

# Editorial

Editors: Sarah Marshall, Michael Sewell, Lewis Smith, with assistance from Jessica Fure

University of Essex

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## Editorial

This issue of ESTRO, the University of Essex Student Research Online journal, is a special issue, following the successful conference, 'The Ever Present Past: How Public History Informs the Present', held by the History Department in October 2017. This is the first time ESTRO and another Department within the University have worked together to produce such an issue. We are delighted that the History Department and the research of PhD students and Early Career Researchers, involved in the conference, can add to the intellectual contributions of ESTRO and the University of Essex. This issue demonstrates the research of those both within the university and those we have worked with from other institutions to create a wider network of researchers.

The aim of the conference was to explore the influence and significance of the past in modern society. This is often evident in the media, anniversaries and commemorations, literature, film and television. Particularly in recent years, there have also been numerous occasions in which the past has been used to promote political agendas and forge identities, such as Donald Trump's 'make America Great again'. Within this, the conference also considered the academic's role in shaping these histories and communicating research to wider audiences. As the organisers of this event, we wanted to extend the reach of the fascinating research presented at the conference which formed the basis of discussions on the day. This issue of ESTRO captures a collection of the papers presented at the conference, and an additional paper from one of our organisers Michael Sewell, with topics ranging from the portrayal of history in film, cultural artefacts, school textbooks, exhibitions and landmarks. The journal issue therefore brings together different approaches to the topic of public history, exploring memory and the influence of the past on the present.

Our issue begins with Steven Bishop's paper which explores the portrayal of the American Civil War in three Hollywood films: *12 Years a Slave*, *Free State of Jones* and *Django Unchained*. Bishop uses these films to explore three vital questions of film as public history: why is it that particular historical events are 'recalled', what aspects of history are forgotten or ignored, and how such histories should actually be remembered. This fascinating article looks at the choices behind the creation of these films, often with directors being drawn to these histories through their relevance

to the present, and the challenges of Hollywood in striking the balance between historical authenticity and artistic license.

Following the topic of film, Mona Becker's paper carefully scrutinises the film *Schindler's List* and the German television mini-series, *Generation War*, to evaluate the portrayal of Germans as 'perpetrators, victims and bystanders' of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Becker notes a simplification of narratives with tales of good vs. bad in *Schindler's List*, arguing that the Jewish characters serve primarily to convey the difference between Oscar Schindler and the film's antagonist Amon Göth. The article also notes the claiming of German victimhood, particularly in *Generation War*. Becker carefully links this idea of German victimhood to the recent rise of German right-wing movements and their attitudes to recent issues, such as the refugee crisis.

Katherine Howells' paper continues the theme of cultural artefacts by using a range of Second World War posters to conduct face-to-face and online surveys, as well as interviews, to gauge how these posters trigger and reflect people's memories of the war. Yet, linking in with the conference theme of how public history informs the present, Howells also explores how these artefacts are equally revealing of people's personal and national identity today, reflecting ideas of popular myths such as the 'People's War' and 'Dunkirk and Blitz spirits'. Howells thus convincingly argues the continued significance of the posters to British history and identity, despite the end of the Second World War being over fifty years ago.

Continuing our collection of fascinating papers is the paper of Somak Biswas which examines a different medium of public history, that of textbooks in India. Biswas focuses specifically on the 'NCERT textbook controversy' which broke out in 2012. This intriguing exploration demonstrates the complexity of caste and social class in India, and how histories of the country and identities are portrayed and reflected. Here Biswas conveys the conflicts between the histories produced by the generally 'left/ liberal, secularist and feminist' academic scholarship and the 'Dalit intelligentsia'. Biswas' work therefore carefully highlights various influences on public history, particularly how the influence of those writing historical narratives dictates which histories are written and which are ignored.

Mark Stoddart's paper explores the case of forgotten history via an examination of the largely forgotten 1887 Newcastle Jubilee Exhibition. Stoddart details the origins of the exhibition being organised by the 'North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers', the intention being to promote the area and its key industries. As Stoddart conveys, commerce and entertainment became dominating factors behind the exhibition. Despite limited remaining evidence and archives, Stoddart effectively paints a picture of the aims of the exhibition, the amusements, and visitors, touching here on issues of class. Stoddart ends with an interesting discussion of why the Newcastle Exhibition, unlike others at the time in Glasgow and Manchester, has been largely forgotten.

Our final paper is by one of our organisers Michael Sewell, who explores the memory of the Civil War, focusing on the local history of Colchester and its Civil War landmarks. Sewell assesses not only the surviving memory of these landmarks and the Civil War in Colchester, but also the

politicisation of the memory into a narrative of ‘good guy’ vs. ‘bad guy’ through the memorialisation of Lucas vs. Fairfax. In addition to this assessment, Sewell highlights the lack of centrality of the memory of the Civil War in Colchester’s local history and memory, where instead more popular narratives of the Romans tend to dominate. Consequently, Sewell concludes with a discussion of the usability of Civil War memory in today’s world.

We would like to thank everyone who has been involved in ‘The Ever Present Past’ conference and the production of this journal issue. We would particularly like to thank our speakers and authors for sharing their research and allowing for stimulating and thought-provoking discussions and reading. We would also like to thank everyone involved in the peer review process, and Dr Alix Green for providing a foreword to the issue, all of whom have kindly dedicated their time to make this possible. Lastly, none of this would have been achievable without the support and guidance of the ESTRO team, particularly the editors Lin Su and Melissa Shales, and the History Department at the University of Essex. We hope you enjoy reading the journal issue as much as we have enjoyed working on the conference and putting this special issue of ESTRO together.

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