




6-10-2014

Broken Record. Broken Record. Broken Record.

John M. Rudy
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw>

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Rudy, John M., "Broken Record. Broken Record. Broken Record." (2014). *Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public*. 51.

<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/interpretcw/51>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

Broken Record. Broken Record. Broken Record.

Abstract

I've been helping a friend workshop some posts for an upcoming anniversary (surprisingly for me, *not* a Civil War event but a deviation into the land of the Revolutionary War). And again and again, I find myself repeating some variation on a single nugget of interpretive wisdom. This is no fault of my colleague. I am often a broken record. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

Creative Commons License

Creative

Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

License



Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

www.civilwarconnect.com



Broken Record. Broken Record. Broken Record.

TUESDAY, JUNE 10, 2014

Lately I've felt like a broken record.

I've been helping a friend workshop some posts for an upcoming anniversary (surprisingly for me, *not* a Civil War event but a deviation into the land of the Revolutionary War). And again and again, I find myself repeating some variation on a single nugget of interpretive wisdom. This is no fault of my colleague. I am often a broken record.

So what has my advice been? It's simple, really. My friend has been following the historian's impulse, trying to share a complete story. She's been trying to include vivid detail, lush explanation, full proper names of British Generals and American Privates alike. It's such a natural impulse, too. You've gone to such amazing lengths to gather knowledge, to amass expertise, to become a *bonafide* know-it-all on a subject, you just need to spout that knowledge like a perverse history fountain. When you cram too much stuff into your head, of course you want to let everyone know everything every day.

But the fire hose is the cardinal sin of interpretation, the first pitfall which all interpreters are warned against. Interpretada, as David Larsen coined the concept, is not interpretation. It's simply chaining together fact after fact.

So what to do then? If you can't tell a complete story, what could you do?

My broken record chimes in: tell a meaningful story.

Those two aims, telling the whole story and telling a meaningful story, are so often mutually exclusive. The completist impulse leads towards overloading the visitor, overburdening them with facts, figures, names, places and dates. Overloading them with precisely why they hated High School history in their teens: lists.

But if you unlink the daisy chains of dates and the flow of events, if you pluck out small occurrences, tiny vignettes, little moments which can *stand in* for the whole, which typify the larger narrative, then you stand to begin helping visitors forge connections.



Definitely not a face driven by facts alone, eh? / [PD LOC](#)

I've written before about [Anton Chekhov and his potent rule of narrative](#). And so you might see this moment as another leap into that same old groove of the record. Eliminating the superfluous helps drive more keenly toward meaning and away from interpredata.

But this is more than eliminating the useless facts and unfired guns. It's about even eliminating the semi-useful facts that might not have all too much bearing on the interpretive moment. Does a visitor need to know the unit a man served in? Maybe not. Do they need to know the Corps or name of the army his unit served in? That might not even have bearing.

Anyone who speaks to me for more than a few minutes about interpretation likely hears another of my favorite phrases, another broken record: good history is just true fiction.

I'm not advocating making things up. What I mean is that interpreters need to seek out stories and moments with the same potential impact as fiction. Using the tools of fiction, the construction of a narrative driven by suspense, drama, irony of situation and, above all else, vibrant characters.

In most good fiction, things don't just happen, people do them. But we so often describe an army's actions in a largely detached and massive way. Armies don't march though. Men march. Armies don't fight. Men fight. Armies don't die. Men die.

When I mention your favorite novel you probably don't remember scenes and actions as much as remember the vibrant characters who inhabit those scenes and make those actions happen. You likely remember who they are, how they think and how they bend when put under stress. And isn't *that* really a route to relevance more so than intricate detail of 18th century combat's small actions? In the end (another broken record here), today's visitors will never need to command an army of a couple thousand farm boys from Connecticut and Massachusetts as they wield muzzle-loading smooth-bore French flint lock muskets against long neat lines of enemy force. Time doesn't move backwards; if it did, historians would be quickly out of a job.

But today's visitors can find inspiration in the thoughts of the people of the past. They'll likely be under stress, and can draw inspiration from how the people of the past bent or broke under immense stressors. If the interpreter builds real people, crafts real character and lets audiences get to know them personally, today's people might begin to care.

Remember, success in interpretation is not defined by, "did I include every last little detail?" Instead, it's typified by the question, "did they find a reason to care?" Education, if ever a goal of interpretation, is always a secondary impact rather than a primary motivation. Helping visitors find their own personal meanings in a landscape, to find a reason to love a place, to provoke them viscerally and emotionally within a landscape is the aim of interpretation.

So breathe. Just keep reminding yourself that you don't have to tell the whole story, you just have to tell a meaningful story. Everything's going to be fine.