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Popular Culture and Identity: Remembering British History in 2015

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RESUMEN:

Los eventos conmemorativos históricos proporcionan a los investigadores una forma de apreciar cómo las comunidades se ven a sí mismas y a su historia, y cómo su identidad se manifiesta. Sin embargo, estos eventos pueden provocar controversias porque la memoria y la identidad son muy subjetivas, y porque otros participantes, o entidades interesadas, pueden tener opiniones distintas acerca del porqué, el cómo y el qué se debe conmemorar. Además, la tecnología y los medios de comunicación intervienen en el proceso de asignación de significados a las memorias del pasado, provocando discusiones en torno a lo apropiado o no de lo propuesto. La identificación con una causa requiere realizar una elección consciente, a menudo entre alternativas opuestas. Al asistir a conmemoraciones de eventos históricos, elegimos identificarnos con un hecho o causa. A través de símbolos nacionales o locales, asumimos actitudes, y establecemos nuestra relación con el Otro. Este artículo analizará unas conmemoraciones culturales e históricas que tuvieron lugar en el Reino Unido en 2015. El nuevo entierro de un rey quinientos años después de su muerte, y el bicentenario de una batalla decisiva se examinarán, dentro del contexto de otras conmemoraciones, para destacar lo que estos acontecimientos revelan en cuanto a la identidad y la cultura popular. El marco teórico se apoya en los estudios de la memoria, los estudios culturales, y las ciencias sociales, junto con un análisis de fuentes relevantes de los medios de comunicación. Sería razonable suponer que los eventos conmemorados después de varios siglos no presentarían controversias, pero este artículo demostrará que no siempre es así.

Palabras clave: historia, memoria, identidad, conmemoración, eventos

ABSTRACT:

Commemorative historical events provide an insight for researchers into how communities see themselves and their history, and how their identity is displayed. However, such events can involve controversy because memory and identity are highly subjective, and other participants, or interested parties, may have different views about what should be commemorated, why and how. Added to this, technology and the media intervene in the process of assigning meaning to memories of the past, sparking debates about appropriateness. Expressing one's identification with a cause requires awareness and active choice, often between opposing alternatives. By attending commemorations of historical dates, we are choosing to be identified with a particular event or cause. Through national or local symbols, we assume attitudes, and mark our relationship with the Other. This article will examine cultural and historical commemorations which took place in the UK in 2015. The reburial of a king five hundred years after his death and the bicentenary of a crucial battle will be studied, in the context of other commemorations, in order to highlight what these events reveal about identity and popular culture. The theoretical framework draws from memory studies, cultural studies, and social science, together with discourse analysis of relevant media sources. It would seem reasonable to suppose that events commemorated after a lapse of several centuries should not cause controversy, but, as this article will demonstrate, this is not always the case.

Key words: history, memory, identity, commemoration, events

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of memory studies is a well-established and rapidly expanding academic domain in which sociologists, historians, psychologists and experts from other disciplines debate how their respective fields intersect to provide different perspectives on commemorative events. Particular attention is paid, for example, to WWI and WWII because of their transnational character, and because of the centenary of the former and the seventieth anniversary of the end of the latter coinciding within a few years of each other. Part of the ongoing research and debate focuses on how the end of WWII did not necessarily provide closure for many Americans (of Japanese, German, African or Jewish origin, as well as Native Americans). In the case of these participants, issues of representation and commemoration are still not resolved (Däwes and Gessner, 2015: 1). Commemorative events can be, and often are, used by governments, organisations and other interest groups to promote their own interpretations of history, often disregarding other points of view. Many researchers examine how contemporary cultural production "animates, fetishes and revises the past", or 'pasts', since history can be viewed differently from scientific, military, literary or other perspectives. Attention is focused on how key historical moments are memorialised and, at times, commercialised in contemporary culture (Project 2015). History and commemoration are intertwined but each has a different role: history rationalizes the past while commemoration sanctifies it; the past is an object of analysis for history, but commemoration makes it an object of commitment and produces symbols (Schwartz, 2016).

