

Historical research, academic and amateur

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There are many disciplines in which research can be divided into two distinct categories that carried out by amateurs and that falling into the province of academics. This division is especially pertinent in the case of history. People are inevitably interested in the past, because we all have our own past as we perceive it through our memory. Thus there are many amateurs at work in this field. One might begin the list with genealogists, who form the largest group, and go on to the writers of memoirs, working either purely from their own recollections or on the basis of written material they have compiled: diaries, correspondence, etc. The third group, which is expanding rapidly at present, concerns the writers of village histories, usually one or more inhabitants of the village concerned. Other contributors to this category of research include investigative journalists and the writers of historical novels. All in all, we are talking about tens of thousands of Finns engaged in historical research in one way or another.

What does academic research have to say about all this? Before I answer the question, I must explain what I mean by academic research. I take it to mean research carried out by people who have received a university training for that purpose. People

who have produced a master's degree dissertation in history would meet this requirement, although they cannot yet be regarded as qualified historians. It is through postgraduate training aimed at the writing of a doctoral thesis under proper supervision that this is really achieved. Looked at in the strictest sense, only a person who has attained the rank of docent can be regarded as an academic researcher, as according to current practice this calls for further independent research equivalent in volume to another doctoral thesis, providing evidence of competence in research and qualifying the holder of the title to teach in a university.

It is thus above all a university postgraduate training in research that distinguishes the academic from the amateur, so that, in addition, someone who has a doctorate or has even reached the level of docent in another subject will still be regarded as an amateur historian. In all this I am naturally speaking on a general level and not about particular cases, as in reality there are a few academic researchers who represent no more than an amateur standard and likewise the occasional amateur who attains the quality of research expected in academic quarters. In both cases these are exceptions to the general rule.

How do the two categories fit together? Generally speaking, exceptionally well, particularly when viewed from the academic perspective. Academic researchers can benefit greatly from the work done by amateurs, and in the best cases this work can point them in new directions. One could take as an example Väinö Linna's historical trilogy *Here beneath the North Star*, which inspired Jaakko Paavolainen to study violence perpetrated by the Reds and the Whites during the war of 1918. It was his research that reshaped our view of those events and transformed the War of Liberation into a Civil War.

The outstanding strength of amateur historical research is nevertheless to be seen at the local level and in individual instances. This has become abundantly evident in cases such as the investigations arising out of the War Deaths project, in which local amateur studies revealed innumerable victims of the Civil War. It was that project that published for the first time in Finnish history the names of the victims among the Reds as well, and unlike statistics, names can always be checked. It should be added here, in fact, that there are some areas within history which can really only be dealt with by amateurs. Well-known examples of this concern the history of classical music, or of mathematics, for only specialists in the respective fields can be capable of writing biographies of the world's great composers or mathematicians; ordinary historians do not have the necessary knowledge of the subject.

If this is the case – that amateur research can be of value to academic research – then why have I chosen to speak on the relation between them? Is not everything as it should be?

Not everything. Some problems have arisen because amateurs have not always

been content with their status as auxiliaries to academic research. There are some who have regarded themselves as competent historians and thereby as qualified to challenge the academics – all the more so if they manage to identify themselves with a particular line of interpretation, direction of research or even school of historians. Amateurs are naturally flattered if and when trained historians openly accept their findings as supporting their own. It is not difficult to set out from such a beginning and drift into the role of a professional historian. The sources are in the archives and can be dug out from there with a minimum of effort and specialization and can be used to support critical observations. And what is wrong with that? The resulting assertions may be weighty ones, and very frequently are. On the other hand, if this path were open to more amateurs, we would have to ask eventually what we need specialized academic training in historical research for. Do we need it at all? Is it the case that the ancient discipline of history does not recognise any distinction between trained researchers and amateurs as other disciplines do?

“Interpretation is not everything in history; there also exist solid facts,” one amateur historian exclaimed to me a little while ago. I was left pondering over a suitable reply. Can there truly be facts without interpretation? What conclusion did I come to?

I will start out from the most illustrative example I can think of, which comes from archaeology, from the Susiluola cave in Karijoki. It has been claimed that the cave was occupied by humans before the last Ice Age, and a number of unusually shaped stones have been collected as evidence for this. Some people claim that these were tools shaped by humans for their use, and others that that they are simply accidental natural

formations. Both parties are looking at the same objects. Researchers have to decide which they believe. The stones cannot tell them.

Exactly the same applies *mutatis mutandis* in history. A written document is not yet in itself a historical fact, a solid and incontrovertible fact. Its value must be determined source-critically, by analysing whether the document is genuine or a forgery, for what purpose it was produced and thus what parts of its content can be regarded as true or close to the truth. Few sources are actually created with a view to their future use by historians, but for the needs of the moment. A researcher must use sources but not be carried away by them. This statement undoubtedly causes consternation among amateurs, but it is one of the basic rules emphasized from the outset in the training of academic researchers. Documents existing in archives are the foundation of historical research, but they are not in themselves written history. It is the researcher who makes them into that. In short, there are no facts without interpretation.

