

AFTER THE FACT

The Art of Historical Detection

FIFTH EDITION



James West Davidson • Mark Hamilton Lytle

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Bard College



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After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection

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About the Authors

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Preface

We began this book nearly a quarter century ago by asserting that history is not some inert body of knowledge “out there” in the past, but a continual act of construction whose end product is being reshaped and made anew every time someone ventures into the archives. Since the previous edition was issued, we have ventured there ourselves to provide two new chapters for *After the Fact*.

“Material Witness” (Chapter 4) looks at inert objects that cannot speak yet provide historians with a great deal of information. The material culture of the hearth and home in the early republic may seem, at first glance, merely rustic reminders of a quaint era. Yet a closer look indicates that these objects occupied a world in the midst of swift change, in which the home was coming to be viewed as a place of refinement and a domestic refuge in the midst of a burgeoning market economy.

“The Body in Question” (Chapter 17) examines evidence most of us glance at every morning in the mirror. Cultural historians have paid a great deal of attention in recent years to the human body—its display and the attitudes expressed toward it—as one significant touchstone of a culture’s meaning. We begin with the diagnoses of what seems at first a narrow medical problem: young women who think they are not thin enough and young men who think they are not big enough. We then follow these cultural distortions in order to place the human body within a broader perspective, as a marker of cultural obsessions both in the late twentieth century and (in surprisingly similar circumstances) the late nineteenth.

Meantime, we owe thanks to those who helped with revisions to this edition. For reviews of this book and for comments on one or both of our new chapters, we would like to thank Jean H. Baker, Goucher College; Abel A. Bartley, University of Akron; Carol Berkin, Baruch College; Joseph E. Bisson, San Joaquin Delta College; Betty Brandon, University of South Alabama; Douglas W. Dodd, California State University–Bakersfield; Harriet E. Amos Doss, University of Alabama–Birmingham; Ted Hamilton, Columbia College; Craig Hendricks, Long Beach City College; Andrew Holman,

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Introduction

This book began as an attempt to bring more life to the reading and learning of history. As practicing historians, we have been troubled by a growing disinterest in or even animosity toward the study of the past. How is it that when we and other historians have found so much that excites curiosity, other people find history irrelevant and boring? Perhaps, we thought, if lay readers and students understood better how historians go about their work—how they examine evidence, how they pose questions, and how they reach answers—history would engage them as it does us.

As often happens, it took a mundane event to focus and clarify our preoccupations. One day while working on another project, we went outside to watch a neighboring farmer cut down a large old hemlock that had become diseased. As his saw cut deeper into the tree, we joked that it had now bit into history as far back as the Depression. “*Depression?*” grunted our friend. “I thought you fellas were historians. I’m deep enough now so’s Hoover wasn’t even a gleam in his father’s eye.”

With the tree down, the three of us examined the stump. Our woodcutter surprised us with what he saw.

“Here’s when my folks moved into this place,” he said, pointing to a ring. “1922.”

“How do you know without counting the rings?” we asked.

“Oh, *well*,” he said, as if the answer were obvious. “Look at the core, here. The rings are all bunched up tight. I bet there’s sixty or seventy—and all within a couple inches. Those came when the place was still forest. Then, you notice, the rings start getting fatter all of a sudden. That’s when my dad cleared behind the house—in ’22—and the tree started getting a lot more light. And look further out, here—see how the rings set together again for a couple years? That’s from loopers.”

“Loopers?” we asked cautiously.

“Sure—*loopers*. You know. The ones with only front legs and back.” His hand imitated a looping, hopping crawl across the log. “Inchworms. They damn near killed the tree. That was sometime after the war—’49 or ’50.” As

his fingers traced back and forth among the concentric circles, he spoke of other events from years gone by. Before we returned home, we had learned a good deal about past doings in the area.

