## Authentic and profound, A Family At War shows how Britain could lead the world in TV drama

BY SIMON HEFFER - Sunday Telegraph 12 JUNE 2017 • 6:03PM

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/o/authentic-profound-family-war-shows-britain-could-lead-world/





American producers credit their viewers with the brains to remain interested for more than three episodes – something long unknown this side of the Atlantic – and routinely turn out five, six or seven series of 12 episodes each. Nor are these dramas hijacked, as many on British television are, for exercises in virtue-signalling about the evils of racism, sexism, homophobia and so on. They simply tell gripping human stories, and tell them supremely well.

British television used to scale these heights, too: and those with access to digital television can now watch the supreme example. Talking Pictures TV is re-running A Family at War, of which Granada Television made 52 episodes between 1970 and 1972.

Many of a certain age will recall it: those of us whose parents had experienced the Second World War, and for whom it was the defining passage of their lives, will remember how for them it was unmissable, not least because it so faithfully reflected what they had endured.

As a youth, I found it compelling: but watching it again (it is also available as a DVD box set) to pass some dark evenings last winter I was overwhelmed by its brilliance. Having seen all the British TV classics – The Forsyte Saga, Brideshead Revisited, The Jewel in the Crown and so on – I have no hesitation in saying it is the best of all.

It tells the story, from 1938 to mid-1945, of the Ashton family, who live in a middle-class suburb of Liverpool. As well as recounting the fears and tensions of such times – the family's three sons are in the RAF, the Army and the merchant navy – the story also portrays the class differences that were even more prevalent in England then than they are now. Edwin Ashton, played in a towering performance by Colin Douglas, is the son of a miner who married the daughter of a successful printer.



Good at his job as foreman of what becomes his brother-in-law's works, he feels beholden to his wife's family and, before war breaks out, is passed over for promotion to manager when the job goes to his embarrassed nephew: it becomes Edwin's when the boy joins the Navy.

But his house is owned by his domineering brother-in-law, Sefton Briggs, played by John McKelvey: and the tension between the two men permeates the whole series. Briggs is what many would consider the archetype of the canny northern businessman, and provides much of the story's humour. McKelvey plays him with immense subtlety and without caricature.



The Ashtons have two daughters, one of whom is a schoolmistress whose husband, after Dunkirk, is missing, believed killed. She begins a relationship with the widowed father of one of her pupils only for her husband to reappear, smuggled out of Belgium where the resistance had been sheltering him.

Every historical detail of the story is accurate – the clothes, the language, the sense of understatement, even the representations of Liverpool during and after the Blitz, and the effect that the sacrifices of war had on millions of families like the Ashtons all over Britain and, indeed, the world.

It is further rooted in its time by the choice of Vaughan Williams's Sixth Symphony as its theme music, composed as the war was ending and with a supposed representation of the nuclear holocaust as its finale.

The genius behind A Family at War was John Finch, one of the original writing team for Coronation Street (some of whose stalwarts turn up in this series) and himself a merchant navy veteran.

Now in his 90s, Finch created the programme and wrote many of the scripts. His perceptiveness when drawing character, shaping dialogue and creating context were what gave A Family at War such authenticity and profundity. It would be impossible, I imagine, to re-create those times now with half the conviction that went into Finch's conception of it: in cultural terms, England in 1970 was far closer to the Forties than our times are even to the Nineties.

So as well as being the most brilliant drama series, it is also a magisterial historical document. If British television could recapture the quality and depth Granada achieved with A Family at War, not least by trusting the taste and intelligence of its audience, it would lead the world