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Media Commemoration in Britain

2.1 The fallen of the Falklands

In contemporary societies, ‘the media play an active role in shaping our understanding of the past, in “mediating” between us (as readers, viewers, listeners) and past experiences, and hence in setting the agenda for future acts of remembrance within society’ (Erll and Rigney, 2009, p. 3). The media is particularly influential in many Western countries, where ‘the legitimising, the contesting, and the waging of warfare have become shaped much more by the media “production” of warfare than any discernible “original” or “authentic” experience’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010, p. 4). This point is particularly relevant in the context of British society, in which only a relatively small number of the population are exposed to the dangers of wars and military profession. This chapter explores the representations of British fatalities from the Falklands War through to the Gulf War, and to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The coverage of these conflicts reveals a series of shifts in war commemoration. The campaign for the Falkland Islands led to the legitimation of repatriation as a new military tradition; the Gulf War problematised the deaths of soldiers in friendly fire incidents; and the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan saw the ‘mediatisation’ of deaths and a shift towards a military service-based commemoration.

In 1989, historian Raphael Samuel in the preface to the volumes of History and Politics Workshop wrote that this volume was ‘born out of anger at the Falklands War, and consternation at the apparent failure of the anti-war half of the nation to assert itself’ (Samuel, 1989, p. x). Samuel was not alone in his quest to understand this ‘surprising upsurge of patriotic feelings’, ‘shocking recapitulation of the imperial past’ and overwhelming ‘flag-waving’ mood which gripped the population for
several months in 1982 (Shaw, 1991; Dawson, 1994; Billig, 1995). While the following analysis discusses the reincarnation of the spirit of nationalism during the Falklands War, it also explores how this war altered the ways in which British society commemorates fallen soldiers.

2.1.1 The spirit of nationalism

In the 1980s, Samuel wrote: ‘patriotism is no longer a ruling passion, as it was when Britain was under siege, but is rather an occasional sentiment, quickening into life under provocation but at other times lying dormant’ (Samuel, 1989, p. xxviii). The Falklands War created this ‘provocation’ and awoke the spirits of nationalism. This reincarnation was assisted by the circulation in the media of historical associations between the image of ‘Britain under siege’, which withstood the dangers of the Second World War, and Britain in the early 1980s, which struggled to find a solution to political, economic and societal problems. These parallels brought the two versions of Britain together by re-imagining its unity and strength.

Since the 1960s, Britain had been undergoing a series of political, economic and social changes. The source of such changes came from several areas, including ‘the question of Europe, violence in Northern Ireland, the growth of Scottish and Welsh nationalisms and the internal “break-up of Britain”, crisis in the schools, fears of sexual minorities, and panics over immigration and race’ (Eley, 2001, p. 822). This general unrest was also fuelled by rising unemployment, a continuous erosion of the old manufacturing bases and a decline in public spending under the Thatcher government. Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s, the country underwent a rapid transformation in societal values and lifestyles. These changes were ‘manifold and complex: they were material (the new experience enjoyment of “affluence”), spiritual (new attitudes to life, more secular and hedonistic), moral (changing attitudes to sexual behaviour, to relations between classes, sexes and generations), and social (a shifting balance of responsibility between the individual and the collective)’ (Mandler, 2006, p. 221). This peaceful revolution in the everyday lives of Britons undermined the popularity of traditional nationalistic sentiments. In this context, the events of the Falklands War presented an opportunity for the political elite to remind the public that ‘Britain was “still the same” in the 1980s, despite changes in the political, economic, social and belief systems of the country’ (Noakes, 1998, p. 105).

On 2 April 1982, the government declared a state of emergency and, soon after this decision, the Task Force sailed to the Falkland Islands. The campaign ended in victory for the British forces on 14 June 1982. Journalists and politicians repeatedly described the campaign as ‘war’,