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THE SUNDAY TIMES

It had me hooked from beginning to end

The Last Days of Anne Boleyn; The Aristocrats; Town; The Hunt for Britain's Sex Gangs; Love and Death in City Hall

AA Gill Published: 26 May 2013



(Meeson, HitAndRunMedia.com)

Court?" "No, I just walk this way." And the trouble with experts who specialise is that they unconsciously mimic, then become, characters from their preferred time. The lady historians sound like coquettes from court, and David Starkey, the Cranmer of Question Time, looks as if he's giving evidence to a Star Chamber. Mantel seems to be talking from inside a heraldic owl.

Oddest of all about this Anne Boleyn, though, was that she was spoken of as if she were a contemporary woman. All of them noticed her sharp wit, her sexiness and her intellect, as if she were Pippa Middleton. Yet Henry is regarded as a medieval character. She is a modern victim of her times, but nobody points out that this makes him a modern psycho serial wife-killer and a cruel solipsist — because he is excused by his times. There was another programme about Cromwell on, but, do you know, I've had an ample sufficiency of the iron chancellor.

I've just been to the press day at the Chelsea Flower Show. By the time you read this, you'll have had enough bosky verdure to give your bott hay fever. A nice woman pressed a packet of seeds into my hand (Deadly Nightshade) and implored that I write about gardeners. "They're dying out, you know — people aren't gardening." I'd never thought of gardeners as being like polar bears, but I expect she has a point. With all the TV crews and posing celebrities in orange make-up and boating blazers, sniffing pansies that have been named after them, it did look as if gardening might be growing into the new cookery: something we watch passively to indulge an escapist interest without actually having to get up and do it.

Gardens on TV are less bother than having all that mud outside. Far better to turn it into a car port and visit Sissinghurst if the weather's nice. Gardening on mainstream television is a singularly English thing. A Frenchman I know said, "Gardening and dogs — only the English. Très fou!" Well, Jérôme, you frogs put Bernard-Henri Lévy on TV. That's madder than a ringful of poodles and petunias.

Three factual shows last week were the good, the bad and the ugly. Let's start with the good, the last in the series on **The Aristocrats**, which has been reshowed on More 4 this spring. This was a mean-spirited and snide little series up until the final episode — like looking through other people's windows to sneer at them. The old aristocracy are, of course, indefensible on every level: genetic, cultural, social, aesthetic and tasteful. But they're hardly a force in the land. They're rarer than gardeners. And smiling at their faces while flicking V-signs behind their backs is hardly a worthy effort. Television loves the upper classes, as long as they're fictitious, and ridicules them in reality. But this episode was altogether another episode of gefilte fish. They took on the Rothschilds. As Jacob, the current baron, succinctly pointed out, they'd been misinformed. They weren't aristocracy at all — never had been. "We are Jewish, we are nouveaux riches," he said with the merest hint of a back-at-you twinkle. "We may be part of the Establishment," he added, for emphasis.

This posed a hideous problem for the programme-makers: you can't be even ironically anti-semitic in the way you can be cynically anti-toff.

How much more do you want to know about Anne Boleyn's miscarriage? If it's a lot more, loads and loads more, then it's a shame you missed **The Last Days of Anne Boleyn**, because you could have filled your boots with her obstetric evacuations. Let me bring you up to gyno-speed. It was, or would have been, a boy — tough call, that. There was a dearth of royal boys back then, unlike now. And it may have been deformed. How deformed was moot. There was a lot of mooring about in Anne's vitals: Hilary Mantel was certain that the deformity was Catholic propaganda, because it was a sign from God that she'd been doing something really, really naughty with her brother. If, on the other hand, you think you already know far more about the Tudors than could possibly be useful in the course of a full life, then I'm sorry for adding to the sum of your doublet and woes.

Television really can't get enough of the Tudors. This programme decided that the new way to plough these barren furrows of regal swiving was to mash up two historic approaches: costumed re-creation and talking-heads reminiscence. The problem with re-enactments is that they are irrevocably mocked by the Carry On film. You can't look at anyone dressed as Henry VIII without hearing Sid James: "Hampton

Anyway, you're not going to outsmart the Rothschilds. Smart is their long suit. Lord Rothschild and his daughter Hannah showed us exactly why they aren't aristocracy. They're quick, bright and bred for brains, not chins. They are also wholly self-aware, another trait that rarely troubles our upper echelons. This programme turned out to be an interesting lesson, not just in turned tables, but in what the Rothschilds aren't, and what they don't do. They aren't devoted to preventing change, and they don't do piteous nostalgia.

The bad of the trio was **Town**, Nicholas Crane's limp and feeble examination of urban clusters — the too-big-to-be-cute villages that never grew up to be cities. They're quite fun to look at, but pretty grim to live in. They're the places you wouldn't go to for a dirty weekend and, if you were born there, couldn't wait to get out of. Crane started off with Oban — and wondered why people didn't stay there longer. I know Oban quite well, and the reason is as plain as the road out. It's because almost everything within 50 miles, in every direction, is better than Oban. Crane is a sort of homesick version of Judith Chalmers, always pointing out truisms, and he has a habit of starting sentences with "as a geographer", which must count as the most uninteresting, dread preamble in the whole of the language. Try saying any deathless quote from poetry and literature, then preface it with "as a geographer", and you'll see what I mean.

The ugly was **The Hunt for Britain's Sex Gangs**, a wretched and coruscating examination of the investigation and torturous prosecution of a Pakistani sex-trafficking ring in Telford. There were 100 victims and 200 suspects, and it was hard to watch without feeling a vigilante fury, spiked with a hopeless pity — not least at the insufferable torment the legal system piled on the victims, like a Tudor torture. This was a worthwhile and important documentary, made with care and journalistic diligence, offering a spark of evidence that Channel 4 still knows what a real documentary is, rather than the traffic in fat freaks and gynaecologically challenged exhibitions that it peddles like a peep show of one-handed prurience.

And then there was the memorably good one. **Love and Death in City Hall** was a charming and poignant look at the work of Belfast City Hall in registering births, deaths and marriages. This was another small example of bringing Northern Ireland in from the repetitive Tourette's of the Troubles — the over-familiar narrative of dogma and revenge was made notable by its absence. What we had were the lives of people caught at the crossroads that come to us all — hatching, matching and dispatching. Its emotional focus was the way they talked about themselves to officials. It was the matter-of-factness that made it so affecting, the red tape that ties us into the fabric of our time and our place.

It is a blandly simple idea that was made without flashiness, that offered a natural dignity to everyone who found themselves in front of the camera. It was made with the ethos of John Grierson, the man who coined the word documentary. He thought they should show people to each other so that we could have a better understanding and empathy, reinforcing our common humanity.

The Last Days of Anne Boleyn (BBC2, Thu)

The Aristocrats (More 4, Sat)

Town (BBC2, Tue)

The Hunt for Britain's Sex Gangs (C4, Thu)

Love and Death in City Hall (BBC4, Tue)

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