For Frost and Laing (2013: 1) commemorative events emphasize remembering and provide an insight for researchers into how communities see themselves, their history and their identity in relation to others. Identity is a complicated concept playing a central role in ongoing political debates about national and ethnic groups. Fearon (1999: 4) claims that "identity" can be used to refer both to social categories and to the sources of an individual's self-respect or dignity. We situate ourselves in relation to our context, and we appreciate a contrast with those outside the scope of our perceived identity. Although it may seem that identity and personality go together, in fact identity is different from

personality, since we may (passively) share personality traits with others, but by sharing an identity we are undertaking some kind of active engagement. Identity requires awareness and some element of selection, often between opposing elements (Identity in Question). It is this aspect of choosing to be identified with a particular event, related to national or local symbols, assumed attitudes and one's relationship with the Other which will form the basis of this analysis of cultural and historical commemorations and what they reveal about values, collective feelings and identification with a cause, at varying distances in time. Merkel (2016: 6) maintains that identities are social constructs and that they occur in specific socio-economic, political and cultural contexts: "They are the outcomes of social interaction and can only be understood properly in relation to the social environment, in particular in relation to other identities and communities". Commemorative events can involve a degree of controversy since memory and identity are subjective, and other participants may hold different views about what should be commemorated, why and how. Such events can be used to promote particular interpretations of the past, disregarding other points of view and sensibilities. However, this is not a new phenomenon, because as early as the sixteenth century, English governments "made calculated use of national memory for dynastic, political, religious, and cultural purposes" (Cressy, 1994: 61). Indeed, Gillis (1994: 5) observes that organizing commemorative activities requires coordinating both individual and group memories, while taking into account social and political factors. What may appear on the surface to be a consensual celebration is in fact "the product of processes of intense contest, struggle, and, in some instances annihilation" (Gillis, 1994: 5).

A number of important historical milestones of different kinds, each with a particular target audience, were commemorated in 2015. Among many others we could mention the following: the eight-hundredth anniversary of the sealing of Magna Carta, the one-hundredth anniversary of the ANZAC landings at Gallipoli, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the evacuation of Dunkirk, the seventieth anniversary of the end of the WWII (VE Day), or the fiftieth anniversary of the death of prime minister and wartime leader Sir Winston Churchill. The oldest historical fact in

this brief list is Magna Carta, but the real meaning of the document is probably only vaguely understood by people today, unless they are historians, politicians, judges or educationalists. It did not seem to catch the public's attention, in spite of the British Library bringing together "iconic documents and artefacts": two of the four surviving original copies, together with Jefferson's handwritten copy of the Declaration of Independence, for a "once-in-a-lifetime exhibition" (British Library). The thirteenth-century document, often called the "corner stone" of democracy certainly marked a turning point in relations between the king and his subjects, although its sixty-three clauses are really a list of complaints by the barons and the church against royal abuse of power. However, in order to give the commemoration more media coverage, activities and re-enactments were organised, including a mock trial in front of three of the world's top judges, focusing on whether the thirteenth-century barons and bishops were acting lawfully by refusing to surrender London to King John. A spokesman for the Magna Carta 800th Anniversary Committee explained that it would be "more than just a bit of historical themed fun" and that it would help explore "some timeless questions of constitutional and legal importance" (Hartley-Parkinson). The intention was to make the public aware of such an important anniversary, adding an element of entertainment. Modern urban dwellers often seek an idealised past, and re-enactments fulfil the function of allowing both participants and audiences to suspend their disbelief, and disengage from the problems and stress of modern life, entering an idealised version of the past for a short period (Frost and Laing, 2013: 78-79). In this light, enjoyment, or the "historical themed fun" cited by the organizers, is therefore justified.

