



RAI Annual Postgraduate Conference

INCREDIBLE: LYING, CREDIBILITY, AND THE TRUTH IN HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Rothermere American Institute
1a South Parks Road
Oxford OX1 3UB
27 September 2018

PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME

9.00–9.15 Registration

9.15–10.45 Lying and rumours

(Chair: Mara Keire, University of Oxford)

Natalie Zacek (University of Manchester), 'The lying hero and the lying author: an Atlantic trickster and his confounding text'

Marie Meier (University of Copenhagen), 'The concealment of mental maladies'

Wesley Correa (University of Oxford), 'Late medieval "fake news": the role of rumours in English public and popular opinion (c.1461–1537)'

10.45–11.00 Coffee break

11.00–12.30 Creating pasts, making truths

(Chair: tbc)

Aaron Bryant (Smithsonian Institution), 'Propaganda and the press, politicians, and public: Resurrection City and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign'

Grace Mallon (University of Oxford), '"The only authentic history": James Madison, the Constitutional Convention, and the power of lies'

Antony Kalashnikov (University of Oxford), 'To be remembered well: Stalin and the quest for a favourable historical record'

12.30–1.15 Lunch

1.15–2.45 Trust

(Chair: tbc)

Lewis Ryder (University of Manchester), 'The bogus mandarin hoax of 1913: fact, falsehoods and the fallible historian'

Charles Beirouti (University of Oxford), 'Assessing the utility of Seventeenth Century European Travel Literature: Edward Terry and the Muslims of Mughal India'

Douglas B. Harris (Loyola University Maryland) and Amy Fried (University of Maine), 'Deep distrust in the (deep) state: truth, lies, and the Trump era's pervasive antistatism'

2.45–3.00 Coffee break

3.00–5.00 The credible voice

(Chair: Oenone Kubie, University of Oxford)

James Greenhalgh (University of Lincoln), 'Childhood heroes or urban fantasists? Questioning the usefulness of children's thrilling accounts of the Blitz'

Jasmine Spencer (University of Victoria), "'This is what they say": Degrees of truth in Dene oral tradition'

Elizabeth Peretz, 'Unwitting revelations of a land agent: - reading into the narrative and journals of Judah Colt, born 1761 Lyme, Connecticut, died 1832 Erie, Pennsylvania'

Mark Walmsley (University of East Anglia), 'Who speaks for me? Journalistic sourcing practices and their impact on early gay activism in the United States'

5.00–5.15 Break

5.15–6.15 Keynote

Samantha Mann (University of Portsmouth), 'Suspects, Lies and Videotape: Deception from the Psychologist's Perspective.'

ABSTRACTS

Natalie Zacek (University of Manchester)

‘The lying hero and the lying author: an Atlantic trickster and his confounding text’

In 1793 Samuel Augustus Mathews published *The Lying Hero*, a defence of the nature of society in the British colonies in the West Indies in the face of increasingly harsh criticism from the metropole. What makes Mathews’ work unique within the corpus of pro-slavery literature is firstly, that he was not a plantation-owner who feared the effects on his finances of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade or the emancipation of his bondspeople, but rather a man of low to middling status who owned neither slaves nor land, and secondly, that in this rambling text he devotes considerable attention to descriptions of the culture, and particularly the dialect, of slaves and free people of colour. Scholars of historical linguistics have been fascinated by Mathews’ work, as it represents the earliest recorded examples of the speech of enslaved men and women of the British Caribbean, but *The Lying Hero* is also unique in that it is the only text from these islands in the eighteenth century which was composed by a non-elite white man, and that, while Mathews made clear that he considered people of colour innately inferior to whites, he also believed that they had developed a culture that was creative and worthy of study.

For these reasons, *The Lying Hero* is an amazing resource through which to better understand the nature of society in the British plantation colonies at the height of the era of “sugar and slavery”—or is it? Throughout the text, Mathews depicted himself as a picaresque rogue whose extensive travels throughout the islands were sparked not just by personal interest but by the need to escape various financial and political misdeeds; he even admitted that he had been repeatedly jailed for his behaviour. He claimed that he had learnt so much about Afro-Caribbean culture by disguising himself as a man of colour and socialising with slaves and free black people as if he were one of them, rather than a “buckra” white man. So, if Mathews freely admitted that he was not always honest or trustworthy, how seriously can, and should, scholars take *The Lying Hero*? Given the fact that it is not possible to prove or disprove many of the stories he recounts, what can we make of them? If we cannot accept his words as truthful, is there value in viewing them as performative, and if so, what is the purpose of and the audience for such a performance? My intention in this paper is to raise questions about the value of sources which represent otherwise unavailable perspectives, but which are problematic with regard to the truthfulness of their representation of those perspectives.

