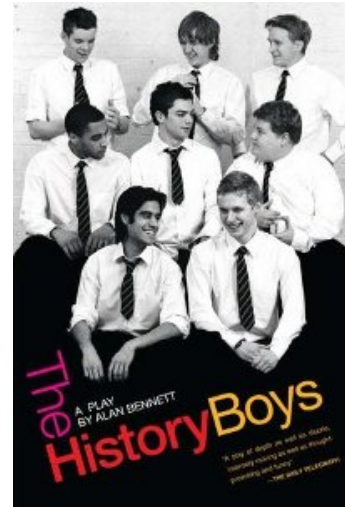


## The History Boys (and Girls) on TV!



Whiling away another sick day on the couch last week, once more losing the plot of *À la recherche du temps perdu* and about to pick up *Oblomov* instead, which would hopefully be a touch brisker, I couldn't help but feel sorry for myself as it struck me just how much I had missed out on in my education. I turned on the TV, but since the Winter Olympics have really become too silly to watch even for a fun and games enthusiast like me, I zapped to a channel, never previously stopped at, where they seemed to be showing history programmes all day and all night. *Frau Hitler: Eva Braun* was half over when I joined, but since her late husband and friends (few foes apparently) were running like a brown thread through the pot-pourri of the channel's offerings, I was to be copiously compensated and soon got intimately acquainted with Frau Himmler, Frau Goebbels, and Frau Göring. My mind still lingering over what seemed to be the happiest of domestic lives on the Obersalzberg and in the Führerbunker, *The Huns* were already taking to ferocious battle, after which we persevered for a good half hour *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great* and then accompanied Mother Teresa on *Pathways to Sainthood*. During *The Olympic Games, XIb: Garmisch-Partenkirchen 1936* I felt entitled to a brief peek at the women curlers' semifinals in Sochi, but was back in time for *Famous Battles* (79th series, Part 8: *La guerra del fútbol*), followed nonstop by *At War With Napoleon: Win Some, Lose Some*; *Air Warfare Takes Off* (though promising, the Zeppelins didn't); *The Mystery of Stonehenge* (a pilgrim's destination, the Neolithic Lourdes, with an astronomical observatory an added attraction); *The Nibelung Treasure Located at Last* (not far from Rülzheim, of all places); *Submarine Warfare in Switzerland* (where??); *The Enigma of Atlantis* (crumbled into the North Sea somewhere around the Dogger Bank in a tsunami: the linguistic evidence against Santorini was overwhelming); *Emperor Hadrian and Why He Preferred Boyfriends* (because his wife Vibia Sabina was a viper, easy as that); *Jesus of Nazareth: The Truth*; *The*

*Mystery of the Pyramids* (earth's closest approaches to heaven, as previously suspected); *Biological Warfare: Early Breakthroughs*; *The Curse of the Kennedys*; *The Curse of the Borgias* (not another series!?!); *The Popes*, No. 214: *Alexander VI* (same actors and props!); *The Secret of the Sphinx* (the only one still oddly unfathomed); *Queen Victoria's Nine Children*, No. 8: *Leopold*. Whew! As if out of Pandora's box, history's stories are welling forever – and it was all there, on telly. At this rate I would comfortably make up in a day or two for all that *temps perdu* boyishly misspent in my formative years.

My favourites by a country mile were those programmes where flamboyant young-at-heart English senior lecturers (sometimes they were Scottish) would recklessly leap from Hadrian's Wall against the sunset or climb up pyramids at dawn while breathlessly telling you all about them, emulating Professor Brian "Wonders of the Universe" Cox of the science channel. Sadly, academic acting talent at such stellar height is thin on the ground, even in the UK. When out-of-work thespians were doing the voice-over you just did not get the same personal flavour, however portentous the narrative and however stunning the action and landscape photography, and it was just harder to stay focused when one expert after another were chipping in their two cents, however absorbing their demeanour. Still, there was something of value to be gotten out of this parading of pundits: it sharpens your flair for local colour in academia. When an ill-fitting drab suit was seated before cheap office bookshelves and the camera work was pitiable, no flash insert was needed to confirm that this was not the sprightly Major Ezekiel Vanderlugt, teaching the history and philosophy of torpedo warfare at the US Military Academy in West Point when not on TV, but a medievalist from some ancient seat of learning in Germany. More rarely on view but never mistaken, the professor contracted for an erudite bon mot deconstructing the Cistercians or Cathar heretics was one *bonhomme* or other from the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres, thankfully subtitled. If a fall guy was required for a human evolution feature, there were evidently hundreds of archaeology establishments in the Chinese provinces at which to recruit one, and you would get the same friendly smile of unswerving conviction. Australian academics only seemed to be cast for natural history programmes. Junior faculty, before tenure, tended to disappoint: with each one of them clamouring to star in what were really only bit roles, you couldn't tell one country of origin from another.

