Amazing Disgrace
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By Scott McLemee

The new titles that arrive from publishers each week usually come with promotional material that, apart from remembering to recycle, I carefully ignore. But over the past week -- thanks to an eagle-eyed colleague -- I have been making up for this practiced neglect by lingering over one publicist's letter in particular.

It is remarkable. It may be the most striking and provocative bit of prose concerning a scholarly book to have circulated in some while. The passage in question runs to one paragraph appearing about two-thirds of the way down the page of a note accompanying the page proofs for 1877: America’s Year of Living Violently by Michael A. Bellesiles, to be published by the New Press in August. Here it is:

“A major new work of popular history, 1877 is also notable as the comeback book for a celebrated U.S. historian. Michael Bellesiles is perhaps most famous as the target of an infamous ‘swiftboating’ campaign by the National Rifle Association, following the publication of his Bancroft Prize-winning book Arming America (Knopf, 2000) -- ‘the best kind of non-fiction,’ according to the Chicago Tribune -- which made daring claims about gun ownership in early America. In what became the history profession’s most talked-about and notorious case of the past generation, Arming America was eventually discredited after an unprecedented and controversial review called into question its sources, charges which Bellesiles and his many prominent supporters have always rejected.”

These sentences have absorbed and rewarded my attention for days on end. They are a masterpiece of evasion. The paragraph is, in its way, quite impressive. Every word of it is misleading, including “and” and “the.”

Bellesiles has a certain claim to fame, certainly, but not as “the target of an infamous ‘swiftboating’ campaign.” He is, and will be forever remembered as, a historian whose colleagues found him to have violated his profession's standards of scholarly integrity. Arming America won the Bancroft Prize -- the highest honor for a book on American history. But far more salient is the fact that the Bancroft committee took the unprecedented step of withdrawing the prize.

It is true that he drew the ire of the National Rifle Association, and I have no inclination to give that organization's well-funded demagogy the benefit of any doubt. But gun nuts did not force Bellesiles to do sloppy research or to falsify sources. That his scholarship was grossly incompetent on many points is not a "controversial" notion. Nor is it open to dispute whether or
not he falsified sources. That has been exhaustively documented by his peers. To pretend otherwise is itself demagogic….

The saga of Michael Bellesiles (pronounced "buh-LEELS" or "buh-LAYELS," depending on who you ask) was at its height in 2001 and came to a resolution (or so one thought) the following year, when Bellesiles resigned from his position as professor of history at Emory University. As the case was unfolding, I followed it rather closely, but until seeing the New Press statement last week had managed to forget it almost entirely.

This was not just a matter of midlife memory loss. The affair was embarrassing and disgraceful, and it left Bellesiles in a position where he had little left that anyone would recognize as dignity….

Matters began with an article Bellesiles published in *The Journal of American History* in 1996. He claimed that his research among probate records suggested a very low rate of individual gun ownership in colonial America -- and indeed well into the 19th century. What Bellesiles called a “gun culture” only really developed in the wake of the Civil War, he argued, when mass-production of firearms made them more affordable.

Expanding on his thesis in *Arming America*, the author presented a new way of looking at the early days of the country. Firearms had been scarce and expensive, and were not found in most households. Hunting mostly involved using traps, rather than shooting. What guns were commonly available were usually old and in bad shape. The men who took up arms for their country during the American Revolution mostly got them from depots. And those citizen-soldiers didn't shoot very well, for not many of them were accustomed to handling guns. Since, again, guns were expensive and scarce.

Bellesiles cited many and diverse sources for all of these claims, but the most impressive aspect of his work -- the part he mentioned in interviews, and the part that professional historians and journalistic reviewers alike always stressed -- was the statistical evidence from his examination of probate records….

But the gun nuts were not the only people who had problems with Bellesiles’s work. *Arming America* received many favorable reviews in major journals of opinion, but fellow historians had been expressing reservations about the probate data ever since that article had appeared in the *JAH* a few years earlier. For one thing, there were questions about how Bellesiles had gathered his information, and where; and about whether he was counting things correctly. He treated wills as if they were a completely reliable list of the whole of someone's property, even though the experts on probate know better, and even though he cited some of those scholars in his own notes.

