1
Now More Than Ever

Everywhere you turn, history is at issue. Politicians lie about historical facts, groups clash over the fate of historical monuments, officials closely monitor the content of history textbooks, and truth commissions proliferate across the globe. As the rapid growth in history museums shows, we live in a moment obsessed with history, but it is also a time of deep anxiety about historical truth. If it is so easy to lie about history, if people disagree so much about what monuments or history textbooks should convey, and if commissions are needed to dig up the truth about the past, then how can any kind of certainty about history be established? Are heritage sites and historical societies set up to provoke, console, or simply divert? What is the purpose of studying history? This book lays out the questions and offers ways of answering them. It will not resolve all the quandaries, since history is by definition a process of discovery and not a settled dogma. But it can show why history matters now more than ever.

Lying

In one of the highest profile examples of lying about history, real estate developer Donald Trump came to public attention in 2012 by insinuating that then President Barack Obama had not been born in the United States and so had been illegitimately elected president. When Obama presented his birth certificate, confirming that he had been born in the state of Hawaii, Trump immediately retorted that it might be fraudulent, even though he had no evidence that it was falsified.[1] During the presidential campaign in 2016, Trump abruptly changed course and admitted that Obama was born in the United States. He proceeded to take credit for ending a controversy that he helped fabricate. That phony polemic now attracts fewer devotees but other fake ones endure, the most prominent being Holocaust denial.

Politicians and a few writers on the extreme right in Europe have sought their fifteen minutes of fame by denying the reality of the deliberate murder of six million Jews between 1933 and 1945. Denial can take various forms, from asserting that many fewer than six million died or that Hitler and the Nazis had no official plan for genocide to the notion that the gas chambers did not exist. Holocaust denial has become the model for those who want to lie about history; its promoters simply refuse to admit the validity of eyewitness accounts of victims and of those who liberated the concentration camps as well as the subsequent painstaking historical research that has established the names and numbers of those killed and traced the means and motives of the perpetrators in excruciating detail. Although historians can and do disagree about how best to interpret the Holocaust, no serious scholar or reader of history doubts the truth that these murders were deliberate and took place on a mass scale.

Yet despite repeated refutations based on mountains of documentation, and despite the exemplary official and unofficial German efforts to come to terms with those crimes,

Holocaust denial still percolates across Europe and the rest of the world, often via social media such as Facebook.[2] It receives robust support at the highest levels of some Middle Eastern governments, which find it useful as part of an anti-Israel policy. On December 14, 2005, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad called the Holocaust "a myth." The official Iranian news agency took those words out of the transcript of his speech as if they had never been uttered, thereby replacing one lie with another.[3] Denials of the Holocaust, however far-fetched or unsubstantiated, have had their effect: an international survey conducted in late 2013 and early 2014 showed that among people living in the Middle East and North Africa, only one-fifth of those who had heard of the Holocaust believed that historical accounts of it were accurate.[4]

Blatant lying about history has become more common owing to the influence of social media. The world-wide web has enabled historical lies to flourish because on the internet virtually anyone can post anything under any name, without prior scrutiny and with no possible sanction. The most outlandish claims circulate widely and gain a measure of credibility just because they are circulating. In this situation, insisting on historical truth has become a necessary act of civic courage.

Historians are rarely subject to the death threats, fatwas, or actual assassinations that threaten journalists, novelists, and opposition figures in too many places, but they have often found themselves at the center of controversy. Authoritarian governments do not like historians known for insisting on inconvenient truths. The popular French historian Jules Michelet was fired from his teaching position by the government of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte in 1851 because students sometimes left his rousing lectures shouting anti-government slogans. The police had sent undercover agents to attend his classes and then released doctored copies of his lecture notes in the hopes of tainting his reputation. Several of Michelet's colleagues cravenly agreed to censure his teaching to prepare the way for government action. He was then fired from his position at the national archives for refusing to take a loyalty oath after Louis-Napoleon executed a coup against the legislature, which had refused to grant his request for a waiver of his term limit. Michelet, however, was luckier than the hundreds of other opponents of the coup who were arrested and forcibly transported to the penal colony of Cayenne in French Guiana.[5]

As the example of Michelet shows, even normally mild-mannered historians can find themselves in the line of fire in times of political or international crisis. In 1940, *Time* magazine reported that the author of a popular history textbook in the United States, Harold Rugg, had been accused of being a communist who depicted the United States as a land of unequal opportunity and class conflict. Labeled a "subversive" because he failed to teach "real Americanism," Rugg had his books banned by some school districts and even publicly burned by a school board official in one Ohio town.[6] Textbook authors and in particular textbook publishers will usually go to great lengths to avoid controversy in order to appeal to the broadest possible markets, but as the example of Rugg demonstrates, disputes about historical truth are always lurking around the corner.

