



Bomber Boys on Screen: RAF Bomber Command in Film and Television Drama by S.P. Mackenzie.

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Military historian S.P. MacKenzie's new monograph nicely complements his earlier study, *The Battle of Britain on Screen*.¹ Both books proceed chronologically, although the emphasis in *Bomber Boys* is on decades-long changing trends rather than individual productions. The author is preoccupied with evolving social and cultural mores, giving more attention to matters of reception and production than textual analyses. He presupposes a specialist audience familiar with the RAF's various roles in the Second World War and the general strategic roles of Bomber Command during larger campaigns as the locales and tides of the war changed over the years. Having assumed this about his readers, MacKenzie (Univ. of South Carolina) promptly cuts to the chase, examining various films and television programs without much fanfare (the book's introduction runs only three pages). He brings an expert's eye to the scrutiny of film and television productions often neglected in studies of World War II on screen.

The following, from his chapter on the 1960s, is a good example of MacKenzie's ability to zero in on relevant issues:

What the bomber boys and those who led them had accomplished during the war came under scrutiny both in print and on stage, while the limitation of having only a single airworthy Lancaster to use for filming purposes was exposed in a pair of major cloak-and-dagger features. (69)

This passage typifies Mackenzie's astute balance of practical issues (dwindling expertise and inauthentic visual representation of Bomber Command and its appurtenances) and conceptual ones (shifting attitudes toward the military and deference to authority as a means of recreating RAF campaigns twenty years after the war).

The most fascinating sections of the book concern the public discourse about controversial productions. Historians have long debated the strategic efficacy of area bombing in the war. Over the years, some (e.g., Richard Overy) stressed its lack of decisive effect on civilian populations (149-50), while Bomber Command veterans defended its value in the larger war effort (128). The most contested production was the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *The Valour and the Horror* documentary (1992; dir. Brian McKenna), specifically its second installment, "Death by Moonlight," which criticized the historical legacy of Bomber Command and led to a rethinking of the myths underpinning Canada's contribution to the war. Conversely, the chapter on the 1940s skillfully parses how early films about Bomber Command either focused on precise industrial targets or only implied area bombing, leaving aside its moral implications (21, 26).

Chapter 1, on propaganda features like *The Lion Has Wings* (1939; dir. Michael Powell et al.) and *One of Our Aircraft is Missing* (1942; dir. Powell and Emeric Pressburger), provides a solid baseline for gauging the changing narratives around Bomber Command. Other early chapters ex-

1. Subtitle: "The Few" in *British Film and Television Drama* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2007; 2nd ed. 2016).

plain how key figures like Powell, actor Michael Redgrave, and RAF Marshal Sir Arthur “Bomber” Harris gained or created reputations that had to be assessed in later productions.

As in his earlier book, MacKenzie considers representations of class and regionalism as well as variances in technical accuracy and reception history. One wishes for more comparative analysis of the findings in the two studies. This might have made clearer how film and television have depicted the changing fortunes of “the few” and the Battle of Britain, thus highlighting the uniqueness of Bomber Command. It would also have furthered MacKenzie’s methodological goal of encouraging precision in discussing historical and procedural details in the context of military history.

The author does not really, then, adopt a literary or film-studies perspective in which textual analysis of style and *mise en scène* would loom larger. But his discerning account of the representation of Bomber Command will inspire scholars in adjacent fields to approach his subject from new perspectives. S.P. Mackenzie is to be praised for elucidating the images, legacies, and myths surrounding Bomber Command as they have shaped film and TV treatments of the Second World War.