

# Crimes of History

PAST IMPERFECT:

*Facts, Fictions, Fraud—American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin.*

By Peter Charles Hoffer. PublicAffairs.

287 pp. \$26

Reviewed by David J. Garrow

In 2001 and early 2002, a cascade of professional misconduct charges shook the history profession. The well-known popular historians Stephen Ambrose and Doris Kearns Goodwin both were accused of serial plagiarism. Another highly visible historian, Joseph Ellis, the author of *Founding Brothers* (2000), admitted telling his students at Mount Holyoke College grandiose falsehoods about being involved in the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. A much-heralded book claiming that colonial-era Americans owned relatively few firearms, written by Emory University historian Michael Bellesiles, was exposed as containing mythical data about nonexistent records.

Pundits wondered whether the flurry of scandals represented a widespread deterioration in professional standards or just a fortuitous cluster. Ambrose died, Goodwin and Ellis publicly apologized, Bellesiles resigned his professorship, and the outrage abated. Yet the problem recurs: In recent months, two of Harvard Law School's best-known faculty members, Laurence H. Tribe and Charles J. Ogletree, have explicitly atoned for plagiarized passages that appeared in their books.

To anyone who has taught in a law school, where student research assistants are legion, or encountered the paid researchers employed by commercially successful authors such as Ambrose and Goodwin, the most common pitfall is readily apparent. Both Tribe and Ogletree, and perhaps Goodwin, if not Ambrose, had to apologize not for any wrongdoing they had personally committed, but for the egregious sins of ill-trained assistants whose sloppy handiwork they had carelessly incorporated into their own texts. A book with one name on the cover may turn out to have a team of contributors. Most

readers may never have pondered the difference, but a history book whose author alone has carried out all of the research and writing is almost always a more dependable work of scholarship than one whose multiple cooks can easily spoil the broth.

Exceptions to that generalization, as in the case of Michael Bellesiles, often involve misconduct far more insidious than simple plagiarism. Peter Charles Hoffer's *Past Imperfect* offers the most comprehensive and erudite analysis of the Bellesiles scandal to date, and his thoughtful and wide-ranging review of the full raft of recent plagiarism cases and other transgressions leaves no doubt that Bellesiles's were "the most egregious of our era."

Bellesiles's book *Arming America*, published in 2000 by Knopf, was preceded by a major 1996 article using the same supposed data in the *Journal of American History*, the discipline's most prominent periodical. According to the article, probate records indicated that relatively few colonial-era Americans owned firearms—evidence tending to undercut the argument that the Second Amendment was meant to enshrine a right of individuals to own guns. The Bellesiles study won an award for the best article in the journal that year; *Arming America* would likewise be honored with the prestigious Bancroft Prize. Bellesiles's work was highly visible among historians, but the first serious questions about the honesty of his scholarship emerged from outside the profession, from politically motivated "gun nuts" whom most scholars initially ignored.

In context, then, the most troubling questions concern not Bellesiles's intentions or mental processes but the unquestioning credence other historians accorded his work. Hof-

fer, a history professor at the University of Georgia, states that it's "almost impossible" for any journal or book editor to "double-check manuscript or archival reference notes" so as to confirm the content, or indeed the existence, of cited records. But anyone who has ever written for an academic law review knows that unpaid student editors at those journals painstakingly review photocopies of every footnoted source. A leading history journal supported by a major university could well do the same, even if a similar practice would be prohibitively expensive for most university presses and commercial publishing houses.

The same statistical presentation of supposed colonial-era probate records that proved to be the most fanciful part of *Arming America* appeared in Bellesiles's earlier article, but no professional historians raised warning flags. When questions about his book finally mushroomed, Bellesiles magnified and compounded his misdeeds by concocting a succession of increasingly implausible excuses for why he could not produce supportive documentation. The many historians who had unquestioningly jumped to Bellesiles's defense quietly slithered away as the conclusion that Bellesiles had "manipulated them and betrayed their trust" became inescapable. The Bancroft Prize was rescinded, and Knopf withdrew *Arming America* from publication.

**H**offer's most telling comment on the Bellesiles saga concerns a revised paperback edition of *Arming America* that a little-known press issued late in 2003. A table in the paperback presents data from 2,353 probate records; in the hardcover, the same table supposedly summarizes 11,170 such records. "What had happened to the data and records of the other counties [Bellesiles] said he consulted?" writes Hoffer. "If for his article and the Knopf book he had actually consulted probate records at the archives, libraries, courthouses, or repositories where the records were stored, he could have gone back and redone the count. But he did not." Hoffer deems this table "the strongest possible admission [Bellesiles] could have made without a full and honest confession" that his earlier data were indeed fabricated. "In his relentless drive to prove his thesis of a paucity of guns," Hoffer concludes, Bellesiles "had convicted himself of the charge

of professional misconduct in his earlier presentations of his research."

