

First World War centenary - beyond Blackadder

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Intro VO: *Welcome to the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast from the University of Birmingham. In each edition we hear from an expert in a different field, who gives us insider information on key trends, upcoming events, and what they think the near future holds.*

Lucy: Today we're joined by Dr Pierre Purseigle, who is senior lecturer in Modern History at the University of Birmingham. And he's also president of the International Society for First World War Studies. Welcome, Pierre.

Pierre: Hi.

Lucy: So tell us about your work in First World War Studies.

Pierre: I'm a comparative historian of the First World War. I'm particularly interested in the way societies experienced and commemorated, dealt with, the legacies of the conflict in this context. I'm also involved in planning a range of activities in relation to the forthcoming centenary of the First World War in 2014-2018.

Lucy: So it's actually not that far away in terms of the amount of planning that needs to be done.

Pierre: No. We are at work because everything needs to be in the pipeline as soon as possible now.

Lucy: So why does it matter? Why should we put all this effort in Britain today into commemorating something that happened 100 years ago?

Pierre: Well, it is very obvious to us historians and indeed to many other commentators that the First World War still matters, and matters a great deal, to the British society, but also to all the former belligerent societies. Books, films, TV programmes related to the First World War are still immensely popular and their success denotes the continuing interest that people do take in this conflict. The British society and the former belligerents still are immensely interested in this conflict and really keen to understand why it happened, how that conflict was waged, and the impact it had on their countries.

Lucy: So how are we approaching the centenary? Is it going to be a commemoration? Is it going to be a celebration? And how will the focus determine what the impact is on the population of Britain when we go through this centenary?

Pierre: Well I think there is an obvious tension between, as you said, commemoration and celebration. The British society is certainly keen to commemorate the sacrifice of those who lost their lives in the conflict. To commemorate also the contribution of a range of other groups in society. But it's perhaps more difficult to think about celebrating what is still, in British collective memory, one of the defining tragedies of the 20th Century. So there is this tension between commemoration and celebration. Historians are not in the business of celebrating [and] they're not necessarily in the business of commemorating. What they can do, though, is contribute and help their society do this work. Our main responsibility certainly is education. And this is one of the things that we're particularly keen to do during the centenary.

Lucy: When you talk about how we have this popular imagination of the war being a great tragedy – perhaps one of the greatest tragedies that's ever happened to Britain – you know, kind of 'poor Tommy Atkins'...or, you know, we've all seen Blackadder [Goes Forth] and we kind of have that as our reference point. And so what's the education to be done around maybe breaking down some of the preconceptions that we have: that we feel that we know this war already? What more is there to learn about it?

Pierre: I think you're absolutely right. Blackadder [Goes Forth] still encapsulates, for most people in Britain, the dominant memory of the First World War. The First World War is seen as the quintessential 'bad war' in particular when compared to the Second World War. The war is still very much seen as a tragedy; the tragedy that led to the deaths of so many brave Tommies...sent to their death by a bunch of incompetent generals. This is this idea of 'the lions led by donkeys'. There's no disputing the fact that the First World War was a tragedy, but historians are keen to get the following point across to the audience at large: that the real tragedy of the First World War does not only lie in the loss of lives, but lies in the fact that British society and indeed the belligerent societies consented to the war effort for so long. The real tragedy of the First World War is that people in most cases went willingly to war [and] accepted to contribute to the war effort through their work on the home front and a range of other activities. But this, of course, is the kind of awkward truth that we're still particularly uncomfortable with. And this is perhaps the biggest challenge that historians of the First World War face. How to find a way to get that point across? To get British society and the former belligerent societies to reflect upon the role they played in this conflict.

Lucy: And of course, we weren't just victims – we were killers as well.

Pierre: Absolutely. I mean, that's the very tension. We don't want to accept the fact that we're not only victims but also perpetrators in this conflict. Incidentally, this is of particular relevance to a country like Britain which remains at war, involved in military operations across the globe. We are often keen to commemorate the loss of soldiers on the battlefield. We are perhaps less keen, for obvious reasons, to confront the fact that these soldiers – even though they are, today, professional soldiers – are fighting these wars on our behalf. That they are effectively fighting and risking their lives, and indeed killing, because we've asked them to do so on our behalf.

Lucy: So how would you like Britain to come out of that commemoration of 2014? What will make you feel like you've done your job? Will it be that we'll have a renewed idea of the relevance of the conflict for who we are as a nation today?

Pierre: I think historians are trying first of all to come to terms with the fact that there's only so much we can do. There's only so much you can do when confronted with something as successful and entertaining as Blackadder [Goes Forth], for instance. But we're still determined to use this opportunity to invite the British public to think differently about the experience of the First World War. And to think about the different ways in which the belligerent societies contributed to the war, and to think about the very complex legacies of this conflict.

Lucy: Because it shaped our whole political map, for example.

Pierre: Absolutely. If you think, for instance, of the relationship between Britain and Ireland, these were defined and redefined in the era of the Great War. But you can also think about the political map of Europe, or indeed think about the political map of the world, and some of the most important conflicts still going on in 2011...like, for instance, the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, this conflict is one of the legacies – one of the continuing legacies – of the Great War.

Lucy: It's really interesting to have the chance to talk to you ahead of a big national, or international, commemoration. Because these things normally happen to us, but you're somebody who's involved in the planning and the thinking about how we're going to approach this and what it's really going to mean for Britain. And how that involves us is going to make quite a big difference.

Pierre: Well that's a very interesting and, I have to say, a very exciting moment as well because historians are usually quite keen to complain about the fact their historical period of interest is depicted on TV or in the cinemas, for instance. Now, we do have the chance to get involved and contribute to the production of a range of media or cultural product, and this is – I think – a tremendous opportunity for us to really try to get our ideas across. And to get the public at large to understand that this field of study – First World War Studies – is one of the most vibrant academic fields in history at the moment.

Lucy: So there's a huge amount of work going on behind the scenes and it's only going to ramp up over the next couple of years!

Pierre: There is indeed. Because it is an opportunity, for instance, to publish books. And it is an opportunity for many historians to enjoy the limelight! The real question for most of us [historians], I suspect, is: how can we make best use of this opportunity to really have an impact on the way people understand the experience of the First World War and can therefore commemorate and perhaps celebrate, if they wish to do so, this conflict, with a better understanding of what that experience meant for British society between 1914 and 1918.

Lucy: Well we're looking forward very much to the centenary. Thank you very much, Dr Pierre Purseigle.

Pierre: Thank you.

Dr Pierre Purseigle has now left the University of Birmingham and currently works in the Department of History at Warwick University.

Outro VO: *This podcast and others in the series are available on the Ideas Lab website: www.ideaslabuk.com (<http://www.ideaslabuk.com>). On the website, you can find out how to e-mail us with comments, questions or suggestions for future topics for the podcast. There's also information on the free support Ideas Lab has to offer to TV and radio producers, new media producers and journalists. The interviewer for the Ideas Lab Predictor Podcast was Lucy Vernal, and the producer was Andy Tootell.*

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