Monuments

In mid-August 2017, a public quarrel about the fate of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee ended in violence in Charlottesville, Virginia. White nationalists who opposed the city council's decision to remove the statue from Emancipation Park (formerly Lee Park) paraded with torches on the University of Virginia campus shouting slogans recalling the Nazi era, and the next day their altercations with counter-protesters ended in general brawling near the statue itself. A neo-Nazi drove his car into the counter-protesters, killing one young woman. A monument in place for ninety-three years can provoke strong feelings when it is seen as standing for something repugnant, in this case racism. The Lee statue is not alone. Confederate flags and monuments are in dispute in several states of the former Confederacy: those who want them removed consider them present-day symbols of white supremacy, while those who oppose their ejection cast such efforts as a willful erasure of history. Days after the events in Charlottesville, anti-fascists in Durham, North Carolina, took it upon themselves to topple a statue of a Confederate soldier.

Monuments are not just an issue in the southern United States. Like students at Yale University who wanted to change the name of Calhoun College because it was named after a pro-slavery politician, students at Oxford campaigned for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes because he was a racist and arch-imperialist. These tame versions of proposed monument removal pale next to those that have rocked countless places in turmoil: after the defeat of Hitler, the allies ordered the immediate destruction of all Nazi symbols; after the fall of the Soviet Union, crowds tore down monuments to Lenin and Stalin from Ukraine to Ethiopia; a bronze statue of Saddam Hussein was dismantled in 2003 during the US-led invasion; in 2008 the last statue in Spain of the dictator Franco was removed; and, to go back more than two centuries, a few days after the promulgation of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, New Yorkers pulled down a gilded equestrian statue of King George III.

Sometimes monument destruction is viewed as vandalism. When the Taliban blew up 1,500-year-old stone statues of the Buddha in Afghanistan in 2001, or when Isis dynamited 2,000-year-old Roman ruins in Palmyra, Syria, in 2015, condemnation of the seemingly senseless demolition of the world's cultural heritage was universal. Islamic militants claimed they were destroying idols, which linked them with a long history of iconoclasm, the breaking or destroying of images, especially religious images, for religious reasons. The term first referred to conflicts in the 700s and 800s over the use of religious images (icons) in the Byzantine Empire. Iconoclasts rejected the growing profusion of images in Christianity and in many instances removed or destroyed them. At the beginning of the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s, especially in Dutch, Swiss, and French cities, mobs sometimes broke into churches and destroyed statues and other decorations considered idolatrous. History therefore seems to provide mixed messages about monument removal.

The ambiguities derive from the nature of monuments. Monuments commemorate: that is, they recall the past and solicit veneration for it. As a consequence, even when they are supposedly secular, such as the statue of General Lee, they inevitably incorporate a kind of religious feeling. Yet monuments are always made for political purposes; they assert power, whether the

power of a church, a sect, a political party, or a political cause, such as the Confederacy. Because of this association with power, changes of religious affiliation or political regime often entail monument destruction as well as monument creation. The early Christian churches in Europe were built over the remains of pagan or Roman temples as a way of physically announcing their superiority. In fact, the long history of the destruction of "antiquities" shows that monument destruction is part and parcel of life. (The term "antiquities" only appeared in English in the 1500s, which indicates a new sensibility about annihilating remnants of the far distant past, in this case Roman and Greek remains.)

The paradoxes of monument destruction came most clearly into view in the French Revolution of 1789. The revolutionaries themselves invented the term "vandalism" in 1794 to condemn the overly zealous attempts of some militants to de-Christianize France by seizing gold and silver from the churches, knocking the heads off statues of kings on Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, and turning churches into temples of Reason. Some churches were sold off and turned into granaries or warehouses. The leaders of the Revolution argued that while symbols of feudalism and monarchy could be legitimately destroyed, those with Latin inscriptions and anything compatible with the spirit of equality ought to be protected. The revolutionaries had already set up the world's first national museum of art in the Louvre palace in 1793 with works confiscated from the crown, the church, and aristocrats who had emigrated. In 1795 the revolutionaries opened the first museum of French monuments with sculpture and tombs scavenged from various religious houses. In short, vandalism and preservation can go hand in hand; the attack on monuments of the past prompted the revolutionaries themselves to think about cultural patrimony. Hated symbols could be preserved if they could be rebranded as art.