Glued to the screen, I felt even sorrier for myself remembering the sad sods of schoolmasters, threadbare in coat, heart, body and brain, and delivery, who I had failed to learn my history from. It's an unequal battle, really, like Sunday League against Champions League football, village green against test cricket.

Now, well into the wee hours, who was scheduled to follow upon *Leonardo da Vinci and his avantgarde war machines?* Queen Elizabeth I of England, none other!!! (Leonardo's sex life, incidentally, had been broadcast over breakfast, I regretted to learn from the opening titles; but then, the latest Da Vinci sequel turned out to nicely complement this afternoon's *How Krupp Almost Won Us the War.*) Cutting edge research by royal virginal experts was about to unriddle the riddle of *The Virgin Queen* for us. The question – which seemed straightforward to me, but I can see that you might have found it a trifle lacking in academic finesse: Why for God's sake didn't she do something to prevent the Tudor line from lapsing with her death? Like, obviously, having children. Like Victoria, who suffered through nine, remember. Or grandchildren, like Elizabeth II, a Windsor (formerly Saxe–Coburg and Gotha).

The answer was as follows, and it came in five parts, uninterrupted by advertisements for this was no commercial channel.



1. Queen Elizabeth I of England was a man. The real Lizzy had suddenly died as a child when in the country, and, so as not to enrage her father, Henry VIII, the poor servants replaced her with a boy. The Bisley Boy was at hand, a playground companion of Lizzy's, probably sired by Henry VIII anyhow, hence looking not too wildly implausible an impersonator. Henry VIII subsequently didn't notice, or didn't care. Later, others would notice her peculiarly thick make-up (to hide her, well, his sprouting facial stubble) and her uncomfortably high ruffs (to hide an Adam's apple).

2. Elizabeth owed her awakening as a woman to her step father, who was a rampant paedophile (Jimmy Savile came to mind, but wasn't mentioned: must have been a BBC programme), although Anne Boleyn does not seem to have noticed, in the little time she had left. Either this juvenile relationship proved more lasting than originally expected, being continued on a more mature basis, or Elizabeth was so traumatised that she wouldn't have anybody, herself included, mention, let alone have, such things as sex ever after, whatever became of the Tudors. Small question mark remaining here, then.

3. Elizabeth was a hermaphrodite of one technical variety or another. They gave the full anatomical detail, filmed at the Wellcome Androgyny Research

Center at Buckingham, but all I can remember is that her morbidly long fingers, which no portrait painter with any sense of verisimilitude would manage to reduce to normal dimensions, are a sure symptom. Further proof is that Elizabeth insisted on her dead body not being embalmed. Preferring to go to rot after death was unheard of for a monarch, but, naturally, she dreaded the posthumous gossip more.

4. Elizabeth had a lasting liaison of a sexual rather than equestrian nature with her majordomo, Lord Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester. (His wife, and to Elizabeth's chagrin mother of numerous little Dudleys, conveniently died, though in mysterious circumstances, breaking her neck in a fall down the staircase, not off a horse.) They had a son and presumably further children, but there were ways of getting rid of the bastards; bad luck that one, by the curious name of Arthur, resurfaced after a shipwreck in the Bay of Biscay. In fact, the queen was pregnant from Dudley practically all the time, which is why she would travel so much: her subjects in London shouldn't notice, because, in the spirit of Adolf Hitler, Elizabeth had become rather attached to this idea of a virgin Führer.

5. A feminist historian exposed the "Virgin Queen" as a male chauvinist conspiracy, before she could be bundled away from the camera. Her institution was the LSE, with what seemed to be a beaver in their coat of arms and the motto "Rerum Cognoscere Causas".

You can probably still download the whole programme if you have any questions and find my summary too concise, although I think it gives a fair idea of the gist of the matter.

I can't speak for other viewers, but with royalty never one of my lines of specialisation all of this was news to me. Other than me being bowled over, there was, however, a deeper, more philosophical lesson here: history wants the broad view, the composite picture. There is no way one-track minds could have seen through the question of the "Virgin Queen", because the answer is the **SUM TOTAL** of the five theories whose juxtaposition I had just been watching. No mutually exclusive alternatives, they must be understood as connected by firm *and's*. Not by indecisive boring old *or's*! The take-home message, although that was where I was anyhow, was this: What is truth? As always in history, if your research has been done evenhandedly and without bias, at the end of the day, in the final analysis, and not to put too fine a point on it, **it's a little bit of this AND a little bit of that**. Never forget that history is a team sport, like curling. Except you need to imagine it played out in non-Euclidean space. S/he wins who lets parallel straight lines intersect, who lets the interior angles of triangles add up to anything they like: two right angles, just one, or five, all at once. Try to see it like that.