

History and Empathy



Matt Kester
Library Archivist, Associate Professor of History
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Students, BYU-Hawaii ohana, honored guests, and community members, aloha.

Thank you for this opportunity to address you at the beginning of a new academic year. I always enjoy the first few days of the fall semester. You can feel the excitement in the new and returning students. You can sense that everyone is shaking off the cobwebs of their summer hiatus and getting ready to jump back into academic life. Let's savor this brief moment of excitement and promise, let's drink it all in together so that we might revisit it in a month or so when it seems like the wheels are falling off.

My official job title is "University Archivist." I meet a lot of people who don't know what that means, and you may be among them, so indulge me a few moments to talk about what I do.

The word "archives" conjures up images of a dusty back room, piled high with boxes and crates. This is at least partially true. Dust, like bugs, mold, dirty hands, moisture, and children, are the archivist's nemesis. And they are formidable opponents indeed. An archives is a place designated for the storage of historical records. Archivists strive to create stable physical environments in order to extend the lives of old, fragile items, in hopes that some well-intentioned researcher will hold them aloft, consider them carefully, and draw profound conclusions about the lives that they represent. It's like a nursing home for everything from the past that isn't actually people. In our archives here at BYU- Hawaii, we collect, preserve, and make available historical records relating to the university, the Polynesian Cultural Center, the La'ie Hawaii Temple, the Hawaiian Mission (which dates back to 1850), the La'ie Plantation, and, more broadly, the history of the church in Hawaii and the Pacific. Being that this is the sesquicentennial anniversary of the church's purchase of the ahupua'a of La'ie and the sixtieth anniversary of the university, we've been busy.

If we do our job right, archives are clean, well-managed, friendly, and inviting places full of things old and worn that were written, made, used, painted, spoken, sung, carved, sculpted, or otherwise created by people that, for the most part, are long dead. Because of this, most archivists feel a responsibility to their collection that is somewhat esoteric - all of these items were created by people who endure only in memory. A part of them resides in these physical objects in a way that is difficult to quantify. Handling these objects, whatever they may be, one is struck with the sense that these people belonged to a world that is both like and unlike our own. I am not referring to the different ideas, customs, practices, or the different patterns of life, although certainly those

things all contribute to the the foreignness of that long dead world. The world these objects represent simply no longer exists. It is gone, like a warm summer day from your childhood is gone. You can look at a picture of it, you can laugh about it with friends who experienced it with you (although their memory of it will differ subtly, and maybe substantially, from your own), you can read about it in your journal, or perhaps in a newspaper. But the physicality of that moment is *gone*, and all we are left with are fragments, clues from a vanished moment that are, in the end, poor and imperfect substitutes for the real thing. Such is the nature of time.

And such is the nature of the past. As tempting as it is to equate the two, history and the past are not the same thing. History is a specific way of experiencing and, one hopes, understanding the past, but it is not equal to it. We construct histories by looking at clues from the past and using them to create a narrative - a story. These stories can take many forms. We encounter them as documentaries, songs, poems, books, chants, websites, articles in newspapers or journals. And these histories in their various forms, if they endure long enough, can themselves become clues that teach us about the past.

When we speak of history and empathy, we most often refer to developing a level of historical awareness which allows us to understand why people in the past acted the way they did. This requires having a fairly detailed knowledge of historical context and chronology, as well as an appreciation of the past as a world that is often very different from our own. We develop historical empathy by understanding that we in the present have a privileged vantage point - we know the consequences of people's actions, we know the story ends. They did not.

While I believe that developing this kind of historical empathy is an important skill, today I want to make a case for an attitude towards history that can help us develop empathy here in the present. When we empathize with others, we identify with them. We vicariously experience their feelings, thoughts and attitudes. Empathy can be expressed in terms of affinity, appreciation, compassion, or insight. Empathy is the antidote to feelings of disdain and indifference towards others. The ability to feel empathy for another person or people is the precursor to understanding and ultimately, to love. Developing empathy for people long dead is actually not particularly difficult. Developing empathy for people who occupy the world with us in the present day is quite another matter. I believe history can help.

