

The death of celebrity historians is much exaggerated

Don't write celebrity TV historians off just yet – as long as they don't stray from their expertise



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Historian and writer Dr Lucy Worsley, currently presenting Harlots, Housewives and Heroines, about Restoration women. Photograph: Richard Saker

For about 15 years, history has been experiencing a popularity boom. History books now sell more than 5 million copies a year in the UK and feature regularly in the bestseller lists. You can hardly switch on your television without seeing Simon Schama, David Starkey, Niall Ferguson or their younger, often female rivals holding forth in some exotic or historic location. Natasha's Dance, Orlando Figes' study of 19-century Russian culture, was advertised on huge posters in London's tube stations. The latest volume in Dominic Sandbrook's multi-volume history of postwar Britain is prominently displayed in bookshops across the land. "History," a BBC television producer is said to have remarked, "is the new gardening."

Not surprisingly, younger academics are keen to jump on the media bandwagon, given the continuing relative decline in academic pay and the continuing absolute increase in the amount of work they are forced to do by the burgeoning audit culture; continuing cuts in teaching funding; and steep rises in student fees, leading students to make ever-increasing demands on their time. When I set out in the academic profession decades ago, nobody would have thought of using a literary agent or being trained as a television presenter. Now it's almost a matter of course for our more ambitious younger colleagues – as Sir Keith Thomas, chair of the judges of the prestigious Wolfson history prize, has recently complained.

A case in point was Amanda Foreman, whose Oxford history thesis was considered, as they all are, for publication in the respectable but little-read Oxford Historical Monographs series and, after lengthy consideration by a battery of referees, turned

down. It was too late anyway: it had already appeared in print as Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire, entered the bestseller lists, and been set up for filming with Keira Knightley in the title role. Meanwhile, its young author had featured in a promotional photograph standing naked behind a pile of copies of her book large enough to avoid any serious unseemliness.

Yet the compromises Foreman had to make to reach a wide audience did not in the end seriously undermine the book's scholarship, any more than putting the notes at the end of the book instead of at the foot of the page, or using them for the discussion of academic disputes, instead of the actual text, means the end of academic respectability. Sandbrook's writings on postwar Britain, Starkey's on the Tudor monarchy, Schama's on the early modern Netherlands, and many other, similar books manage to combine popular appeal with solid scholarship. It's when they abandon the latter for the former that they get into trouble. The latest row involving Orlando Figes concerns allegations of poor scholarship, misattributions and basic factual mistakes. But this isn't a consequence of his celebrity; allegations of the same kind have been made against obscure academic historians in the past as well.

Celebrity historians are especially likely to get into trouble if they desert their own field of expertise and enter the rough-and-tumble of political debate. David Starkey aroused accusations of racism when he said on television that the summer riots of 2011 showed that white people had "become black". Historians who court controversy by being provocative are likely to get more than they bargain for. Two years ago, Niall Ferguson's much-publicised divorce drew down upon him the kind of fake moral disapproval combined with salacious and intrusive comment usually reserved for footballers or soap-opera stars. Perhaps one of the outcomes of the Leveson inquiry will be to put an end to this kind of reporting, though, unfortunately, one suspects it won't.

Does all this mean the death of the celebrity historian? Are the media and the public getting fed up with the whole phenomenon of popular history? Will we go back to the old style of television history programmes – where there was no historian to be seen, only visual images backed by an anonymous voice- over read out by an actor? Is the day of the bestselling history book and the big advance finally over?

Despite all the media controversy, there's no sign of it. History continues to have a broad popular appeal, and long may it continue to do so. Good publishers and television producers know that history works best when written or presented by a historian who really knows the subject, such as Thomas Asbridge on the Crusades or David Reynolds on postwar international summits. It's when historians leave the territory of their expertise, get things wrong, appear on Question Time, host chatshows or write newspaper columns, that they become real celebrities; and, as some of them have found out, you become a celebrity at your peril.

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