

themselves because no one would listen; they were afraid of condemnation or ridicule. Female experience is submerged territory, centuries of well-kept secrets. Now, women are still afraid of expressing themselves because they are suspicious of the avenues on offer and are caught between what they feel (whether it is aggression or dependence) and what they think they *should* feel. Women bands from the Roches to the Raincoats were obliquely, self-consciously, filtering their experience through irony.

Joan Armatrading speaks directly and she would be valuable for that alone, if nothing else. The old-fashioned rock format she uses is one that many women singers now avoid, as a male-created vehicle of expression, opting instead for the whimsy of folk music. Armatrading proves it's not the genre that matters but the spirit in which you use it: rock and roll won't kill you. Some might condemn her songs for expressing an old-fashioned sexual politics, in which one is either dominant or dependent. But these are the politics with which we live, the old romances we are still working through sometimes as women, sometimes as men and there is no other songwriter whose work expresses so clearly our lives today. D

SANITISING THE WAR

Anthony Arblaster

'It is our pride that we have no censorship. That is the essence of a free country.'
Margaret Thatcher, House of Commons, May 11 1982.

With her fake-soft voice, and her vapid but sinister gush about the war being 'an inspiration to the youth of Britain' (to do what — fight another war?), Mrs Thatcher squeezed every drop of phoney sentiment out of her Falklands visit in January this year.

As a media stunt it was well-timed, to fall in the post-Christmas vacuum of hard news, and carefully staged. Just as the media were lied to by the Government and the civil service during the war itself, so they were lied to about this trip, which they were led to believe had been cancelled or postponed. It was yet another example of what is euphemistically called 'misinformation'. No doubt 'security' was the excuse offered for this deception, as it usually is. But where will it end? The logic of it would be a pattern of

systematic lies about the plans of all important state personnel.

The result of this lying was highly satisfactory to the Prime Minister in her campaign for re-election as the midget Churchill of the South Atlantic beaches. There were no rude or cynical newsmen to dog her footsteps round the sacred islands — just a suitably obsequious BBC television team, specially tipped off, whose pictures reached us with all the speed and immediacy which was apparently so hard to achieve six months before.

Yet there was still one revealing, unscripted moment during this elaborately managed performance. The Prime Minister was caught telling a group of Port Stanley residents what a relief it was when 'we' heard about the Argentinian surrender. 'Yes' said one of them drily, 'it was a relief to us too'. Perhaps he had no intention of being rude; but intentionally or otherwise he had exposed the gulf which separates Thatcher

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Corporal Barry Morgan a Falklands veteran, zoatching the Victory Parade to which he had not been invited, on television

from reality. For her the war was an ideological, symbolic struggle revolving around Downing St. That it was the Falkland islanders who were at the centre of the *actual* invasion and war hardly impinged on her self-righteous, self-obsessed consciousness. No wonder she found the war so 'thrilling', as she told the Scottish Tories at the time (see Tam Dalyell: *One Man's Falkland**)

As for the BBC, it has certainly made amends for its one or two quite minor indiscretions at the time of the crisis in April and May 1982. For the whole latter half of 1982, news bulletin after news bulletin was stuffed full of extensive film of victory parades, medal awarding ceremonies, last posts, memorial services and other patriotic rituals — all of which have already enshrined this cruel and totally unnecessary war as one more heroic episode in Our Rough Island Story. As *The Times* put it, in its editorial of April 5, 1982, 'We are an island race, and the focus of attack is one of our islands, inhabited by our islanders.'

Many of these supposed news items — the award of still more medals, the return of yet another ship to Devonport or Portsmouth — were so trivial that they have hardly featured at all in the next day's serious newspapers. But they have presumably appeased the Prime Minister and her party, and restored the BBC's reputation for unthinking patriotism and deference to the government of the day.

Robert Harris, in his quite brief study of relations between the media and the Government during the war, *Gotcha!* presents a far more charitable view of the BBC's performance. He concentrates on the row that followed the *Panorama* programme of May 10, which included interviews with two Labour and two Conservative critics of the Government's war policy. He shows how both the Chairman and the Director-General designate of the BBC defied the wrath of the mob of Westminster Tories — 'growling like dogs', as Alasdair Milne described them — and refused to apologise for the programme.

