

Chapter 7

The telling of truth

On the morning of 28th May 1851, in a crowded church in Akron, a woman, an ex-slave who called herself Sojourner Truth, stood up to address the Ohio Woman's Rights Convention. There are two accounts of what Sojourner Truth said. Here (slightly edited for space) is the first:

May I say a few words? . . . I am a woman's rights. I have as much muscle as any man, and can do as much work as any man. I have plowed and reaped and husked and chopped and mowed, and can any man do more than that? I have heard much about the sexes being equal; I can carry as much as any man, and can eat as much too, if I can get it. I am as strong as any man that is now. As for intellect, all I can say is, if a woman have a pint and a man a quart - why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much, - for we cant take more than our pint'll hold. The poor men seem to be all in confusion, and dont know what to do. . . . I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if a woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again. The lady has spoken about Jesus, how he never spurned woman from him, and she was right . . . And how came Jesus into the world? Through God who created him and woman who bore him. Man, where is your part? . . . But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, the woman is coming on him, and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard.

and here (also edited) is the second:

Well, chillen, whar dar's so much racket dar must be som'ting out o'kilter. I tink dat, 'twixt the niggers of de South and de women at de Norf, all a-talking 'bout rights, de white men will be in a fix pretty soon. . . . And ar'n't I a woman? Look at me. Look at my arm . . . I have plowed and planted and gathered into barns, and no man could head me - and ar'n't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man, (when I could get it), and bear de lash as well - and ar'n't I a woman? I have borne thirteen chillen, and seen 'em mos' all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard - and ar'n't I a woman? When dey talks 'bout dis ting in de head [intellect], what's dat got to do with woman's rights or nigger's rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint and yourn holds a quart, wouldn't ye be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full? . . . Den dat little man in black dar [a minister], he say woman can't have as much right as man 'cause Christ wa'n't a woman. *Whar did your Christ come from?* . . . From God and a woman. Man had noting to do with him.

The first account was written by Marius Robinson, a white man who edited the *Salem Anti-Slavery Bugle*. He published his version in that newspaper in June 1851. The second account was published in another paper, the *New York Independent*, in April 1863. It was written by a white feminist writer, Frances Dana Gage. The two versions also present different audiences for Truth's speech. Robinson (and indeed other sources) indicates a meeting of people who supported the call for women's rights, and who listened respectfully. Gage tells of a hostile crowd, of pompous men and timid women, including some who did not want questions of slavery and race to be combined with calls for women's rights. So which account is the truth?

We still have some other questions lingering from the previous chapters: whether historians can understand and gain access to past lives; whether the tales they write are 'true stories'; and what the point

of history might be. I think we can make good on those promises, before this short book closes; and I think we can start by trying to answer the question above.

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella Van Wagenen in about 1797, in Ulster County, New York. She was the child of slaves, owned by a colonel who had fought in the American Revolution. By the age of about 30 she was a free woman, although her children remained enslaved. She was devoutly religious, illiterate, and obviously possessed of a powerful character. She adopted her new and resonant name in 1843, became involved in the abolitionist movement, the American Civil War, and the fight for women's rights. Details of her life are found in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, an autobiography she dictated and published in several versions. She became a woman of some fame during her life (meeting three different American presidents), and has become a symbol of African-American resistance and feminist protest, remembered chiefly now for the 'Ar'n't I a woman?' speech.

We have other accounts of the lives of slaves and ex-slaves from the nineteenth century, many written or dictated by the people themselves. One might then try to reconstruct a *mentalité* for black Americans at that time, a mode of shared thought and language, and thus decide which account of the speech at Akron fits better within this model. This might lead us towards preferring Gage's account: it is written in dialect (for surely an illiterate black woman would not speak the accurate English of the first account?), it shows what might be an 'authentic' lack of familiarity with abstract concepts such as 'intellect', and it resounds with a poetic ring of oral performance ('Ar'n't I a woman?') that connects with black American traditions of religious preaching.

