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**Past Imperfect**  
**Facts, Fiction Fraud**  
**American History from Bancroft and Parkman to Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin**  
**by Peter Charles Hoffer**

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[I know why this assignment was saved until last: to scare the living you-know-what out of us.]

Peter Charles Hoffer wrote a compelling account of four very sad cases of fraud and fiction, where truth and integrity was to have been the aim. In his own very careful scholarship, he modeled for his reader the best of *new history*. And with his exciting narrative, he demonstrated that even a tedious effort, such as the attempt to set straight the record on the cases of Ambrose, Bellesiles, Ellis, and Goodwin, could be wonderful to read, as in *consensus history* or *popular history*.

The reasons for the fraud in each of the cases were very different. In the case of Ambrose, now dead, we may never know. He kept defending his work without admitting wrongdoing, and blaming his critics for their jealousy of his success. Hoffer was most careful in giving both sides of the controversy with respect to Ambrose not only because he is not here to defend himself, but also because he is still considered such a fine writer and historian. As Hoffer says, ultimately, it is the taste of the reader which sells books. Ambrose's books still sell. That may have been the temptation that pushed Ambrose (and Goodwin) to borrow without giving credit: he had to keep turning out the histories in order to satisfy his public, his publisher, and his bank account. Tonight (Tuesday, November 15, 2005) in his *Writer's Almanac*, Garrison Keillor read from the work of none other than Stephen Ambrose. The section read was about how the end of the draft meant that people of different types were no longer thrown together in far away

places they would never have visited. The prose was beautiful. But was it *his*?

In the story of Bellesiles, we watch as a zealot deconstructs. If he could defeat the gun lobby, there is almost nothing he would not have done. In his case, there seems to have been an intent to mislead the public in order to sway opinion against the NRA. This is a cautionary tale for those of us who become caught up in looking for substantiation of our own view, rather than in discovering the truth.

Joseph Ellis turned loose his historical imagination, used to great effect in his published histories, in his class lectures. Taking his inspiration from a Jefferson reenactor, he used his imagination to place himself into the history he was teaching. He lied to his students. He said he was there. He wanted so much to be larger than life, like his historical characters, that he willed it. Hoffer says of Ellis, *In short, it is his power to invent truth-on its face an oxymoron-that allows him to tell us the story.* Hoffer also says of Ellis, *...I am personally convinced that the fabrication of his own life and his rising powers of historical imagination were linked.*