Marie Meier (University of Copenhagen)

‘The concealment of mental maladies’

As part of the collaborative research project ‘*The politics of family secrecy*’, financed by The Independent Research Fund Denmark, my PhD-project ‘*The Concealment of Mental Maladies*’ will investigate what caused families to cover up and lie about mental illnesses in the period c. 1920-1980, as well as how the motives and strategies of secrecy related to changing social norms and political agendas, in particular to the development of the Danish welfare in the mid 20th century.

Drawing on post-structural theory and recent research into the history of emotions, the project will examine the concealment of madness over time and across different types of cultural testimonies: patient records, official documents, oral memoirs and fiction – to explore the variable reasons for curtailing psychiatric disorders. When was stigma maintained or challenged through secrecy or disclosure? Was family secrecy a survival strategy or a way to preserve family reputation? How were stories constructed with the intention to seem more trustful or gain credibility in the eyes of somebody else; a family member, official institutions or society? Who had the power to lie? How did lying affect those whose stories were suppressed?

Thus, the main concern of the project will not be to distinguish between falsehoods and truths, but rather to explore how the management of knowledge about mental illness reflect, challenge or reinforce power dynamics between families and institutions in the context of broader historical and societal developments.

Moreover, the project raises different methodological discussions: which strengths and challenges follow from the combining multiple types of empirical sources such as hospitals journals, oral history interviews and fiction? How do we identify lies and practices of secrecy in these different types of sources? And, importantly: which ethical considerations do each of the different data require?

Wesley Correa (University of Oxford)

‘Late medieval “fake news”’: the role of rumours in English public and popular opinion (c.1461–1537)’

Our contemporary view of fake news tend to explain a lot of what happens with public opinion, especially in periods of crisis. If today the proportions of falsehoods are unprecedented because of the internet, the phenomenon itself is not. A long time ago, Allport and Postman thoroughly argued that rumour spreading is a psychological phenomenon that cuts across ages and different societies. According to them, rumours are specific propositions for belief in the absence of official communication about a given topic. Because of that, to paraphrase Virgil, they flourish by speed and gain strength as they go, very often slipping away from the authorities’ power. In late medieval times, rumours constituted one of the ways through which the temperature of public opinion could be measured and the fact that they are often ‘false tales’ is not a huge problem for historical research. Historians have written a lot about how gossip and rumours played a role in the spreading of information and the formation of public opinion. On the one hand, we can check their veracity through official records which often contradict the rumours and are concerned with them. On the other, their role in public opinion establish their importance even as a lie, once they could prompt general turmoil, riots, serious rebellions, and sometimes even foreign or civil war. In this sense, I would like to explore in this paper one aspect of my thesis that deals with these facets of public speech in late medieval England. In order to do so, I will illustrate the different shapes of rumour and its vocabulary, analyse the concern they provoked in authorities, especially in dealing with slander and seditious speech, and its intimate relationship with the rebellions of the period.

Aaron Bryant (Smithsonian Institution)

'Propaganda and the press, politicians, and public: Resurrection City and the 1968 Poor People's Campaign'

In 1968, the United States (U.S.) was a global model of wealth and democracy, yet an estimated 35 million people lived in poverty. Seeing this as an injustice in a nation of prosperity, Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged the U.S. government to close the gaps in wealth and opportunities that he believed stood between the American dream and the nation's realities. Taking his message nationwide, King mobilized a Poor People's Campaign, in which people of every race, age, and region of the country would protest in Washington, D.C. for jobs, liveable wages, housing, education, healthcare, nutrition, and the promises of democracy.

The campaign faced severe setbacks, however. King was assassinated days before the movement was scheduled to launch, and the campaign lost momentum. Although the crusade moved forward in King's memory and honor, it faced opposition from the media, politicians, and segments of the American public.

