

The Truth of History

Determinants of Truth

The sworn testimony of the truth, whole truth and nothing but the truth is complex. Truth relates to what we know, understand and can remember and assumes complete honesty. Our most vivid recall, as some psychologists might agree, is our most recent experience or association with a subject, perhaps in a book or TV documentary. It is a sobering thought for, as with age, our distance of historical time increases. Similar to changes in eyesight in later life, our recall can become blurred or out of focus.

The more holistic our understanding, arguably the more coherent and complete truth is but whose truth? Was it written from our own direct experience, as an observer, by association, from a description given by others, the distant lens of time or perhaps a fusion of these? Was the purpose in presenting this version to give an accurate and concise account, to set the record straight, give a viewpoint and therefore a 'take,' or maybe shed new light? Possibly the reason was to provide fresh evidence. If so, was this stumbled across or was there was a motive, perhaps an ulterior one?

The internet age is a boon for researchers but brings its dangers. Some historians are tempted to underplay the contribution of others, focus on selected and controversial aspects to the detriment of a complete picture and give little weight to contextual issues. How do we interpret this mosaic as there may be many standpoints? Picking our way through truth may be not only contextual but conditional. In that sense all historical truth is provisional. Usually we were not personally there at the time and rely on the accounts of others, their testimonies, narratives and rhetoric. Revelations may emerge decades or even centuries later, casting a different light.

Desmond Tutu, Emeritus Archbishop of Capetown, puts his finger on one problem of historical interpretation and recollection in his foreword to *South Africa - A Modern History*, 5th edn (Davenport & Saunders). He was referring to apartheid, racism and nationalism and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in an attempt to reveal the truth of what occurred in South Africa, and then come to terms with it.

"The history of South Africa from 1652 is really the story of how the lawmakers first denied our significance and then contradicted that assumption by their actions. Thus we should not have been shocked to discover that those who were meant to uphold the rule of law used their considerable power to subvert it. A lie cannot tell the truth to sustain itself."

Avoiding Pitfalls

For historians, these are minefields to avoid with great care. Original documents help provide a firm base, augmented by accounts at the time, ideally by direct observers. In so doing it is important to understand the stance and nuances, and views of others looking in, not just on what they said but their integrity and sincerity saying it, if this can be deduced. By so doing it is possible to empathise more with a bygone age and

accounts of credible witnesses. Other texts and commentaries provide context, the rationale and flavour but a note of caution from the Bodleian Library. "Just because a document is old, or seems to be important, it should not be trusted absolutely and its context and purpose need to be considered. Seek evidence from different sources to corroborate a historical 'fact'." A difficulty that may arise is which version to believe if there are conflicting accounts. If accessed in an academic environment consulting an archivist may be helpful, not as an arbiter, but to steer the researcher to what may seem the most trustworthy or reliable accounts as well as other avenues to explore

Each author may give a perspective or slant that shapes their agenda or theme in an attempt to present fresh light. A cynic may conclude they are almost bound to do this as otherwise why regurgitate accepted accounts. This can also apply to internet articles that may appear 'authentic.' Take a closer look at the author, the 'pedigree' and URL that may well give a clue. These may produce surprising results sometimes, such as a fixation or almost obsession with a particular viewpoint, contrary to what most may deem a reliable and unbiased account.

Similar to matching décor, care has to be taken in selecting a colouring that adds to historical and archival material, without detracting from it, rather than use of varnish or gloss. A recurring theme is the thoughts and feelings of those affected, from their anxieties and fears to hopes and expectations. The entire cast comprises participants, onlookers and associates all of whom recounted events as they saw them, using narratives or anecdotal evidence, occasionally amounting to gossip. Their collective impressions represent their form of the truth, validated or otherwise.

A real temptation for historians is to reinterpret history and, unwittingly, to view it through the lens of society today, or regurgitate or rewrite history as if disagreeing with what occurred. Some authors may refer to limitations of human knowledge and a need to avoid rash misjudgements, speculations or even worse a manipulation of the truth. How true! Gervas Clay, for three years Resident Commissioner for the Barotse Protectorate, (part of Northern Rhodesia) contended that "everyone is likely to be biased without realising it." Even relying on original accounts and documents comes with a truth health warning. What purports to be truth may masquerade as an authentic version, albeit bleached, sanitized or redacted.

Erasing, Reinventing and Refreshing the Past

Manchester Art Gallery removed one of its best known and popular paintings, *Hylas And The Nymphs* by Victorian artist, J. W. Waterhouse. The painting features naked pubescent girls enticing a handsome young man into a water pool. Removal was to promote debate the Gallery insist. It did, provoking mostly outrage. The picture has been put back. In the Victorian age, the pre-Raphaelites were popular, but for the Art Gallery the picture was deemed "appalling evidence of the exploitation of women." As historian A. N. Wilson says, with this high moral tone we are even more puritanical than the Victorians.

