

Keynote Address: Whose History Is It?

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Preparing this talk was an interesting and unique challenge for me. I received by e-mail the title of my talk, "Whose History Is It?" Although I'm sure I could have changed the title if I'd liked to, I've never been given the title and then tried to think about a talk that would fit the title. It was a wonderful challenge. My mother is an elementary school art teacher, and it reminded me of elementary school. The teacher hands out art paper, then comes around to each pupil's desk with a big, fat, thick magic marker and draws a squiggle on the paper, and you have to take crayons and fill in the squiggle to make it something recognizable. Trying to write a talk in reply to the title reminded me of that effort. So, see if you think I'm contorting the squiggle of my title to fit the talk.

In 1908, surgeon and explorer Frederick Cook claimed to have reached the North Pole, a year before Robert Peary did. And he had proof, photographs taken by his two Inuit guides. But the world was skeptical. Cook's achievement seemed nothing short of miraculous, and the evidence slippery at best. As Mark Twain wise-cracked, "the golfer, when he puts in a record round, has to have his card signed, and...there is nobody to sign Dr. Cook's card; there are two Eskimos to vouch for his feat, to be sure, but they were his caddies, and at golf their evidence would not be accepted." To Twain, Cook's clumsy claim illustrated the fine line between facts and miracles: "If Dr. Cook's feat is put forward as Fact, the evidence of his two caddies is inadequate; if it is put forward as Miracle, one caddy is aplenty."

Whose history is it? Robert Peary's apparently. When the U.S. Congress conducted an inquiry into the two explorers' competing claims of "discovering" the North pole, Cook's Inuit guides informed investigators that the photographs had been taken miles short of ninety degrees north. Cook was labeled a fraud; Peary was promoted to Read Admiral of the U.S. Navy. Peary died a hero in 1920; Cook went to jail in 1923, convicted of involvement in a slimy oil-well swindle. Peary will always be the intrepid Admiral but, though the good doctor was pardoned of the oil-well fiasco a few months before his death in 1940, he will always be crooked Cook.

Whose history is it? History is told by those with the best evidence. History is told by people who have left diaries, letters, stamp collections, journals, wills, wedding rings, house plans, court records, manifestos, newspapers, cotton quilts, woodcuts, inscriptions on tea cups. All of these records matter, because without them, history is only fiction. Frederick Cook knew this, of course. That's why he posed, bundled in his furry parka, for a frigid photograph, miles short of his goal, on a block of ice he thought might look just enough like the North Pole to convince a fraud-weary world. Because he knew no one would take his word for it. As it turned out, no one would take his guides' word for it either. And, to Cook's undying dismay, the grainy photographs he presented to Congress were only slightly more credible than the cut-and-paste images on the covers of Rupert Murdoch's tabloid magazines: Princess Diana marrying Elvis, Bigfoot in a dress, Boris Yeltsin playing poker with E.T.

Evidence matters. And history belongs to those with the most, and best of it.

But what's curious about this story, and about Twain's golf metaphor, is that history, in this version of things, does not belong to the caddies of the world. As Twain tells it, the Inuits who guided both Cook and Peary are part of the evidence, not part of the event. Their Arctic adventures are irrelevant because they are not actors; they are acted upon. History can be like that. Sometimes the evidence seems to be all on one side.

Take, for instance, the original seal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Here, the Puritans, intrepid explorers themselves, tell the story of their "discovery," not of the North Pole, but of a "New England." And they tell it, not with a photograph, but with a picture, an engraving. But we ought to understand that this engraving is just as fanciful as Frederick Cook's photograph of himself, sporting a furry parka, braving the Arctic snow.

The original seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay Colony seal (the model, of course, for our state flag) tells a fascinating story, a story of a place named by its inhabitants "Mattachusetts," and considered, by newcomers, to be

part of a "Nova Anglia." In that place, these newcomers claim to have found naked men who greet them with open arms, peaceably, with weapons exposed and arrows facing down. These naked men are begging for help. "Come Over and Help Us," this "savage" pleads, "share with us the good news of your savior, who will be our Lord. We have here an empty land, an Eden, yours for the taking."

The vision of pagan natives peaceably and eagerly awaiting the good news of the gospel is, of course, the Puritans' fantasy, their fondest wish. When John Winthrop's ship, *Arabella* sailed across the Atlantic in 1630, the Puritans on board hoped to found a "city on a hill," a beacon of Christian truth and piety, for all the world to see. Part of their piety would derive from their devoted reading of the Bible, their daily prayerfulness, and the ecclesiastical ordering of their lives. And part of their piety would derive from the swiftness and gentleness with which they would convert the native "heathen" peoples to Christianity, thereby saving the Indians' souls, and enlarging the realm of Christ on earth. But this part of the Puritans' piety, alas, was never realized. The colony seal was a fantasy, a vision of a miracle, and little more.

