

Eddie Scissons Syndrome

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Over a decade ago Rob Sheinkopf and I examined Eddie Scissons Syndrome and its many manifestations in American society. This piece was published in *Aethlon: The Journal of Sport Literature*, after having been presented at a meeting of the Sport Literature Association in Florence, Oregon. A little over a week ago Rob offered an update of this peculiarity of human folly at the SLA meeting in Johnson City.

Eddie Scissons Syndrome is named for a character in W.P. Kinsella's novel *Shoeless Joe*. Eddie is the self-proclaimed "World's Oldest Living Chicago Cub," who in fact is a total fraud. He never played with the Cubs nor any other major league team.

The practice of grown men claiming to have played major league baseball is much more common than one would think, and the variety and creativity of stories told are mind numbing. The circumstances of the telling often defy any notion of human rationality.

A few days after hearing Sheinkopf's update a similar story hit the front pages from the field of history. Joseph P. Ellis won the 1997 National Book Award for his Jefferson biography, and more recently won the Pulitzer Prize for *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, a best-seller for twenty-six weeks. This past week Ellis, who has been a history professor at Mount Holyoke College for thirty years, admitted that he had misled his students and others by telling them of his exploits in the Vietnam War. He had never been in Vietnam.

Ellis is not the first to go down this road.

A few years ago Toronto Blue Jays manager Tim Johnson admitted that for years he had been lying to the press and his players about his Vietnam experiences. Johnson used combat stories to motivate his players and apparently felt it gave him added credibility with the press and public.

Former President Ronald Reagan recounted his experiences in the Normandy Landing to a French Diplomat. Reagan told Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir that he was heavily committed to Israeli because he had taken part in the liberation of the death camps. Reagan of course never set foot in Europe during World War II.

Ellis not only claimed to have been a paratrooper in Vietnam, but also said he was a member of the staff of General Westmoreland in Saigon and that he had been interviewed by David Halberstam for *The Best and the Brightest*.

Ellis also embellished his role in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements. He even had an "Eddie Scissions moment" claiming to have been on his high school football team and scoring the winning touchdown in an important game. There is no record of him having played sports in high school.

Seeing a picture of Joseph Ellis wearing a Boston Red Sox baseball cap, underlined for me the strange echoes from these different sets of events.

It is one thing to embellish and quite another to fabricate. The first involves the vicissitudes of memory. A little added or subtracted here and there from an essentially true story is something we all have done. Sometimes it is for dramatic effect, sometimes it is to hide less pleasant parts of a story. Sometimes it happens because memory simply isn't all that reliable.

Memory is flawed. Eyewitness accounts are notoriously inaccurate and several witnesses to the same events remember them very differently. In the recently published *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*, Harvard Psychologist Daniel L. Schacter, examines the many ways in which memory betrays us. In the film "Momento" the tricks and twists of memory are detailed in the lead character who has apparently lost all short-term memory.

Fabrication however is a different animal. It is essentially a form of lying. But to what end? Why would a man claim to have played major league baseball? Why would a president invent a past he did not have? These questions may have plausible answers, but the case of Joseph Ellis is nonetheless puzzling. Why would he invent this military career and announce it to his students and to the press? How could such a public figure expect to get by with this? Did he expect to get by with it, or is this essentially self-destructive behavior?

For the historian and the students of history, especially those who admire Ellis' work or those mentored by Ellis, how does this reflect on his historical work? Can one fabricate in one area of scholarly endeavor, teaching, and not in the other, research? American historian Eric Foner says he admires Ellis' work

because "he recreates past situations with amazing vividness..."
Indeed, and did Ellis use this skill and art to create as well
as recreate?

Finally what are the obligations of teacher to student in the
classroom? Thirty years of passing off fantasies and lies as
truth to college students does not speak particularly well for
Joseph Ellis no matter how much his students admired him. I
suspect that on reflection these students will feel betrayed and
come to contemplate how little respect Joseph Ellis had for them
as students and as human beings.

Or perhaps they will be filled with sadness by this public
psychological disaster that is Joseph Ellis' personal tragedy.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you
don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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