Because history and past are not identical to one another, we often find ourselves in situations where reasonable people look at the same events and interpret them in vastly different ways. I would like to suggest that by developing the ability to recognize value in versions of the past that differ from our own, we become more empathetic people, capable of an increased love and understanding for those who we see the world differently from us. Understanding about how history is made and how history is used can help.

In my history classes, I often ask students to provide some antonyms for the word "history." The most common answer by far is "myth." "Fiction" runs a close second. Defining history as the stories we glean from the past that are true, as opposed to stories that are either unverifiable, supernatural, or simply made up on the spot, seems common between students from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and faiths. History is tethered to the idea of truth, and the idea that history consists of stories about the past that are true is widespread enough that it has made it into that well-known realm of "common sense." If I wished to assign blame for this, I would choose Thucydides, the Renaissance, and colonialism as the primary culprits. Thucydides for proposing it, the Renaissance for reviving it, and colonialism for shoving it down everyone's throats.

Now, my purpose today is not to try and settle the academic debate about the nature of truth or the possibility of real knowledge, nor is it to determine, once and for all, if there is something we can identify as objective history. I think it's important to bring up the idea of historical truth, however, for one simple reason: because we all assume that our version of the past is the right one. But even if we could prove that *we* are right, where would that leave us? It is rare that "facts" trump people's feelings, attitudes, and preconceived notions in discussions about the past. For better or for worse, that is not how we use history.

I have always been interested in how we use history and why. For me, one of the most fascinating things about history is that it has a *purpose*. Why do you keep a diary? Hold on to family heirlooms? Watch the History Channel? Read stories about World War II? Why study the lives of the "Founding Fathers, visit the Smithsonian or the 9/11 memorial? Why study the fall of Rome, the life of Shakespeare, church history, Mesoamerican archaeology, or China's cultural revolution? History is a tool, it is always *for* something - it is never an end in itself.

This is what twentieth century anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss had in mind when he proposed we abandon the term "history" in favor of "history-for." Levi-Strauss recognized both our purposes in doing history, and the inadequacy of history to the task of understanding the past in all of its complexity. In an essay entitled *History and Dialectic*, he stated that: "Insofar as history aspires to meaning, it is doomed to select regions, periods, groups of men and individuals, and to make them stand out... What makes history possible is that a sub-set of events is found, for a given period, to have the same significance for a contingent of individuals who have not experienced the events, and consider them at an interval of several centuries. History is therefore never history, but history-for." It is the necessity of selection, of deciding in the present which events or stories from the past are germane to our concerns now, that constitutes history. History is that part of the past we choose to see as significant. We hand-pick specific events, we privilege the experiences of certain individuals or institutions, we organize around certain themes - and from this we build a story, complete with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The motivation for what we study about the past is determined by our need to explain our world in the present. And our needs in the present are forever changing. If we live long enough, it is nearly certain that we will see the heroes from our past become villains, and our villains become saints. "History-for," indeed.

Consider for a moment the ways we use history to create and maintain our identities - our sense of self. Nations, cultures, ethnicities, religions, and individuals all draw from the past, real or imagined, when they ask questions like "who am I?" or "who are we?" For example, many within our Latter-day Saint community view pioneer heritage as a deeply meaningful marker of belonging. Tracing one's ancestry to Saints who were with the prophet in Nauvoo, or who endured the sacrifice and hardships of the plains, or struggled and sacrificed to settle the arid valleys of the Great Basin becomes an important part of religious, and thus personal, identity. So important, in fact, that we refer to new converts as modern day pioneers. And in doing so, we create an anchor for the identities of their descendants. For Latter-day Saints, the word pioneer carries with it an immense connotative meaning, drawing on a very specific history. Similarly, ethnic identities rely on a connection to a shared past, whether recounted in histories or poems, or in song, art, or theater. Sometimes this past is glorious. Sometimes it is tragic. Regardless, the answer to the question "who are we?" is most often expressed in terms of a statement - "we are the people who..." We see this in collective efforts to memorialize certain aspects of our past, thus reinforcing a specific version of history as a way to bind us together. We see this in La'ie's sesquicentennial anniversary, an ongoing, collective effort on the part of our community to commemorate our shared past. Firesides, parades, pageants, and performances become public opportunities to celebrate La'ie's history (at least since 1865), all with the purpose of advancing a glorious version of our past, reminding ourselves that "this is who we are."