In similar vein, the clamouring by Oxford University students for the removal of the statue of Cecil Rhodes misses the point. We are referring to an important era albeit a colonial one where, by modern standards, unpalatable actions took place. Removal helps advance a different construct on history, much in the same way that Poland has decreed it an offence to state or infer that the nation was involved in the Holocaust. Evidence is overwhelming that some Polish citizens betrayed and even murdered Polish Jews, including kapos within the death camps. The jury is out whether the Polish government was complicit

The Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, contends that Jews were also responsible for perpetrating the Holocaust. He adds the lines between victims and perpetrators are becoming increasingly blurred. There may be sensitivity too in people referring to Polish death camps, rather than death camps in Poland. With the constant sifting and revision of history, and passage of time, Morawiecki may be correct in a gradual blurring. That is why it is important to preserve and protect documented studies, film footage, testimonies of witnesses and accounts of trials, survivors and perpetrators.

Quite aside from air-brushing, there is the rewriting of history to express the views of the author and possibly audience. Holocaust denial is only one example. Trying to penetrate the refreshing of history is problematic also. With digitising of material, and use of algorithms, it is possible to unearth lost or buried revelations. Whether these are transcribed accurately and completely, and whether they are expressed with a 'slight spin,' is hard to fathom unless researching the totality of evidence produced.

Refreshing the past takes other forms too. Viewing history in a fresh light, decades or a century or two later, may be revealing. With the advantage of algorithms we can dig and delve more, and crucially make connections, with the benefit of hindsight. In so doing we may obtain a more holistic appreciation of events at the time, as well as factors impinging on these that had a bearing. A drawback is trying to assess what occurred in a different time period, distilled through the lens of today. This is a tricky task even for skilled historians.

How Truth Manifests Itself

Truth may be concealed, suppressed, disguised, camouflaged, falsified, manipulated, ignored, covered up, distorted, embroidered, tweaked, adapted or steered away from a specific issue. Those asserting their own viewpoint may retort, 'don't confuse me with the facts.' Given authority, status and power, this may carry considerable weight. An account may be diluted, omit certain events or be redacted to avoid disclosure or causing offence. It may be done to protect self interest, especially if a reputation or career or is at stake, or the integrity and honesty of a government. It may not pay to argue with the official line or version.

'I was there' was a famous catch-phrase of popular and ebullient Welsh entertainer, Max Boyce. Forefinger tapping his chest, Max expressed this with great passion and feeling. But did we see the same things, even though a witness to the events of the

time? Might our memory or imagination have played tricks? Did we recall only the most vivid incidents? Important yes, but were they the most significant, assuming we were in a position to know.

What about the wrap-around goings-on that we may not have noticed, or even been aware of, or the preceding events, or those following that may have influenced what happened? These could have altered our perception, if only we were aware. Did we select a nugget of truth but fail to give context and assume *ceteris paribus* applies, with the assumption of all other things being equal? They may not have been. We may have disregarded or discarded something important, affecting our judgement of events, and our version of the truth. In looking back, might we have embellished or tweaked the truth, or even added a mild dressing, a little hot pepper or spice in our desire to explain this story to others? The temptation may be irresistible for some.

Occasionally, a conspiracy to pervert the course of human justice might arise. This may come to light when examining official documents and accounts suppressed or tampered with, or through witness testimonies ignored, underplayed or altered. For this to happen it often requires collusion and an orchestrated campaign to deflect attention and shift the blame elsewhere.

A simmering illustration is what happened at Hillsborough on the fateful day, 15 April 1989, in the semi-final of the Football Association Cup. A total of ninety six soccer fans died in the crush on the terraces. The police, providing safety and security, had their accounts but some conflicted with other versions and testimonies of witnesses. Over two decades later, the reality of the Hillsborough disaster finally emerged and gave a very different picture of the truth to that presented by the local police force.

Not only what was said, and the veracity, are important but all the underlying reasons and motivations. Did what was conveyed reflect the truth and did recipients take this at face value? The purpose may be to convey an impression that is real or an illusion, or intended to convey multiple meanings. It may be designed to put people off the scent, play for time, throw other issues into the arena to create confusion, shift blame or create a diversion. But how can we ever know, unless evidence comes to light?

Whether genuine, or containing elements of subterfuge, language may be dressed up in forms of diplomatic parlance, expressed with a convincing air of authority. It may be hard for readers and listeners to fathom and unravel. We may think it resembles smoke and mirrors by the subtle manipulation of information, presentation style and inference. We may be left bewildered, exhausted and frustrated by barriers placed in our way and hurdles, if not boulders, strewn in our path as we relentlessly pursue the truth. We may not even notice the unpalatable news if published on the same day as something even more revelatory or sensational. As a Government spin doctor once said, September 11 was indeed a good day to bury bad news.