The monuments issue can never be definitively resolved. The entire past cannot be preserved because no one wants to live in a museum. Yet some of the past must be preserved in order to maintain a sense of connection and continuity over time. The question is what should be preserved, and that is an inevitably political question. How do we see ourselves, to which past are we most connected, and which parts of that past should be preserved? Every case has to be decided on its own merits, and historical research provides crucial evidence, for example, into the motives of those who commissioned and built the statue of General Lee. Subsequent generations will undoubtedly revisit the decisions. History does not stand still, even if most monuments do.

Textbook Controversies

History textbooks are always being revised, but that only makes them more contentious. One Japanese candidate for governor of Tokyo in 2015 insisted that "As a defeated nation we only teach the history forced on us by the victors." He continued, "To be an independent nation again we must move away from the history imposed on us." Japan was not the aggressor in World War II, he insisted, did not commit the notorious massacre at Nanjing, China, in 1937, and did not force Korean women to serve as "comfort women" (sex slaves) for Japanese soldiers.[7] The controversy was not new. Ten years before, in 2005, Chinese and Korean demonstrators protested revisions in a textbook prepared by the Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform. Claiming that it minimized Japanese culpability for World War II, demonstrators burned Japanese flags and demanded a boycott of Japanese goods.

The Japanese have not been alone in wanting to skew history textbooks toward favorable depictions of their nation. Although a 2011 study of Japanese history textbooks concluded that they largely omitted the country's oppressive colonial regime in Korea (1910–45), the same study also found that Chinese and Korean textbooks focus single-mindedly on Chinese and Korean resistance to Japanese occupation while ignoring the wider context of World War II.[8] Such complaints have a long history. In 1920 a letter to the editor of *The Daily Gleaner* in New Brunswick, Canada, objected that the American-authored world history textbook used in local schools failed to even mention Canada's participation in World War I.[9]

Throughout most of the 1800s and 1900s, and in many cases right up to the present, the effort to instill a feeling of national belonging usually required a positive spin. Textbooks talked about national triumphs or tragedies but rarely about a government's or people's mistakes or misdeeds. The great exception was West Germany after 1945, where from a young age children learned about the crimes committed by the Nazi regime and were constantly reminded of them by visits to concentration camps and to the many memorials and museums found across the country. More common is the recent experience in France, where a law passed in 2005 (later abrogated) insisted that schools teach "the positive role" played by French colonial administrations. A study of French textbooks used since 1998 indeed shows that such books systematically downplay the violence and racism of French colonial administrations in Africa.[10]

Still, this French criticism of textbooks – and the legislative reaction against critical views of French colonial history – makes clear that the traditional feel-good narratives are being questioned and that not everybody likes the questioning. In the United Kingdom, historians now draw attention to the way previous textbooks marginalized the Welsh, Scots, and Irish, treating them as bit players in an overwhelmingly English story. Popular histories of Britain routinely referred to "our Empire" as a way of cementing empire as a part of British identity. Although critics of the empire had repeatedly pointed to its instances of violence and injustice, until a few decades ago British historians continued to focus on the constitutional and reform efforts of the imperial administrations. Historians' recent focus on the downside of empire is only just beginning to influence opinion: a YouGov survey in 2014 found that there were three times as

many Britons who felt the empire was something to be proud of compared to those who felt it was something to be ashamed of, and more than three times as many believed that countries colonized by Britain were better off rather than worse off as a result.[11] Opinion would never change, however, if historians did not do the digging into archives that produces new perspectives.

Traumatic events in a nation's life often prompt major revisions of the national narrative, as they did in post-World War II Germany and Japan and in the aftermath of decolonization in France and Britain. As the slow change in assessment in France and Britain shows, however, it can take decades for events to be fully processed. The Civil War and slavery in the United States stand out as prime examples. History textbooks in the pre-Civil War United States did not advocate slavery but they presented a nation in which anti-slavery and pro-slavery forces could co-exist. For decades after the disastrous war, the same kind of accommodationist line persisted as authors blamed the conflict on extremists on both sides. Serious discussion of slavery hardly appeared in US history textbooks before the 1960s, a century after the conflict.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s put the history of slavery in the spotlight, but a sea change in university education after World War II helped pave the way. The proportion of the US population aged 18–24 enrolled in colleges or universities increased from 14 percent in 1947 to 36 percent in 1970 and 54 percent in 1991. The doors opened to social groups long excluded from higher education: young people from the lower classes, women, Jews, African Americans, and other ethnic minorities. The proportion of those enrolled who were female went from 29 percent in 1947 to 51 percent in 1979 and 57 percent in 2014.