Once they arrived, few colonists found the time to preach to the Indians, who seemed to be dying off anyway, plagued by smallpox and other European diseases for which we now know they had no natural immunity. As much as ninety percent of the native population may have died in the first few decades of English settlement. In the 1650s and 1660s John Eliot, minister of Roxbury, managed to convert several hundred Indians to Christianity, many on their deathbeds, and established praying Indian towns, like Natick, to house them. But most colonists were suspicious, believing that Eliot's alleged converts were simply looking for food and shelter in a world that to them had become a chaos of disease and devastation. Still, most of the Indians who survived the epidemics were not particularly interested in Christianity. When Eliot tried to preach to Philip, the influential Wampanoag sachem and son of Massasoit, Philip ripped a button off of Eliot's coat, held it up before his eyes and told Eliot that he cared for his gospel just as much as he cared for that button.

"Come Over and Help Us," indeed. Thus, the Massachusetts Bay Colony seal in its original seventeenth century version is miracle, and not fact. By Mark Twain's wry reckoning, "one caddy is aplenty." One caddy, this caddy, is all the proof that we need of the miracle of the Puritan's mission. To unravel the fact, to unravel the true story of the early history of colonists and Indians in Massachusetts we need a lot more caddies than just this one. And we need a heck of a lot more evidence than just the wonderful Massachusetts Bay Colony seal that we have here, however valuable and important it is. We need more.

History does belong to those with the most and the best evidence. But the job of archivists, museum curators, preservationists, teachers, and historians is to make sure there's enough evidence to go around, and evidence for everyone to see. Evidence about great golfers, whom we can admire and evidence also about lowly caddies whom the humbler of us can relate to. And that's really, for me, the wonder of recent history writing.

"Whose history is it?" History has long belonged to the finest golfers to the men who have had boldest aspirations, and who have realized their goals. For millennia, historians have celebrated great men, from Alexander the Great to Admiral Peary, and great events, from the Peloponesian War to the Puritan migration. Yet, in the last century, and particularly, since the 1960s, American historians have become more interested in the caddies of the world: ordinary men, and women, too. New kinds of documents, from probate records to nursery rhyme books, have commanded attention. And new methods of analysis, like demography and social history and material culture studies, have shed new light on the lives of people who left few written records. Meanwhile, a whole generation of historians interest in writing history "from the bottom up" have risen, come of age, and come of retirement age. Libraries are now filled with American history books about immigrant Irish workers, rural farm children, colonial wives, domestic servants, slaves in the antebellum south, Chinese-American railroad workers, Mexican-American political activists. In Twain's estimations, surely caddies all. But to us, invaluable. No longer witnesses to the world's great events, ordinary men and women, however humble their background, now have a place, and a voice, in our history books, even in elementary school textbooks, as actors, as shapers of their own destinies, and the people "who build America."

But it's only because so many different kinds of records have been saved and preserved that we can continue to broaden our scope, to learn more about the past.

So what's the caddy's perspective on the early history of the Puritan mission in Massachusetts? Unfortunately, the colony seal, while utterly fascinating, doesn't tell us very much at all about the Algonquian version of events. We have here only words put in an Indian's mouth. Our task, then, is to conduct the equivalent of the U.S. Congress' fastidious investigation of the competing claims of Frederick Cook and Robert Peary (fastidious, but perhaps not as exhaustive as investigations conducted by Kenneth Starr). And how do we conduct our investigation? Not by calling in witnesses, who no longer exist (and who, in Starr's estimation, cannot be relied upon, unless questioned on twelve different occasions). We must, instead, sift through the records, the wonderful documents rescued from decay and destruction, in archives, in historical societies, at historic houses, in attics, cellars, museums, in dusty libraries. And there we will find, frankly, that the Puritan version of the story of the early history of Massachusetts, as told in the colony seal, does not hold up terribly well.

What the documents will tell us is that far from eagerly awaiting Christianity, many Algonquians in this "New England" were willing to risk everything to rid their home of its newcomers, and particularly, to destroy the newcomers' religion. In 1675 and 1676, Wampanoags, Narragansetts, Nipmucks, Pocumtucks, and Abenakis all began attacking English towns in a war that would prove to be, in proportion to population, the most fatal war in American history. That war, named King Philip's War after Philip, who led the initial uprising, nearly destroyed the Massachusetts Bay colony, wiping out every English settlement west of Concord. And what did the Indians most love to attack? The Puritans' churches, their Bibles, their faith in God. Indians in King Philip's War burned and shredded Bibles and, when killing a man in Providence, ripped him open and stuffed his Bible in his belly. They destroyed churches, and then asked weeping ministers, "What will you do for a house to pray in now we have burnt your Meeting-house?" In Brookfield, Indians tried to get terrified townspeople to abandon the safety of a garrison house by vandalizing the church next door, and making fun of Puritan psalm-singing, wailing riotously, and calling out to the besieged colonists, "Come and pray, & sing Psalmes." They mocked the colonists' God. In an attack on Sudbury, one Nipmuck tormented his English victim, taunting him "Come Lord Jesus, save this poor Englishman if thou canst, whom I am now about to Kill." When the Nipmucks returned from a fight they celebrated by scoffing that "They had done [their victims] a good turn to send them to heaven so soon." As one colonist aptly put it, "Our enemies proudly exult over us and Blaspheme the name of our Blessed God; Saying, Where is your O God?"