The proposed paper will examine photographs, oral histories, archival documents, and film footage to survey the Poor People's Campaign and challenge the propaganda of its opposition. Legislative records, congressional testimonies, and newspaper articles often painted the campaign as a national threat, menace, and failure. This, however, conflicts with the recorded experiences of campaign participants and the movement's documented achievements.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of King's death and the launch of his final and most ambitious dream, the 1968 Poor People's Campaign. This paper will argue that the movement marked a critical shift in U.S. history. The campaign brought national attention to poverty throughout the U.S. It was a catalyst to federal programs that laid the groundwork for later legislation and social change. Additionally, the campaign was a precursor to subsequent human rights movements and introduced age, gender, and quality-of-life issues to a national discourse on equality and the American democracy.

Grace Mallon (University of Oxford)

"'The only authentic history'": James Madison, the Constitutional Convention, and the power of lies'

When James Madison's Notes on Debates in the Federal Convention were published in 1840, fifty-three years after the events they described, many Americans expected that they would reshape understandings of the making of the Constitution and the founding of the republic. Arriving in a time of bitter political conflict, with disputes centring around the meaning of the Constitution and the intentions of its framers, commentators hoped that Madison's account might establish the truth about the nature of the American union. This paper will explore why these expectations were disappointed, and why Madison's hotly-awaited diary of the Constitutional Convention failed to make a meaningful difference to prevailing views of the founding for nearly a hundred years.

Madison's account emerged into a landscape of understandings shaped over decades by figures from across the political spectrum, a landscape disproportionately crafted by those who had opposed the Constitution in its final form. A small number of convention delegates, now scarcely remembered, at that time had a monopoly on the story of the Constitution's drafting. Competing accounts were left unreconciled, a smorgasbord of possible truths to appeal to a range of political

tastes. In amongst the unconfirmed stories about those four months in Philadelphia, outright lies flourished. While Madison's Notes were widely seen as the most complete and reliable source yet published on the proceedings of the Convention, his account did not take precedence in the press, in Congress, or in the Supreme Court in the time of constitutional crisis leading up to the American Civil War. This paper will investigate why making new truths stick was harder than the commentators of 1840 had expected.

Antony Kalashnikov (University of Oxford)

'To be remembered well: Stalin and the quest for a favourable historical record'

This paper will address the Soviet General Secretary Iosif Stalin's "desire to be remembered well," oft-noted in the scholarship. Two major hypotheses address how the dictator attempted to mould future history-writing. One suggests that Stalin ordered the destruction of incriminating documents, immediately after their usefulness had passed, or through *ad hoc* purges of the archives. The other hypothesis notes the creation of "authoritative" histories, written alongside or immediately following the unfolding events of the era. These were expected to act as interpretative templates for all future historical work. In this paper, I will access the above hypotheses, ultimately rejecting them for lack of evidence and limited explanatory power. Rather, I will argue that the main form of manipulation was targeted not at moulding future history-writing, but rather at future collective memory of Stalin and his times.

Monumental art and architecture, I will contend, served as the principle avenue for "influencing posterity". On the discursive level, monumental constructions were referred to as being "monuments to the epoch," "writing the chronicle of history in stone," constructing "the pantheon of the Stalinist epoch." Monumental art and architecture were also touted as superior mediums for communicating with future generations, due to their capacity to engage emotions, their physical permanence, and their inescapable presence. On the material level, architects and artists consciously developed and employed long-lasting durable materials and forms, with a view to centuries-long durability. Monuments hastily executed in impermanent materials were later rebuilt out of longer-lasting materials. Finally, once constructed, monuments were immediately placed under a preservation and restoration regime, guaranteeing their indefinite existence as protected national heritage.