But the problem with *mentalité* as a concept is that it can flatten out all difference, mould the complexity of human idiosyncrasy into one picture of what is 'normal' for a time and place. And these elements of 'normality' are necessarily drawn from sources, usually written



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SUBSTANCE. SOJOURNER TRUTH.

documents, which are themselves *representations* of how people spoke, thought, and behaved. The historian Nell Irvin Painter, biographer of Sojourner Truth, tells us that Truth did not, in general, like having her words reported in dialect. Whereas we might see the phonetic spelling as representing authenticity, Truth suspected it belittled the meaning of what she had to say. To decide that the second account of the Akron speech is true, because it looks more like the words we would expect from an uneducated black woman, is to dissolve the individual Sojourner Truth into a melting pot of 'black woman-ness' – and to fail to ask ourselves how we have come by our expectations. This is not to say that one cannot attempt a more nuanced and subtle reconstruction of *mentalité*, but the dangers of assuming that there is *one* mode of thought remain. *Mentalité* may obscure variation and difference; it can also hide the existence of struggle and conflict. Sojourner Truth was engaged in just such a struggle: at heart, to get white men to think *differently* about gender and about race.

In trying to decide which account is true, but also to understand Sojourner Truth as a historical actor, the historian might be seen as caught between two roles. On the one hand, the imaginative recreator of past events: asking him or herself 'if I had been in that church, what would I have heard said? What would it have meant to me?' On the other, the hardened detective, demanding of the sources 'which one of you is lying to me?' Anglo-American historians have been fond of depicting this dichotomy as a conflict between History as Art and History as Science, asking within which camp our subject truly belongs. But this is, and always has been, a silly question, that wilfully misunderstands the nature of both art and science, pretending that the latter involves no imagination or insight, and that the former contains no close observation or methodical craft. It also polarizes two kinds of knowledge: a truth that is grounded in meaning and perception, and a truth that is based on inert fact and prosaic 'reality'. Put another way, it is to ask the age-old question of whether historical knowledge is

subjective (dependent on the observer) or objective (independent of the observer).

If we took up the 'detective' position, we would probably decide that the first account of the Akron speech is true. It was written very close to the time of the event, the writer knew Sojourner Truth well, and had an ear for language, such that (as Painter argues) he was unlikely to have missed a fourfold refrain of that beautiful phrase 'Ar'n't I a woman?' Robinson's is the account that most historians now accept as the truth, following this kind of careful analysis of the evidence.

However, the image of the historian as detective (so beloved by generations of writers) omits the final chapter of the crime story: the courtroom scene. Whilst the detective attempts to decide which account is right and which is wrong, the tale is only done when the jury has delivered its verdict. For the audience to the battle of truth and falsehood must also decide the *import* of the conflicting stories. And in history, unlike in law, the same case can be re-tried many times. This is to suggest two things: first, that the polarity of fact and meaning is untenable, as no 'fact', no 'truth', can be spoken outside a context of meaning, interpretation and judgement. Secondly, that truth is therefore a process of *consensus*, as what operates as 'the truth' (what gets accepted as 'the *true* story') relies on a general, if not absolute, acceptance by one's fellow human beings.

It is likely that Robinson's account of Sojourner Truth's words is more accurate than Gage's poetic version. But Gage's retelling may capture something different about that woman, how she acted and was perceived by those who knew her. Finally, however, *we do not know*. The historian can imagine him or herself back in that church, and can try to examine the sources with all necessary diligence, care, and open-minded sympathy. But he or she cannot actually *be* there. And if he or she could, there is no guarantee that what the historian heard issue from Truth's lips would match exactly what every other soul in that

audience thought they heard. As every detective and historian knows, accounts that match exactly usually indicate collaboration in composition rather than independent reporting. Robinson's and Gage's accounts correspond on most of the matters that Truth spoke about, although they differ in order of topic and the words used. So what we are struggling with here is a matter of feeling and meaning.