Now it occurs to us that our neighbor had a pretty good knack for putting together history. The evidence of the past, like the tree rings, comes easily enough to hand. But we still need to be taught how to see it, read it, and explain it before it can be turned into a story. Even more to the point, the explanations and interpretations *behind* the story often turn out to be as interesting as the story itself. After all, the fascination in our neighbor's account came from the way he traced his tale out of those silent tree rings.

Unfortunately, most readers first encounter history in schoolbooks, and these omit the explanations and interpretations—the detective work, if you will. Textbooks, by their nature, seek to summarize knowledge. They have little space for looking at how that knowledge was gained. Yet the challenge of doing history, not just reading it, is what attracts so many historians. Couldn't some of that challenge be communicated in a concrete way? That was our first goal.

We also felt that the writing of history has suffered in recent years because some historians have been overly eager to convert their discipline into an unadulterated social science. Undeniably, history would lose much of its claim to contemporary relevance without the methods and theories it has borrowed from anthropology, psychology, political science, economics, sociology, and other fields. Indeed, such theories make an important contribution to these pages. Yet history is rooted in the narrative tradition. As much as it seeks to generalize from past events, as do the sciences, it also remains dedicated to capturing the uniqueness of a situation. When historians neglect the literary aspect of their discipline—when they forget that good history begins with a good story—they risk losing that wider audience that all great historians have addressed. They end up, sadly, talking to themselves.

Our second goal, then, was to discuss the methods of American historians in a way that would give proper due to both the humanistic and scientific sides of history. In taking this approach, we have tried to examine many of the methodologies that allow historians to unearth new evidence or to shed new light on old issues. At the same time, we selected topics that we felt were inherently interesting as stories.

Thus our book employs what might be called an apprentice approach to history rather than the synthetic approach of textbooks. A textbook strives to be comprehensive and broad. It presents its findings in as rational and programmatic a manner as possible. By contrast, apprentices learn through a much less formal process; they learn their profession from artisans who take their daily trade as it comes through the front door. A customer orders a pewter pot? Very well, the artisan proceeds to fashion the pot and in doing so shows the apprentice how to pour the mold. A client needs some engraving done? Then the apprentice receives a first lesson in etching. The apprentice method of teaching communicates a broad range of knowledge over the long run by focusing on specific situations.

So also this book. Our discussion of methods is set in the context of specific problems historians have encountered over the years. In piecing the individual stories together, we try to pause as an artisan might and point out problems of evidence, historical perspective, or logical inference. Sometimes we focus on problems that all historians must face, whatever their subjects. These problems include such matters as the selection of evidence, historical perspective, the analysis of a document, and the use of broader historical theory. In other cases, we explore problems that are not encountered by all historians but are characteristic of specific historical fields; these include the use of pictorial evidence, questions of psychohistory, problems encountered analyzing oral interviews, the value of decision-making models in political history, and so on. In each case, we have tried to provide the reader with a sense of vicarious participation—the savor of doing history as well as of reading it.

Given our approach, the ultimate success of this book can be best measured in functional terms—how well it works for the apprentices and artisans. We hope that the artisans, our fellow historians, will find the volume's implicit as well as explicit definitions of good history worth considering. In choosing our examples, we have naturally gravitated toward the work of those historians we most respect. At the same time we have drawn upon our own original research in many of the topics discussed; we hope those findings also may be of use to scholars.

As for the apprentices, we admit to being only modest proselytizers. We recognize that of all the people who read this book, only a few will go on to become professional historians. We do hope, however, that even casual readers will come to appreciate the complexity and excitement that go into the study of the past. History is not something that is simply brought out of the archives, dusted off, and displayed as “the way things really were.” It is a painstaking construction, held together only with the help of assumptions, hypotheses, and inferences. Readers of history who push dutifully onward, unaware of all the backstage work, miss the essence of the discipline. They miss the opportunity to question and to judge their reading critically. Most of all, they miss the chance to learn how enjoyable it can be to go out and do a bit of digging themselves.

