This is a book that should and no doubt will find its way into the curriculum of most introductory courses on public history. Although I do not quite agree with Meringolo’s characterization that the development of history in the National Park Service has been a forgotten chapter in our understanding of the field’s development, she poses the discussion of that history in an engaging and useful manner. As advocates of the importance of history in understanding the present we would do well to pay more attention to our own history. Near the end of the book she notes, “The history of public history is, at its most basic level, a story about expansion—of federal authority, disciplinary expertise, and public space” (155). If expansion has indeed been a factor in public history’s development as a field—something well illustrated by the National Council on Public History’s growth and maturity since 1980—how do we as educators, site managers, and consultants adjust to what may well be an age of contraction?

Theodore J. Karamanski
Loyola University Chicago

History on Television by Ann Gray and Erin Bell. London: Routledge, 2013. 246 pp; notes, bibliography, index; clothbound, $150.00; paperbound $39.95; e-Book, $39.95.

This important new work arises from “Televising History 1995-2010,” a specific research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which drew on a range of disciplinary areas and approaches to explore the development of “factual history” programs on television. Undertaken by British scholars, the work focuses on programs designated as history. The emphasis is not on audiences’ reception of history programs, which also would have needed to include the plethora of past-based fictional programs with which audiences enthusiastically engage. Rather, the book emphasizes the motivations of film-makers and commissioners.

I started off disliking the approach—albeit recognizing the funding constraints of the project—since an understanding of people’s fascination with the past and their use of it in their daily lives cannot be reduced to programs defined as history. I was also wary of an approach that seemed to imply, at least initially, that public history was reducible to “the” presentation of “the” past to “the” public by professional historians and how historians were incorporated into the “business of television” (4). However, I was quickly won over by the authors since their approach is far more nuanced and interesting than the first pages suggest.

Importantly, Gray and Bell situate their discussion within debates in public history around the social construction of knowledge and the democratic opening up (or not) of the making of history programs. As they sensibly conclude, to suggest that television history is democratic simply because it is placed outside academia is “almost certainly inaccurate” (219). The most interesting
part of the book is the range of behind-the-scenes interviews with program schedulers revealing their control over what audiences are permitted to see. The authors organize the BBC history output into five categories: heartland or straight narrative history built around an event, investigative programs that are “challenging” and require intellectual engagement from the audience and are usually presenter-led, immersive adventures offering excitement from reconstruction and drama, contemporary journeys that embrace contemporary experience in programs such as *Who do you think you are?*, and finally, largely ignored due to the high production costs, scripted drama. Later in the book they discuss the content of history in different modes such as “a civilizing” gaze (*A History of Britain* for example) or the personally reflective gaze (*Who do you think you are?*). Such categorization is helpful in understanding the way in which history is constructed.

The book provides perceptive insights into the thinking of programmers and presenters and their perceptions of audiences. Thus we are introduced to the thinking behind the Military Channel: “our classic history channel viewers today we call Roy who is 55 years old, we pretty much know what Roy likes, he likes military history . . . they don’t call us the Hitler channel for nothing . . . now we’re making a push to an audience we call Ben and Sue. And Ben and Sue are between 23 and 35, just had their first kids, they want TV that is entertaining but they don’t think they’ve wasted their evening by watching it” (168).

The authors develop their analysis by discussing the way particular presenters are employed. Some historians such as Simon Schama or Niall Ferguson are given “landmark” or “major series” while well-qualified female historians are often ignored. As Gray and Bell discuss, “we wish to argue that clever and intellectual women pose a “threat” to the “natural” order of femininity and masculinity and especially in the very public arena of television” (55). Their argument is strengthened through extensive interviews with historians. As one female historian explained, “David Attenborough was given to me as an example on which I should model myself, and I think they were always terribly worried that I would appear too academic; and they were very anxious that I should appear extremely enthusiastic. Which is fine because I’m quite good at seeming enthusiastic because I am feeling enthusiastic. But I think they wanted a kind of naïve enthusiasm . . . On the one hand they seemed to want someone who was an expert to present it, but they wanted you to present yourself as a non-expert” (59).

At a time when the BBC, the main commissioner of serious history programs, has apparently had its history budget cut by 35 percent, leading both commissioners and commercial companies pitching to the BBC for work to reconstruct history as natural history, for example, this is a timely work. This book will be a very useful addition to reading lists for undergraduate and postgraduate students studying historiography, heritage studies, or public history. The examples discussed are mostly drawn from British television (although several of the examples have been shown on North American television).
The need, at least in higher education in Britain, to show “impact” and dissemination of scholarship to non-academic audiences has led to pressure on historians to try to break into television. This book will also provide some reassurance that failure to do so is not attributable to a personal deficit but one determined by a few programmers and their conservative approaches to who and what “the public” should be allowed to see.

HILDA KEAN
Honorary Research Fellow, Ruskin College, Oxford


Upon seeing George Washington’s portrait on the cover of Philip Levy’s Where the Cherry Tree Grew, one could assume it is yet another book about Washington’s life. Could another book on Washington have anything new to share? By adopting an approach aimed at the place, rather than the man, however, Levy, a historical archaeologist at the University of South Florida, has attempted to do just this. The book is the result of a decade-long excavation of Ferry Farm, Washington’s boyhood home. Supported by the George Washington Foundation, the excavation’s aim was to identify the Washington house site. However, despite reinterpretation of some of Washington’s childhood events, the book is not intended to be a new Washington biography. What readers will find instead is a biography of Ferry Farm, examined through the different meanings attached to it for more than four hundred years. For the general reader, it succinctly distills a complex history and provides a striking example of the value of archaeology. For professional historians, the value lies in Levy’s use of extensive documentary research alongside analysis of the features and more than 500,000 artifacts excavated at the site. It is a lesson in the importance of re-examining previous assumptions, and of thinking about how the shared and beloved national mythologies historians interpret for the public might stack up against the physical evidence—and the potential implications.

Distinguishing myth from reality in the written material about Washington, and recognizing when the two aren’t mutually exclusive, is a daunting task. Ferry Farm, the setting of Mason Locke Weems’s cherry tree story from his 1809 Life of Washington, is ripe for this topic, and Levy has approached it with enthusiasm. The first eight chapters of Where the Cherry Tree Grew might be encapsulated with one statement from the introduction: “The land produced stories as easily as it produced corn or wheat” (2). In entertaining and readable fashion, these pages trace the landscape’s development until just before the author began his excavations in 2002. Only one-fifth of the book concerns the Washington period, though George’s legacy is ever present. The bulk revolves around the land’s other important association, the later