To decide 'which version is True' is also to turn one version into detritus, something to be discarded. But do we want to discard something as beautiful as 'Ar'n't I a woman'? This is not to suggest that historians should not aim at truth, for, if nothing else, *true* stories are more likely to persuade the jury to consensus. But it is to argue that if we ask for one, sole, monolithic Truth, we may silence other possible voices, different histories.

This is more than a romantic caveat, for the process of silencing other historical stories has been predominant for more than two thousand years. Thucydides' tower of political history shut out the sound of other voices, other pasts, although (as we have seen) there have been partial escapes from those walls at various times. The tower only fell, however, in the twentieth century, and fell most completely in the last thirty years. Political history and the narrative of events now take their respected places alongside *other* true stories, the stories of the vast majority of the people from all times, places, and cultures. Social history has been transformed from 'history . . . with the politics taken out' (as the British historian G. M. Trevelyan once described it) to a lively, argumentative and powerful field, combining the insights of Marxism, anthropology, sociology, and annaliste *mentalité* to produce an understanding of the everyday lives of past peoples, and how these lives combine to affect 'what really happened'. It should be clear by now that the actions of the general populace have just as much to do with 'big' events as decisions made by a small group of elite kings, politicians, and rulers: without the George Burdetts, there would be no colonization of

America; without the *sans-culottes*, no French Revolution; without the Sojourner Truths, no abolition of slavery.

But social history has also given birth to further questions. In the post-war period, feminist historians began to question whether women were satisfactorily contained within the term '*mankind*', and to investigate whether women might be said to have had their own history. Studies of the position of women in the middle ages and the early modern period chart a rather different story of struggle from the progressive narrative of men's affairs. Women in the late fourteenth century, for example, almost certainly had more choices, freedoms, and economic independence than their sisters in the late fifteenth century. The project of women's history, which originally aimed to recover the voices of those originally 'hidden from history', has in recent years also led to new questions about the relationships between the sexes, the patterns to which gender conforms in different periods, and the ways in which these things affect other areas of life and politics. The manner in which one is expected to 'be' a woman, and indeed to 'be' a man, has changed across time, and has informed other patterns of behaviour, from the ways in which Queen Elizabeth I of England controlled her realm, to the training in the English public schools of muscular Christian chaps who would form an officer class in the First World War.

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Black historians, particularly in the United States, have engaged in their own recovery of voices hidden in the past, finding that there is a wealth of evidence not only for the conduct of slavery from the masters' viewpoint, but also the songs, accounts, and autobiographies of black people (not all, in any case, slaves) themselves. As with gender, 'race' – as a way of thinking and looking – has become a productive category for investigation, to see how people have understood and legitimized their subjection of other people, and how those thus enslaved or colonized have negotiated the experience. These histories have sought to challenge the monotone voice of traditional history, not only to find a place for other viewpoints and other stories, but also to make historians

realize how much they unthinkingly take for granted. Since historians tend to pride themselves on their ability to question *everything*, this can only be a good thing. The most recent example has been those historians who have investigated the histories of gay and lesbian people. Apart from the importance of finding that such people did indeed exist in the past (one can find, for example, the interrogation of a gay man in a medieval inquisition register), an investigation of people's sexual identities and behaviours across time also challenges a lot of contemporary assumptions about what is 'normal' and 'natural'. The ancient Greeks, to pick an obvious example, did not appear to see men-having-sex-with-men, and men-having-sex-with-women, as two opposite and polarized kinds of behaviour. The terms 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' (and, for that matter, 'gay' and 'straight') would have made no sense to them.