PROLOGUE

The Strange Death of Silas Deane

The writing of history is one of the most familiar ways of organizing human knowledge. And yet, if familiarity has not always bred contempt, it has at least encouraged a good deal of misunderstanding. All of us meet history at a tender age when tales of the past easily blend with heroic myths of the culture. In Golden Books, Abe Lincoln looms every bit as large as Paul Bunyan, while George Washington's cherry tree gets chopped down yearly with almost as much ritual as St. Nick's Christmas tree goes up. Despite this long familiarity, or perhaps because of it, most students absorb the required facts about the past without any real conception of what history is. Even worse, most think they do know what it is and never get around to discovering what they missed.

"History is what happened in the past." That statement is the everyday view of the matter. It supposes that historians must return to the past through the surviving records and bring it back to the present to display as "what really happened." The everyday view recognizes that this task is often difficult. But historians are said to succeed if they bring back the facts without distorting them or forcing a new perspective on them. In effect, historians are seen as couriers between the past and present. Like all good messengers, they are expected simply to deliver their information without adding to it.

This everyday view of history is profoundly misleading. In order to demonstrate how it is misleading, we would like to examine in detail an event that "happened in the past"—the death of Silas Deane. Deane does not appear in most American history texts, and rightly so. He served as a distinctly second-rank diplomat for the United States during the years of the American Revolution. Yet the story of Deane's death is an excellent example of an event that cannot be understood merely by transporting it, courier-like, to the present. In short, it illustrates the important difference between "what happened in the past" and what history really is.

AN UNTIMELY DEATH

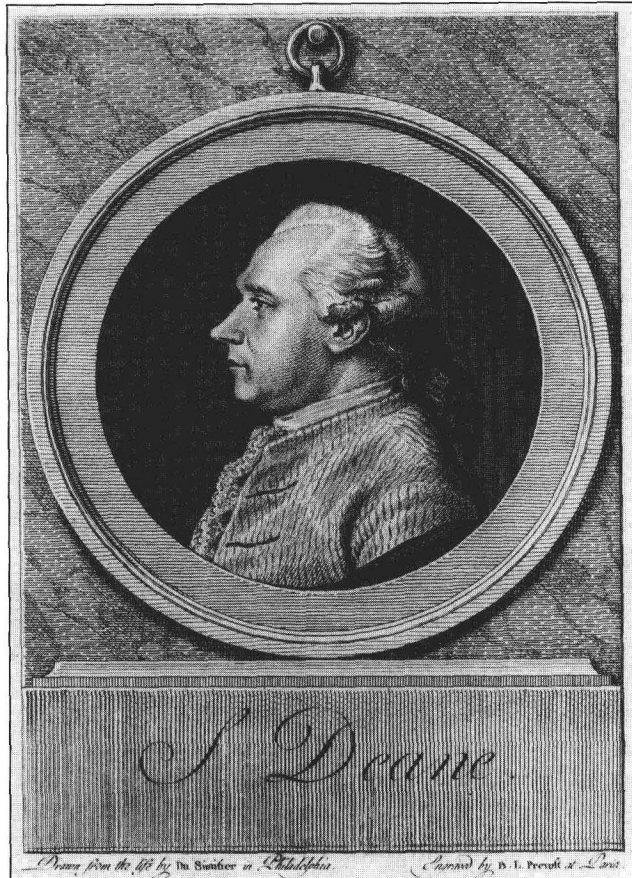
Silas Deane's career began with one of those rags-to-riches stories so much appreciated in American folklore. In fact, Deane might have made a lasting place for himself in the history texts, except that his career ended with an equally dramatic riches-to-rags story.

He began life as the son of a humble blacksmith in Groton, Connecticut. The blacksmith had aspirations for his boy and sent him to Yale College, where Silas was quick to take advantage of his opportunities. After studying law, Deane opened a practice near Hartford; he then continued his climb up the social ladder by marrying a well-to-do widow, whose inheritance included the business of her late husband, a merchant. Conveniently, Deane became a merchant. After his first wife died, he married the granddaughter of a former governor of Connecticut.

