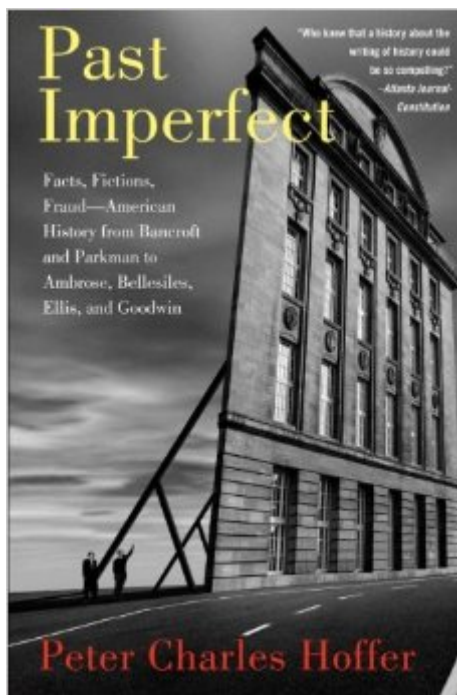


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Past Imperfect: Facts, Fictions, Fraud American History From Bancroft And Parkman To Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, And Goodwin



Synopsis

Woodrow Wilson, a practicing academic historian before he took to politics, defined the importance of history: "A nation which does not know what it was yesterday, does not know what it is today." He, like many men of his generation, wanted to impose a version of America's founding identity: it was a land of the free and a home of the brave. But not the braves. Or the slaves. Or the disenfranchised women. So the history of Wilson's generation omitted a significant proportion of the population in favor of a perspective that was predominantly white, male and Protestant. That flaw would become a fissure and eventually a schism. A new history arose which, written in part by radicals and liberals, had little use for the noble and the heroic, and that rankled many who wanted a celebratory rather than a critical history. To this combustible mixture of elements was added the flame of public debate. History in the 1990s was a minefield of competing passions, political views and prejudices. It was dangerous ground, and, at the end of the decade, four of the nation's most respected and popular historians were almost destroyed by it: Michael Bellesiles, Doris Kearns Goodwin, Stephen Ambrose and Joseph Ellis. This is their story, set against the wider narrative of the writing of America's history. It may be, as Flaubert put it, that "Our ignorance of history makes us libel our own times." To which he could have added: falsify, plagiarize and politicize, because that's the other story of America's history.

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Customer Reviews

Initially I thought this book, by the distinguished University of Georgia historian Peter Charles Hoffer, would be limited to examining cases of historian inappropriate conduct, including plagiarism,

falsification of data, and outright fabrication. That he does, but the book is so much more. In order to establish the context for his discussion of recent misdeeds by some prominent historians, Hoffer essentially writes a substantial history of the how the concept of history has developed in this country--i.e., a history of historic writing. Of course, the issue has always been relative to historical writing whether there are absolute truths, or whether interpretation and bias make it impossible to write value-free analytical history. Hoffer discusses several traditions which sets the stage for his later discussion: Consensus history (things are great); the new history (much more critical, especially as to the role of slavery, women and immigration); professions of history (which developed as the discipline became more professionalized (H.B. Adams and Johns Hopkins); Progressive history ala Charles Beard; and Cold War History (Daniel Boorstin's "The Americans" Trilogy). Along the way, the author also discusses the "National History Standards" and the American Historical Association's guidelines for professional conduct and its former "Professional Division" which enforced them. Hoffer then moves on (in the second half of the book) to looking at some prominent recent cases where inappropriate conduct was alleged: Bellesiles' book on the extent of colonial gun ownership (alleged falsification); Doris Goodwin and Steven Ambrose (alleged plagiarism); and Joseph Ellis (alleged fabrication of his Vietnam background).

In some ways I prefer historiography to straight history (although I read the latter extensively), so when *Past Imperfect* appeared on Borders' "New Non-Fiction" table my fate was quickly sealed. Overall I enjoyed this book quite a bit. The first half in particular, where Hoffer provides an overview of American history writing from roughly the Revolution to the present, is excellent. Although I was quite familiar with the Enola Gay controversy, I discovered that I had missed the bulk of the debate over standards which occurred at roughly the same time. So I learned a lot and was entertained (Hoffer is an excellent writer). I would however, like to make a couple of observations.¹⁾ Throughout *Past Imperfect* Hoffer places a great deal of emphasis on the idea that academic historians are "professionals", in contrast to the albeit skilled "amateurs" of earlier eras or creators of popular history today (Indeed, my impression is that he uses the word "professional" remarkably often). I have absolutely no dispute with the notion that historians are professionals. However, I would suggest that professionalism among historians is somewhat different than the case for say, doctors or lawyers, especially with respect to training. In their graduate programs, the latter are expected to master well defined bodies of material, whether it be human biology, legal statute, or whatever. Before they are accredited, they have to pass rigorous, standardized tests, for example, lawyers have to pass the bar exam. One might well expect to take a doctor or lawyer right out of school, and

be reasonably assured that there would be a high degree of agreement across the recently mastered body of knowledge. By contrast, the training of historians is far more idiosyncratic.

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