The other events cited in the previous paragraph are related to the First and Second World Wars and are shared and commemorated by many other countries. In the case of Churchill, a remembrance service for the statesman was held in London, as well as a recreation of the route followed by his coffin on board a steamer on the River Thames, and in the presence of his descendants and people who witnessed his funeral in 1965. On that day half a century ago, a million people had silently lined the streets of London to watch the funeral cortege pass by. Fifty years on, the presence of the public was not comparable, but London Bridge was

still crowded with spectators:

... its entire span crammed with onlookers standing patiently in a perishing breeze. On either side, whole office blocks seemed to have come to a standstill as faces pressed against tinted windows. While the numbers could not match those of 1965, people still lined the banks to acknowledge the nation's debt to Churchill. (Hardman, January: 2015)

The tributes to Churchill were "an opportunity to mark the passing of the generation that fought and won World War II. They also provided politicians a chance to bask in the glow of a leader who symbolized Britain's darkest hour, and its greatest victory" (Detroit News). According to this view, via conscious association and identification, some of the qualities of the protagonist of the tribute could, ideally, be transferred to today's leaders, or would-be leaders.

With so many important events being commemorated within the space of a single year, it would seem arbitrary to single out some rather than others, but two of the commemorations held in 2015 and which may throw most light on the topic of this article are concerned, respectively, with the bicentenary of the Battle of Waterloo, and the reburial of King Richard III some five hundred years after his death. Our theoretical framework draws from sociology, memory studies, and cultural studies, together with discourse analysis of information sources.

2. WATERLOO: BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS

In his introduction to the Official Souvenir Publication for the Bicentenary Commemorations, the chairman of Waterloo 200¹ asks why the Battle of Waterloo should be celebrated at all, since it might be argued that it was "a long time ago and it would only annoy the French" (McCall, 2015: 5). The intention, far from annoying the French or anybody else, was "to commemorate and not in any way glorify or be triumphalist", and that the thousands who died on both sides deserved remembering. This battle constitutes a significant moment, even a "full stop in European history", with Victor Hugo calling Waterloo the hinge on the door to the nineteenth century (McCall, 2015: 5). Moreover, it is often forgotten by casual observers that this

battle marked the end of an international conflict which had lasted twenty-two years, on both land and sea. For these reasons, the Waterloo 200 organisation felt justified in commemorating a bloody battle with enormous loss of life and far-reaching consequences. Commemorative events relating to national identity are often highly contested, and when these events include re-enactments of battles, the dissonance is greater, because battles are, by definition, contested occurrences (Frost and Laing, 2013: 87). While the essential facts of Waterloo are beyond dispute, there was disagreement over the presentation or emphasis of certain aspects, and perhaps as a consequence, the commemoration was organized mainly by Belgium and Britain rather than France. The lesser French input gave the impression, much commented in the British press, that the French were either not really interested, or still too sensitive to assimilate a two-hundred-year-old defeat. Some would be careful to point out that, technically, France was not defeated: rather it was Napoleon who suffered this outcome.

The bicentenary was celebrated via a series of events and, according to the official webpage selling the corresponding tickets, spectators could expect to be

... at the very heart of the grandiose reconstruction of an event which continues to speak to the collective imagination: the Battle of Waterloo! To commemorate the Bicentenary of this Battle that left Europe stunned and that was instrumental in determining the future of our regions, the ASBL 'Bataille de Waterloo 1815' is planning the most impressive reconstructions ever seen in Europe: 5000 re-enactors, 300 horses and 100 canons. Don't miss this opportunity as the next edition won't be until 2025!

(...)

Attend two exceptional re-enactments of two different phases of the Battle. These shows promise to be different, fun for all, and full of emotions. Come and participate from the very front line. You will also have the opportunity to visit the museums, take a wander through the bivouacs and discover life as it was for the troops 200 years ago. (Waterloo 2015)

The language used in this Internet announcement is obviously intended

to boost ticket sales and tourism in the Belgian battle region by resorting to sensational vocabulary: "grandiose reconstruction", "most impressive reconstructions ever seen in Europe", "exceptional re-enactments", as well as promising a spectacle which would be "fun for all, and full of emotions". In spite of these expressions, which contrast with the intentions of Waterloo 200 to commemorate but not glorify, the Belgian message does contain some elements of historical decorum by describing the battle as an event which "continues to speak to the collective imagination", and which "left Europe stunned".

