A Short History of Celebrity

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Celebrity is becoming a hot topic for academics of all kinds, witnessed by the launch of the journal Celebrity Studies earlier this year. However, in a 2007 article for History Today, Lucy Riall observed that ‘the history of celebrity has yet to be written’. (1) Fred Inglis has made the first attempt to bridge that gap, in a book which is thought-provoking but ultimately frustrating.

While fully acknowledging the seedier aspects of modern celebrity culture, Inglis’s book is essentially optimistic. It begins with the premise that celebrity is a vital ‘social adhesive’ (p. 4) in a society fragmenting under the pressures of globalisation, digitisation and loss of community. As he outlines in his second chapter, ‘A short history of the feelings’, the emergence of celebrity accompanied the development of new ideas about self-hood and individuality during the 18th century, and in particular the Romantic commitment to live for the passions, whether love or, as Inglis wryly points out, money. The developments set in train by the Romantics lead us to what he earlier describes as the ‘radical individualisation of modern sensibility’, which, together with the rise of urban democracy and the expansion of media communication, is the sine qua non of the emergence of celebrity (p. 5). In the process, however, despite the cultural weight attached to the development of individuality, Inglis argues that the bureaucracy and regimentation of modern life have robbed the individual of any opportunity for significant action. In these circumstances media celebrities appear as the only ‘fully realised’ individuals, and become screens onto which the doubts and aspirations of the audience are projected (p. 32). Celebrities show us the possibilities of how to live, and, more importantly, how to feel, when feeling is the only sphere of action open to most of us. In many ways this is not a novel argument. As early as 1840, Thomas Carlyle was attempting to use his lectures on heroes and hero worship to identify the socially useful among the expanding number of public individuals, and naturally to arrive at a set of criteria that would identify him as one of them. (2) Thus Carlyle’s acme of the modern hero was not Napoleon, the ‘Hero as Man of Action’, but Samuel Johnson, the ‘Hero as Man of Letters’.

However, realising that not everybody could aspire to such lofty heights, Carlyle also identified Boswell as the ideal type of the ‘hero worshipper’, the man whose devotion to his subject enabled him to bask in the glow of his subject’s aura, and thereby himself to attain a kind of reflected greatness.

Once his conceptual framework is in place, Inglis’s method is to examine the different stages by which the conditions for the modern culture of celebrity evolved from the second half of the 18th century to the present day, linking the evolution of the modern sensibility to other social and economic developments which were
‘the underlying forces which composed celebrity’ (p. 9). In the pre-20th-century chapters, these developments are tied to particular urban environments: 18th-century London’s ‘new consumerism’; the department stores of Hausmann’s Paris; and the gossip columns of gilded age New York and Chicago. Each environment fostered the evolution of new ways of generating and sustaining fame that were then exported to the world, and each gave rise to a constellation of celebrities who embodied new ways of being in public, to be censured, admired or emulated. Thus, the Romantic poets were valued by Georgian London for living according to their feelings in a world governed by rigid hierarchies and rules of etiquette, while in 19th-century Paris the avant garde of famous artists and writers sent postcards from the disputed borderlands of respectability to their bourgeois neighbours. Indeed, to Inglis the lives of ‘good’ celebrities are akin to art in their life-enhancing benefits. All this is contrasts with the amoral vacuity of ‘mere money’, first personified by the American robber barons, but which worked its way into all aspects of public life by the end of the 20th century, destroying all it touched.

There are drawbacks with this approach. For one thing, it occludes the extent to which celebrity was a transnational phenomenon long before the early 20th-century development of the French Riviera as a playground for the rich and famous, as described by Inglis in chapter six. Focussing on London as the centre of 18th-century celebrity ignores the role of the Enlightenment philosophes, especially Rousseau, in developing new public subjectivities, and the extent to which he and others, including Voltaire, themselves became celebrities. Similarly, the eastern United States played a vibrant role in international fame culture after the opening up of the literary lecture circuit in the 1830s, not to mention the intercontinental promotional activities of Phineas Barnum, who among other triumphs introduced the ‘Swedish Nightingale’ Jenny Lind to enraptured audiences across America in the 1850s. However, it does draw out very neatly the importance of major urban centres in providing the necessary conditions for the first celebrity cultures to thrive, including places to see and be seen, proximity to the centres of political and/or financial power, a thriving press and a large, literate audience. These are factors often ignored by contemporary theorists, who hold that the mass audiences and means of communication which enable the culture of celebrity to survive did not exist before the 20th century. (3)

Perhaps Inglis’s greatest achievement is to demonstrate that celebrity has a history at all, in the face of scepticism from within and without the historical profession. When Daniel Boorstin produced his famous aphorism about a celebrity being ‘a person known for his well-knownness’ (4), he envisaged a past golden age of great men, where fame was based on solid achievement rather than glamour and display. Inglis demonstrates beyond doubt that this is wishful thinking. The trappings of celebrity have been the necessary companions of fame of all kinds since at least the middle of the 18th century: particularly for those who lived by their reputations as painters, actors or poets, rather than on inherited wealth. Yet this is where A Short History of Celebrity starts to become frustrating. Despite frequent references to the ‘machinery’ of fame and the ‘celebrity industry’, which we are told was ‘hardly more than a workshop industry’ in 19th-century Paris (p. 91), we are given little more than glimpses of how that machinery functioned, and who, with the exception of short sections on press barons and gossip columnists, was at the controls. Instead, Inglis is more fascinated by the celebrity subjects he has chosen to illustrate the various stages of his argument.

