

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Politics & Government	85	96 Religion & Philosophy
Foreign Policy & Defense	87	99 Science, Technology
Economics, Labor & Business	92	& Environment
Society	94	101 Arts & Letters
Press & Media	96	104 Other Nations

A Scholarly Crime Wave

A Survey of Recent Articles

“Teachers are supposed to be role models in students’ lives,” declared Roy Groller, a sophomore at the University of Pennsylvania. “They should try to lead by example.”

He was explaining to a *New York Times* reporter (Jan. 15, 2002) his opposition to the use of historian Stephen Ambrose’s books in university classes now that the emeritus professor at the University of New Orleans stands accused of plagiarism. After an exposé by Fred Barnes of the *Weekly Standard* (Jan. 14, 2002), the best-selling author of *The Wild Blue* (2001) and seven other books since 1997, denied having committed plagiarism. But he acknowledged having “used” extensive passages from another author’s work while making only footnoted references to the source. He promised to use quotation marks in future editions.

Ambrose soon was joined in the media’s dock by another popular historian, Doris Kearns Goodwin, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author who had taught for 10 years at Harvard University. She, too, denied the plagiarism charge, but said that, yes, mistakes had been made in her 1987 book, *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, and would be rectified.

Those are only two of the scholarly scandals of recent months. The other cases appear much more serious.

One involves Michael A. Bellesiles, a professor of history at Emory University, and his cel-

ebrated *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture* (2000). The work, seemingly based on exhaustive research, was acclaimed by the eminent historians Edmund Morgan and Garry Wills, and last year won Columbia University’s prestigious Bancroft Prize for history. Bellesiles contends in his book that, contrary to popular myth, no “gun culture” existed in early America, that until the mid-19th century only a minority of white men—15 percent prior to 1790—owned firearms. When local militia were summoned, government had to supply the guns.

Arming America lent credence to the view that the Second Amendment was meant to protect a collective, rather than an individual, right to bear arms. It was swiftly embraced by gun-control advocates and furiously attacked by the National Rifle Association. Then James Lindgren, a law professor at Northwestern University, and other scholars began to question Bellesiles’s methods, zeroing in on his use of county probate records to support his contention that private ownership of firearms was rare.

“It is unprecedented for such a celebrated work of scholarship to contain as many errors,” Lindgren tells Danny Postel of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Feb. 1, 2002). Don Hickey, a professor of history at Wayne State University, in Nebraska, who originally supported Bellesiles’s thesis, now views the book as “a case of

genuine, bona fide academic fraud.”

Responding to his critics in the *Organization of American Historians' OAH Newsletter* (Nov. 2001), Bellesiles minimizes the importance of the five paragraphs devoted to the probate records in his 444-page text, and says that a flood in his office “turned most of the legal pads on which I had taken notes into unreadable pulp.”

But Lindgren and others, after examining some of the original probate records, were unable to replicate Bellesiles's findings. And some records he cited apparently do not exist. “Bellesiles claimed to have counted guns in probate records of the estates of people who died in 1849 or 1850 and 1858 or '59 in San Francisco,” writes Melissa Seckora, an editorial associate at *National Review* (Oct. 1, 2001). “The problem is that, according to everyone who should know, all the probate records that Bellesiles allegedly reviewed were destroyed in the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and fire.” Emory launched a formal inquiry into the Bellesiles case in October.

The January 2002 issue of *William and Mary Quarterly* contains four essays on *Arming America*, and a reply by Bellesiles. Three are severely critical. Bellesiles found that only seven percent of Maryland men owned guns, but Gloria L. Main, who teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder, points out that he ignored her study of probate records in six Maryland counties from 1650 to 1720, which showed 76 percent of young fathers owning arms of some sort. Other studies of probate records in early white America, she notes, “also report rates far higher than Bellesiles's, and none falls below half.” The burden of proof is on him, Main asserts, and he has failed “to lay out his methods for critical perusal.” Richard Roth, a historian at Ohio State University, makes a similar complaint, and adds to the list of Bellesiles's alleged errors his calculations showing that homicide rates were low during the period. “It appears that every mistake he makes in his own calculations goes in the same direction, in support of his thesis,” says Roth. Rice University historian Ira D. Gruber agrees.

But even if Bellesiles is wrong about the extent of gun ownership in early America, writes Jack N. Rakove, a historian at Stanford

University, his book—by stressing firearms' limited practical value in daily life and the shortcomings of the militia—still sheds new light on the meaning of the Second Amendment.

Responding to the essayists, Bellesiles denies bias, admits a few errors, and says he now believes that the method he used to determine the presence of guns from the probate records is “insufficient.” But he again minimizes the importance of the probate records and other “quantitative material.” “If you strike the probate evidence,” he writes, “the argument still stands.” Whether his career still stands is now up to Emory University.

Another case of a provocative thesis resting on questionable evidence is the celebrated “small world” notion that there are “six degrees of separation” between any one person and another. Acclaimed social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1933–84) advanced the thesis in the premiere issue of *Psychology Today* in 1967 and it caught on, giving rise to a notable 1990 play, *Six Degrees of Separation*, and a recent game, *Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon*. But Judith S. Kleinfeld, a psychologist at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, says in *Society* (Jan.–Feb. 2002) that when she dug into Milgram's papers at Yale University recently, she made a “disconcerting” discovery: He apparently suppressed evidence at odds with his thesis. In Milgram's experiments, subjects were asked to find a way to get a parcel to a distant stranger by passing it along through a chain of acquaintances. In fact, his papers suggest, most of the parcels never even reached their destination.

Yet another case of academic malfeasance involves Joseph Ellis, a professor of history at Mount Holyoke College and the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Founding Brothers* (2000). After a *Boston Globe* (June 18, 2001) exposé, he admitted that he had lied when he told students in his classes on the Vietnam War that he had fought in the war. Though Mount Holyoke's president at first minimized the offense, the college eventually rebuked Ellis and suspended him for a year without pay. Ellis planned to use the year off “to find time for self-reflection and to begin work on a new book.” He is expected back in the classroom in September.