From this perspective, history becomes much more than a chronicling of successive events. History becomes

stories for living, and the purpose behind our forays into the past transcends mere curiosity. There is no “history for history’s sake.” History exists because we need it. It is a tool for us to *use*. And we use it constantly. We use it to instruct, to edify, and to warn. We use it to memorialize, to inspire, to entertain. We use it to unite and to justify. When we look around us and ask, “why is the world this way,” we look to history. Aristotle famously advised that “If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and development.” The Stoic philosopher Cicero personalized this idea when he stated that “To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child.” History matters. And not in some nebulous, career-oriented, it will give-you-transferrable-skills-that-will-help-you-be-a-better-real-estate-agent sort of way. Recognizing appeals to history in public discourse, understanding historical arguments and learning to think critically about them - these are tools for living.

One of the most common and enduring questions about the the nature of the past is whether or not it has some deeper plot or pattern. Think of the “connect-the-dots” puzzles you used to do when you were a kid. You look at a bunch of scattered dots on a page, each with a corresponding number. The scattered numbers are actually arranged into a pattern which is invisible at first glance. But as we connect the dots, the pattern emerges. Applying this analogy to history, we can liken the numbered dots to events. If we draw the right connections between events, the pattern emerges. And of course, it was there all the time.

It might seem strange at first to argue for a grand pattern to history. But that is precisely what many of us believe. In his book *Life of Reason*, twentieth century philosopher George Santayana outlined what he called the “Christian drama,” a historical pattern through which, for Christians, all events in human history might be explained. (Full disclosure: Santayana was an observer, not a believer). The Christian drama, Santayana argues, begins with a version of the pre-mortal life, where “a great celestial King (God), wise and good, had always intended, when the right moment should come, to create temporal beings, imperfect copies of himself in various degrees.” History then proceeds through the Creation and the Fall, continues through God’s covenants with Abraham and his posterity, identifying them as His chosen people. This history identifies the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Savior as the central event in human history. Borrowing from St. Augustine of Hippo, Santayana identifies two principal forces motivating human behavior and thus, human history: First, the vain, cruel, corrupt, and impious City of Man, that, however gleaming its accomplishments, was ultimately condemned and doomed to failure. The City of God stands opposed, populated by humble believers, who, however inconsequential they might appear, stand to inherit the promise of eternal salvation through Jesus Christ through their faith and piety. In this great drama, “All history was henceforth essentially nothing but the conflict between these two cities: two moralities, one natural, the other supernatural, two philosophies, one rational, the other revealed; two beauties, one corporeal, the other spiritual; two glories, one temporal, the other eternal, two institutions, one the world, the other the church. Their conflict was to fill the ages...”

Latter-day Saints, like much of Christendom, accept the rough outline of this historical pattern, with additional knowledge as revealed through modern-day prophets and apostles. We expand and modify this so-called Christian drama through a deeper knowledge of a pre- and post-mortal existence, by the division of human history into apostasies and dispensations, and finally, by belief in a final dispensation where all is restored and revealed in preparation for the return of the Savior. Latter-day Saints understand much of our personal, institutional, and community life in relation to this pattern. When we ask “What is history?” the our answer is as definitive as it is profound. History is God’s dealings, from beginning to end, with all He has created.

Others, of course, have looked at the past and suggested alternative patterns. Some argue that history is the the story of human rationality working itself out towards the end goal of a perfect social order. Others see history as the world spirit realizing itself in the spirits of individuals and nations. For some history is the age-old contest between the haves and the have-nots, for others, the meteoric rise of cultures into civilizations, followed by their inevitable decline. Still others see no pattern at all, merely a series of struggles whose meaning is never fixed,

but defined and redefined as necessary in order, I suppose, for us to get a good night's sleep. Judged by Santayana's Christian drama, however, these competing interpretations of the past all belong to one group. The wrong one.

The danger inherent within this is that it becomes all too easy to objectify those who subscribe to an alternative version of the past as deluded, misguided, or dangerous. And when that happens, empathy suffers. It is difficult, if not impossible, to empathize with someone while simultaneously viewing their deeply held notions about the past, which often translate into deeply held beliefs about themselves and their communities, with indifference or disdain.

