

Viewer

BEWARE

Sarah Ferguson, The Duchess of York, recently produced *The Young Victoria*. As might be expected from a royal insider, her film contains a high degree of historical accuracy. Yet, in one scene, she has Prince Albert taking a bullet while protecting Queen Victoria from an assassination attempt. According to historians, he wasn't even hurt during this incident. Fergie's film therefore presents a slab of history with a sliver of dramatic license, a fib of sorts, wedged in for good measure.

It could have been worse. Had Mel Gibson produced it, Queen Victoria might well have been turned into a mincing trollop, an imbecile, or a maniacal lunatic killing folk left and right because it takes her fancy. Since historical dramas are too often viewed as entertaining history lessons, and

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many viewers readily believe what they see onscreen, Queen Victoria's fine reputation would be forever sullied. This concern is not to be sniffed at. When Gibson portrayed Edward II as a strikingly effeminate homosexual in *Braveheart*, he was accused of homophobia. When defending a ridiculous scene that has King Edward I killing his son's male lover, Gibson described the king as being psychopathic. Huh? *Braveheart* was deemed such codswallop, critics the world over howled their objections. In fact, historian Alex von Tunzelmann described it in *The Guardian* as "a great steaming haggis of lies." Gibson eventually admitted that *Braveheart* was based on Blind Harry's poem and not historical truth. But cinema audiences remained largely unconvinced, believing what their eyes had first shown them.



Aside from entertainment, historical films offer an education too and, as movie-goers, we're often quick to believe what we see. However, **Christine Todd** explains why 'being up there onscreen' doesn't always mean 'accurate'.

So hostile was the backlash from this movie, it was reported that a number of English families living in Scotland were forced to flee their homes. *Braveheart* set off a Gibson-inspired wave of Scottish nationalism by instilling dangerous levels of xenophobia into unwitting people. He must be pleased. It won five Oscars.

Gibson played the same game with *The Patriot*, which also evoked a chorus of jeers from historians. This time he set off American fury. In part, due to one horrific scene in which English villain Tavington corrals a number of villagers inside their local church before setting it afire and burning them alive. This event never happened. That is to say, it never happened in 18th century America and the British didn't do it. It *did* happen in 1944 during WWII to the inhabitants of *Oradour-sur-Glane*, a village in France, and Germany's 2nd Waffen-SS Panzer Division did it.

Of course, by the time historians launch their complaints against such shockingly deceptive movies, it's too late. The film has been created and watched. The general public has made up its mind. Fantasy has been accepted as truth, or at least been deemed close enough.

What a shame we don't add labels to these films, the way we do with processed foods at risk of nut contamination. Then, before every historical movie, we'd be enlightened with a full-screen public service announcement that states: "WARNING: This product may contain traces of fibs or whopping lies." **S**

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