But a single interpreted source is still usually of little significance historically. We need a host of other sources to back it up, and those other sources may well be – and frequently are – mutually contradictory. What should we do with them? Can we accept some and reject others?

Certainly not. Historical research must set out from the principle that my academic mentor, Pentti Renvall, was constantly repeating: “Reality is not contradictory, only the sources produced by it are.” The scholar has to form some sort of impression of the reality of which the sources represent detached fragments, and construct an overall explanation into which all the sources fit, whether they are mutually contradictory or not.

What is this overall explanation? It is the product of a two-stage process. First we have to reconstruct the past, forming a chronological picture of what must have happened. It should be remembered, of course, that this reconstruction may also cover parts of the past for which no sources are available. Decisions may have been taken verbally, or the written documents may have been subsequently destroyed. If we rely only on written documents we have to conclude that no alliance between Finland and Nazi Germany ever existed during the Continuation War of 1941–1944, for instance. The archives contain no such written agreement, but conclusions to this effect can be reached from agreements existing on individual details of their collaboration, e.g. the pact between Finland and Germany to the effect that the Finns should begin an offensive on the Soviet Union as soon as the Germans had advanced to the Vainäjoki Line in the Baltic region. Further conclusions can also be reached on the basis of which Finnish leaders visited Germany at given points in time and which German leaders came to Finland, taking care throughout to examine the consequences of each visit.

This reconstruction of the past will then lead us to outline a set of explanations for why things happened as they did, what the causes were, and why they happened at the time they did. Answering the question “Why?” is the most difficult part of historical research and the stage that calls for the greatest skills acquired through training. The answers are not to be found in individual sources, or if they are, they need confirmation from other sources and partial interpretations linked to them. There is no single source – nor can there be – that reveals as such why it was that Finland embarked on the Continuation War. In such a

situation the research will be complete only when the scholar has formulated an overall explanation in which all the pieces appear to fit together – both what happened and why it happened in the way it did. In addition, this overall explanation has to fit in convincingly with the mainstream of history, with events that took place in Finland and elsewhere before and after that stage.

If we come across new, previously unknown reliable sources which do not fit in with the overall picture, we then have to alter the picture to accommodate this new information, and the same is true if it transpires that certain crucial sources can be interpreted in different ways from previously. The outcome must always be a consistent entity, free of contradictions.

Given that this is the case, why is it that schisms and differences of interpretation exist between trained researchers? How can overall explanations and interpretations constructed on the basis of the same sources differ from one another? As the differences cannot be due to the sources, they must in the last resort arise from the researchers, their varying backgrounds, the differing circumstances in which they have grown up, etc. It is part of the everyday reality in which we live that people, historians and others, should assign different significances to the same things.

Let us now return to the question of what is a historical fact and what is not. A considerable proportion of historians regard sources, especially official sources, as facts, and amateur historians are particularly apt to hold by the decisions of law courts in this respect. Courts of justice are searching for the truth in the same way as historians are, even to the extent that they start out from the assumption that a confession on the part of the accused is not alone sufficient to justify a conviction but must

be backed up by other evidence. Is not a legal decision announced by a court of law, then, the most powerful conceivable historical fact? No, it certainly is not. If legal judgements revealed the truth, we would have to accept the alleged practise of witchcraft in the 17th century as a historical fact. Indeed, we don't need to go anything like so far back in time, as vacillation in legal matters is clearly in evidence at times of serious crisis. Jukka Kekkonen has written about the sentences handed out by the courts assessing crimes against the state in 1918 under the title *Laillisuuden haaksirikko* (The shipwreck of justice), and Juha Siltala could very well have used the same title for his account of the legal proceedings arising out of the deportment incidents staged by the Lapua Movement in the 1930s, where only a tenth of the hundreds of court cases heard led to an actual prison sentence. The same may be said very largely of the cases brought to court during the Second World War and in connection with it in the subsequent years. All in all, the judgements reached by courts of law may also be said to be highly contingent in terms of time and background, so that they have no supra-historical validity.

But is there anything wrong with the differences between academic and amateur research as described above? Is it not all to the good that there is an abundance of competing theories and explanations in circulation in this country, no matter whether they originate from academic or amateur researchers? We do not usually regard a country where there is just one accepted interpretation for each event as a paragon of historical investigation, on the contrary. Should we not, therefore, strive to bring about a situation in which there are as many competing interpretations – i.e. deviating versions of the 'truth' – available as possi-

ble? This would be one way in which we could guarantee a high standard of historical research.

This sounds fine, but it would simply not work in Finland. The linguistic area is so small and the country's geopolitical location is such a dangerous one. There are inevitably strong pressures for achieving a consensus. Finland has been and still is a country where there is 'one truth', as they say, and this is a trend that is increasing at the present time rather than declining.

