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Meet Mr. Everyman: Everyone His Own Interpreter

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Meet Mr. Everyman: Everyone His Own Interpreter

Abstract

In 1931, Carl Becker, president of the American Historical Association, the largest professional organization of historians, gave a speech in which he tried to distill history to its very essence. In that address, "Everyman His Own Historian," Becker declared that history reduced to its lowest terms was the "memory of things said and done." Using that simple definition, Becker argued that everyone, no matter whether they had professional training or expertise, was in some way, at some point in time, an historian. Everyone at some time in their lives did as a historian does – asks a question about the past and researches it, using evidence to come up with the most logical conclusion. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation, NPS, Civil War to Civil Rights

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public 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."

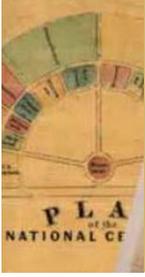
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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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Meet Mr. Everyman: Everyone His Own Interpreter

TUESDAY, MAY 15, 2012

Note: I originally wrote this piece for a NPS training course on Civil War to Civil Rights; I think it correctly characterizes some of my views on the theme (I love it!). Today, I thought I'd share the piece (albeit with a few edits) here as well. Enjoy.

In 1931, Carl Becker, president of the American Historical Association, the largest professional organization of historians, gave a speech in which he tried to distill history to its very essence. In that address, "[Everyman His Own Historian](#)," Becker declared that history reduced to its lowest terms was the "memory of things said and done." Using that simple definition, Becker argued that everyone, no matter whether they had professional training or expertise, was in some way, at some point in time, an historian. Everyone at some time in their lives did as a historian does – asks a question about the past and researches it, using evidence to come up with the most logical conclusion.

I would make the same argument for interpreters. If we reduce interpretation to its very essence, that interpretation is the facilitation of personal and meaningful connections, then similarly everyone is her own interpreter. Everyone at some point in their lives finds some sort of meaningful connection to some familiar landscape that matters to them.

What do I mean by that? Well, first off, I truly believe that everyone, no matter who they are or where they come from, can find deep meaning and true personal relevance in every historical site that is worthy of preservation. Interpreters are simply there to help them and (in some instances) get out of their way. Historic sites, at their very core, speak of human universals.

But if everyone is his own historian and interpreter, why do we need professional interpreters and or historians? This is of course a logical extension of Becker's argument. But Carl Becker, realizing this, did not despair. He realized that historians help to serve Mr. Everyman's emotional needs and work towards his emotional satisfaction. The historian (and interpreter) help to facilitate a connection between Mr. Everyman and the past he craves to connect with. They act as a guide and adviser to Mr. Everyman, offering advice and guidance on what might help him find meaning. As one Civil War blogger has succinctly said, "Everyman's his own historian, but not every man is very good at it." The interpreter helps to solve that.

Carl Becker's piece taken as a whole was an eloquent plea for historians to be responsive to society, to the very people for which they ostensibly wrote history. That is my plea as well – we have to be responsive to the whole society we interpret for – the whole [American public](#) and not just those who already visit our historic sites. How do we, as an interpretive corps, accomplish this task? For the

National Park Service, it means connecting two core historical eras they interprets – the Civil War and the struggle for Civil Rights. These two historical periods are messy. They frequently intersect, overlap, and cross paths repeatedly. They bounce off of each other too, traveling in different directions for years before finally crossing paths again. Yet too often, our interpretation of these sites is segmented, partial, and too narrow in its focus. Sometimes we miss the bigger picture, too wrapped up in our site's specific details to see the broad forest of meanings.

Whichever area you interpret; it is history all the same. And I love history. But I love interpreting history even more. Playing with contradictions on a landscape, warping time and chronology, considering multiple and radical points of view and pitting them against each other – these are magical and transformative things you can do while interpreting that historians often frown upon when creating history. But that doesn't matter. Interpreting is all about helping Mr. Everyman find meaning in a place and promoting his care for it. It's not about pounding into a visitor's head what important thing happened at this battlefield, why this historic site is important, or some broad historical thesis about why the events happened the way they did.

It is about the visitor discovering personal value in the landscape. It is about every person becoming their own interpreter.