Not content to remain a prospering businessman, Deane entered politics. He served on Connecticut's Committee of Correspondence and later as a delegate to the first and second Continental Congresses, where he attracted the attention of prominent leaders, including Benjamin Franklin, Robert Morris, and John Jay. In 1776 Congress sent Deane to France as the first American to represent the united colonies abroad. His mission was to purchase badly needed military supplies for the Revolutionary cause. A few months later Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee joined him in an attempt to arrange a formal treaty of alliance with France. The American commissioners concluded the alliance in March 1778.

Deane worked hard to progress from the son of a blacksmith all the way to Minister Plenipotentiary from the United States to the Court of France. Most observers described him as ambitious: someone who thoroughly enjoyed fame, honor, and wealth. "You know his ambition—" wrote John Adams to one correspondent, "his desire of making a Fortune. . . . You also know his Art and Enterprise. Such Characters are often useful, altho always to be carefully watched and contracted, specially in such a government as ours." One man in particular suspected Deane enough to watch him: Arthur Lee, the third member of the American mission. Lee accused Deane of taking unfair advantage of his official position to make a private fortune—as much as £50,000, some said. Deane stoutly denied the accusations, and Congress engaged in a heated debate over his conduct. In 1778 it voted to recall its Minister Plenipotentiary, although none of the charges had been conclusively proved.

Deane embroiled himself in further controversy in 1781, having written friends to recommend that America sue for peace and patch up the quarrel with England. His letters were intercepted, and copies of them turned up in a New York Tory newspaper just after Cornwallis surrendered to Washington at Yorktown. For Deane, the timing could not have been worse. With American victory complete, anyone advocating that the United States rejoin Britain was considered as much a traitor as Benedict Arnold. So Deane suddenly found himself adrift. He could not return to America, for no one



“You know his ambition—his desire of making a Fortune. . . . You also know his Art and Enterprise. Such Characters are often useful, altho always to be carefully watched and contracted, specially in such a government as ours.”—John Adams on Silas Deane. (Photo: Library of Congress)

would have him. Nor could he go to England without confirming his reputation as a traitor. And he could not stay in France, where he had injudiciously accused Louis XVI of aiding the Americans for purely selfish reasons. Rejected on all sides, Deane took refuge in Flanders.

The next few years of his life were spent unhappily. Without friends and with little money, he continued in Flanders until 1783, when the controversy had died down enough for him to move to England. There he lived in obscurity, took to drink, and wound up boarding at the house of an unsavory prostitute. The only friend who remained faithful to him was Edward Bancroft, another Connecticut Yankee who, as a boy, had been Deane’s pupil and later his personal secretary during the Paris negotiations for the alliance.

Although Bancroft's position as a secretary seemed innocent enough, members of the Continental Congress knew that Bancroft was also acting as a spy for the Americans, using his connections in England to secure information about the British ministry's war plans. With the war concluded, Bancroft was back in London. Out of kindness, he provided Deane with living money from time to time.

Finally, Deane decided he could no longer live in London and in 1789 booked passage on a ship sailing for the United States. When Thomas Jefferson heard the news, he wrote his friend James Madison: "Silas Deane is coming over to finish his days in America, not having one *sou* to subsist on elsewhere. He is a wretched monument of the consequences of a departure from right."

The rest of the sad story could be gotten from the obituaries. Deane boarded the *Boston Packet* in mid-September, and it sailed out of London down the estuary of the Thames. A storm came up, however, and on September 19 the ship lost both its anchors and beat a course for safer shelter, where it could wait out the storm. On September 22, while walking the quarterdeck with the ship's captain, Deane suddenly "complain'd of a dizziness in his head, and an oppression at his stomach." The captain immediately put him to bed. Deane's condition worsened; twice he tried to say something, but no one was able to make out his words. A "drowsiness and insensibility continually incroached upon his faculties," and only four hours after the first signs of illness he breathed his last.

