

The Pros and Cons of History's Portrayal in Film and Television

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On June 24th, 2016, the film, *Free State of Jones* was released in theaters nationwide, starring Matthew McConaughey. *Free State of Jones* tells the story of Newton Knight, a real life confederate soldier who fought in the US Civil War and defied the confederacy by joining with small farmers and runaway slaves to establish a free state in Jones County, Mississippi.¹ The story of this secession within a secession is based on Professor Victoria Bynum's book, *The Free State of Jones: Mississippi's Longest Civil War*, but the movie itself has sparked a controversy. Bynum had sold the rights to the book to Gary Ross, the director of the yet released film, but Bynum was in for a surprise when she learned that Ross had "spurred the publication of a new and somewhat sexier work on the same subject," ultimately encouraging Sally Jenkins and John Stauffer to encroach on the research of Bynum and write a similar book entitled, *The State of Jones: the Small Southern County that Seceded from the Confederacy*. Not only was Bynum upset that her work was appropriated, but she was upset at "what she saw as the new book's tendency to romanticize Mr. Knight and his love life, its insistence on the idea that Jones County actually seceded and its attempt to place Mr. Knight at the Battle of Vicksburg -touches that do not hurt the story's cinematic potential."²

Regardless of the issues of academic territory that Professor Bynum had been upset about (a worthy issue to tackle but entirely separate from what is addressed here), this last point brings to the forefront the issue that historians have to face in today's media age and that is the role that films can play in expanding historical knowledge among the general populace. There is nothing new about depicting historical people and events for entertainment purposes. Shakespeare wrote many plays set in historical eras from Julius Caesar to Henry VIII. Like many movies today, Shakespeare even had plays that involved fictional

¹ "Free State of Jones (2016) Movie," *Movie Insider*, Accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.movieinsider.com/m13112/free-state-of-jones#plot>.

² Michael Cieply, "Civil War Fires Up Literary Shootout," *New York Times*, July 29, 2009. Accessed May 2, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/30/movies/3Ojones.html?_r=0.

characters set upon a historical backdrop, such as Titus Andronicus, a tragedy with fictional characters set in the late Roman Empire. This essay seeks to address the inherent issues involved in depicting historical people and events for entertainment purposes, while providing examples of films that depict history from different angles.

The first point worth mentioning is that money has a very influential role in all of this. Though it is rare that an academic can earn a ton of money from an academic historical monologue, it is certainly not as rare for historical dramatic films to make a large profit, but it seems that this often comes at a price. Numerous historical films have been criticized for their lack of accuracy. In one regard, this is understandable because a film director has to be extremely accurate in creating an entire historical image. A director may have to make sure the actors are wearing the most accurate clothing, eating the most accurate foods and using the most accurate technology, down to the most mundane level. Whereas the historian is free to ignore many of these details if that is not the subject he or she is addressing. On the other hand, many directors blatantly distort famous historical events in order to create a more dramatic story.

For example, in the 2000 film, *The Patriot*, Mel Gibson plays fictional Benjamin Martin, a farmer from South Carolina who joins the rebels in the American Revolution after a British officer murders his son. In this movie, the British soldiers are often portrayed as cruel and sadistic, though in reality, many British troops, as well as the British people, saw the war as an unnatural war that was unnecessary. Most redcoats would not have taken joy in killing their fellow countrymen. Even Colonel Banastre Tarleton, who the antagonist, Colonel Tavington was based on, never burned a church down with all the townspeople in it. Colonel Tarleton was involved in the Battle of Waxhaws, in which his men slaughtered patriot soldiers who were surrendering, though the reasons this happened have been highly disputed. In addition to this, the protagonist, Benjamin Martin was given the whitewash treatment. Though Benjamin Martin was supposed to be based on Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion, a slaveholding officer in the Continental Army, Martin was portrayed "as only employing 'freed slaves' on his plantation, almost 100 years before the abolition of slavery."³ It is clear that revising Francis Marion's slaveholding and portraying Banastre Tarleton as an

³Joe Carroll, "Older Americans Uncomfortable with Mel Gibson's Playing of Patriot Game," *The Irish Times*, July 15, 2000. Accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/older-americans-uncomfortable-with-mel-gibson-s-playing-of-patriot-game-1.292925>.

unmistaken war criminal was designed to create a very black and white drama which makes it clear, beyond a doubt, who was in the wrong and who was in the right, when the real politics behind the war were much muddier than they were portrayed. In addition to this, creating a good-versus-evil version of the American Revolution works great for nationalistic purposes.