New England's English settlers won King Philip's War, and never again faced such a horrifying Indian war on their soil. But what of the mission, enshrined on the colony seal, to convert the Indians to Christianity? During the war, the Massachusetts Council ordered the imprisonment of all of Eliot's Christianized Indians, fearing that they would otherwise join the enemy, and deciding, in effect, that no Indian could ever be so fully Christian as to be loyal to the English. For the duration of the fighting, these several hundred Christian Indians were confined on Deer Island in Boston Harbor, where over half died of exposure or starvation. Others were sold into slavery and shipped to the West Indies. By the war's end, Massachusetts colonists had clearly abandoned whatever hope they once held for converting the natives to Christianity.

But the Bay Colony did not see fit to alter its seal, which continued to miraculously depict a peaceful, welcoming Indian, desperate for the light of the gospel, mouthing the words, "Come Over and Help Us." One caddy is aplenty.

Had the seal been altered, updated to tell the Algonquian version of the story of King Philip's war, we might see that Indian mouthing not, "Come Over and Help Us," begging for the Puritans to bring him Christ, but instead at once mocking and rebuking them, asking "Where is Your O God?" But that, too, would only be a half truth.

These conflicts over how Americans remember their past, these "history wars," are in large part a consequence of historians' newfound interest in ordinary people, and not just in studying ordinary people, but also in giving them all sides of the story and letting them reconcile it. Ordinary men and women are now not only the subjects of history, they are historians, too. In 1931, when Carl Becker delivered his presidential address to the American Historical Association, he titled it, "Everyman His Own Historian." To Becker, history consists simple of "the memory of things said and done." Thus anyone who remembers anything said and done is an historian. Doctoral degrees be damned. That you remember you promised your daughter you'd take her to a karate lesson tomorrow makes you an historian. That you keep a record of that memory archived in your four-dollars-and-ninety-five-cents faux leather datebook makes you an historian (or perhaps, as some in this audience would have it, an archivist). What professional historians may do that is different (and whether or not this warrants a Ph.D. is debatable) is to put those memories in the context

of broader stories, in this case, perhaps, the story of girls' sports in late twentieth-century America. But, as far as Becker is concerned, a professional historian's history of girls' sports must reach out to a wider public, including, especially, the very people who send their daughters to karate classes. As Becker put it, "The history that lies inert in unread books does no work in the world."

Whose history is it? History belongs to everyone, from presidents to paupers. History ought to tell the story of all of us, and let all of us do part of the telling. And there's where the two-sidedness inevitably comes in. If we are all part of history, and if we are all historians, there are bound to be more than a few areas of disagreement. What we make of the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Puritan mission, as memorialized in the colony seal, is just one of them. But it's not an idle dispute. Last Thanksgiving, when the town of Plymouth held its annual "Pilgrim's Progress" parade, protesters, considering Thanksgiving a Native American day of mourning and urging Americans to remember the war waged by Massasoit's son, Philip, found themselves in a battle with the Plymouth police. When the police arrested (and allegedly battered) some of the protesters, the incident brought national media attention to yet another of our "history wars" At stake in Plymouth is the very question that titles this talk, "Whose history is it?" Does the history of Plymouth belong to the people who want to celebrate the Pilgrims' fortitude in establishing a new society in this new world? Or does the history of Plymouth belong to the people who want to mourn the devastation of the Wampanoag people who lived in Plymouth long before it was "Plymouth"?

Because these questions seem, in a sense, unanswerable, Americans can be ornery about history, bringing to it the kind of skepticism that plagues "new math" and "invented spelling" and most lose-weight-quick schemes. History, told from so many different perspectives, and told by so many different people, seems to be up for grabs. Meaningless. Or, as Henry Ford once put it, "History is more or less bunk." But history is not bunk. History is evidence. History is the diaries, letters, stamp collections, journals, wills, wedding rings, house plans, court records, manifestos, newspapers, cotton quilts, woodcuts, inscriptions on tea cups, those things we collect and house, and preserve, and consult and ponder and wonder at. We will always, thank goodness, come up with different interpretations of these many different kinds of records, and some explanations will be cleverer and more plausible than others. But, in the end, history will always come down to the evidence, which is why we need to make sure to collect documents that tell different stories, and to share those documents with all of the different people who'd like to learn about the past, and let them make up their own minds. History is not up for grabs. History is under investigation.

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