Such, in outline, was the rise and fall of the ambitious Silas Deane. The story itself seems pretty clear, although certainly people might interpret it in different ways. Thomas Jefferson thought Deane's unhappy career demonstrated "the consequences of a departure from right," whereas one English newspaper more sympathetically attributed his downfall to the mistake of "placing confidence in his [American] Compatriots, and doing them service before he had got his compensation, of which no well-bred Politician was before him ever guilty." Yet either way, the basic story remains the same—the same, that is, until the historian begins putting together a more complete account of Deane's life. Then some of the basic facts become clouded.

For example, a researcher familiar with the correspondence of Americans in Europe during 1789 would realize that a rumor had been making its way around London in the weeks following Deane's death. According to certain people, Deane had become depressed by his poverty, ill health, and low reputation, and consequently had committed suicide. John Cutting, a New England merchant and friend of Jefferson, wrote of the rumor that Deane "had predetermin'd to take a sufficient quantity of Laudanum [a form of opium] to ensure his dissolution" before the boat could sail for America. John Quincy Adams heard that "every probability" of the situation suggested Deane's death was "voluntary and self-administered." And Tom Paine, the famous pamphleteer, also reported the gossip: "Cutting told me he took poison."

At this point we face a substantial problem. Obviously, historians cannot rest content with the facts that come most easily to hand. They must search

the odd corners of libraries and letter collections in order to put together a complete story. But how do historians know when their research is “complete”? How do they know to search one collection of letters rather than another? These questions point up the misconception at the heart of the everyday view of history. History is not “what happened in the past”; rather, it is *the act of selecting, analyzing, and writing about the past*. It is something that is done, that is constructed, rather than an inert body of data that lies scattered through the archives.

The distinction is important. It allows us to recognize the confusion in the question of whether a history of something is “complete.” If history were merely “what happened in the past,” there would never be a “complete” history of Silas Deane—or even a complete history of the last day of his life. The past holds an infinite number of facts about those last days, and they could never all be included in a historical account.

The truth is, no historian would *want* to include all the facts. Here, for example, is a list of items from the past that might form part of a history of Silas Deane. Which ones should be included?

Deane is sent to Paris to help conclude a treaty of alliance.
 Arthur Lee accuses him of cheating his country to make a private profit.
 Deane writes letters that make him unpopular in America.
 He goes into exile and nearly starves.
 Helped out by a gentleman friend, he buys passage on a ship for America
 as his last chance to redeem himself.
 He takes ill and dies before the ship can leave; rumors suggest he may have
 committed suicide.

* * *

Ben Franklin and Arthur Lee are members of the delegation to Paris.
 Edward Bancroft is Deane’s private secretary and an American spy.
 Men who know Deane say he is talented but ambitious and ought to be
 watched.

* * *

Before Deane leaves, he visits an American artist, John Trumbull.
 The *Boston Packet* is delayed for several days by a storm.
 On the last day of his life, Deane gets out of bed in the morning.
 He puts on his clothes and buckles his shoes.
 He eats breakfast.
 When he takes ill, he tries to speak twice.
 He is buried several days later.

Even this short list demonstrates the impossibility of including all the facts. For behind each one lie hundreds more. You might mention that Deane put on his clothes and ate breakfast, but consider also: What color were his

clothes? When did he get up that morning? What did he have for breakfast? When did he leave the table? All these things “happened in the past,” but only a comparatively small number of them can appear in a history of Silas Deane.

Readers may object that we are placing too much emphasis on this process of selection. Surely, a certain amount of good judgment will suggest which facts are important. Who needs to know what color Deane’s clothes were or when he got up from the breakfast table?

Admittedly, this objection has some merit, as the list of facts about Deane demonstrates. The list is divided into three groups, roughly according to the way common sense might rank them in importance. The first group contains facts that every historian would be likely to include. The second group contains less important information, which could either be included or left out. (It might be useful, for instance, to know who Arthur Lee and Edward Bancroft were, but not essential.) The last group contains information that appears to be either too detailed or else unnecessary. Deane may have visited John Trumbull, but then he surely visited other people as well. Why include any of that? Knowing that the *Boston Packet* was delayed by a storm reveals little about Silas Deane. And readers will assume without being told that Deane rose in the morning, put on his clothes, and had breakfast.