The statistical claims in particular were a problem. Scholars would later try -- and fail -- to duplicate the results Bellesiles reported from his number-crunching. At first, it was possible to
shrug this off as evidence that he was clumsy with the calculator. But things were not that simple. The figures on Bellesiles’s statistical tables were the tip of the iceberg.

People following up his notes kept finding problems: inaccurate quotations, mischaracterized sources, failure to include evidence that ran contrary to his thesis, and so on. At first, it was easy to dismiss the complaints because they had a screed-like quality. But qualified scholars who looked into the matter came away shaking their heads. A symposium on Arming America appeared in the William and Mary Quarterly in early 2002, followed not much later by James Lindgren’s review-essay in The Yale Law Journal.

At the request of Emory University, three prominent historians, assisted by graduate students, examined the evidence about Bellesiles’s work. In particular, they looked at his claims concerning what probate and militia records showed about gun ownership in early America -- and, in what proved even more of a problem, at how he accounted for the discrepancies between what he claimed and what the archival records actually showed. The resulting “Report of the Investigative Committee in the Matter of Professor Michael Bellesiles,” released in October 2002, was devastating.

“We have interviewed Professor Bellesiles,” the committee reported, “and found him both cooperative and respectful of this process. Yet the best that can be said of his work with the probate and militia records is that he is guilty of unprofessional and misleading work. Every aspect of his work in the probate records is deeply flawed.... Subsequent to the allegations of research misconduct, his responses have been prolix, confusing, evasive, and occasionally contradictory. We are surprised and troubled that Bellesiles has not availed himself of the opportunities he has had since the notice of this investigation to examine, identify, and share his remaining research materials.”

While acknowledging that "unfamiliarity with quantitative methods or plain incompetence" possibly accounted for some of the deficiencies in Bellesiles's statistical data, the committee found that he was also in violation of the standards of scholarly integrity as defined by the American Historical Association, which (to quote its report) "includes ‘an awareness of one’s own bias and a readiness to follow sound methods and analysis wherever they may lead,’ ‘disclosure of all significant qualifications of one’s arguments,’ careful documentation of findings and the responsibility to ‘thereafter be prepared to make available to others their sources, evidence, and data,’ and the injunction that ‘historians must not misrepresent evidence or the sources of evidence.’ ”

Bellesiles was culpable on all points. “In fact,” the report noted, “Professor Bellesiles told the committee that because of criticism from other scholars, he himself had begun to doubt the quality of his probate research well before he published it in the Journal of American History.”

So much for the myth of a scholar whose greatest crime was making “daring claims” that left him vulnerable to "swiftboating." Michael Bellesiles's greatest enemy was never the NRA. It was Michael Bellesiles….
An Issue of Plagiarism

Mary is an assistant professor of modern Japanese economic history. Everyone in the field acknowledges her to be one of the brightest young minds in the profession. Her first book, based on her dissertation, is a study of post-World War II economic recovery. Following the customary practice, before agreeing to publish Mary's book the publisher sent the manuscript to several experts in Mary's field for them to review and provide critical comments. The referees all agreed that it is a first-rate, pathbreaking work. The press therefore accepted the book for publication.

Bill, Mary's counterpart at another university, has eagerly begun to read Mary's book, which has now been published. As he reads, he gets the feeling that something is not right. He is sure that he recognizes some of the text. Certain that it seems familiar because Mary has published articles and delivered papers at conferences based on chapters of the book, Bill decides to let it go. But after finishing the book, he is left with a gnawing feeling that the familiar passages are not Mary's own words. He decides to look at her published work and satisfies himself that her articles are not the source of the familiar text.

A year has gone by. During that year, Mary's book has received glowing reviews, both in professional journals and in the popular press. Her new research has attracted a good deal of attention from her colleagues at other universities across the country. In the meantime, while doing some of his own research work, Bill looks at his notes from an unpublished dissertation and finds a quote that sounds familiar from another context. On reflection, he realizes what that source was: Mary's book. He pulls the book off the shelf, riffles through, and, sure enough, there it is. Mary appears to have taken portions of the dissertation and used them as if she had written them herself. There are no quotation marks around the text in question, nor is there a cite to this or any other source. He wonders what other portions of her book have been taken from other sources and also about the integrity of the articles she has published. Bill is in a quandary: What should he do?

