‘The Last Coiner’: Eighteenth-century Yorkshire history destined for the big screen

Hannah Greig

York University historian, Dr Hannah Greig, in collaboration with local film and documentary-maker Peter Kershaw, has been awarded an Arts and Humanities Council (AHRC) grant to launch an innovative project linking academic history research to the creation of a non-profit feature film.

‘The Last Coiner’ is an exciting period film under development with Kershaw’s Duchy Parade Films, a Harrogate-based production company. Set in the rural communities of late eighteenth-century Yorkshire, it will dramatise the history of the ‘Yorkshire coiners’, a notorious group of counterfeitors.

The AHRC’s £15,000 grant will support a series of collaborative research workshops. Bringing academic historians and specialists from Yorkshire museums into conversation with the film’s production team, the organisers propose that the workshops will help to inspire a historically-informed script for the film and also stimulate a new regional partnership.

In the eighteenth century, coining was a treasonable offence, punishable by death. But in the 1760s and 1770s hundreds of Yorkshire people risked the gallows to counterfeit British and Spanish coins. A decline in the textile trade plunged Yorkshire into recession and local communities were forced to put their craft skills to alternative use as a means of survival. Illegal counterfeiting became the new cottage industry.

Concentrated around Halifax and involving hundreds of people at its peak, the operation was reputedly led by a ‘royal family’ of ‘King David’ (David Hartley) and his brothers ‘The Duke of York’ and ‘The Duke of Edinburgh’, known locally by royal titles in acknowledgement of their success in fighting poverty. Their actions, however, upset the establishment. An extensive and expensive manhunt and a series of criminal trials were initiated by a furious Mint and government, and the savvy coiners met an unhappy fate.

Whilst their stories were memorialised in Yorkshire ballads and their colourful characters were celebrated by pamphlet writers and reported in the press, many of the counterfeitors ended their days in gaol, or were sentenced to hang at York’s Tyburn.
Kershaw’s proposed film ‘The Last Coiner’ will bring this story from Yorkshire’s past to life. Tales of the coiners are familiar to many people in the region and the AHRC-workshops (and eventually the film) will shed more light on their history.

Dr Greig, a lecturer in eighteenth-century British history, suggests the story of the Yorkshire coiners has a broader historical significance. “The lives and experiences of the coiners have much to tell us about our Georgian past,” she explains. “The practice of counterfeiting reveals tensions in Britain’s developing economy. The 1700s are recognised by historians as a time of ‘consumer revolution’, with new goods flooding the marketplace and new trade routes bolstering economic exchange. But cash was in short supply and, as Yorkshire discovered, some of the markets were fragile. When the woollen market declined and ready money ran out, the coiners found alternative ways to beat their own eighteenth-century credit crunch. Indeed, the boom and bust culture experienced by coiners is one that might seem uncomfortably familiar to us now.”

The workshops will provide a chance for those involved in the film to discuss surviving evidence related to the coiners’ history (such as trial records, newspaper reports and coining artefacts) with scholars in the field. These sources will then inspire the characters and narrative for Kershaw’s production.

For Peter Kershaw ‘The Last Coiner’ challenges the genre of the period film. Set in a rural community and dealing with the everyday lives of working people, the coiners and their experiences are far removed from the sumptuously gilded world and aristocratic excesses usually portrayed in films based in eighteenth-century Britain.

It is an innovative project in other ways too. Both Greig and Kershaw see this project as a testing ground for a new model of practice which supports the positive exchange of knowledge and expertise between academic and non-academic partners. Kershaw is the first to admit that such an emphatic collaboration between professional historians and a film production is not the standard way in which filmmakers operate. “Usually, historical advisors are only brought in at the sharp end of delivery for a period drama” Kershaw admits. “Historians might be called upon during filming, and even join the crew on set, but in fact at this point their advice is least able to alter the result. For ‘The Last Coiner’ we are pioneering a very different approach, ensuring that academics and experts are involved in the film from the beginning of the creative process.”

Dr Greig is no stranger to film and media, having acted as historical advisor to Keira Knightley’s recent blockbuster, The Duchess, and contributed to numerous television and radio productions. Nevertheless, she accepts that scholars are not always enthusiastic participants in these types of projects. “Bruised by cold calls from busy television researchers, and wary of productions that pay little attention to the facts of research, academic
historians are often extremely reluctant to contribute to media productions” says Greig. “However, by putting scholarly research to the heart of the production process, we hope to demonstrate that happier collaborations can occur.”

The workshops will be held at the end of 2009, after which the group will seek further funding to support the filming. You can follow their progress on thelastcoinermovie.com. Following the workshops, extracts from the evidence uncovered about the Yorkshire coiners will also be used to inspire an online game ‘Coins and Nooses’ (further details on The Last Coiner website).

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