

Evaluating a Primary Source:

The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists by William Drayton, 1836.

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Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier wrote in the introduction to their book on historical methods, *From Reliable Sources*, “that critical analysis of sources is the basis of good historical scholarship.”¹ They warned, however, that with sources “reliability is a stubbornly elusive goal...”² The following analysis compares and contrasts a primary and secondary source on the proslavery argument, details additional insight the primary source provides, and discusses how to analyze a primary source to ensure its reliability.

As the country hurtled toward the bloody confrontation of Civil War, Northerners increasingly called for the abolition of slavery while Southerners vigorously defended it. How slavery was defended provides insight into why so many were willing to die for its preservation. An understanding of the proslavery argument could also shed light on barriers faced by African Americans in achieving civil rights.

“Slaveholders did not consider themselves egregious sinners,” wrote famed historian James M. McPherson in *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*.³

¹ Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Method* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 2.

² Ibid.

³ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 8, accessed January 29, 2021, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=431834>.

“Slavery...was a positive good,” according to defenders of the institution, he explained, and that “emancipation would produce economic ruin, social chaos, and racial war.”⁴

By reviewing primary sources, one can determine the extent to which McPherson’s characterization of defenders of slavery was accurate. William Drayton, a South Carolina congressman and Unionist who opposed the nullification of tariffs imposed by Congress (such an unpopular position in his state he had to move his family to Pennsylvania), wrote a fierce defense of slavery he published in 1836.⁵ In an unapologetic three hundred- and fourteen-page book, Drayton confirmed McPherson’s depiction of the opinion on slavery of at least this proslavery advocate.

Drayton did not believe slaveholders to be sinners, remarking instead “[slavery] is fully sanctioned by the clear and unequivocal expression of divine will.”⁶ Not only were slaveholders following the will of God, but Drayton also further claimed their altruism as “a protector and a friend able and willing to shield

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ “Drayton, William 1776-1846,” Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, accessed January 29, 2021, <https://bioguide.congress.gov/search/bio/D000490>.

⁶ William Drayton, *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists* (Philadelphia: H. Manly, 1836), 88, accessed January 25, 2021, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.319510023193312>.

[the slave] from suffering.”⁷ Abolishing slavery, Drayton warned, would “throw the whole organization of southern society into chaos...”⁸ Without slavery, he declared, economic ruin would befall the South. “[S]lavery is indispensable to the South; that it is the source of its wealth, influence, power, and prosperity; and that its abolition would make the southern states a desert.”⁹

Beyond affirming McPherson, Drayton’s words offered more depth. His fury with abolitionists was clear as he called them “fanatics...to whom the tranquilizing chair or strait jacket is the only effective argument.”¹⁰ The conviction he held for his views was indisputable. The detail in his arguments showed he had given extensive thought upon his subject. Reading Drayton’s words brought forth the zeal of his belief in sustaining slavery, something not as clear in a couple sentences from McPherson.

If McPherson, or any other historian, relied only on Drayton’s work though, he would not be engaged in “good historical scholarship.” One must consult multiple primary sources to be as confident as possible that he or she has the complete story. The historian must also carefully examine any primary source for potential bias by delving into the biography of the author. Drayton, for example,

⁷ Drayton, *The South Vindicated*, 68.

⁸ Drayton, *The South Vindicated*, 71.

⁹ Drayton, *The South Vindicated*, 114.

¹⁰ Drayton, *The South Vindicated*, xiv-xv.

was clearly proud of his community and its people even after he no longer lived there. What influence did his pride have on his writing? Was there a possible exaggeration about slaveholders' benevolence because of his love for the South? These and other critical questions are necessary for the historian to determine the usefulness of any primary source.

“Our entire craft,” wrote Howell and Prevenier, “is based precisely on the understanding that our knowledge of any event comes to us through sources which we know are *not* perfect reflections of ‘reality.’”¹¹ Historians are never perfect but using primary sources and carefully considering their potential biases, makes historical scholarship better.

¹¹ Howell and Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources*, 149.

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