Apart from the gains to be made by increased tourism, there are other factors to be taken into account when promoting the re-enactment of a battle:

It offers a way of learning through experience about a wide range of issues, including both factual and qualitative understandings of history. The fact that it engages people as partisans – supporters or enemies – rather than detached observers can add an additional dimension to understanding. (O'Sullivan, 2015)

There has been a re-awakening and a surge of enthusiasm in the twentieth century, especially among groups of ordinary citizens who re-enact particular episodes of history, and interest in the medieval period, in particular, seems to have captured the popular imagination. Those who take part in re-enactments emphasise the empirical value of their research:

Materials used are carefully selected to reproduce the qualities of medieval clothing, armour and weapons, and many groups also engage with wider lifestyle research, such as cooking, gardening, and other household activities. The battlefield reconstructions often incorporate educational goals specifically for young audiences, aiming to communicate some of the realities of medieval life. (O'Sullivan, 2015)

It is, therefore, a justifiable way of teaching about history by experiencing, as closely as possible, the real conditions and context of periods which would otherwise be lost for succeeding generations. There can be no doubt that, from an educational point of view, there is a vast difference between

participating in or watching one of these activities, and passively viewing a glass case full of artefacts with tiny informative labels in a static museum exhibit, however academically correct it may be. If there is enthusiasm for such activities as faithful re-enactments, then it must follow that history is considered a valued item in a community's collective imagination. When a conflict is remembered, especially an internal one such as the English Civil War (1642-1651) or the medieval Wars of the Roses (1455-1485), participants identify with and re-enact the part of a member of one of the contending factions, and even mere spectators will resort to wearing badges, or carrying flags, flowers or other symbols of their chosen side, much as they would at a modern sporting event. This fact seems to confirm what was mentioned above, that there is an element of choice in identifying with a historical figure or cause, just as one is free to choose which football team to support, or to support none at all. It is assumed that the historical figure or cause chosen for our allegiance must have some qualities or represent some values that we admire. In the case of Churchill, it was his success as wartime leader, his determination not to accept defeat however difficult the circumstances, and his gift for memorable turns of phrase which enabled modern politicians to identify with him, or at least to recognize that he was a figure worthy of commemoration on the fiftieth anniversary of his death. However, controversy appears when people do not agree about what or who should be remembered, how it or they should be commemorated, and which characteristics should be highlighted.

In the case of the Waterloo celebrations, there was disagreement at government level about Belgium's decision to mint a new two-euro coin to commemorate Napoleon's defeat. This would appear to be a minor detail but France vetoed the new coins, which had to be withdrawn, and so the Belgian authorities instead unveiled a €2.50 coin, circumventing French resistance by invoking an EU rule permitting the issue of euro coins by any of the countries, provided they are in an irregular denomination and for use only within the issuing country. What was polemic about these two-and-a-half euro coins was the illustration they bore: "a monument of a lion atop a cone-shaped hill on the site of France's humiliation, as well as lines indicating where troops were positioned when forces led by Britain and Prussia defeated Napoleon in the countryside near Brussels" (Bilefsky,

2015). According to the Belgian finance ministry, the new coins were not intended to provoke Gallic anger: "The goal is not to revive old quarrels in a modern Europe. [...] But there's been no battle in recent history as important as Waterloo, or indeed one that captures the imagination in the same way" (Bilefsky, 2015). French officials protested that the battle had "a deep and damaging resonance in the collective French consciousness", and that the coin could "spur an unfavourable reaction in France", because the victory embodied in the coin was being presented as if Belgium itself had triumphed on the battlefield (Bilefsky, 2015). In addition, it was feared that even though it was a minor issue, it could undermine European unity and the symbolic force of the euro, especially in difficult economic times. In relation to this news item, the media channel France 24 carried a significant headline and opening paragraph in its online edition:

France has prevented the minting of a euro coin commemorating its defeat at Waterloo, two centuries after Napoleon's **failed battle** changed the course of European history.