To return to the question of Truth, by way of these thoughts, the danger in deciding in favour of one account against another is that it aims to mould 'history' into a *single* true story. This is the logic too of seeking an 'objective' or 'scientific' history – neither of which is possible, in the way that they're meant to be. Both are attempts by subjective historians (with their own prejudices, class interests, sexual politics) to present *their* version of events as the only possible version. But the idea of a single true story – of History, with a capital H – remains tremendously attractive, and hence tremendously dangerous. Newspapers talk daily of how 'History' will judge politicians or events; politicians argue for foreign policy on the basis of 'what History shows us'; warring factions across the globe justify their killing on the basis of 'their History'. This is History with the people left out – for whatever has happened in the past, and whatever it is made to mean in the present, depends upon human beings, their choices, judgements, actions, and ideas. To label the true stories of the past 'History' is to present them as having happened independent of human interaction and agency.

None of this, however, means that historians should abandon the 'truth'

and concentrate simply on telling 'stories'. Historians must stick with what the sources make possible, and accept what they do not. They cannot invent new accounts, or suppress evidence that does not fit with their narratives. But, as we have seen, even abiding by these rules does not solve every puzzle left by the past, and cannot produce a single, uncomplicated version of events. If we can accept that 'truth' does not require a capital 'T', does not happen outside human lives and actions, we can try to present truth – or rather *truths* – in their contingent complexity. To do any less is both to let down ourselves, and the voices of the past. In telling the tale of Sojourner Truth, we may well present the reasons why Robinson's account of her Akron speech is likely to be the more accurate (explaining the processes whereby we reach that judgement); but we should also tell of Gage's version, and place both into the wider 'truth' of what the words and actions of that remarkable woman meant and came to mean. We should also point to what we do not, and cannot know: the magic of hearing Sojourner Truth's oral poetry, which can be reported but not recreated. Dead voices must be allowed to keep their silences too.

What I am suggesting here is complex, but its importance demands a careful reading. To relinquish 'Truth' and the idea of *one* history does not lead to absolute relativism, where any version of events is taken as being equally valid as any other. It does not, for example, give succour to those charlatans and ideologues who seek to deny that the Holocaust ever happened. The evidence for the systematic murder of more than six million people by the Nazis is overwhelming. To try to argue that it never occurred is to violate the voices of the past, to suppress that evidence which goes against the twisted thesis. The same is true for less fraught examples: dispensing with 'Truth' does not mean dispensing with accuracy and attention to detail, and to suggest for example that the colonization of the New World never happened would be equally untenable. So too would it be to claim that this colonization was not bought in part by the untimely deaths of colossal numbers of native Americans.

However, to argue about what the Holocaust *means* is somewhat more complex. The consensus is rightly so strong on this topic that we know the Holocaust to have been an act of astounding evil. We may well decide that it was the *most* evil act ever perpetrated by human beings on fellow people. But even when agreeing with this judgement, we should take care over whether we are preventing ourselves from asking further questions, and thus turning the Holocaust into an impassable barrier, not only for morality but also for enquiry. For example, by whom was this abomination committed? If our answer is 'Adolf Hitler', we may lose sight of those Germans, Austrians, French, Swiss, and others who actively participated or passively colluded in the crime. If we examine the anti-Semitism of Germany alone, we hide the anti-Semitic and fascist elements within other countries of the period (for example, the pre-war English fascists led by Oswald Mosley). These complexities do not diminish the horror and the atrocity of what was committed in German concentration camps – but they will hopefully lead us to a better understanding of what human beings (not monsters) were capable. A better understanding of *ourselves*.

So if history is so complex, so *difficult*, and not totally secure, why do it? Why does history matter? It is sometimes suggested that we should study history to learn lessons for the present. This strikes me as problematic. If we mean by this that history (or History) presents us with lessons to be learnt, I have yet to see any example of anyone paying attention in class. Apart from anything else, were these lessons (patterns, structures, necessary outcomes) to exist, they would allow us to predict the future. But they do not; the future remains as opaque and exciting as ever it did. If, however, we mean that the past presents us with an opportunity to *draw* lessons for consideration, I am more persuaded. Thinking about what human beings have done in the past – the bad and the good – provides us with examples through which we might contemplate our future actions, just as does the study of novels, films, and television. But to imagine that there are concrete patterns to past events, which can provide templates for our lives and

decisions, is to project onto history a hope for certainty which it cannot fulfil.