*Past Imperfect* offers an exceptionally astute survey of recent trends in the history profession, and Hoffer's subtle argument is that the more politically engaged "new history" that has emerged over the past 35 years almost inevitably led to the flock of scandals. It did so in two separate but related ways. First, as the profession became more politicized, and as the major professional organizations took on a more "distinct ideological cast" and moved leftward, a collective desire to make scholarly activity more politically relevant became increasingly pronounced. Hoffer sees the Bellesiles case as one deplorable result; during the Clinton impeachment battle, the embarrassingly partisan behavior of some historians, most of whom had no professional expertise concerning impeachment, was another.

Second, the evolution of the discipline away from the tastes of most nonprofessional readers encouraged the growth of "popular history" as a publishing phenomenon with few ties to the academy. Authors such as Doris Kearns Goodwin and the late Stephen Ambrose may have Ph.D.'s and even university affiliations, but the conception and marketing of their books is a commercial enterprise, not a scholarly one. Their "immunity from close professional scrutiny," Hoffer explains, has further encouraged the absence of originality in most mass-market works.

Ambrose, perhaps the quintessential popular history author, "compiled rather than composed" many of his books, Hoffer reports. In one of them, *The Wild Blue: The Men and Boys Who Flew the B-24s over Germany* (2001), extensive plagiarism was proved beyond any doubt. Hoffer correctly notes that slight wording changes in purloined prose are "the telltale marks of an intent to borrow illicitly, proof of a pattern of unethical conduct." Nonetheless, he says that evidence of conscious intent is not required for a finding of literary theft, and he applies that standard in concluding that Goodwin did plagiarize, even if not purposely.

When Hoffer examines how Joseph Ellis falsely "projected himself into the center of the decade's most important events" while teaching about the 1960s, he acknowledges that Ellis "falsified his credentials before his stu-

## Current Books

dents,” but otherwise minimizes the seriousness of the offense. “All he had done was falsify his life experiences,” and such imaginative storytelling, Hoffer speculates, merely reflects how “a man’s ability to invent himself and his ability to reinvent the past in his books” draw upon the same creative skills. But Hoffer’s declaration that “Ellis did not mean the lies to hurt anyone” betrays undue sympathy, as the same excuse could also be offered in behalf of Ambrose, Goodwin, and even Bellesiles. Ellis betrayed his students’ trust in a profound way, even if equivalent wrongdoing has never manifested itself in any of his widely praised books.

**H**offer ends his impressively intelligent book on a pessimistic note. From 2002 until 2004, he served in the Professional Division of the American Historical Association (AHA). Long responsible for adjudicating accusations of professional misconduct against historians, the division had considered serious allegations in the early 1990s that a less-noted popular historian, Stephen B. Oates of the University of Massachusetts, had committed plagiarism in his biography of Abraham Lin-

coln. Oates challenged the association’s authority to adjudicate the charges against him, and the AHA held back from issuing an explicit verdict on Oates’s guilt.

Hoffer says that, even a decade later, the association’s handling of the Oates case “was still an embarrassment to the Professional Division,” and in mid-2003 the AHA shamefully decided to discontinue review of *any* professional misconduct charges against historians. Hoffer blames this “retreat from professional responsibility” on historians’ “unwillingness to act in cases of misconduct.” The AHA rhetorically proclaims a strong commitment to professional integrity, but its “hypocritical refusal to enforce ethical precepts,” Hoffer writes, gives the lie to that declaration. More cases like Ambrose’s, if not Bellesiles’s, will certainly occur, and when they do, interested Americans unfortunately will not be able to look to academic historians’ professional organizations for expert guidance on what has gone wrong.

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## *Grace and the Grotesque*

*FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S SACRAMENTAL ART.*

By Susan Srigley. Notre Dame Univ. Press. 208 pp. \$42 (hardcover), \$20 (paper)

*FLANNERY O’CONNOR AND THE CHRIST-HAUNTED SOUTH.*

By Ralph C. Wood. Eerdmans. 272 pp. \$22

*Reviewed by Charlotte Allen*

**F**lannery O’Connor (1925–64) is now recognized as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century, perhaps second in stature only to fellow southerner William Faulkner. This despite the fact that, because she died at age 39 of hereditary lupus, her literary output was small: just two novels and 32 short stories, nearly all set in or near her native

Georgia, and nearly all bearing her signature qualities of extreme physical and emotional violence, mordant wit, and fascination with the “Christ-haunted” (her words) consciousness of the Protestant fundamentalist South.

The characters in O’Connor’s fiction typically flail in semicomical, semitragic misery as they strive to break free from