Challenges to traditional narratives that focused on the actions of elite white male political leaders might not have been an automatic outcome of these changes, but they were perhaps predictable, given the entry of women, non-whites, and non-Protestants into universities and eventually into university faculties in the United States. The histories of workers, women, African Americans, and immigrants gradually made their way into the textbooks from the 1960s onward, shifting the focus away from heroic figures such as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, or Theodore Roosevelt toward the previously overlooked contributions of slaves, workers, women, and minorities to the building of a nation. Historians showed, for example, that the supposed "manifest destiny" of Americans to expand westward to the Pacific, a doctrine developed in the 1840s, justified the racial superiority of white Protestant Americans over Mexicans, Native Americans, and Jews and Catholics.

These changes in emphasis and interpretation enraged some people; critics of the critics complained that historians had become obsessed with the politically correct and were failing in their mission to create a positive sense of national belonging. Anger in the United States came to a head in the mid-1990s over two events that critics saw as interrelated. In 1994 the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum proposed an exhibition of the plane that had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and planned to include references to the debate about whether dropping the bomb was morally and politically justified. The same year a federally funded National Center for the Study of History in the Schools proposed national history standards that reflected the new histories of workers, women, slaves, and immigrants that had

been gaining steam since the 1960s.

An outpouring of fury greeted both. Senate Majority Leader and future presidential candidate Robert Dole complained that "educators and professors" were engaged in "a shocking campaign … to disparage America." Columnist George Will denounced the "cranky anti-Americanism of the campuses," and Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich maintained that most Americans were "sick and tired of being told by a cultural elite that they ought to be ashamed of their country."[12] The Smithsonian removed almost all of the supposedly objectionable materials, and the national history standards were withdrawn, but historians continued to revise the long-accepted narratives. The politicians won the skirmish, but the historians won the cultural war. No US history textbook can be published today that neglects the history of slavery or discrimination against women and minorities.

Even though a more highly educated population is often more open to discussions of history, textbook controversies cannot be linked in lockstep fashion to enrollment figures. In Russia, for example, the level of university enrollment was already quite high in the 1970s (nearly three times that of the United Kingdom or France in 1971 and about the same as the United States according to Soviet figures), yet textbooks could hardly keep up with the fast-moving events after 1989. In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, historians gained greater autonomy, but as Vladimir Putin has consolidated his power, he has also sought to influence textbook writing more directly. Putin's desire to enforce an inspirational patriotic narrative has resounded positively for most Russians.

Still, in Western Europe, especially the United Kingdom and France, discontent with the standard national narratives does seem to follow the trajectory of enrollment figures; in both places enrollment in higher education passed the 50 percent mark in the 1990s, which is when criticism of the national narratives began to bubble up. It is also when gender parity was reached (as many women as men enrolled); in most countries of the world, more women than men are now enrolled in higher education, which represents a staggering change from the 1970s, when only half as many women as men were enrolled. More women does not necessarily mean more criticism, but it does represent a shaking up of the system of higher education. Sadly, it may also explain some of the rising disdain for universities across the Western world; the feminized professions are generally underpaid and less esteemed.

Memory Wars

Textbooks come relatively late in the process of making national memories. The material traces of past events must first be gathered and organized. In recent years, several striking instances of that recollection endeavor have shown how hard it can be to recover the past when forgetting seems desirable, especially the forgetting of events that run counter to a positive national narrative. For more than 150 years, historians debated whether President Thomas Jefferson, the chief author of the Declaration of Independence, had fathered children by one of his female slaves, Sally Hemmings. Until the advent of DNA testing, no definitive answer seemed possible, but when that testing in 1998 made his paternity all but undeniable, a

major shift in perspective was inevitable. Well into the 1980s and 1990s, many exhibitions and living museums alike had either obfuscated the role of slavery or made it seem paternal and even benign.[13] In 2012, however, the first major national exhibition to highlight a president's slaveholding activities took place at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Even more wrenching have been the efforts to recover historical memories in places like Spain that endured not only violent civil wars but also subsequent decades of political repression. Until the military dictator Francisco Franco died in 1975, it was impossible to seriously research the killings that took place during the civil war of 1936–9, much less exhume the bodies of republicans, maligned as "reds," who had been killed without trial and buried in unmarked graves.The empirical work of historical reconstruction began in the 1980s, but not until 2000 was an Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory formed to exhume, identify, and rebury bodies. Attention has turned in recent years to the "lost children," those who died in prison, were sent to state institutions, or had their names changed so that they could be illegally adopted by regime-friendly families.

