Reviews

to the post-sixties "new history"-- is a fair one is an open question: it is more assumed than argued for in his book. A reader not already persuaded of this now familiar narrative would have very little to go on from Hoffer’s presentation. The scattershot effect of the book’s cumbersome title all too accurately reflects the unfocused and overreaching quality of his argument. In addition to his contrast between “consensus history” and the “new history,” Hoffer weaves in and out of the first part of his book concerns about the development of the historical profession from a sociological and economic point of view, the question of professional standards and official review of historical work, the public perception of the work of historians, and the need for both scientific history and a national sense of the past in which the nation can take understandable pride. When in his brief conclusion Hoffer claims that observers of these recent cases of historians’ dishonesty “did not think in historical terms, or understand the long historical causes of the crisis, [that] they did not see the long dark side of American history writing,” it sounds both sensational and unjustified by anything that came before.

As a balanced, well-document account of the problems some prominent historians have had with standards of honesty, Past Imperfect is of genuine value. What, if anything, this recent spate of cases says about American history as an activity, or a profession, remains to be seen.

Mitchell Meltzer earned his doctorate in English; he is the author of Secular Revelations: The United States Constitution and Classic American Literature (Harvard University Press, 2005) and is currently teaching in the General Studies Program at New York University.

The Propagation of Misinformation: Archeological Hoaxes throughout History

Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries: Science and Pseudoscience in Archaeology


Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries, now in its fifth edition, is an engaging introduction to many famous archaeological hoaxes. Tackling well-known examples in popular culture such as the lost city of Atlantis, Columbus’ discovery of America, Noah’s Ark, and water dowsing, Feder devotes a chapter to each myth to shed light on “unsubstantiated, occult, and speculative claims” (1991, p. 5) and “highly speculative and unproven or, at worst, complete nonsense” (2006, p. 10). The author specifically addresses his book to fellow archaeology teachers (such as in the introduction when Feder notes that “all of us who teach archaeology hear [uninformed] comments … from our students”), but Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries is useful reading for anyone who wants to learn more about how misinformation is propagated throughout societies. Because the author only briefly assesses many different hoaxes over the course of nearly four hundred pages, this book seems best suited to an introductory college-level reader. However, as an introductory text in a course that addresses scientific rationality, frauds and misinformation, and/or rhetorical awareness of audience, Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries offers some appealing examples that will likely connect well with students.

The first edition of this work was not specifically marketed as a textbook, though the writing was engaging enough and the complexity level of the writing was certainly not above the average college student’s grasp. However, the fifth edition now leaves no doubt as to its purpose; many changes make the book more classroom-friendly, such as the addition of short critical thinking exercises at each chapter’s end and a companion website for educational use. Other textbook-friendly features include a “frequently asked questions” section before the critical thinking exercises and a short quick start guide before the first chapter begins. This guide asks students to critically analyze claims by asking themselves
where the claims are presented and by whom; how do the authors “know” they are right; whether others have been consulted and whether these others are also convinced; and whether confirming data are presented. These factors are all offered to encourage students to consider whether they have sufficient evidence to make an informed decision about issues. This critical material is provided, of course, in the hopes that students will apply these analysis tools to their archaeological studies—and perhaps to Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries itself.

The companion website offered at <http://www.mhhe.com/frauds5> showcases a companion video guide (a seven-page summary of videos related to the topics covered in the book), the URLs for websites highlighted in the book’s brief “best of the Web” notes, and quizzes. Finally, throughout the book students are presented with additional research sources, such as a list on page 13 of “skeptical publications on extreme claims not directly related to archaeology” covering topics like astrology, the Bermuda triangle, faith healing and miracles, Holocaust denial, UFOs, and urban legends. These additional sources enhance the material provided by Feder to give a broader perspective of a field often colloquially referred to as “myth-busting.” Although all these changes certainly make Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries a better textbook, they do detract a bit from the more scholarly nature of the first edition. Whether this is good or bad depends on individual perspective and need, of course—for instance, the reader should question whether this book is intended for use in a class or as an academic resource. The fifth edition seems more solidly in the “textbook” camp and indeed, Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries is a popular choice in many introductory archaeology and anthropology courses.

Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries is organized in an easy-to-follow, one-topic-per-chapter format. Though Feder systematically uses each chapter to debunk a single fraud or myth (except for the second-to-last chapter, which deals with three separate religious myths), his goal for the book “is not to simply debunk individual claims … the aim here is to put the analysis of such claims firmly within the perspective of the scientific method as it relates to archaeology” (vi). To set up this perspective from the beginning, the author begins by relating his own personal trajectory of interest in this project, then systematically explains epistemological reasoning in the second chapter, “Epistemology: How You Know What You Know.” Feder rather quickly moves away from epistemology to a more basic understanding of the scientific method. He methodically describes how scientists understand the world through the inductive and deductive processes using examples such as childhood fever in Vienna in the late nineteenth century. Feder’s goal is to provide the uninitiated reader with an understanding of the scientific method (testing hypotheses, deducing implications, and using experiments to uphold scientific theories) so they will understand why chapters three through twelve follow the same general format: outline the fraud or myth; show, using scientific evidence, the falsity of the claim(s); and provide “current perspectives” on the issue along with frequently asked questions from students.

For example, Feder outlines the history of the Cardiff Giant in chapter three. The giant, rumored to be the fossilized remains of a prehistoric man discovered in Cardiff, New York, in 1869, was actually a fairly elaborate gypsum fake—and a fairly lucrative fake at that, bringing in millions of dollars by today’s standards (p. 51). The Cardiff Giant was exposed because one of the men behind the fraud, George Hull, confessed after rumors and suspicion began to circulate. Feder addresses the concepts of authenticity and belief in the brief “current perspectives” section at the end of chapter three. The Cardiff Giant myth was dispelled after skeptics proved it was made from gypsum, a soft stone that would have broken down in the soil long before the “discovery” of the supposed petrified man. However, the Giant was widely famous before it was discredited; many people were apparently taken in, believing the remains were actually the petrified carcass of a prehistoric man. Feder asserts that no one would be fooled by such a “shabby hoax” today. Thanks to more sophisticated technological tools, scientists can now rely on radiocarbon dating, scanning electron microscopes, ion microprobes and the like to discern the validity of archaeological finds. Still, the power of the human capacity to believe despite evidence may prove Feder wrong—even today near where I live in Tucson, Arizona, residents of Sedona, Arizona believe in the healing power of the red rocks and “magical” vortices.

The frauds Feder describes in successive chapters grow more complex; as time has passed and science has become more sophisticated, so too have the tools available to potential charlatans. Chapter four points out the “inelegant fake” (p. 86) of the Piltdown man fossil, supposedly a missing link in our...
evolutionary history that would prove the human brain evolved long before the modernization of the human body. Though the identity of the person(s) responsible for the Piltdown fake remains unknown, it is not so much “whodunnit” (p. 78) as why. Why did people so readily accept the shoddy fake Piltdown skull at—if you’ll pardon the pun—face value? Feder points out a truism applicable to all fields of inquiry and particularly pertinent for writing instructors. Whether out of naiveté, a refusal to accept that individuals might purposefully trick one another, or because it is more comfortable to believe a lie (p. 86), Feder argues that we believe what we want to believe, often despite evidence to the contrary. As a college writing instructor, I have found myself in the past wanting to believe that a suspicious paper was not plagiarized. I wanted to believe that no student I taught would ever possibly plagiarize. This desire was further complicated by the institutional difficulties that accompany an accusation of plagiarism; I must figure out where the student plagiarized from, perhaps fill out forms detailing the accusation, meet with the student and perhaps re-grade the assignment, and so on. (And, much like the rigorous collection of evidence that Feder points to as necessary to expose myths and mysteries, instructors who wish to accuse a student of plagiarism must often collect enough evidence to prove their case, often using plagiarism detection services and the like.) Like accepting frauds because it is easier than potentially overturning already-entrenched belief systems, it is often easier to turn a blind eye to plagiarism than to challenge suspicious writing. However, Feder clearly believes in setting the record straight by providing evidence to prove their case, often using plagiarism detection services and the like. Like accepting frauds because it is easier than potentially overturning already-entrenched belief systems, it is often easier to turn a blind eye to plagiarism than to challenge suspicious writing. However, Feder clearly believes in setting the record straight by providing evidence to prove accepted myths wrong. Similarly, most researchers who study plagiarism and falsification would assert that exposing fraud and complicating accepted ideas about plagiarism is a worthy goal.

