

MAKING HISTORY

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Editor's note: Here Shawn explains some of the challenges involved in writing history.

When my former deacon's quorum advisor, a prominent architect in Utah, learned that I had been hired to teach history at BYU-Idaho, he solemnly admonished me to be sure to "teach the truth." Over the years he had read just enough history (and listened to more than enough talk radio) to make him skeptical about historical interpretation. In the subsequent discussion I found that he thought that historians should be mere couriers—bringing the past to light without adding or subtracting anything. What my friend did not understand is that the writing of good history by its nature has some interpretive element. Think about Joseph Smith's account of his first vision. Joseph does not just tell the details of the actual event, but he indicates how he felt at the time, comparing his experience to that of Paul's. Note also how in the very selection of events in his *History* he shapes the account in order to emphasize the themes of apostasy and restoration. In short, Joseph Smith demonstrated the two things that historians do—recount a narrative, using true events, and convey something of what was significant about those events.

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Yet all of us at one time or another have read an interpretation of history that does not fit with what we know to be true. These accounts can challenge our beliefs, confuse us, and make us feel threatened or even angry. Indeed, the number and variety of interpretations of past events can challenge even trained historians. But there are some basic things to remember as we are confronted by multiple versions of the past. First, having differing perspectives is normal and can actually be healthy; they can help us see things in new ways, enhancing our view of the past. Some can cause us to think about who we are and why we act the way we do. This does not mean that all interpretations are equal. The recent claim that the Holocaust is largely a myth, for example, is a seriously flawed interpretation because it denies a mountain of evidence to the contrary.

This brings us to the second important point about interpretation in history: good history is true to the evidence.

Historians must have the humility to accept and account for evidence even if it does not fit their philosophy or expectations. Being true to the sources often means looking at context. In my research for my dissertation on fatherhood in nine-teenth century America, I came across this quote in a letter from Thomas Kilby Smith to his wife, Elizabeth¹:

Speaking of guns, does the young aristocrat grow? There seemed to be room for it when I left. I hope you do not permit him to stay out late at night & above all that you permit no improper familiarity between him & Mrs. Donald.... By the way, does he still drink? If so & you cannot break it up, beg him earnestly to conceal the fact & if he must indulge, urge him to do so privately & in your room or...he will certainly sacrifice his reputation.²

On the surface it seems to be a man directing his wife to guide an older son who has a problem with drinking and possibly philandering — two sins that were the middle-class father’s nightmare in the nineteenth century, for they meant dissipation for the son and dishonor for the family. A closer look at other documents in the collection showed, however, his son was an infant, and Mrs. Donald was a servant. The comments about drinking were humorous references to nursing. What looks on the surface to be evidence illuminating the tensions between a father and an older son, actually tells us more about how a man views his infant son and his relationship with his wife.

The final point to make about historical interpretation has to do with theory. Historians are often accused of avoiding a theoretical basis to their work. More accurately, historians tend to resist being tied to one theory, borrowing from selected theories when they feel it is prudent, and then only loosely. Historians tend to be skeptical about theory because with their breadth, they often see the holes that invariably are found in any theory. For example, my research on fathers was informed by some psychology, sociology, economics, and literary criticism, but it is better to describe it as pragmatic in its approach. In a collection of letters found in the Huntington Library, I came across a father and adult son who had considerable tension in their relationship. Against the wishes of his father, William Brown went to California to look for gold in 1852. Ironically, he struck it rich by forming a shipping company while his father, Joseph Brown, faced bankruptcy back at home. With his wealth, he purchased a home for his mother, demanding that Joseph not contribute, so that the house would be protected from creditors. He chided his father for his bad business practices, and even reproached him for “making my back black & blue” when younger.³ My reading in psychology allowed me to find explanations for William’s behavior in the obvious Oedipal tensions and resentment at his father’s abuse, but I did not feel compelled to be governed by any one specific theory. The result is an under-theorized, but I think convincing, interpretation of why William disobeyed his father.

Whatever tools historians use to interpret the past, their task can be disturbing to some. Cries of “revisionism” are common from critics who do not realize that their own view of history is an interpretation as well—undoubtedly a revision of an earlier interpretation. This is not

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to say that there is no such thing as a true historical story. Rather, like most historians, I believe that man's ability to perceive and convey to others what actually happened in the past always runs into bias. The task of the historian—indeed anyone who cares about understanding the past—is one of sifting evidence then choosing the best interpretation, often followed by a re-examination and resifting. Fortunately, we who believe in revelation have a better method for coming to truth than the one that I practice as a historian. I look forward to the dialogue on campus concerning learning by study and faith, for it suggests an exploration of how to bring together these two approaches.



NOTES

- 1 Historians understand that the sources themselves may not be accurate. Historians work hard to verify the validity of primary documents, but they know that forged documents, errors in transcription, dishonest accounts, etc. find their way into the historical record.
- 2 Thomas Kilby Smith to Elizabeth Smith, 1854, Thomas Kilby Smith Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, Ca. See also Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge Press, 2001), 69-70.
- 3 William Brown to Joseph Brown, 14 February 1852, William Brown Collection, Huntington Library; William Brown to Cornelia Brown, 29 February 1852, William Brown Collection; Johansen, *Family Men*, 157.

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