One of the most egregiously inaccurate examples of history in film is the 1941 film, *They Died With Their Boots On*, starring Errol Flynn. This movie follows a fictional version of the life of General George Armstrong Custer, from his entry into West Point Academy to the Battle of Little Bighorn, aka. "Custer's Last Stand". Like *The Patriot*, this film's inaccuracies go far beyond adjusting facts for dramatic purpose. Both films, but more so this one, are examples of propaganda, meant to create a sense of national pride. *They Died With Their Boots On* seems less forgivable though because, while fighting for representation and sovereignty is very justifiable, the treatment given to the Sioux Indians in the late nineteenth century was anything but justified and there is little way around facing Custer's role in the battle. Historian Alex Von Tunzelmann describes part of the film:

Custer is shown trying to make peace with the Lakota Sioux nation. He is thwarted by an evil businessman, Ned Sharp, who announces that there is gold in the Black Hills and provokes a war. Sharp is fictional: the person who really announced that he had found gold in the Black Hills, causing a rush which violated the Treaty of Port Laramie and started the Great Sioux war, was George Armstrong Custer.⁴

While movies like *The Patriot* and *They Died With Their Boots On* distort reality for potential propaganda purposes, many films do so, not with any nationalistic purposes in mind, but in order to make the issues at hand more relatable to a modern audience. One such film that follows this path is Ridley Scott's 2010 version of *Robin Hood*, starring Russell Crowe. Though there have been many reiterations of the Robin Hood story in film, this one attempts to link Robin Hood to the events of the time, which in and of itself is historical revisionism. Of course, the majority of the versions of Robin Hood incorporate

⁴ Alex Von Tunzelmann, "They Died With Their Boots On: Overdressed, Overblown and so over," *The Guardian*, February 11, 2009, Accessed May 2, 2016.
<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/feb/11/reel-history-errol-flynn-little-bighorn-general-custer>.

the story of the crusades, since it is the crusades that pull King Richard “Lionheart” away from England and thus, King John taking the throne, but this telling of the story attempts to make Robin Hood responsible for the creation of the Magna Carta.⁵

There is much talk in the film about liberties and the idea of a king having to be accountable to his subjects. It should be noted that the Magna Carta did not give any liberties to the King’s subjects as a whole. The document had the overall effect of prohibiting an English king from taxing the nobles or confiscating their territory arbitrarily. The signing of the Magna Carta was not the result of a battle between the king and the common people but one between the nobles and church versus the king. It is very unlikely that this type of rhetoric of rights would have been used by commoners. This period predates Protestant resistance literature by over three hundred years and enlightenment principles of natural rights by almost five hundred years. In this case the question arises, would the movie have suffered greatly for making a more nuanced but less modern argument of nobles resisting arbitrary taxation?

Though They Died With Their Boots On acts almost solely as a propaganda piece, The Patriot and Robin Hood have inaccuracies in them that respectively attribute nationalist and modern ideas to them that simply would not have historically been part of the ideological landscape. Many movies that are filled with historical inaccuracies though, do so, less on an ideological level and more on factual level. In the 1995 Mel Gibson film, *Braveheart*, Gibson plays William Wallace, a Scottish leader of the Scottish Wars of Independence against England in the thirteenth century. In real life, William Wallace was from a family of lesser nobility. Perhaps in the attempt to make him a more populist figure, the movie depicts him as a commoner until he earns the title of “Sir” William Wallace. It also creates a romance that implies that William Wallace fathered the son of Queen Isabella of France, when in reality, this romance, made for the movie, would have been impossible because Isabella would have been a young child at the time. It also had cultural inaccuracies such as the Scotsmen wearing kilts. William Wallace was executed in 1305 but kilts were not invented for

⁵ Ishann Tharoor, “Top 10 Historically Misleading Films: Robin Hood,” *Time Magazine*, January 25, 2011. Accessed May 2, 2016, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/01/26/top-10-historically-misleading-films/slide/robin-hood-2010/>.

another three centuries.⁶

On top of all of this, Dr. Sharon L. Krossa points out that the Scottish would not have worn rags and they would have known how to sew. In fact, it would have been more important to a poor Scot who could not afford to buy new clothing. The introduction of the movie refers to King Edward II as a pagan, yet the evidence shows he was a Christian. The introduction is an aerial view of the West Highlands in Scotland, an area that had no involvement in Wallace's story. As Krossa states, "this is like using aerial shots of the Grand Canyon in Arizona as the 'scene setting' opening shots of a movie about the American War of Independence."⁷

Assuming that these inaccuracies were intentional and not the result of poor research, the question is raised, "Why were these inaccuracies used?" As mentioned before, one of the reasons can be attributed, not only to writers desiring to take advantage of a dramatic story line, but because the money involved also creates an incentive to create the most entertaining storyline possible. *Braveheart* was accurate in depicting Edward II as favoring his male advisor and though there has been speculation to this day that King Edward II and his male advisor, Piers Gaveston, were lovers, if the writers were to focus on a story set during the time of William Wallace's life, Mel Gibson would not have been able to fit in this storyline he created in which William Wallace plays the part of surrogate lover to the unsatisfied queen because, in reality, the age difference between Wallace and Isabella would have made this impossible. In one interview concerning the movie, Gibson states, "It was the kind of movie I always wanted to see when I was a kid that had a lot to do with, you know, primal things: love, death, hatred."⁸ This says a lot about the mentality that Mel Gibson had going into the making of the film, which would have affected his decisions regarding the plot.