Belgium withdrew a proposal (...) that would have had Europeans **jingling coins** valued at **only two euros** but that would have **weighed with humiliation** of France's defeat to Anglo-Dutch-German forces outside Brussels on June 18, 1815. (France 24, *emphasis added*)

According to this interpretation, France was defeated but Napoleon merely experienced a "failed battle". "Jingling coins" in one's pocket would have implied playing with a trivial amount of loose change, contrasting with how much symbolic value such commemorative coins would have had for the French, and consequently being "weighed with humiliation". It was a case of a small symbol having a disproportionate amount of importance. Unofficial comments on public media included comments about Napoleon's defeat still being hard for the French to swallow, with participants asking whether France was a poor loser, or reminding readers that in contrast to more important problems, the value of the dispute was only €2.50. Nevertheless, this example illustrates the importance of strategic management of events, of the way in which a historical event is interpreted and presented, and how it can cause a disproportionate amount of

disagreement, even at a considerable distance in time. Expressions such as “captures the imagination”, “collective consciousness”, or “deep resonance” give some idea of how a commemorative act can stir up feelings of positive identification or, on the other hand, humiliation and animosity. The organisers of Waterloo 200 intended to commemorate events “in the spirit of international accord” and “to encourage greater understanding through education and debate, embracing different perspectives of opinion” (Wat 200), but it is easy to reduce it to commercialisation and a chance to inflict humiliation on those still sensitive to the outcome or unhappy with the version of the historical narrative. Some six months before the Waterloo commemorations were to take place, the press echoed the comments made by the actor who would be playing the role of Napoleon in the re-enactments. He apparently stated that “the public will acclaim him [Napoleon] and we have forgotten that he lost. In terms of public relations, in terms of his historical importance, it’s clear that he won at Waterloo” (Ward, 2015). With reference to the aim of the re-enactment, the French daily *Le Figaro* wrote that “the magic of the show is intended to make us forget a defeat that seems today to have turned in favour of Napoleon. This loser is harvesting the laurels of glory” (Ward, 2015).

From among the year’s multiple works published to coincide with the commemoration of the battle, there is a particular title which concerns the topic discussed above: *How the French Won Waterloo (Or Think They Did)*. With his customary ironic tone, but based on rigorous historical research, the author explores the French version of Waterloo, as told by battle veterans, novelists, historians, Napoleon himself and even today’s politicians. He comes to the conclusion that “French revisionists seem to have taken possession of Waterloo, and Napoleon’s image is everywhere. He has been turned into the icon that represents the events of 18 June 1815. He lost, but it doesn’t seem to matter” (Clarke, 2015: xiv). The author points to what he calls Napoleon’s “fan-historians” who are constantly reminding the world that Napoleon was France’s greatest champion, since “he won far more battles than he lost, and during his short reign France was at the peak of its influence in the world (...). To these determined and highly outspoken Bonapartists, Waterloo is nothing more than a minor

blemish on Napoleon’s glorious record” (Clarke, 2015: xv). The author concludes that thanks to a prolonged and effective publicity campaign throughout the last two hundred years, every European today knows who the French leader was in June 1815, but the same cannot be said about the leaders of the Prussian, Russian, Austrian or even British forces: “Bonapartists might accept (grudgingly) that Napoleon lost Waterloo (...), but they can rightly claim that his memory has triumphed. He has been history’s winner” (Clarke, 2015: 197).