If the link between history and empathy seems like an abstraction, consider this example, in which the past came roaring headlong into the present in some pretty profound ways. In 1995, curators at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. prepared what they believed would be a fascinating and popular exhibit commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. The exhibit's title, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," hinted at the thematic elements of the installation. The centerpiece was the front portion of the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 bomber that delivered the nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. The curatorial team was comprised of historians from the National Park Service, Stanford University, Harvard University, the University of Wisconsin, and other eminent institutions. The exhibit included a small section that showed images of the devastation wrought by the nuclear bombs on both cities, including a child's lunch box, twisted and blackened into an almost unrecognizable shape. The exhibit script, which had been submitted to two advisory boards, including one chaired by the sitting Air Force historian, had undergone extensive revisions before a final version was approved. But when the script was leaked, the result was a political firestorm. Veterans groups and members of Congress lambasted the exhibit as "anti-nuclear," "anti-military," and "un-American." This despite Air Force historian Richard Hallion's assessment that the exhibit was "a most impressive piece of work, comprehensive and dramatic, obviously based on a great deal of sound research, both in primary and secondary sources." The debate raged in the opinion pages of major newspapers, and eventually resulted in a condemnatory letter signed by twenty-four Congressmen condemning it. After a year of wrangling, the curators agreed to add to the exhibit the testimony of veterans and *Enola Gay* pilots, that included their positive feelings about what they had done that day. In the final analysis, one exhibit curator admitted that there was simply no way to make everyone happy.

For some involved in this debate, it was deeply offensive to consider anything other than a version of the past where the Japanese were prepared to fight to the last man, and that the decision to drop the atomic bomb was a humanitarian one, in the sense that it ultimately saved American lives. For enlisted men in early 1945, for whom the invasion of Japan had seemed imminent, the bomb was a gift. They felt it had saved their lives. Perhaps they were right. Regardless, evidence indicating that Japan was close to surrender was discounted as beside the point. Any interpretation of the past that considered the use of the atomic bomb in the context of the Cold War that followed was not only suspect, but dismissed as anti-American. It seemed not to matter that World War II in the Pacific theatre was characterized by atrocities on both sides, including the so-called Rape of Nanking at the hands of the Japanese and the American firebombing of scores of Japanese cities, including civilian areas. As happens so often in war, no one's hands were clean. But the memory of this terrible war loomed large in the collective consciousness of those who participated, and even larger still for a nation whose identity rests on the ideals of justice and freedom. A nuanced, empathetic version of the past seemed impossible. The possibility that the terrors of the nuclear age may not have been truly necessary was, perhaps, too difficult to bear. Better to double down on a more comfortable narrative where the single-minded fanaticism of our enemy forced our hand to an unfortunate but inevitable conclusion. The *Enola Gay* controversy illustrates a common enough scenario. We see history's periodic encroachment on our deeply held narratives again and again, in debates over textbooks, flags, and the personal lives of revered figures. And we will see many more. In moments such as these, empathy is too often found in short supply.

In recognizing alternative perspectives on the past, I am not suggesting that we abandon our ideas about the meaning of history, that we abandon our historical narratives and with them, our collective identities. I *am* suggesting that it is worth reflecting critically, for a crucial moment, on how we are using the past, and why. I am suggesting that there is something deeply cathartic and human about extending an olive branch to someone who sees the past, and thus the present, differently than we do. I am suggesting that we do so with a message of humility, recognizing that we are also constructing the past for a specific purpose and saying, in essence, "Please try to understand me. I am trying to understand you."

Fortunately, as we gather to celebrate the last one hundred and fifty years of La'ie's history, our efforts will not rise to the level of the editorial pages or the halls of congress. We will benefit from the fact that, for the most part, we have enough in common that our versions of the past are not hopelessly opposed, and our differences are not insurmountable. But as we celebrate, I challenge us all to be aware of how we construct the past, and to what ends. Who are the heroes of our story, and what version of the past have we pushed to the margins to make room for them? Let us be cognizant of the historical patterns we see and how they shape our view of the past. And let us recognize that if we are not careful, they can blind as easily as they can illuminate. As we look back together, let us try remember that history is about lives lived, both in the past and in the present. Let us remember to first emphasize what we do share - our humanity. As we celebrate our history, let us strive for empathy. Thank you.