Lewis Ryder (University of Manchester)

'The bogus mandarin hoax of 1913: fact, falsehoods and the fallible historian'

In 1923, Chinese art collector John Hilditch revealed a hoax he had perpetrated on the people of Manchester. According to Hilditch, ten years previous he had disguised his friends in make up and Chinese clothing and paraded them around Manchester's civic institutions. The local press presented the trick as 'Manchester's Greatest Ever Hoax', but not all were convinced that the hoax was a success. In particular the Art Gallery Committee were clear in their denial of offering the Chinese dignitaries a 'civic reception'. While the Bloomsbury group's Zanzibar (1905) and Dreadnought (1910) stunts have been subjected to in depth historical enquiry (Jones, 2013; Marsh 2017), the Hilditch 'Bogus Mandarins' trick remains unstudied. Although much of this hoax remains a mystery, by shifting attention to the abundant and contradictory historical evidence surrounding

the hoax allows us to consider the historian's limits, and reconsider their role in establishing historical narratives.

Through an analysis of Hilditch's fraught relationship with the Art Gallery Committee, this paper analyses how the hoax was exaggerated by Hilditch and denied by the Art Gallery Committee in a bitter power struggle. I examine 'how' and 'why' the lies were told and explore the restrictions of historical research in understanding the past. Do we need to know the 'truth' about the hoax to further our historical understanding, or is 'truth' itself the obstacle to unpicking this historical episode? I address these questions by contrasting the conflicting newspaper reports with private correspondence and census records. I argue that rather than seeking to uncover the 'truth', we should use the hoax to show the fractured notion of 'trust' in 1920s Britain and its implications on historical research.

Charles Beirouti (University of Oxford)

'Assessing the utility of Seventeenth Century European Travel Literature: Edward Terry and the Muslims of Mughal India'

Medieval European travellers to Asia frequently returned with fanciful tales of what they had encountered there, ranging from unimaginable riches and supernatural flora and fauna, to sorcery and grotesque parodies of men and women. By the sixteenth century, these stories, though believed by some, were also commonly satirised in contemporary literature, and travellers began to acquire a reputation for deceit. Successive generations of travel writers, increasingly aware of the mendacious reputation of their forebears, began to eliminate or even correct some of the more fabulous Western tales of the Orient. Influenced by the rise of empiricism, they claimed to base their observations on eye-witness testimony (either from themselves or others), which therefore began to compete with the authority of Biblical and Classical lore.

One such travel writer was the English chaplain Edward Terry (c. 1590-1660), who travelled around parts of India between 1616 and 1619. In 1655, Terry published an account of his observations and experiences there, entitled *A Voyage to East-India*. Terry claims that his work can be trusted, because he drew on eye-witness testimony for what is described therein. Like many other European travel writers, however, it is clear that Terry frequently misunderstood, or wilfully misinterpreted the unfamiliar, primarily due to his Western frame of reference. Using Terry, this paper addresses one of the salient themes of the conference: the ways in which historians can exploit sources that clearly lie. It also investigates the nature of misinterpretation in early modern European travel literature about Asia. Why, for instance, in spite of the growing influence of empiricism, and the increased contact between East and West, did it remain so difficult for seventeenth-century Europeans to write objectively about Asia? And to what extent was this lack of objectivity accidental, or deliberate, to advance a particular religious or political agenda?

Douglas B. Harris (Loyola University Maryland) and Amy Fried (University of Maine)
'Deep distrust in the (deep) state: truth, lies, and the Trump era's pervasive antistatistism'

The sheer volume of contested claims and verifiable falsehoods emanating from Donald Trump's White House has significant implications for Americans' perceptions of reality, national collective

memory, and the ability of a polarized American society to agree on facts as the basis of governance and policy (*New York Times* 2017). It presents myriad problems, too, to political historians seeking to construct and assess the historical record of an era.

Importantly, President Trump has muddied questions of credibility and authority to stoke distrust in government generally by challenging the statements and motives of political opponents and media institutions. Building on past research, we see Trump's efforts as bolder, more expansive continuations of a long-standing conservative and Republican strategy to undermine trust in government that dates back at least to the 1960s (Fried and Harris 2001, 2015). Using public opinion and focus group tactics to plan and coordinate anti-government media appeals, conservatives have stoked existing public distrust of government (a staple of American culture) to produce *organizational, electoral, institutional, and policy benefits* to the movement and the party.