Memorialization has proved more difficult in Indonesia, where as many as 500,000 communists were killed after an abortive coup in 1965. The general who came to power, Suharto, remained president until 1998, and during that time the killings could not be publicly debated. Textbooks attributed the attempted coup, in which six generals were killed, to the communists and said little about the subsequent torture, beheadings, and mutilations that were carried out by the military and army-affiliated militias who had been whipped up into an anti-communist hysteria. After the fall of Suharto in 1998, the floodgates flew open. Memoirs of imprisoned activists drew public attention, as did previously untranslated works in English. Oral historians began collecting memories of the events.

Reconciliation did not follow, however. In 2000, when a group devoted to exhuming the bodies of the murdered was filming on Java, a Muslim youth group stopped the reburial. The NU (Nahdlatul Ulama, a traditionalist Sunni Muslim organization) burned textbooks deemed pro-communist in 2007 rather than allow a projected textbook reform.[14] In 2013, a museum celebrating Suharto's rule opened in his home town; it was paid for by his brother, who had been convicted of corruption, and its displays justified the crackdown, saying nothing about the innocent people killed.

Countless other examples might be cited of conflicts over memory, but perhaps the most remarkable are the more than thirty truth commissions that have been established around the world since the early 1980s. Many different kinds of societies, from Guatemala to Thailand, have expressed the need for some kind of official mechanism to come to terms with past atrocities committed either during civil wars or under authoritarian governments. A truth commission is a kind of history hearing set up on the premise that the full truth about past murders, imprisonments, tortures, and discrimination must be told if the nation is to move forward. Most truth commissions have been explicitly modeled on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) set up by law at the end of 1995 in order to facilitate the transition from the apartheid regime to a democratic one. Because of its influence around the globe, the TRC has been the subject of extensive analysis and debate.

The mandate of the TRC was far-reaching: it included reporting on the nature, extent, and causes of violations of human rights between 1960 and 1994; restoring the dignity of victims by giving them a voice; and even granting amnesty to perpetrators of violence if they divulged all the relevant facts. The task of achieving unity and reconciliation could not have been more daunting. Under apartheid, the white minority (13 percent of the population) controlled almost all the access to land, natural resources, medical care, education, and good jobs. To maintain the white supremacist regime, the authorities had imprisoned as many as 200,000 people, torturing some, forcibly deporting people to unviable "native reserves," and maintaining segregated facilities of all kinds. As resistance to the regime intensified, violence increased on all sides because different political factions within the black communities also fought each other; the regime used violence to put down protests and eliminate resistance leaders, while some in the armed opposition set bombs or killed collaborators, regime personnel, or members of competing oppositional groups.

Despite holding nearly 100 public hearings and receiving more than 21,000 individual testimonies, the TRC itself admitted to the shortcomings of its findings. The white parties supporting apartheid largely refused to cooperate, as did the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the main black opposition to the African National Congress (ANC). The ANC won an outright majority in 1994 in the first parliamentary elections open to all races and set up a government of national unity that included the main white party, the National Party, and the IFP. Nevertheless, the TRC was associated most closely with the ANC, and it was only ANC members who were willing to fully participate. Not surprisingly, then, many whites and IFP members considered the TRC findings biased. Moreover, scholars have criticized the TRC for focusing too much on storytelling and not enough on objective or forensic truth, and studies undertaken on outcomes have shown that at least in the short term, the TRC did not achieve the goal of reconciliation.[15]

These specific complaints should not obscure a larger truth: the recovery of history has become important in virtually every instance of transition from one regime to another. Moreover, this desire to set the record straight is not limited to places transitioning from civil war to peace, from apartheid to black majority rule, or from military authoritarianism to elected civilian government. The history of supposedly stable nations, such as Japan, the United States, or the United Kingdom, is also in question because of elements that have been forgotten, effaced, or repressed and are now coming to the surface. History is always liable to erupt.

