

The following is a reprint of a short article prepared for publication in the popular re-enactment magazine Skirmish.

What price “Authenticity”?

Courting controversy is not something I do intentionally, although the following may be akin to repeatedly poking a hornet’s nest with a big stick. However, complacency is not good for anyone, and to encourage debate it is occasionally useful to shout out loud the things others mutter behind closed doors. So, whilst many share these views few openly support them. Nevertheless I still ask if a wide spread drive for improved “authenticity” is inadvertently costing the hobby the very thing it set out to improve?

It is undoubtedly true that over the last forty years costumed historical interpretation has changed from being a minority professional activity utilised by a limited number of museums, to a widely accepted recreational passtime for thousands. You could debate whether such a transition must inevitably result in lowered academic credibility or could be a driving force for improvement, nevertheless the word “authenticity” entered the re-enactors vocabulary long ago and is something ever more of us are spending our hard earned cash on trying to improve. Consequently a large commercial market has evolved producing all manner of “replica” goods for recreational re-enactment, but does spending more on our costume and equipment actually guarantee improvements in authenticity?

Well, of course spending more doesn’t guarantee improvement. It depends on the knowledge, skill and integrity of the people we buy from, along with our own understanding and expectations. Obviously traders can only make money out of producing what their customers will actually buy, and the reality is no consumer knows everything about every last bit of research, nobody has a limitless budget and to some degree modern aesthetics and personal tastes bias all our judgement of the replicas we buy. So how much do different traders compromise authenticity (deliberately or through ignorance) in order to make profitable goods, and do we as consumers know enough to recognise those compromises? Do we believe every trader’s expertise if their recommendations contradict our own preferences? If we don’t know what is appropriate do we simply follow the majority, purchase what the traders try to sell us and what we see other re-enactors using, or do we walk away and do some research? In short do we genuinely want to buy more authentic goods, or do we simply want all those around us, even if ill informed, to tell us the goods we are buying are more authentic?

Almost every re-enactor, group and manufacturer now claims to take pride in their authenticity, as such it has become a meaningless statement. Nobody sets out to get things wrong but attitudes regarding appropriate levels of research, along with the degree to which compromises are tolerated vary enormously. Many use the term “fully authentic” for something which meets all of their understanding, others see it as a phrase used only by those whose

understanding is too limited to recognise that compromise is an inevitable part of this hobby. I’ve even come across individuals who derisively refer to people who “dress up like re-enactors” as a means of criticising those whose costume and equipment reflects all the misconceptions, compromises and errors common in the hobby today. We must also distinguish between accuracy and authenticity; It is relatively easy to take a detailed reference source and accurately copy a single artefact or item of clothing but does this make it authentic? Context and use are just as important as constructional accuracy and so even if a replica is beautifully made the more authentic choice may be to do without.

Too many re-enactors and traders derive their understanding of what constitutes authentic merely from copying others around them. Much like a game of Chinese whispers errors creep in and get compounded each time they are copied. Prior to the rapid growth of the internet, we had to research directly from period sources or specialist publications written by experts. Now anybody with a computer (myself included) can make their thoughts accessible to the world at the push of a button, enabling huge amounts of information to circulate rapidly with no form of quality control. It’s no surprise that there is ever increasing conformity of attitudes, standards and equipment amongst re-enactment groups around the globe for it is now so easy to base your own portrayal of the past and your own replica goods solely on what other re-enactors have already done. Consequently many “facts” about the past that re-enactors unquestioningly promote as authentic, can only be traced back as far as the origins of a particular re-enactment society and the assumptions their founding members made. So next time somebody says something along the lines of “it’s well known that” or “these were common in the period” consider that such expressions are most often used by those who were told things they never bothered to verify.

It’s a very bold trader who, having done research which contradicts the trends established by the most active groups portraying a particular period, will actually change their products. As a case in point I’ve a couple of friends who both make a living out of making replica historic footwear. I’ve raised issues with each of them about their shoes only to be told that although they agree with my concerns, the corrected shoes wouldn’t conform with what everybody in a particularly prominent society wears. As such the majority of their customers won’t actually buy the more authentic versions as they say they look wrong! Conversely I know of a talented metalworker who created an original piece of work in a loosely period style he thought would get noticed as a bit different. To this day he won’t be drawn on whether or not it was actually a deliberate experiment, but because of his reputation for quality work it was inevitably copied, quite a lot actually. Consequently in its increasingly modified variations the design has evolved to become commonplace among most traders supplying this particular period, with many listing their own interpretations as authentic period replicas.

