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Crusading for the Truth

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Crusading for the Truth

Abstract

Last semester, I received a very memorable critique on one of my more polarizing blog posts. In it, a reader derisively referred to another of the CWI Fellows and me as “truth-driven crusaders” for our commitment to healthy historical engagement. Finding it an appropriate if not excessively romanticized description of the work we do as historians-in-training, my friends and I have since then appropriated the term to describe ourselves. I feel obliged to admit here that the antagonism signaled by the term “crusader” makes me a bit uneasy, but I like to think that we “crusade” against certain ideas, and not the people who hold them. Some interpretations of history are worth fighting for or against—with rhetoric as our weapon, though, not swords and spears. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Crusading for the Truth

March 11, 2015

by Kevin Lavery '16

Last semester, I received a very memorable critique on one of my more polarizing blog posts. In it, a reader derisively referred to another of the CWI Fellows and me as “truth-driven crusaders” for our commitment to healthy historical engagement. Finding it an appropriate if not excessively romanticized description of the work we do as historians-in-training, my friends and I have since then appropriated the term to describe ourselves. I feel obliged to admit here that the antagonism signaled by the term “crusader” makes me a bit uneasy, but I like to think that we “crusade” against certain ideas, and not the people who hold them. Some interpretations of history are worth fighting for or against—with rhetoric as our weapon, though, not swords and spears.



A rather less benevolent crusader than those of the “truth-driven” historian variety. The Last Crusader by Karl Friedrich Lessing. Wikimedia Commons.

I have no intention here of reopening what was a well-argued debate on both sides of the original issue, but rather to offer a reflection on the question it raised in my mind.

To whom or to what do a historian's responsibilities lie if not to truth?

One might argue that there is a higher calling than truth, that historians should leverage their skills and knowledge for a purpose more tangible than an abstract ideal that can never be wholly attained. The specialized training of historians has given them a unique relationship with the past. Is historians' training accompanied by a responsibility to harness their knowledge in pursuit of a certain higher good?

That's a rather sketchy question. What could that higher good be? Moreover, who gets to define that what that higher good is? The government? The popular majority? Maybe even the academics themselves?

Perhaps historians have a patriotic duty to their native land. But in the long nineteenth century, some historians "played a malevolent role" in contributing to a belligerent sense of nationalism that Margaret McMillan has credited as a factor in the perfect storm of 1914. When truth goes to the wayside, we risk telling ourselves the story we want to hear instead of the story we need to hear.

Perhaps historians have a duty to shape the future for the better based on lessons learned from the past. Still, as any responsible historian would acknowledge, the past can only go so far to inform our present decisions. Today's Ukraine and Russia are not 1939's Czechoslovakia and Nazi Germany, no matter how many times world leaders try to make the comparison.

Perhaps historians should be activists, bringing attention to real-world issues. I think historians can be activists in many ways, including by drawing attention to underappreciated issues of modern consequence, but I don't think scholarship can reflect any inherent predisposition on an issue and still be considered responsible.

Perhaps historians even have a certain responsibility to creators of their sources. Their work is, after all, constructed upon the primary and secondary sources that preceded it. Yet if they worry too much about honoring their debt to their sources and neglect to properly interrogate these records, we get a twisted vision of history that accomplishes essentially nothing.

Or should historians bear in mind a responsibility to the public who might not be as adept at wading through the murk of history? Public historians certainly do have an obligation to serve the public – it's in their very title. But even this case, if truth is not the primary commitment of the public historian, the public could too easily be deprived of the truth and fed an easily consumable narrative that further obscures the inherent complexities of human history. The public deserves—and hopefully wants—better.

All of these answers make me uncomfortable – firstly, because they promote scholarship on a modern political agenda and commit historians to a linear and single-sided understanding of history that undermines its inherent complexities. It's unrealistic to expect historians to totally escape the cultural perspectives and methodologies that

undergird their work, but it's dangerous to ask them to abandon an ideal that, though unattainable, will help ensure their commitment to the veracity of their work.

So I'm okay being a truth-driven crusader, although I'd rather convert than conquer. I do believe there can and must be more to history than the abstract idea of Truth, but I still think that truth needs to be the first priority of historians or any other priority is poorly served.

But I'm curious what you, our reader, think of this idea.

To whom or to what do you believe a historian is ultimately responsible? Why?



Statue of Clio, Greek muse of history, from the Soldiers' National Monument at Gettysburg National Cemetery.

Photo by Donaldecoho. Wikimedia Commons.

Sources:

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