This paper examines Trump (and Republican) efforts to undermine trust in government even as they control it. In addition to exploring these four "benefits of distrust," this paper focuses on two developments in the Trump era: 1) Trump has expanded this strategy of distrust to aspects of the American state that had heretofore escaped conservative efforts to stoke distrust (e.g., the FBI and intelligence communities); and 2) Trump has applied this strategy to mainstream media institutions, likely undermining public confidence in news reporting leading citizens to question nothing less than the truth itself. Additionally, we consider the difficulties of researching such strategies in an era when the reading of history itself is especially politicized and in light of academics' professional norms and obligations of objectivity.

James Greenhalgh (University of Lincoln)

'Childhood heroes or urban fantasists? Questioning the usefulness of children's thrilling accounts of the Blitz'

When, in 1942, the British government's operational research division asked over two thousand children to reflect on their experience of being bombed, their objective was to understand the potential effectiveness of their own air offensive against Germany. The essays they received illustrated just how little effect bombing had on morale, but also left a uniquely fascinating collection of children's writing that reveals the way 10-14 year olds experienced and narrated a world under extraordinary stress. As I have argued elsewhere, the stories the children tell reveal the complex constructions of gender, patriotism, family life, bravery and civic duty that lay at the heart of the process of assembling wartime subjectivities. Using the collection is, however, fraught with difficulties. The credibility of children as narrators has routinely been questioned by historians, who have tended to believe that children lack the capacity to interpret and reproduce events with any degree of accuracy. Even where such *a priori* judgements are ignored, further doubts persist over how much of children's accounts are 'truthful' or accurate. The children studied here often recounted their central role in dangerous or thrilling situations that are scarcely credible or confuse dates, times or known events. Other elements are fantastical, conform to classic 'near miss' narratives or reproduce popular children's stories and comics with uncanny accuracy. In this paper I will argue that these fantasies of what it meant to be a child in wartime are still profoundly useful and historically illuminating. Taking a dialogic approach to the analysis of the essays here provides an opportunity to ask why the children composed themselves on the page in the manner they did. The accounts reveal powerful constructions of wartime civilian duty emanating from the state that are based in deeply spatial ideas about gender,

patriotism and civic duty. What I aim to show is that, sometimes, childhood fantasy can be just as useful as the supposedly more reliable accounts of adults.

Jasmine Spencer (University of Victoria)

“This is what they say”: Degrees of truth in Dene oral tradition’

“This is what they say” is a formula that occurs in very many Indigenous oral accounts, and it affirms the collective truth of a story as verified by generations of tellers as well as listening witnesses. Oral tradition can be philosophically true, historically true, and spiritually true (see e.g. McKechnie 2013, Tatti 2015). But what about instances within one continuous oral tradition where there are degrees of truth—nuances—or even outright lies? Tracking these nuances requires attention to the Dene (Athabaskan) languages of the stories.

In English, degrees of truth are usually marked using tone of voice and other non-linguistic cues in oral speech and adverbial modifiers or other idioms in oral or written language. In Dene languages, degrees of truth are marked using “evidentials,” epistemic particles (tiny words) that indicate the certainty or uncertainty of the speaker, or the believability or unbelievability of the reported or direct speech (see e.g. de Haan n.d., Holton and Lovick 2008). One particular class of evidentials are quotatives, and these words represent the truth-value of any direct speech within a story, and also the profoundly witness-oriented speech-act of telling the story as true.

In this paper, I will share my survey of the contextual uses of quotatives in story collection from one Dene language, Dene Suline (Chipewyan), to discern and at times disambiguate the nuances of these quotatives (Mandeville 1976, 2009). The value in doing so is linguistic, but also perspectival: both human enemies and animal allies of the protagonists in each story in the collection at times speak using the quotative “sni,” “this is what they say”—however, the storyteller, François Mandeville, also uses sni to mark the most profound turns of the stories at the highest epistemological and metaphysical levels. Of great interest for the question of veracity in the oral tradition are moments when animals speak, and their speech is marked by the same evidentials as human speech.

By tracking and sharing some of these formal narrative patterns, as defined by the structural context of the stories themselves, I will offer some larger conclusions concerning the kinds of philosophical, historical, and spiritual degrees of truths available within Dene oral tradition. I will also discuss some of the perceptual effects of epistemological constructions in Dene languages, which are so different from English, and how these effects may relate to Euro-Western forms of historical witness.