But if common sense helps select evidence, it also produces a good deal of pedestrian history. The fact is, the straightforward account of Silas Deane we have just presented has actually managed to miss the most fascinating parts of the story.

Fortunately, one enterprising historian named Julian Boyd was not satisfied with the traditional account of the matter. He examined the known facts of Deane’s career and put them together in ways that common sense had not suggested. Take, for example, two items on our list: (1) Deane was down on his luck and left in desperation for America; and (2) he visited John Trumbull. One fact is from the “important” items on the list and the other from items that seem incidental. How do they fit together?

To answer that we have to know the source of information about the visit to Trumbull’s, which is the letter from John Cutting informing Jefferson of Deane’s rumored suicide.

A subscription had been made here chiefly by Americans to defray the expense of getting [Deane] out of this country. . . . Dr. Bancroft with great humanity and equal discretion undertook the management of the *man* and his *business*. Accordingly his passage was engaged, comfortable cloaths and stores for his voyage were laid in, and apparently without much reluctance he embarked. . . . I happen’d to see him a few days since at the lodging of Mr. Trumbull and thought I had never seen him look better.

We are now in a better position to see how our two items fit together. And as Julian Boyd has pointed out, they *don’t* fit. According to the first, Deane was depressed, dejected, almost starving. According to the second, he had “never looked better.” Alert historians begin to get nervous when they see

contradictions like that, so they hunt around a little more. And Julian Boyd found, among the collection of papers published by the Connecticut and New York historical societies, that Deane had been writing letters of his own.

One went to his brother-in-law in America, who had agreed to help pay Deane's transportation over and to receive him when he arrived—something that nobody had been willing to do for years. Other letters reveal that Deane had plans for what he would do when he finally returned home. He had seen models in England of the new steam engines, which he hoped might operate gristmills in America. He had talked to friends about getting a canal built from Lake Champlain in New York to the St. Lawrence River in order to promote trade. As early as 1785 Deane had been at work drumming up support for his canal project. He had even laboriously calculated the cost of the canal's construction ("Suppose a labourer to dig and remove six feet deep and eight feet square in one day. . . . 2,933 days of labour will dig one mile in length, twenty feet wide and eight feet deep.") Obviously, Deane looked forward to a promising future.

Lastly, Deane appeared to believe that the controversy surrounding his French mission had finally abated. As he wrote an American friend,

It is now almost ten years since I have solicited for an impartial inquiry [into the dispute over my conduct]. . . . that justice might be done to my fortune and my character. . . . You can sufficiently imagine, without my attempting to describe, what I must have suffered on every account during so long a period of anxiety and distress. I hope that it is now drawing to a close.

Other letters went to George Washington and John Jay, reiterating Deane's innocence.

All this information makes the two items on our list even more puzzling. If Deane was depressed and discouraged, why was he so enthusiastic about coming back to build canals and gristmills? If he really believed that his time of "anxiety and distress" was "drawing to a close," why did he commit suicide? Of course, Deane might have been subject to dramatic shifts in mood. Perhaps hope for the future alternated with despair about his chances for success. Perhaps a sudden fit of depression caused him to take his life.

But another piece of "unimportant" information, way down in the third group of our list, makes this hypothesis difficult to accept. After Deane's ship left London, it was delayed offshore for more than a week. Suppose Deane did decide to commit suicide by taking an overdose of laudanum. Where did he get the drug? Surely not by walking up to the ship's surgeon and asking for it. He must have purchased it in London, before he left. Yet he remained on shipboard for more than a week. If Deane bought the laudanum during a temporary "fit" of depression, why did he wait a week before taking it? And if his depression was not just a sudden fit, how do we explain the optimistic letters to America?

This close look at three apparently unrelated facts indicates that perhaps there's more to Deane's story than meets the eye. It would be well, then, to reserve judgment about our first reconstruction of Silas Deane's career and