Summing up, the Waterloo bicentenary and its commemorative events represented a mixture of feelings of collective consciousness depending on one’s loyalties, the confirmation of an iconic figure, a degree of didactic intention, and recognition that Europe today would be very different if events had taken a different direction. However, the historical fact on which a commemorative event such as this is based can cause conflicting interpretations and assessments:

Not every nation remembers Waterloo in the same way. For the Russians it was an inevitable postscript to Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow in 1812. For the Prussians (...) it was far less important than Leipzig in 1813 as a landmark in their Wars of Liberation. For the French, meanwhile, it represented a national trauma comparable in modern times only to the events of 1870 and 1940. In Britain’s case, however, Waterloo rapidly became part of the collective memory, and remained so until well after the Second World War. (Foster, 2015: 8)

Frost and Laing (2013: 24) maintain that national stories and identities are built upon a wide range of historical occurrences that are held to be important. Battles, they argue, are open to a wide range of interpretations, and their commemorations can imply major government involvement and funding, the aim being to reinforce notions of national spirit and pride. However, at the time the authors were writing, in 2013, it was significant that the two-hundredth anniversaries of many of Napoleon’s victories previous to Waterloo had not been celebrated in France, and so they concluded that “this seems to reflect that the French are still uncertain of what Napoleon means to them” (Frost and Laing, 2013: 24). According to the

Irish state TV webpage, the bicentenary renewed debate over the battle and its meaning for Europe today, highlighting the polemic nature of commemorative events by looking back to two occasions in the past when socio-political circumstances affected the Waterloo commemoration, namely the 1915 centenary (under WWI German occupation), and in 1965 “when French officials boycotted British events for the 150th anniversary” (RTE 2015). It is easy to associate the French boycott with the socio-political context of General de Gaulle’s veto of the British application to join the EEC; Gallic pride and sensibilities were apparently averse to celebrating what the British saw as “their” victory. Since then, attitudes and strategies seem to have changed, according to the data reflected on here, and as we have seen, the French perspective now concentrates on preserving the memory of the positive aspects of Waterloo and their hero, and not the negatives ones or the part played by other forces. Yet the contemporary socio-political context surrounding each major celebration will always influence its acceptance by the descendants of opposing sides in the conflict.

The battle of Waterloo has been a quieter annual commemorative event for some time, with five-year events enjoying more participation and publicity. However, a bicentenary as important and well-publicized as this one is considered a once-in-a-lifetime experience by many ordinary people, although some of them may still be around for the 250th anniversary, or any other milestones in between. The need to be able to say “I was there”, and show one’s photographs and souvenirs links visitors to a period in the common European past with which they are familiar and with which they decide to identify, albeit in different ways.

3. THE KING IN THE CAR PARK: RICHARD III

When, in 2012, the skeleton of King Richard III was discovered underneath a Leicester council car park, not only did it offer a chance for valuable scientific and academic research, but it also sparked a renewal of popular interest in fifteenth-century England and the myths surrounding the character, many of which had been propagated by his dynastic opponents, Shakespeare’s play *Richard III*, and the official Tudor historical narrative. It was also an opportunity to stage a week of events including a commemoration at the battlefield on

which he died, a funeral procession to where he was to be re-buried, and the funeral rites themselves. However, the first problem for the authorities was the right to re-bury him in Leicester, since the city of York claimed his remains should be brought there because his title was Richard of York, and he had established a religious foundation there, thus proving, according to modern-day Yorkists, that his wish was to be buried there. Whatever (historical) legitimacy was claimed by both York and Leicester, it is tempting to deduce that there was also a commercial interest in conserving the bones in one city or the other. After litigation and a High Court ruling, Leicester won, due to the fact that the University of Leicester had already secured the licence from the Ministry of Justice to exhume the body, with the provision that after all the scientific research, they would rebury the remains respectfully at the nearest church of significance, which happened to be Leicester Cathedral. The Yorkists, however, were still not convinced, and continued to criticize the whole programme of events, and especially the humiliation suffered yet again by their king, this time at the hands of commercialism. Original printed copies of the order of service for the cathedral ceremony, for example, were auctioned on eBay for extraordinary sums. However, the religious rites surrounding the reinterment were carried out in an ecumenical way, after agreement between Catholic and Anglican authorities was reached as a result of a petition asking for a Catholic burial, since Richard had lived and died a Catholic. In fact, as one historian pointed out, if Richard had not died, perhaps the Anglican Church would never have existed at all (Greaves, 2015). A debt was probably owing, therefore, by those now re-burying him in their cathedral. In this case, Anglicans chose to identify with a Catholic figure because, in spite of his actions or possible crimes, he had been their anointed king, and they were able to participate in closing the historical narrative.