While “believing because we want to believe” is a major theme throughout the book, a second theme emerges in chapter two and runs throughout the book as well. Feder tackles the division between science and theology, two areas that “are often forced to part company and respectfully disagree” (p. 26), by addressing the Shroud of Turin, Noah’s Ark, and the biblical Flood. The book’s undercurrent of religious skepticism comes to a head in chapter eleven, “Old Time Religion—New Age Harmonics.” In the 1991 edition, Feder begins by likening scientific belief in religious artifacts to an Indiana Jones movie:

Indiana Jones did manage to recover the Ark of the Covenant—the receptacle for God’s word as described in the Old Testament—from the Nazi band that wished to control the enormous power contained within. Maybe Indy’s next adventure could involve archaeological proof of the God of the Bible. (1991, p. 171)

In the fifth edition, references to Indiana Jones have been stripped, but the tone remains the same: “The scientists have uncovered concrete proof of a miracle and, at least indirectly, proof of the existence of God. … [this scene] reflects actual claims made on a number of occasions by self-styled scientists” (2006, p. 278). Feder goes on to argue that “self-styled scientists” who believe in artifacts like the Shroud of Turin have essentially stepped over into the realm of archaeological debate and are therefore subject to available scientific tests:

Although the purpose of this book is certainly not to assess the veracity of anyone’s religious beliefs or to judge the philosophical basis of anyone’s faith, when individuals claim that there is physical, archaeological evidence for a basic belief of a particular religion, the argument is removed from the field of theological discourse and placed squarely within the proper boundaries of archaeological discussion. (p. 278)

My only issue with Feder’s treatment of the tensions between scientific belief and religious faith is his occasional reliance on sarcastic dismissal of religious beliefs. Chapter eleven mostly proceeds along the same formula that guides the previous chapters—introduce the fraud, provide scientific evidence of the deception, and give a current perspective on historical events—but the author intermittently sidesteps the issue at hand to deliver comments like these:

Many creationists believe that dinosaurs lived during Noah’s time and were among the animals saved on the Ark (Taylor 1985a). Obviously, a 30-ton, 40-foot-tall, 100-foot-long Supersaurus would have been more than a little cramped in its quarters. (p. 285)

Sarcasm regarding dinosaurs aside, Feder provides sufficient scientific evidence to prove his point in this chapter, even going so far as to turn to bibliographic references when it serves his purpose (such as pointing out on page 301 that there are no mentions
of a mysterious image on Christ’s burial shroud anywhere in the Gospels). As a rhetorician, I find Feder’s occasionally invective tone off-putting; particularly in the 1991 edition, his tone often slides dangerously close to an ad hominem attack. However, the eleventh chapter is the only one in which the author’s anti-religious invective really surfaces, and then it is still balanced by a reliance on facts, figures, and other scientific evidence. And, admittedly, Feder’s tone is less sarcastic in the fifth edition than in the first; for instance, while he paints creationists as “lame” and “laughable” threats to scientific rationality in his 1991 text, Feder refers to these same creationists as simply “weak and unoriginal” (p. 286) in 2006, attacking the strength of their evidence rather than their character—a crucial rhetorical shift. Still, Feder is at his strongest when he is explaining his view of scientific rationality; I hate to see him contributing to the perpetual tension between science and religion using sarcasm and dismissal.

Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries ends with “Real Mysteries of a Verifiable Past,” where Feder outlines the mysteries of European cave painters, Mayan civilization and its collapse, Stonehenge, and crop circles. He ends by again imploring the reader to make informed decisions about history based on critical analysis of available evidence: “Many different possible pasts can be constructed … not all of these constructed pasts—not all of the possibilities—are equally plausible” (p. 331). Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries remains a useful addition to the field of archaeology and a potentially helpful text for courses with a rhetorical basis (this textbook would be excellent for a unit on evaluating evidence, analyzing claims, and presenting an argument). As well, it is an interesting read for anyone who wants to know more (albeit in brief) about many captivating strands of misinformation in our culture.

Notes


2. Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian physician, was credited as discovering the importance of hygiene in obstetrics after testing numerous hypotheses regarding high mortality rates for women in a Viennese maternity ward. Feder outlines the process of Semmelweis’ discovery but does not address the fact that few in the medical community initially believed in his assertions. Considering that Feder spends most of his time in Frauds, Myths, and Mysteries outlining how “we believe what we want to believe” despite evidence to the contrary, Semmelweis’ own story would have been a powerful demonstration of how even the scientific community sometimes refuses to believe in factual evidence.

Stephanie Vie is a PhD candidate in the Rhetoric, Composition, and Teaching of English program at the University of Arizona in Tucson. Her research interests include the ethics of peer-to-peer networking systems, intellectual property, and plagiarism; memetic theory and the spread of urban legends; and feminist and qualitative research.