

The President's Column

The autumn is upon us. And *Poldark* is back! The images of the beautiful Cornish coast around Treen, Porthcurno, and St Michael's Mount are welcome visitor to the screen as the grimy nights draw in. The television series, reborn from the novels of Winston Graham, and the earlier screen adaptations of the mid-1970s, continue to attract considerable attention and interest from the general public and historians alike. The historical preparation for the portrayal of mid- to late eighteenth-century rural, coastal and town life has been meticulous: attention to the details of dress, commerce, urban sociability and gentry etiquette have been scrutinised by the learned and the expert. The narratives are compelling, blending the personal, the emotional and the political in a very challenging and provocative way. Over the course of successive Sunday evenings the heroes and villains, the scoundrels and the indigent encounter each other but also the deeper seams of eighteenth-century life: the rule and administration of law by local elites, the impact of commerce on the routines of customary economic practices and the complexity of popular and parliamentary politics. While much has been made of the visual reconstruction and the marvellous acting, the more profound themes of gender inequality, class war, the 'old corruption' of public politics and the abject poverty of rural labour have not been teased out in the reviews, while in effect they are the sinews of the power of the narrative which keep us engaged. We see the complex social mobility of the marriage market, the crises of familial relationships that shape reputation and authority, the dangers of gambling and the financial markets, and the hard grind of everyday life of ordinary people.

Although the original novels were written in the immediate post-war contexts of the later 1940s, the fictions have been made more historically interesting by the growth of social history in the 1970s. The ages of Walpole and then the Pitts, elder and younger, were not simply stories of landscaped country houses, glittering society and polite culture: they were times of revolution and class struggle. The American wars of independence saw the diffusion of radical commonwealth ideas across the



Atlantic; at home, popular resistance was manifest in the campaigns of John Wilkes for the liberties of the freeborn English. Later the French Revolution offered radical opportunities for protest, freedom in Europe and the Black Jacobins of Haiti. In the British Isles 'riots' prompted by political ideology or economic desperation reflected the increasing dominance of 'King Property' and the increasingly rapid destruction of what the great historian Edward Thompson called 'customs in common'. Labourers, artisans and skilled workers, men and women saw their traditional means of regulating their work and providing for their families constrained and disrupted by the demands of the market, and the ever-powerful coercive legal code which led to 'Albion's fatal tree'. Smuggling, poaching, and wrecking were all subjected to criminal codes of brutal savagery.

Poldark exposes many of these themes in the social history of crime and society explored in the great and formative works of historians like Edward Thompson (*Whigs and Hunters*, 1975), and the collection of essays exploring the lives and deaths of labourers and city-workers by Douglas Hay *et al.* (*Albion's Fatal Tree*, 1975). Markus Rediker has written a wonderful book on the Atlantic world of pirates and seamen (*Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 1987), while Peter Linebaugh's *London Hanged* (1991) explored the lives of those who were victims of Tyburn in the struggle between rich and poor. The criminalisation of what were regarded as customary rights in

the name of defending property and order is the backcloth to the struggle of Poldark and his friends. Commerce and maritime innovation may have brought new commodities to the gentry tables, but they also destroyed the system of perquisites of employment which enabled the poor and labouring to survive. Exploring these histories will make the viewing of the series even more exciting.

For those interested in the histories of smuggling, poaching and the highwayman then there is an alternative fictional series which seems to have been forgotten. I refer to the 'Dr Syn' novels of Russell Thorndyke, written during and after the First World War and set in the smuggling culture of Romney Marsh in Kent and Sussex. Thorndyke's novels travel widely, involving Caribbean characters, pirates and American revolutionaries: a much more diverse palette for the modern viewer. These novels have been serialised on the radio (read by Rufus Sewell), and indeed turned into graphic novels and Disney films. There was even a 'Carry On' version. The rock band, Led Zeppelin, recorded a song 'No quarter' drawn from the stories, while 'The Days of Syn' is a festival held in the town of Dymchurch to raise funds for local community activity. Perhaps the BBC will explore the possibilities of creating a further series? Let's hope so.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which reads "Justin Champion". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Justin Champion
President of the Historical Association