A great deal of trouble was taken to plan every single detail of the events organized: the coffin was made by a Canadian carpenter descended from the king’s relatives; actor Benedict Cumberbatch, another distant relative, read a poem composed by no less than the Poet Laureate; a special arrangement of music was played; soils from Fotheringhay, Middleham and Bosworth² were sprinkled on the coffin by the researcher and member of the Richard III Society who

had campaigned relentlessly for ten years for the car park to be excavated; white roses (the symbol of the House of York) were everywhere; army veterans carried the coffin, and Richard's own prayer book, on loan for the day, was placed at its foot. Given the media coverage of the finding of the king's remains five hundred years after his hasty burial, it is not surprising that people responded in huge numbers to the chance of being a part of history revisited. It is estimated that some 35,000 people queued to file past the coffin during its lying-in-state. On the day of the funeral, there were crowds up to ten deep in the streets forming part of the processional route, leading from the battlefield of Bosworth, where Richard met his end, to the cathedral. Frost and Laing (2013: 79) point out that re-enactments of battles and other key events staged at the original locations convert these places into sacred or hallowed ground for enthusiasts. King Richard's modern followers turned out in large numbers to pay their respects to him all along the route and at the key places in his final days. Inside the cathedral on the day of the reburial

Every seat was filled with well-dressed guests in military uniforms, black or navy suits, academic gowns, chains of office, the silver boar badge that was Richard's emblem, white rose brooches and flamboyant hats. (...) Two yeoman warders in medieval tunics (...) stood with their backs to the south door of the cathedral, as if the Tudors or Lancastrians might try to break in at any moment. (Kennedy, 2015)

Apart from the military and civil dignitaries, academics, royal representatives and distant relatives in the congregation, there were also ordinary members of the public who had won their seats in a draw among thousands of applicants. The sermon, delivered by the Bishop of Leicester, highlighted the links between this historical figure and the present day:

King Richard has stepped from the pages of history into the fullest glare of the world's attention (...). The "Richard Effect" has revealed a deep connection between a global audience and this young King who bore his disability with courage (...). [The crowds lining the streets] have confounded the sceptics by their respect for the remains of an anointed King and a baptised Christian whose lot it was to live and

die at a turning point of our history. (Church of England, 2015)

The Bishop also referred to kingship, the constructs of power, and the essence of government as public service, calling these concepts "unifying symbols of our common story", and "the values which unite us" (Church of England, 2015). For his part, the Dean of Leicester Cathedral reflected on the interpretation of historical facts: "There's a sense of trying to put some things right from the past. But I'm aware you can't undo history, you have to live with history as it is and try to understand it" (Last journey, 2015). However, in spite of all the careful planning, inclusive messages of reconciliation, and a generally positive public response, there were still some discordant voices. Many asked why a king who had very possibly ordered the murder of his two young nephews³, in order to ensure the throne for himself, should be given such a grand funeral. "We should not be honouring this serial killer with a holy burial", claimed author Nigel Jones (2015). According to others, Richard was a "villainous" king, Britain's most maligned ruler, but that in spite of this he was to be part of "a five-day extravaganza" which Britain would watch "enthralled" (Hardman, March: 2015). Many of those who lined the streets may not have been aware of the darker side of Richard's reign; those better informed might allege that in fact few medieval rulers were saints. In any case, the "Richard effect" had sparked public interest in a narrative of historical mystery solved by modern scientific methods and the sheer determination of those involved. For most, it must surely have been the attraction of another of these once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, being able to witness the reburial of a five-hundred-year-old character they had only read about in history books. History, for them, had come to life, paradoxically, with the funeral rites and reburial of their ancestors' king.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