Questions

1. Has Mary committed plagiarism?
2. What should Bill do about his discovery (e.g., confront Mary directly, contact her department chair, contact the author[s] whose work he believes Mary has plagiarized, do nothing)? Explain.
3. If Mary is found to have plagiarized other scholars' work, what professional consequences should result?
4. What responsibility should Mary's dissertation supervisor have for her work?

Suppose that the chair is not satisfied with Mary's explanations. She decides to initiate an investigation into Bill's allegations. The investigation results in a finding that Mary not only plagiarized this source and several others in her book, but also numerous other sources in her
other published works. Technically, Mary should be asked to leave the university. But everyone agrees that despite these flaws, her work is brilliant. The university committee, together with the department chair, decides to allow Mary to stay on, but to require that her work be reviewed by a more senior scholar in the department, so that she can learn better research methods.

Questions
1. Is the outcome of this case appropriate? On what do you base your answer?
2. If the outcome of this case is not appropriate, what would be an appropriate result?
American Historical Association, Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct
(updated 2011)

This Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct addresses dilemmas and concerns about the practice of history that historians have regularly brought to the American Historical Association seeking guidance and counsel. Some of the most important sections of this Statement address questions about employment that vary according to the different institutional settings in which historians perform their work. Others address forms of professional misconduct that are especially troubling to historians. And some seek to identify a core set of shared values that professional historians strive to honor in the course of their work….

3. Scholarship

Scholarship—the discovery, exchange, interpretation, and presentation of information about the past—is basic to the professional practice of history. It depends on the collection and preservation of historical documents, artifacts, and other source materials in a variety of institutional settings ranging from libraries to archives to museums to government agencies to private organizations. Historians are committed to protecting significant historical evidence wherever it resides. Scholarship likewise depends on the open dissemination of historical knowledge via many different channels of communication: books, articles, classrooms, exhibits, films, historic sites, museums, legal memoranda, testimony, and many other ways. The free exchange of information about the past is dear to historians.

Professional integrity in the practice of history requires awareness of one’s own biases and a readiness to follow sound method and analysis wherever they may lead. Historians should document their findings and be prepared to make available their sources, evidence, and data, including any documentation they develop through interviews. Historians should not misrepresent their sources. They should report their findings as accurately as possible and not omit evidence that runs counter to their own interpretation. They should not commit plagiarism. They should oppose false or erroneous use of evidence, along with any efforts to ignore or conceal such false or erroneous use.

Historians should acknowledge the receipt of any financial support, sponsorship, or unique privileges (including special access to research material) related to their research, especially when such privileges could bias their research findings. They should always acknowledge assistance received from colleagues, students, research assistants, and others, and give due credit to collaborators.

Historians should work to preserve the historical record, and support institutions that perform this crucial service. Historians favor free, open, equal, and nondiscriminatory access to archival, library, and museum collections wherever possible. They should be careful to avoid any actions that might prejudice access for future historians. Although they recognize the legitimacy
of restricting access to some sources for national security, proprietary, and privacy reasons, they have a professional interest in opposing unnecessary restrictions whenever appropriate.

Historians sometimes appropriately agree to restrictive conditions about the use of particular sources. Certain kinds of research, certain forms of employment, and certain techniques (for instance, in conducting oral history interviews) sometimes entail promises about what a historian will and will not do with the resulting knowledge. Historians should honor all such promises. They should respect the confidentiality of clients, students, employers, and others with whom they have a professional relationship. At much as possible, though, they should also strive to serve the historical profession's preference for open access to, and public discussion of, the historical record. They should define any confidentiality requirements before their research begins, and give public notice of any conditions or rules that may affect the content of their work.