Of course celebrity is a system based around personality, so it makes sense to study it through the lives of individual celebrities who can act as exemplars of particular celebrity types, of the wider cultural significance of famous people, or an aspect of the impact of fame on the individual. However, the problem facing any student of celebrity is the sheer volume and bewildering variety of available subjects. Any choice of case studies will therefore be highly personal. Even so, it is clear that Inglis’s interest in those who played a big role in the development of their own public personas sways him in the early chapters towards the obviously self-made and promoted, such as Joshua Reynolds, Lord Byron, or Sarah Bernhardt. Even here, he glides over the mechanisms which allowed them to communicate with their audiences: the changing technologies of printing; the engravings which allowed Reynolds’s paintings of other famous men and women to reach a far wider audience; in Bernhardt’s case the development of photography; above all, the increasing demand from the literate and moderately affluent. He is silent on the way that in 1838 the
‘workshop industry’ of painting, printing, poetry, pottery and song turned a lighthouse keeper’s daughter, Grace Darling, into a national phenomenon almost overnight, without very much encouragement from its subject, and her increasing reliance, as a woman from a relatively humble family, on the paternalistic Duke of Northumberland to manage her public image. When he does turn away from his subjects to the wider context, the tone is often dutiful and not a little bored, as the occasional references to the ‘reach-me-down explanations’ of social and economic history suggests.

As we approach the present day, the background narrative becomes more familiar and well-rehearsed: the gossip columns, the ‘star’ system, reality T.V. Simultaneously, the celebrity biographies take over even more completely, with rapturous tributes to Inglis’s eclectic assortment of personal idols: Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Marilyn Munroe, Eric Clapton and Freddy Mercury to name a few. Throughout, Inglis is concerned to demonstrate the work done by celebrities in personifying and constructing social possibilities. For example, Jimmy Stewart ‘incarnated and (as I am at pains to insist) caused to become liveable a different, powerful version of celebrated maleness’ (p. 193). That is, a more complex and sensitive version of maleness to the one personified by John Wayne. In some ways, Inglis’s tendency to concentrate on his own heroes has a limiting effect on the analysis. Perhaps we would learn more if those he disapproves of were not dismissed so peremptorily from view, as in the case of fashion models whose public personas are said to compose only of ‘a wonderful smile, a habitual narcissism, and a nasty temper’ (p. 244). Hardly a balanced opinion, and clearly based on the public behaviour of one or two individuals at best. At least Inglis is prepared to identify some contemporary celebrities, from Nelson Mandela to Kylie Minogue, who in his view have the ‘right’ mix of qualities to make them socially valuable: including an essential congruence between their private selves and their celebrity ‘personalities’, which deflects potential accusations of hypocrisy and allows them the necessary time to become accepted as part of the social fabric. Hence Inglis’s optimism that the current celebrity mania is not the great danger to social morals and civic culture implied by some of the more hysterical contemporary comment.

History is a useful tool in developing this position; giving celebrity a lineage makes it less of an innovation and so less frightening. The danger of enlisting history in the development of such a present-minded argument is that it risks distorting the past by a continual searching after what is similar to the present, while differences in belief and practice can easily be missed. This is particularly true when it comes to the role of the audience, which tends to remain in the shadows cast by Inglis’s blazing galaxy of stars. This despite periodic acknowledgement of the role of the audience in the construction of the celebrity:

The celebrity acts, necessarily in public; the public reacts by taking the action and, after transforming it for its own purposes, projects it, as a filthy or a glowing image, back upon its source. The wretched celebrity not only asked for it but must incorporate the image as amiably as possible, turning it for better or worse into corporeal reality (p. 68).

This is a rather simplified version of what has been described more fluidly (and succinctly) elsewhere as the process by which audiences ‘productively consume’ celebrity images. Unfortunately, Inglis never really explores this process, or explains what he means by the audience transforming the celebrity action ‘for its own purposes’, let alone how these purposes may have changed over time. The result is a one-sided approach: if the audience is necessary to the production of celebrity, then half of the equation is missing. It is here that the scant attention paid to the ‘machinery’ is most keenly felt, because connection between audience and celebrity is facilitated by that machinery and its productions.