If history is worth remembering, it is also worth re-enacting. There is a widespread fascination with attempts to remember and reflect upon past events through the donning of archaic costumes and acting in the roles of historic characters. And there is also scepticism and sometimes downright hostility about such practices. (Frost and Laing, 2013: 78)

Commemorations of battles and (in) famous characters provide opportunities to reflect on tragedy, bravery and sacrifice, while appealing to identification with a cause and a feeling of belonging to a particular group. Some events can be polemic because they revive old quarrels, especially in episodes which have not been fully resolved and assimilated. In this case, a great deal of tact is needed to avoid offending, humiliating or excluding, but organizations do not always achieve this objective. The choice of event is crucial; with 2014 being the centenary of the outbreak of the WWI, there were numerous memorial services, inaugurations of monuments and meetings of descendants of combatants, but there were, understandably, no re-enactments of WWI battles. Conflicts from recent memory (approximately the last hundred years) are considered to have a special resonance, being still "too dark and embedded in personal memories to be commemorated in this form" (Frost and Laing, 2013: 82). The Battle of Waterloo, at a distance of 200 years, ought not to have posed this problem, but as seen above, there were still sensibilities as to how it was to be commemorated, and with what kind of emphasis. Attendance (or absence) by national figures at such events can also be polemic, as when Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was criticized for going on holiday instead of attending a centenary ceremony to remember the fallen in the WWI Battle of Jutland. The grandson of the Royal Navy's Commander-in-Chief at Jutland remarked that he had hoped that a politician who would like to enjoy the support of the armed forces "would understand that he has to show some sensitivity to what they hold to be important" (McCann, 2016).

In the case of the reinterment of King Richard's remains, there ought to have been sufficient distance (500 years) to be able to commemorate without controversy the battle in which he died and to take the king's remains to a more fitting resting place than the municipal car park. However, as history books and popular myths have always portrayed him in a negative light, his memory still had to fight against detractors. In addition, his new place of burial was contested, for historic or other reasons, but legality prevailed. Perhaps what was really being celebrated is the fact that modern scientists at a British university had been able to prove with 99% certainty that the remains discovered in the car park belonged to Richard, that his relatives

could be traced through five centuries, that at last the physical circumstances of his life and death could be confirmed or refuted, and that a ceremony fit for a king could be organized with such attention to detail. The massive response, or the "Richard effect", must mean that it was recognized by the public as a unique occurrence worth witnessing; not every day does one manage to contemplate the funeral procession of a king, and much less that of a medieval king. The novelty of the situation inspired many people to travel a long way, from overseas as well as from other parts of the UK, much further, in many cases, than if the deceased had been a contemporary ruler or other well-known figure. Many visitors in the crowds had come from abroad, making their holidays and a stop in their itinerary coincide with the reburial and commemorative events. Such was the popular attraction of the "Richard effect".

Inevitably, commemorations and re-enactments also show another side, that of commercial interest and mass tourism, and many critics are unhappy with what some refer to as the theme-park kind of context created around events. Those organizing a re-enactment face a difficult balancing act between education and providing entertainment, that is, getting the facts right, without perpetuating myths and legends, while still making it a gratifying experience (Frost and Laing, 2013: 93). Yet re-enactments are a part of popular culture, providing an enjoyable and educational experience for a broad range of social groups. Commemorative events may lack the scientific rigour of museum displays but they attract interest, and they constitute an attractive and colourful spectacle, revealing cultural values and how communities identify with figures, periods and deeds from the past.

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NOTES

1. The Waterloo Committee was founded in 1973 by the 8th Duke of Wellington, after successfully stopping a project to build a motorway across the battlefield. Since then the Committee has preserved the battlefield, encouraged historical research and public education concerning the wars between Great Britain, her allies, and France. Waterloo 200 was granted charitable status in 2009 (McCall 2015, 78).
2. Richard's birthplace, home and final battle, respectively.
3. The Princes in the Tower were Edward (1470-1483) and Richard (1473-1483), the sons of Edward IV. Soon after young Edward was crowned Edward V, he and his brother disappeared and were never seen alive again.

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