At times this can reduce to farce as depicted in *Yes Minister*, the highly popular and topical series running on TV in the 1980's, watched gleefully by politicians. There was much more than a grain of truth in the political machinations, policy decisions and

witty interplay between ministers, permanent secretaries and other officials, and irony of unintended consequences. Yet, there is a serious side as mellifluous tones of those charged with responsibility carry considerable weight, even more so if backed up by impressive looking documents, bursting with statistics.

Making Sense of Truth

Just how do we assimilate truth? Take for example a radio documentary, also shown on television. In the former, our thought processes are influenced by what we hear and what our imagination tells us. More likely in the second case is the absorption of content, the dramatic effects we see and the presenter's personality that may appear almost theatrical. Lord Reith famously said the remit of the BBC is to inform, educate and entertain but not necessarily all at once! The word 'kayfabe' is a wrestling term that refers to the double consciousness of rivalries, violence and drama whilst being aware these are fake. So back to TV history programmes, drama documentaries and films. What do we make of them? Put bluntly, if we enjoy them do we really care?

If say analysing vast quantities of original documents, such as those of politicians, a colonial government and officials, it is relatively easy to comprehend and interpret what was said. Fathoming the unsaid is far harder. Articulation was rarely an issue, other than verbosity, as almost all authors were well educated. More challenging is decoding nuances, deeper messages and implications and why minimal comment may have been made on certain issues. In attempting to make sense of a forest of correspondence and archive material, we must keep in mind the concept of collective responsibility, of keeping the line intact, of playing the game, of being acutely aware of our position in deference to far greater authority, and not least our future career, especially if we wish to climb the greasy pole. This may partially explain why certain documents appear not to have been seen or read.

On inter-governmental issues there are also reciprocal agreements to consider. In the case of Africa, there was plenty of that going on in the helter-skelter scramble, on the premise I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine. If no personal account is left we rely only on the accounts of others, relaying and recalling what is purported to have been said, giving their opinions and slant on what the person was thinking. We may then draw conclusions by interpolation and comparison, searching for consistent themes and common strands. We may then conclude this was not only plausible but highly likely as accounts from diverse sources appear broadly consistent. It just could be some were cribbed or plagiarised. A possibility also exists they were all wrong!

In our endeavour to search out the truth we come up against the issue of certainty, an imperative for some aspects of history but not that essential for others. A good example is dates. Does it matter if we are talking about a few days, a month or two or even a year, if there is agreement an event took place? The same with the spelling of names. These may vary slightly for reasons of dialect etc but does consistency matter, providing we know who the person is? Far more important it seems is subject content, context and the implications, especially the effect and consequences.

Our Own Truth Bubble

It is for each reader to distil these thoughts and impressions through their own eyes in an attempt to make sense of history. Using a test applied by A. C. Grayling, an account of the truth may not be entirely watertight in all places. In spite of great care taken, information may be omitted through error or ignorance. As the saying goes, you don't know what you don't know.

We try to make sense of information by interpretation, and filtering out what is not relevant, or less important. There are two difficulties. The first is our interpretation may well be different from others. Sit ten people in a room with precisely the same 'facts' and request a summary of findings, in order of importance. The most unlikely outcome is everyone all agreeing. Deciding what to include and omit is not easy as there may be contextual factors to consider, aside from any personal bias.

This leads onto the most complex issue of all. An account of truth is rarely complete. It doesn't come vacuum packed and sealed but is invariably porous, leaking in and out. Unlike geometry, with prescribed and self-imposed limits, truth is not contained in a bubble unless we ring-fence the parameters. This assumes we can but this in itself is judgemental, and judgements vary – and may change over time.

Our emotions are involved and what some may regard as 'personal baggage.' Take Brexit. In the referendum few 'facts' were presented. This did not deter voters from forming their own views about immigration, sovereignty and trade. It is likely these views had been formed well before the referendum, overtly expressed or within our subliminal conscience. Emotional appeal or attachment resonates. When listening to compelling and convincing testimonies of victims the tendency is to be sympathetic. The emotional accounts of those assaulted by Jimmy Savile and Barry Bennell amply illustrate this point. The difficulty is deciphering what was heard or read as false allegations against both sexes are not uncommon.

The conclusion is we are our own truth bubble. We include what we think pertinent, and only that, according to our 'set of rules.' It is about what we as individuals make of supposed truth, perhaps swayed by the convincing arguments of others, based on what is before us at the time and our own belief system about the topic, subject or theme. Beware! Truth is a slippery concept.