⁶ Caroline White, "The 10 Most Historically Inaccurate Movies," *The Sunday Times*, August 4, 2009. Accessed May 2, 2016, http://web.archive.org/web/20110615070116/http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/article6738785.ece.

⁷ Sharon L. Krossa, "Braveheart Errors: An Illustration of Scale," *Medieval Scotland*, October 2, 2008. Accessed May 2, 2016, <http://web.archive.org/web/20131009105036/http://medievalscotland.org:80/scotbiblio/bravehearterrors.shtml>.

⁸ Ruthe Stein, "Mel Gibson Dons Kilt and Directs I Heartthrob as a Freedom Fighter," *SF Gate*, May 21, 1995. Accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Mel-Gibson-Dons-Kilt-and-Directs-Heartthrob-as-3032016.php>.

In the case of the Scotsmen adorning kilts, this decision to be inaccurate was most likely made for the same reason that Ridley Scott's 2000 film, *Gladiator*, removed a part of the original script that would have brought up an interesting issue to a modern audience. *Gladiator* tells the story about a fictional second century Roman general, Maximus, who becomes a gladiator with the intention of exacting revenge on the new emperor, Commodus. In the original script, Maximus, as a gladiator, is depicted as advertising for olive oil.⁹ Though this would have been completely accurate (gladiators were involved in advertisements for various products, just as our modern athletes are today), this is not the perception that many in a modern audience have of the Roman gladiatorial fights. It is a shame that this detail was left out of the movie because it would have been a great moment to make a modern audience think about the relationship between sports, advertising and profit, through the use of two thousand year old history, and is not understanding our present through the past one of the key reasons for studying history? In both cases of *Braveheart*'s thirteenth century kilt wearing Scots and *Gladiator*'s advertisement-free gladiatorial fights, inaccuracies were purposely used in movies to cater to a modern audiences' inaccurate understandings of the past, which only serve to perpetuate these inaccuracies. This may be one of the worst reasons to include inaccuracies in movies. Instead, film directors should make historical films which challenge what we think we know about history.

It should not be thought that certain historical accuracies in film will be perceived as inaccurate, and thus turn viewers away from a film since it is much more likely that a viewer will be inspired to research the events in order to find out their accuracy. One example is the AMC television show, *Turn*, which is about George Washington's spy ring during the American Revolution. In season two, episode eight, one of the spies operates a wooden submarine in order to plant a bomb in New York Harbor, serving as a distraction for the redcoats. Though the show was inaccurate in depicting who operated the submarine, known as the "Turtle", this early underwater craft was a real machine that was used to attempt to plant a bomb in New York Harbor.¹⁰ Wooden submarines are certainly not a

⁹ Joshua Griffin "Not Such a Wonderful Life: A Look at History in *Gladiator*." *IGN* February 10, 2000. Accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.ign.com/articles/2000/02/10/not-such-a-wonderful-life-a-look-at-history-in-gladiator>.

¹⁰ History.com Staff, "World's First Submarine Attack." *History* (2009) Accessed May 04, 2016, <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/worlds-first-submarine-attack>.

part of American historical memory about the American Revolution, but that does not necessarily mean including these lesser-known events in a historical show will push viewers away. Tum's official Facebook page included several comments about the Turtle in its post directly following the airing of the episode. One fan stated, "I was nervous about the turtle, thinking it seemed pretty preposterous. So relieved to learn it was a real device." Another responded to her comment: "I loved the Turtle. I was in awe of the technology for that time."¹¹ This goes to show that fans are more engaged by challenging their preconceived notions of history, inspiring them to research the truth.

