, 1997). The siege is now only tangentially remembered through detached plaques or bizarre local myths, such as the persistent but historically baseless legend that the nursery rhyme 'Humpty Dumpty' originated from a Royalist cannon falling from the tower of St Mary at the Walls. Both Stoddart and Sewell highlight how geographic and local memory is not static; it is actively curated, preserved, or discarded to suit modern civic agendas and the demands of the tourism industry.

The Friction Between Academic Authority and Public Consumption

The final, and perhaps most volatile, theme explored in this issue is the friction between the curation of history by academic elites and the lived, emotional experience of marginalised communities. This dynamic is powerfully addressed in Somak Biswas's (2019) consideration of the 2012 NCERT cartoon controversy in India. In 2005, the Indian government initiated the National Curriculum Framework to rewrite school history textbooks, attempting to undo the cultural distortions of the Hindu Right and foster a more secular, open-ended "critical pedagogy."

Prominent academic historians were enlisted to curate these texts, which included the insertion of political cartoons to encourage critical thinking.

In 2012, a massive national furore erupted over the inclusion of a 1949 cartoon depicting B.R. Ambedkar, the iconic leader of the Dalit (ex-Untouchable) movement and chief architect of the Indian Constitution, sitting on a snail representing the Constitution, while being whipped by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The inclusion of this image sparked outrage among Dalit communities, leading to protests, petitions, and lawsuits. The response from the academic establishment was swift and remarkably unified: a coalition of left-wing, liberal, secular, and feminist historians (predominantly from upper-caste backgrounds) aggressively defended the cartoon. They argued that the ability to laugh at political satire is a hallmark of a healthy democracy, and they dismissed the Dalit protests as "unreasonable," "fanatic," and an immature manifestation of identitarian politics.

Biswas brilliantly unpacks the profound disconnect at the heart of this controversy. He illustrates how the universalising, secular language of academic historians, who claimed to be defending "freedom of expression", masked a deep blindness to their own social privilege and the lived realities of marginalised groups (Narayan, 2009). For the Dalit community, the image of their most revered icon being whipped by an upper-caste politician was not a harmless piece of critical pedagogy; it was a visceral, deeply offensive invocation of historical slavery, physical violence, and centuries of systemic humiliation. Biswas highlights how the newly empowered Dalit middle class is actively claiming its own history, relying on oral traditions, performative myths, and identity-driven narratives to counter the hegemony of the secular academic establishment. The controversy serves as a stark reminder that historical texts do not exist in a vacuum. Cartoons, textbooks, and academic frameworks are all implicated in the structures of power and knowledge. When critical pedagogy is deployed without self-reflexivity regarding access, audience, and historical trauma, it risks collapsing into a false universalism that dictates to the marginalised how they ought to consume their own pain.

Conclusion: History with a Public Purpose

This friction effectively mirrors the overarching tensions identified by Dr Alix Green (2019) in her foreword to the issue. Green argues that public history must be viewed not as a diluted or inferior form of academic history, but as history with a 'public purpose', animated by a commitment to the needs, anxieties, and questions of the present. Public history is practiced precisely because a particular past matters *now*, whether it involves confronting the racism built into our civic monuments, debating the political bias of school textbooks, or unravelling the nostalgic mythology of wartime posters.

Ultimately, the articles in this special issue remind us that history is an active, ongoing, and frequently uncomfortable dialogue. The act of narration is an act of profound responsibility. It requires a constant negotiation between fidelity to the historical record and responsiveness to the public's interpretive demands. By stepping away from the ivory tower of overly abstract theories

and engaging directly with how the public consumes, curates, and contests history in the cinema, on the streets, and in the classroom, historians can fulfil their duty of academic citizenship. The 2017 issue of *ESTRO* stands as a testament to this vital work, proving that the past is never truly settled; it is indeed ever-present, demanding our constant vigilance and engagement.

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