This drawback is compounded by Inglis’s overheated prose. When applied to Inglis’s potted biographies, it leads quickly to cliché: a weakness the author himself acknowledges in a moment of self-awareness (p. 237), though the reader feels it much earlier. When dealing with people in the mass, it tends to generalisation, abstraction and hyperbole, as when he refers to the 1832 Reform Act making ‘access to the vote the unslakable thirst of all those without it’ (p. 77), or his rather crass description, albeit prefaced by a self-condemnatory remark about old curmudgeons, of ‘clothes-crazed young girls thronging the shopping malls with nothing on their tiny minds but magic dust makeup, thongs, and glitter jeans’ (p. 244). Seemingly
unable to explore social groups without resorting to abstractions or stereotypes, Inglis is more comfortable in the company of literary archetypes, such as Dickens’s Mr Dombey: pressed into duty in chapter four as the quintessential bourgeois, the miserable product of political reform and industrial revolution.

All this is an unfortunate distraction. It could certainly never be suggested that the book is, in that vacuous formulation, more ‘style than substance’: as with the majority of the celebrities Inglis describes, there is plenty of both here. At his best, Inglis is quite capable of neatly expressing an idea, as when he describes the process by which celebrity both ‘attributes charisma and strips it off’, a paradox attributed to ‘the effects of a new kind of performing society in which appearance ... began to count as much as standing, longevity, tradition’ (p. 46). However, there is a sense that, despite its Princeton University Press imprint, A Short History of Celebrity has been published with more than half an eye on a popular as much as an academic readership, and has therefore fallen a little between two stools. The unfortunate consequences of this include the lack of a thematic index or bibliography and a footnote count that is meagre at best, making it hard to judge the significance of Inglis’s contribution to the growing literature of celebrity studies, historical or otherwise. Some of the celebrities of cultural studies itself, Adorno, Geertz, Sennett, are referenced frequently enough, but there are notable omissions. There is no mention at all of Leo Braudy’s magisterial, and one would have supposed essential, history of fame, The Frenzy of Renown, although familiarity is suggested by the subtitle of the eighth chapter, ‘The Democratisation of Celebrity’, echoing the title of the fifth and longest section of Braudy’s book, ‘The Democratisation of Fame’. (6) There are also very few references to contemporary theorists of celebrity, and none at all to recent authors such as P. David Marshall, Chris Rojek or Graeme Turner, despite the fact that the idea of celebrity having a social function through the mobilisation of affect, strikingly similar to Inglis’s notion of modern celebrity as the performance of feeling, is something that Marshall in particular has developed at length – albeit from a more overtly Marxist perspective.(7)

Perhaps in a semi-popular book there is good reason not to get caught up in dry theoretical debates with other authors, which might obscure the book’s central contention. Less forgivable is the unusually high error count. Robert Walpole, George I’s Whig Prime Minister, is labelled a Tory and his rule a ‘Tory settlement’ (pp. 21, 38), although the word ‘Tory’ (from the Irish tóraidhe meaning outlaw) was initially a term of abuse for opponents of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Protestant succession. Similarly, the progressive Whig Charles James Fox is misidentified as a ‘radical’ (p. 52). At one point Inglis seems to suggest the existence of a spurious reform act in 1906, between Gladstone’s act of 1884 and the Representation of the People Act of 1918 (p. 77). Later, punks become the ‘predecessors’ of glam rock (p. 239), rather than being in revolt against it, while, with similar chronological insouciance, two different dates are given for Louis Napoleon’s coup d’etat of 1852 (pp. 81, 83) – although this, alongside the hapless Napoleon’s misidentification as ‘Louis Philippe’ on one occasion (p. 81), can perhaps be put down as a typographical error, as can the otherwise inexplicable reference to the ‘short happy life’ (p. 261) of Princess Diana. This carelessness occasionally surfaces in the celebrity biographies themselves, as when Inglis apparently conflates land and water speed record holders Malcolm (1885–1948) and Donald (1921–1967) Campbell, with the latter too young to have been ‘a regular on the Côte d’Azure’ between the wars, at least as a celebrity in his own right (p. 153). Perhaps this merely illustrates Inglis’s point that Donald’s death during a water-speed record attempt, though on Coniston Water rather than Windermere as Inglis states, succeeded in confirming him as ‘an immortal celebrity’, who eclipsed even the memory of his own illustrious father.

A Short History of Celebrity provides an important corrective to those (celebrity theorists among them) who assume the phenomenon has no history worth speaking of, and lends intellectual legitimacy to the effort to recover that history. However, it is at least as notable for what it obscures as what it reveals. A truly satisfying, though perhaps not so brief, account would surely give due weight to the role of the audience, and to the mechanisms by which they were brought into contact with their idols. In the meantime, there is plenty of work for specialist historians to do filling in the gaps in our knowledge of how those mechanisms operated before the rise of Hollywood. In particular, they should be concerned to illuminate the social and cultural practices of fame: the myriad moments of meeting, recognising (or failing to recognise), collecting,
and composing; the construction of the albums and scrapbooks of autographs and photographs which attempted to categorise and contain the ever-expanding pantheon of public individuals; the purchase and display of the multitudinous objects stamped with the names and images of the famous; the attempts to establish more-than-imagined relationships with them through writing letters, sending gifts, even physical contact. Future studies will reference Inglis’s book as a stimulating fund of ideas rather than as a definitive account. Celebrity, meanwhile, still awaits its historian.

Notes

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