Public History and Collective Memory

Even in countries with settled governments, the public appetite for history has never been greater. Memoirs and biographies frequently make the bestseller lists, and some of the most successful films, television series, and video games are set in the past, not just in the United Kingdom and the United States but also in China and many other countries. More than half of the 35,000 museums in the United States are history museums, heritage sites, or historical societies. The National Heritage List for England, first established in 1882, now includes

nearly 400,000 monuments, buildings, landscapes, battlefields, and protected shipwrecks. The number of visitors to such sites increased nearly 40 percent between 1989 and 2015. In other words, public interest in history is not simply rising; it's skyrocketing.

Visitors to historical sites do not just want to read labels, look at exhibits, listen to guides, or even watch organized pageants; they sometimes want to enter more directly into the past through historical reenactments and other forms of virtual experience. Living museums such as Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia aim to reconstruct life as it was lived at a moment in the past, in this case the 1760s and 1770s. Tourists stroll streets fronted by eighteenth-century houses and meet people dressed in the costumes of the time who are carrying out the activities that occupied people, women and men, slave and free, in those days. Even more gripping for participants are historical reenactments of battles in which reenactors dress and play the parts themselves. Historical reenactment now influences television and history teaching. In the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and Germany, history reality programs on TV have featured people living for months in houses exactly as they would have in the past, recording the experiences and conflicts for viewers in the present. History teachers have long used some form of reenactment to intrigue their students, whether putting on period costume for a lecture or having their students take the roles of past historical figures. The advent of digital modeling promises to enhance this trend as ancient Rome, medieval Bergen (Norway), and a neighborhood of eighteenth-century Paris are all now available in 3D, or even 5D in the case of Paris, in which historical sounds and a first-person perspective have been added.[16]

These techniques are reshaping history museums and the presentation of historical sites. Even where digital modeling is not yet in use, material objects are being displayed in ways designed to assure both the authenticity and immediacy of a viewer's experience. Many visitors to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum report feeling especially moved by the sight and smell of the heap of 4,000 shoes confiscated from Holocaust victims at one concentration camp. Historically minded tourists walk the few preserved trenches of World War I or view the guns, landing ships, and actual planning maps for the D-Day invasion that are now kept in the Utah Beach Landing Museum in Normandy, which is housed in a former German bunker at the landing beach itself. Sometimes the objects come from very long ago. The Jorvik Viking Centre in the United Kingdom takes visitors underground in specially commissioned time capsules to travel back 1,000 years to the Viking era. Animatronic Vikings help bring alive the thousands of pieces of timber, textiles, and other artifacts found in an archaeological dig on the site.

Professional historians have long been critical or even disdainful of historical reenactment and virtual historical experiences because they give priority to the viewer's empathetic identification with people in the past rather than to a deeper understanding of contexts and causes. In other words, walking the preserved World War I trench enables the tourists to feel kinship with the young men who fought there rather than prompting them to ask why the war happened in the first place or why so many young men had to die. Moreover, most virtual experiences must offer an aesthetic appeal in order to attract customers: the slaves at Colonial Williamsburg cannot suffer too much; the Vikings appear mainly at their more peaceful moments; and the trenches are now surrounded by park-like settings.

As multi-media devices and techniques such as virtual reality have become more familiar, it has become impossible to continue to ignore them, and historians have grown increasingly involved with collective memory projects. “Public history” has long engaged many historians, whether working in museums or public and private archives, but until recently, such positions were often considered less desirable than academic posts, and historians in them rarely received training designed for public history. The situation is rapidly changing, as public history becomes ever more important and as a substantial proportion of academic posts have been turned into part-time employment.

Public historians now have their own organizations as well as a recognized place within older associations. A National Council on Public History was established in the United States in 1979, and by 2003 nearly one in five members of the American Historical Association engaged in public history. At least twenty-four US universities now offer a PhD or a PhD-level certification in public history. Nine universities in the United Kingdom offer an MA in public history or a history MA that includes certification in public history; since the first such program only appeared in 2009, growth in this area has been remarkable. An International Federation for Public History formed in 2009 to bring together public historians world-wide; public history is increasingly prominent in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Brazil, and the Netherlands, and new programs are opening in many other countries.

Collective memories are shaped in many ways, from books and museums to television programs and internet rumors. Whether of traumatic events or national triumphs, collective memories do the most useful and enduring work of shaping identities when they are based on truthful accounts of the past. The public deserves the most accurate possible presentations of historical events and developments, as well as ones that succeed in capturing their attention. The question is how to balance accuracy and artfulness. That brings us to the question of historical truth and how best to ascertain it.

Notes

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