He shows too that at least two opinion polls indicated that the public at large did not share the hatred of the BBC shown by the Conservatives and their gutter press (the *Daily Express* referred to 'Traitorama', and *The Sun* screamed about 'treason'.) Very well. But what he does not explore is the impact of that row upon the BBC's — and no doubt ITV's — subsequent coverage of the war. The row over *Panorama*, carefully encouraged by the Prime Minister, may have been a genuine expression of Tory atavism. But it was also in the nature of the warning

shot across the bows of the media. Notice was being served that no further deviations from the patriotic line would be tolerated. Thatcher's boast about the lack of censorship — quite apart from the fact that news from the South Atlantic was being censored — was particularly empty and hypocritical since it occurred in the context of a series of threats and threatening remarks directed against the BBC and the media in general. 'We expect the case for freedom to be put by those who are responsible for doing so', she said.

So far as I know, that *Panorama* programme was the last, and almost the only occasion when there was any attempt by radio or television to reflect and communicate the debate that was in fact going on about British policy and the war it led to. What was striking was the absence from the small screen of some of those commentators who in normal circumstances are regularly called on to comment on British politics — journalists like Hugo Young of the *Sunday Times*, Peter Jenkins of *The Guardian*, and Peter Kellner of the *New Statesman*. We don't have to look far for the reason: they were all opponents or critics of the war policy.

Since Harris's book appeared the minutes of the BBC's weekly internal meetings to discuss coverage of the issue have been leaked to the press, and it is clear that the Corporation was, as it usually is, amply sensitive to any possible government objection to their coverage. Thus interviews with the relatives of those killed were not screened, ostensibly on the grounds of non-intrusion into private distress. When it turned out that some of the relatives were willing and even keen to be interviewed, a more fundamental argument against showing them was brought to light: 'There was a danger that, by broadcasting an emotional interview, the BBC would be charged with undermining national will.' (*Sunday Times*, January 30). And that would never do.

Harris does not go into any of this, presumably for the simple reason that he works for the BBC's current affairs department — a fact which is not mentioned anywhere in his book.

Perhaps it is for the same reason that he says so little about the overall presentation of the war in pictorial terms, beyond noting that whereas the Lebanon war was presented in terms of 'pictures of suffering and destruction', 'images of death and injury hardly featured at all in the media's coverage of the fighting in the South Atlantic.' As Gareth Parry of *The Guardian* remarked, visually the war was 'carefully sanitised'. But it is

naive to believe, as he did, that this was done for the benefit of relatives. What mattered was not sapping the 'national will'.

And this, of course, is what so much of the censorship of war coverage was about. The House of Commons Defence Committee proved itself to be as credulous and uncritical as the Commons itself when, in investigating government handling of the media during the conflict, it concluded that censorship was justified on grounds of protecting and supporting the military operations themselves. Concealing the number of casualties at Bluff Cove, eliminating a journalist's reference to people being 'badly burnt', or simply ensuring that only the most 'positive' (ie, propagandist) reports got transmitted — none of this had anything to do with protecting troops or misleading the Argentines. Nor did the fact that no newspaper (to my knowledge) had the guts to put the word 'censored' at the head of the despatches they were printing, even though they knew full well that they were being vetted both in the South Atlantic and at the Ministry of Defence. These were the ways in which opinion in Britain was sedated and manipulated. Censorship, like the whole giant apparatus of governmental 'security', is largely intended to conceal disturbing truths from the people at home — not from any external 'enemy', real or imagined.

There were, certainly, tensions between the media and the Government and the armed forces, as Harris's book shows, and as many journalists have reported. But such disagreements are trivial stuff when set against the fact that for the most part press, TV and radio accepted without much demur the operations of the censors; while television in particular operated a system of self-censorship through which both the more disturbing aspects of the war itself and the debate about it were systematically concealed from their viewers. The 'sanitising' of the war was not the work of the censors alone; but of collusion between the Government and the media. Given that the Government not only controlled the flow of information, but was also prepared to mislead and lie to the media and the press; and given the willingness of most of the media to go along with this, it was no wonder that one American TV mogul said bluntly that 'the British press was discounted here as a reliable source of news all during the Falklands engagement'. Robert Harris is right to suggest that the war may have one tiny side-benefit: it will have taught many people to be a good deal more sceptical in their approach to what passes in the press, and on our screens, as 'news'. D