I refer to a factor that is not new but which has gained enormously in significance in recent times, namely the media, the public sphere. The concentration of the ownership of daily newspapers on the one hand and the fierce competition among evening papers and magazines on the other, combined with the rise of television to join the heavyweight class, have turned the media into an element in society that extends its influence even to the sphere of historical research. Of particular importance nowadays is the role of Web chat columns, as these enable individuals to launch the sort of writing anonymously, under cover of a pseudonym, which they would not dare to release in public under their own name.

This means that an essential change has taken place. We are not necessarily carrying on our disputes alone, and certainly not on the grounds of who have the best-argued justifications for their interpretations, but rather an entirely different route has emerged: the competition for publicity. The one who wins this is judged to have won the academic debate. And it is a battle in which a lack of methodological training is by no means an inescapable handicap. Also, the media are interested – and perhaps especially so – in negative smears attached to the individuals concerned, and certainly not exclusively in arguments based on re-

search findings. But anyone at all can dream up smears and scandals; you don't need an academic qualification for that. Although the media are not uncritical when taking sides in such disputes, it cannot be denied that violent attacks are more likely to achieve prominence than they used to be, and it is always easier to sell something negative than something positive.

This situation has also paved the way for the appearance of mass rejoinders, volumes of papers in which a number of authors gather together to oppose an interpretation put forward by a single scholar. These are a new phenomenon in Finnish historical writing, which has certainly witnessed rejoinders before but not mass rejoinders of this kind. And as one of the aims of these is to smash through the wall of publicity simply by maximizing the number of participants, amateurs are accepted as well. Thus it is the sheer weight of numbers, through the publicity that this gains, that guarantees the competence of the research. The old adage that "two is always better than one" is applied in this case with an increase in the coefficient, i.e. a doctrine that 'at any rate six will always be better than one'. It is also true, of course, that in a mass rejoinder less responsibility devolves upon each individual author – and the result is predictable. The main point as far as an academic researcher is concerned, however, is that the risk of negative publicity has increased enormously, and this cannot fail to have certain consequences. Negative publicity affects its victim in the same way as a conviction in a court of law affects the accused. In the eyes of the legal profession a conviction in law serves two purposes: individual deterrence and general deterrence. The former means that it induces the criminal to remain on the straight and narrow path from that time onwards and the latter that it deters others

from following suit. The same is true in research, although there are admittedly some who prove more durable under pressure, on whom the individual deterrence effect makes little impression, but these are few and far between. The general deterrence effect almost inevitably works, however. Researchers become wary and are inclined to go along with old-established, accepted explanations, confine themselves to absolutely reliable sources and avoid sensitive topics. Which all serves to slow down innovation in matters of research.

One of the reasons for this is that the amateur research which is mobilized, or mobilizes itself, to challenge academic research in this way scarcely ever – with only a few rare exceptions – attempts to defend a new interpretation. Amateurs almost always rely on old, accepted truths, and in the last resort on the memoirs, statements and explanations of contemporaries. Nevertheless, or perhaps precisely for this reason, although the diversity of research may increase, as is the case in academic circles as well, it tends to increase in innocuous directions. The recently published account of the hundred years of activity of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters contains many allusions to such a trend in historical research over recent decades.

Should something be done about this? Should we seek for means of encouraging rather than suppressing the emergence of new academic interpretations, including ones that touch upon shady aspects of the past? In 1933 an Office for Local History was founded in Finland in order to raise the standards of local histories. These had been produced earlier, of course, but almost entirely by amateurs, mostly priests and local politicians, which meant that the books be-

came endless strings of quotations from the sources, exhausting chronicles that were little more than lists. The new office succeeded in its aims, in that local histories and commissioned research in general gradually became the province of academically trained historians and their standard improved no end. Would it be possible to achieve something of this kind now?

I suspect that it wouldn't. This conclusion might come as a surprise to natural scientists, but it can scarcely be much of a surprise to historians. According to another old adage, "each generation writes its own history". This is undoubtedly the case, but as the adage as such implies, that "own history" need not necessarily be based on new sources. It relies on new interpretations, and thereby, in the last resort, on the general opinions adopted by the new generation, which are bound to the times and to structures embedded deep in society. One of these deeply embedded structures is freedom of expression. This is one of the principal values enshrined in democracy, but it is going through a process of restricting its own validity at the present moment, particularly, although not exclusively, on account of anonymous writings on the Web. It is this that has the effect of branding every researcher who strives for something new as a dissident, and there are many who are not prepared to take this upon themselves. It may seem a fine thing in hindsight, but not at the time.

Do I paint too dismal a picture? Maybe, but these things have to be said. They have to be brought out into the open and discussed, however difficult and tacky, or even embarrassing, it may be in a Finnish context. One thing is certain, matters will not improve if we remain silent about them.