4. Plagiarism

The word plagiarism derives from Latin roots: plagiarus, an abductor, and plagiare, to steal. The expropriation of another author's work, and the presentation of it as one's own, constitutes plagiarism and is a serious violation of the ethics of scholarship. It seriously undermines the credibility of the plagiarist, and can do irreparable harm to a historian's career.

In addition to the harm that plagiarism does to the pursuit of truth, it can also be an offense against the literary rights of the original author and the property rights of the copyright owner. Detection can therefore result not only in sanctions (such as dismissal from a graduate program, denial of promotion, or termination of employment) but in legal action as well. As a practical matter, plagiarism between scholars rarely goes to court, in part because legal concepts, such as infringement of copyright, are narrower than ethical standards that guide professional conduct. The real penalty for plagiarism is the abhorrence of the community of scholars.

Plagiarism includes more subtle abuses than simply expropriating the exact wording of another author without attribution. Plagiarism can also include the limited borrowing, without sufficient attribution, of another person's distinctive and significant research findings or interpretations. Of course, historical knowledge is cumulative, and thus in some contexts—such as textbooks, encyclopedia articles, broad syntheses, and certain forms of public presentation—the form of attribution, and the permissible extent of dependence on prior scholarship, citation, and other forms of attribution will differ from what is expected in more limited monographs. As knowledge is disseminated to a wide public, it loses some of its personal reference. What belongs to whom becomes less distinct. But even in textbooks a historian should acknowledge the sources of recent or distinctive findings and interpretations, those not yet a part of the common understanding of the profession. Similarly, while some forms of historical work do not lend themselves to explicit attribution (e.g., films and exhibitions), every effort should be made to give due credit to scholarship informing such work.

Plagiarism, then, takes many forms. The clearest abuse is the use of another's language without quotation marks and citation. More subtle abuses include the appropriation of concepts, data, or notes all disguised in newly crafted sentences, or reference to a borrowed work in an early note
and then extensive further use without subsequent attribution. Borrowing unexamined primary source references from a secondary work without citing that work is likewise inappropriate. All such tactics reflect an unworthy disregard for the contributions of others.

No matter what the context, **the best professional practice for avoiding a charge of plagiarism is always to be explicit, thorough, and generous in acknowledging one's intellectual debts.**

All who participate in the community of inquiry, as amateurs or as professionals, as students or as established historians, have an obligation to oppose deception. This obligation bears with special weight on teachers of graduate seminars. They are critical in shaping a young historian's perception of the ethics of scholarship. It is therefore incumbent on graduate teachers to seek opportunities for making the seminar also a workshop in scholarly integrity. After leaving graduate school, every historian will have to depend primarily on vigilant self-criticism. Throughout our lives none of us can cease to question the claims to originality that our work makes and the sort of credit it grants to others.

The first line of defense against plagiarism is the formation of work habits that protect a scholar from plagiarism. The plagiarist's standard defense—that he or she was misled by hastily taken and imperfect notes—is plausible only in the context of a wider tolerance of shoddy work. A basic rule of good note-taking requires every researcher to distinguish scrupulously between exact quotation and paraphrase.

The second line of defense against plagiarism is organized and punitive. Every institution that includes or represents a body of scholars has an obligation to establish procedures designed to clarify and uphold their ethical standards. Every institution that employs historians bears an especially critical responsibility to maintain the integrity and reputation of its staff. This applies to government agencies, corporations, publishing firms, and public service organizations such as museums and libraries, as surely as it does to educational facilities. Usually, it is the employing institution that is expected to investigate charges of plagiarism promptly and impartially and to invoke appropriate sanctions when the charges are sustained. Penalties for scholarly misconduct should vary according to the seriousness of the offense, and the protections of due process should always apply. A persistent pattern of deception may justify public disclosure or even termination of a career; some scattered misappropriations may warrant a formal reprimand.

All historians share responsibility for defending high standards of intellectual integrity. When appraising manuscripts for publication, reviewing books, or evaluating peers for placement, promotion, and tenure, scholars must evaluate the honesty and reliability with which the historian uses primary and secondary source materials. Scholarship flourishes in an atmosphere of openness and candor, which should include the scrutiny and public discussion of academic deception.