Another suggestion, mentioned at the beginning of this book, is that history provides us with an identity, just as memory does for an individual. This is certainly true as a phenomenon: various groups, from Protestant Ulstermen to Inuit Indians, lay claim to past events as a basis for their collective identities. But it is also a danger, as the bloody conflicts between different ethnic groups across Europe surely attest. We can lay claim to the past for part of our identity, but to become imprisoned by the past is to lose something of our humanity, our capacity for making different choices and choosing different ways of seeing ourselves.

It is also sometimes thought that history can show us some deep, fundamental insights into the human condition; that sifting through the past we may discover some intrinsic thread to our lives. Ranke's 'only to say, how it really was' can also be translated as 'only to say how it *essentially* was'. Historians have long been charged with the job of divining 'essences', to human nature, God, situations, laws, and so on. But are 'essences' of any use to us now? Do we believe in any 'essential' links between different peoples and times? If we do, it is because we wish to present universal human rights, we wish to hang on to decency and hope. And as well we should. But the historian is not, and should not be, of much use here: the historian can remind us that 'human rights' are a historical invention (no less 'real' for all that) just as are 'natural law', 'property', 'family', and so on. 'Essences' can get us into trouble, as when we come to believe that the term 'man' can always stand in for 'woman' also; or when we think that different 'races' have intrinsic characteristics; or when we imagine that *our* mode of politics and government is the only proper pattern of behaviour. So the historian might take on another job: as reminder to those who seek 'essences' of the price that might be exacted.

I want to suggest three alternative reasons for doing history, and for why it matters. The first is simply 'enjoyment'. There is a pleasure in studying the past, just as there is in studying music or art or films or botany or the stars. Some of us gain pleasure from looking at old documents, gazing at old paintings, and seeing something of a world that is not entirely our own. I hope that if nothing else, this short introduction has allowed you to enjoy certain elements of the historical past, that you have gained pleasure in meeting Guilhem de Rodes, Lorenzo Valla, Leopold von Ranke, George Burdett, and Sojourner Truth.

History

Leading on from this is my second reason: using history as something with which to think. Studying history necessarily involves taking oneself out of one's present context and exploring an alternative world. This cannot help but make us more aware of our own lives and contexts. To see how differently people have behaved in the past presents us with an opportunity to think about how we behave, why we think in the ways we do, what things we take for granted or rely upon. To study history is to study ourselves, not because of an elusive 'human nature' to be refracted from centuries gone by, but because history throws us into stark relief. Visiting the past is something like visiting a foreign country: they do some things the same and some things differently, but above all else they make us more aware of what we call 'home'.

Lastly, my third reason. This again is connected with the first two: to think differently about oneself, to gather something of how we 'come about' as individual human beings, is also to be made aware of the possibility of doing things differently. This returns me to a point made in the first chapter of this book: that history is an argument, and arguments present the opportunity for *change*. When presented with some dogmatist claiming that 'this is the only course of action' or 'this is how things have always been', history allows us to demur, to point out that there have always been *many* courses of action, *many* ways of being. History provides us with the tools to dissent.

We must bring this short book to a close. Now that I have made the introductions ('Reader, this is history; history, this is the reader') I greatly hope you will continue your acquaintance.

There is a writer I much admire, an American novelist called Tim O'Brien. He spent time as a soldier in Vietnam, and his writing struggles with the possibility and impossibility of telling a 'true war story', and what that might mean. He captures, much better than myself, the tremendous importance of the paradox within that phrase. To him, then, we give the last words:

'But this is true too: stories can save us'.