These aren’t the only artefacts affected by such problems, I know traders dealing in arms and armour, camp equipment, costume and much more who feel compelled to compromise their under-

standing of authentic simply to make their products saleable, and many more who are seemingly unaware of the errors or compromises in the so called “replicas” they copy. I therefore recommend you always ask what references products are based upon, and the time frame, geographical location, social status or rank in which such products can be considered “authentic”. Don’t just ask what features make them more accurate, but more importantly the compromises made to make them more appealing or affordable. Very few traders are genuinely dishonest and willing to lie in order to make a sale, though not all traders are knowledgeable enough to talk through the research relating to the products they sell, and sadly even if they can, relatively few consumers are interested enough to listen and learn.

I personally feel the widespread push for improved authenticity across every re-enactment group has in many cases backfired. It’s certainly made us more defensive about insisting that what we do is just as authentic as everybody else. It’s certainly made us all much keener to stress how much more “stuff” we own, as if this is a direct measure of academic credibility. However, I feel all this stems from increased feelings of inadequacy, constantly compelling us to compare our efforts to others around us, thereby increasing the number of people who are primarily trying to convince themselves that what they are doing is authentic. Many groups seem so frightened of being bettered by competitors they feel compelled to emulate their standards. Many individuals now seem so frightened of not meeting their group’s “standards” they are desperate to conform rather than question those standards. All of which leads to stagnation rather than improvement.

Ultimately I feel the drive for improved authenticity has, unintentionally, reduced the percentage of re-enactors willing to risk their reputation by putting forward new ideas or research. Let’s be honest, how many of us now simply “Google” the things we want to know, hoping some anonymous re-enactor or trader will have made available a few pretty pictures with captions telling us what they do? So whilst many welcome the ease of this unquestioning conformity as a form of research based authenticity, is it true that those of us still interested in genuine academic study of period sources and surviving artefacts have been so outnumbered their efforts no longer have an impact on driving forward understanding and authenticity?

Total authenticity is an ideal no re-enactor or manufacturer will ever fully achieve, the best we can hope for is to minimise compromise. However, are we now defining authenticity merely as an objects ability to meet the standards of others, or our willingness to keep amending our own standards to meet new evidence? We all say we want to improve our authenticity but it seems most simply want the reassurance and anonymity of fitting in with those around them? So I question “What price Authenticity?” Is the hobby truly getting more authentic products for our increase in expenditure or primarily cheaper quality versions of products we couldn’t previously afford? My own personal feeling, one which some may view as condescending or elitist, is that a drive for improvements in authenticity is not inherently a bad thing, much like opening up further education to a wider percentage

of the population should not be bad thing. However, badly implemented changes in university education ultimately lowered overall standards, caused dissatisfaction and generated a glut of unemployed graduates whose quasi-academic degree certificates are worthless to professional employers. Similarly, because of a stampede like drive for improved authenticity, the notion of gradual improvement through constant research is slowly being lost among the crowds hoping to bypass any period of learning and simply buy instant “authenticity”. Naturally where there is money to be made suppliers have stepped in to exploit such consumers. Reputable suppliers are still out there, but when the word authentic is now used to describe all “replica” goods of widely varying quality and price it is increasingly difficult for the growing numbers of re-enactors without appropriate knowledge to separate the good from the bad. It is in such situations, that we tend to look to the majority opinion, rather than reference books for reassurance, and in doing so we further perpetuate the problems.

We can’t all know everything about everything but we must try to learn enough to decide for ourselves which opinions are worth following. Consequently I’ll finish with a warning and an illustration of the principle that; “a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” I am aware of a certain trader, who to spare embarrassment shall remain anonymous, one who retails hand dyed and hand woven cloth for making replica historic costume. Obviously such a thing is very expensive to produce but the people who buy this presumably do so as they believe they are getting a much more authentic set of replica clothes out of it. Sadly, although hand coloured with “traditional” plant dyes, some of the dyes used are ones I am unaware of there being any archaeological evidence for from the chosen period of history, so in terms of colour they may be no more accurate than a modern synthetic dye. The yarns used are wool only in so much as the modern definition uses the term for mixtures of man made fibre containing some natural wool. Similarly whilst being hand woven, the modern loom used bears little similarity to the period looms the original cloth would have been woven on and with differences in sett, weight and pattern of weave the end product is arguably no more appropriate than the mass produced, modern, acrylic mix fabrics most re-enactors buy because it is labelled “wool”. However, no one thinks to question the majority opinion or suggest such expensive products made by a self proclaimed “specialist” solely for producing higher quality replica clothing might not be so special after all, consequently we all aspire to using the more “authentic” cloth....Don’t we?

....and am I the only one who recalls the tale of an emperor who bought his new clothes based upon fairly similar logic?

It may have become an unpopular truth, but to genuinely improve our authenticity we must study the past, not just copy other people’s portrayals of it. So whilst most now claim that what they are doing is more authentic, do we simply mean increasing numbers of us are conforming, without question, to a dumbed down definition of authenticity?