Elizabeth Peretz

‘Unwitting revelations of a land agent: - reading into the narrative and journals of Judah Colt, born 1761 Lyme, Connecticut, died 1832 Erie, Pennsylvania’

Colt, a Connecticut born self styled gentleman of Erie Pennsylvania, shows himself to us through his diaries and ‘narrative’, his will and a clutch of letters to family, employers, and legal advisers. Is what we read the truth? Can we read a different story between the lines? Did he believe the narrative he wove— about settling the ‘wilderness’ when we know the burnt villages and fields of the 6 nations were still everywhere to be seen?? And what of the barely glimpsed actors all around

him – females, indentured servants, slaves, original inhabitants? He tells of a dark period in 1800-1801 when he stood accused of financial irregularities by his employers. He was acquitted and rehired. Was he guilty? I'll explore Colt's 'truth' in the light of current research, and comment on how his words (like those of so many other settlers of early independence days) have been used in the decades since they were written.

Mark Walmsley (University of East Anglia)

'Who speaks for me? Journalistic sourcing practices and their impact on early gay activism in the United States'

The new focus on legal, psychiatric, and medical solutions to the "abominable crime" of homosexuality in the 1950s not only increased coverage of the gay community, but also created a wider pool of "experts" from whom journalists could source ideas and information. It was within this climate that early homophile organisations began to form relationships with medical, legal, and religious professionals in an attempt to influence newspaper coverage and educate the wider public. With all three fields institutionally hostile to the community and often holding power over the lives of gay men, this interaction was never going to be free from compromise or conducive with what we may now view as a radical interpretation of sexuality and social change. However, while it is always useful to highlight the blind spots and prejudices of previous activism, it is equally important to recognise the impact that homophile activism had on who was, and who was not, considered a "credible" expert on the lives of gay men.

This paper will use the work of homophile groups, specifically the Mattachine Society of New York and the Mattachine Society of Washington, to explore wider themes about journalistic sourcing practices and the ways that minority social movements often have to fight to be included in narratives about their own lives. In the process, it examines how the definition of credible and incredible voices is often fluid and considers the impact of this on activists, journalists, and historians alike. Consequently, while focused on the history of gay liberation, the paper will raise ideas of interest to scholars of the LGBTQ community more broadly as well as those working on other communities and movements that often see their members excluded from white, middle-class, cis-male, definitions of "expertise".

Samantha Mann (University of Portsmouth)

'Suspects, Lies and Videotape: Deception from the Psychologist's Perspective.'

Lying is not a trait unique to humankind. Animals and even arguably plants use deception to achieve their objectives. However, we as humans differ in that we have speech and the written word, which allow us to deceive in a wider variety of ways. Not all lies are selfish. By and large, many of the lies committed by people are inconsequential and in fact, lubricate social exchanges. A person who spoke exactly what they felt would in fact be considered rude and probably hurtful. We expect a certain amount of deception from those we encounter (though we may deceive ourselves that those people are always being honest). However, some lies can have serious or dangerous consequences. It is these lies that we strive to find ways to detect.

In our lab we consider a lie as a 'a successful or unsuccessful deliberate attempt, without forewarning, to create in another a belief which the communicator believes to be untrue'. Much

attention is paid to the non-verbal behaviour of a liar, and often the media will tell us that a liar will look up to the right, scratch their nose and so on. This is despite a vast body of historical psychological research reaching the general consensus that those non-verbal behaviours which are somewhat consistent in liars (and are not behaviours that most people would expect) are small and unreliable. Differences may occur between large groups of participants, but these cannot be relied on when determining the veracity of an individual. Lying in itself, after all, is not a behaviour. The act of lying may (or may not) lead to behaviours. Typically psychology deception studies involve asking lots of people to lie or tell the truth (lab studies) and looking for differences. Practitioners, particularly those who felt non-verbal indicators to deceit are reliable, would often ask what such artificial studies tell us about real life liars in high-stakes situations. Indeed, capturing liars in the act, via a medium such as video which can be analysed, is rare, especially with the added challenge of knowing when they are indeed lying or telling the truth (the Ground Truth). We were able to do this with the advance of video-recorded police interviews, the findings of which replicated the decades of laboratory research into deceptive behaviour. Hence we now tend to focus on verbal cues and on ways to catch liars out, or at least make the task of lying more difficult.