Accurate historical events depicted in film and television that challenge traditional notions of history may inspire viewers to research history but do inaccurate historical events inspire viewers to research history? Unfortunately, even if the answer is yes, it may not matter. One study from Washington University in St. Louis studied the effects of using historical films for teaching history in a classroom setting. It stated that although students will learn the events of history better if they are shown a film along with a text, they will learn the inaccuracies as well:

We found that when information in the film was consistent with information in the text, watching the film clips increased correct recall by about 50 percent relative to reading the text alone, explains Andrew Butler, a psychology doctoral student in Arts & Sciences. "In contrast, when information in the film directly contradicted the text, people often falsely recalled the misinformation portrayed in the film, sometimes as much as 50 percent of the time."¹²

The study showed that students still tended to memorize the inaccurate facts even when given a general warning about the inaccuracies of historical films but when told about the specific inaccuracies, students could correctly recall the true

¹¹ AMC Staff. "There Is Hope Yet.-Turn: Washington's Spies." *Facebook*, May 26, 2015. Accessed May 4, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/rumAMC/photos/a.664916730216373/1073741830.597681423603935/906327496072658/?type=3&theater>.

¹² Gerry Everding, "Historical Movies Help Students Learn, but Separating Fact from Fiction Can Be Challenge." *The Source*, August 4, 2009. Accessed May 4, 2016, <https://source.wustl.edu/2009/08/historical-movies-help-students-learn-but-separating-fact-from-fiction-can-be-challenge/>.

history.¹³ This study was aimed at using films to teach history to students, but could easily be applied to understanding how historical films affect the general populace's perceptions of history. The average viewer who watches a historical film for their own enjoyment may not be seeking the inaccuracies of a historical film and are likely to stick with their false understanding of the facts. This can be especially problematic for historical films aimed at children such as Disney's 1995 film, *Pocahontas* and the 1997 animated film, *Anastasia*. *Pocahontas* tells the story of the daughter of Native American chieftain, Powhatan and her romance to explorer, John Smith, who she saves from death. Although many historians believe *Pocahontas* did save John Smith's life, the love story between the two is entirely fictional. *Pocahontas* married John Rolfe and not John Smith. Perhaps this simple fact could be corrected in an American history class, but it is much less likely for a film like *Anastasia* to have its inaccuracies corrected in the minds of American children since the movie tells a fictional story of the daughter of the last czar of Russia, Nicholas II, not a subject typically tackled by any classes offered in American secondary schools.

This is not to say that all historical films are missing major facts or failing to capture the essence of the time period. Some historical films manage to accurately tell history, such as *Tora, Tora, Tora*, *Das Boot*, *All Quiet On The Western Front*, *La Revolution Francaise*, *The Battle of Algiers*, *Gallipoli*, *Cleopatra* and *Twelve Years A Slave*.¹⁴ The inaccuracies in these films may not be significant enough to avoid using these movies as tools for learning about history. The general spirit of the times caught in these films may justify overlooking whatever small factual errors may exist. In fact, if used by a teacher to aid students in understanding history, many history films, even historically inaccurate ones could be useful, as long as the inaccuracies are understood to be just that, but for the general populace as a whole, films based in history can be very influential in

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Alex Von Tunzelmann, "The Battle of Algiers: A Masterpiece of Historical Accuracy." *The Guardian*, March 26, 2009. Accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/mar/26/the-battle-of-algiers-film-historical-accuracy>. Von Alex Tunzelmann, "Gallipoli: top of the class." *The Guardian*, January 22, 2009. Accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jan/22/reel-history-gallipoli>. Alex Von Tunzelmann, "Cleopatra hits the Nile on the head." *The Guardian*, March 31, 2011. Accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/mar/31/elizabeth-taylor-cleopatra-reel-history>; Alex Von Tunzelmann, "12 Years a Slave: Ejiofor's eyes open ours to the painful truth." *The Guardian*, January 8, 2014. Accessed May 4, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2014/jan/08/12-years-a-slave-chiwetel-ejiofor>.

historical memory. Inaccuracies in historical films are not benign errors. They have consequences. For example, Lin Anderson's book, *Braveheart: From Hollywood to Holyrood* claims that the movie *Braveheart* "played a prime role in Scotland's independence movement," leading to "the 1997 vote for a new Scottish parliament."¹⁵

As *Free State of Jones* airs in theaters, it will become clear how dedicated the writers were to historical accuracy. If the movie is careless with the truth, the reasons for the inaccuracies will say more about our own times than the past. The movie may distort facts for story-telling purposes or for an underlying agenda. It may distort facts simply because the writers felt the need to cater to preconceived notions of history for a modern audience, further perpetuating those falsehoods. Whatever the reason, historians should act as constant reminders that historical films are not documentaries, entertainment is not education and how we remember our past has real consequences for our future.

¹⁵ Senay Boztas, "Wallace Movie 'helped Scots Get Devolution'." Sunday Herald Online, July 31, 2005. Accessed May 4, 2016, http://web.archive.org/web/20130702163829/http://www.braveheart.info:80/news/2005/sunday_herald/2007-07-31/51063.html.