Benjamin Gutenberg
The History of James Robertson Jr.
Professor Moyer
10/13/07
Full Paper 1

The Civil War has been a defining event in the life of historian James I. Robertson Jr. The grandson of a Confederate veteran, Robertson has written numerous books on the Civil War. Beyond his writings, he is an Alumni Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, where he teaches a 250 student course of the Civil War era each semester. Having won every major award in the field of Civil War History, Robertson possesses truly impressive credentials. His latest book alone, on the subject of "Stonewall" Jackson, has won eight awards and been selected as a main selection by two major book clubs. Given the level of his success, Robertson's methods in analyzing and presenting history must be both accessible and effective.

In The Landscape of History John Lewis Gaddis presents methods for the practice of history. Numerous methods and factors are mentioned, such as scale, selectivity and simultaneity (Gaddis 22). These can be applied to the published works of historians such as Robertson to gain a deeper understanding of his diverse works. Robertson writes of "Stonewall" Jackson in both Mexico and a Hero's Mantle: Stonewall Jackson in the Mexican War, 1846-1848 (Robertson, 1997) and The Christian Soldier: General Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson (Robertson 2003). Robertson presented Religion and Revelry in Frontier Kentucky (Robertson 1981) to the Kentucky Historical Society on Boone Day. He briefly commented on current scholarship and debate in The Continuing Battle of Gettysburg: An Essay Review (Robertson 1974). Robertson mused on our nation's fascination with the Civil War in Why the Civil War Still Lives (Robertson 1993). These articles present a broad range of Robertson's scholarship in the field of Civil War era history.

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One of the most noticeable factors, particularly in a field as contentious as the Civil War, is bias. In Mexico and a Hero's Mantle: Stonewall Jackson in the Mexican War, 1846-1848, Robertson displays a pro-Jackson bias. Robertson is clearly enamored enough with Jackson to research and write about his life. Also, Robertson never really contradicts or criticizes Jackson's actions and assessments. Robertson makes no efforts to qualify Jackson's praise of Generals Scott and Taylor (Robertson 1997, pg102). Robertson remains for the most part detached, he tends to allow Jackson's letters to give any opinions rather than stating his own. While this does prevent Robertson's personal feelings from influencing the statements of the text, it also leaves the biases of Jackson unchallenged. Occasionally, Robertson's praise becomes rather heavy, though not bombastically so. For example, he refers to Jackson's courage and stead-fastness during the battle for Chapultepec as,

> …the scene of which legends are made: a tall, young subaltern, in advance of the whole American army, contesting against insurmountable odds and showing no fear as he matched his small volleys against massive salvos (Robertson 1997, pg109)

This praise is grand indeed, though not necessarily inaccurate. Jackson's undeniably great achievements that day make it difficult to determine whether Robertson's admiration is warranted or if it stems from biased adoration.

An article focusing solely on the actions of "Stonewall" Jackson in the Mexican war works with an understandably narrow scale. Robertson has no need to alter the scale he is working with to properly examine his subject. He can concern himself almost completely with letters and other personal writings by the participants to get the complete picture of Jackson's

involvement. Robertson uses Jackson's letters to his sister to provide the majority of the quotations and sourced references, supplementing occasionally with quotations from Jacksons fellows and superiors. Despite an overall small scale for the article, Robertson is still able to switch between general statements about Jackson's experience in Mexico and specific anecdotes of important events. This ability to manipulate scale is, according to Gaddis, scale's primary application for historians (Gaddis 25). Robertson also speaks of Jackson's desire to find the Christian sect that spoke most to him, specifically of Jackson's experiences with Catholic monks and the archbishop of Mexico. Jackson's encounters with Mexican women are also recounted broadly and in specifics.

Similar to scale, selectivity focuses on what a historian chooses to study, and why. Robertson's choice of Jackson as a subject is not that surprising. As a Civil War historian, Robertson could easily become intrigued by Robert E. Lee's right hand man. Jackson was a major player in the war, and his early death most definitely affected the outcome. The Mexican War is not an outrageous choice for an article either. It provided Jackson's first taste of action and first distinction on the field of battle, something Robertson stresses. Robertson concludes the article by summarizing the lessons on warfare the young officer learned that would forever affect his career. The mention of Jackson's religious search is also unsurprising as Jackson was a very devout man. Robertson devoted another article to the subject of Jackson's faith; if Robertson were to fail to touch upon Jackson's Catholic experience in this article it would be odd indeed.

Simultaneity is another tool of historians, one that allows them to compare events that occur centuries apart. This device does not see much use by Robertson. By focusing exclusively on Jackson and the Mexican War, Robertson chooses to avoid drawing comparisons between events. This remains fairly consistent though all five articles. Four of the five stay extremely focused on their subject, whether that be specific or broad. Most of the comparisons he does make tend to be related very closely, such as when he compares Jackson and Lee in The Christian Soldier: General Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson (Robertson 2003, pg1). These comparisons do not take advantage of simultaneity, and lack the strengths of such comparisons. Comparing historical events and people to more modern ones allows those less familiar with history to better understand it.

In The Christian Soldier: General Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson Robertson displays greater admiration for Jackson. This again brings the question of bias into play. While Robertson's praise of Jackson is even more complimentary, Robertson also does a better job in qualifying it. The article opens with three quotes extolling the military genius and pious devotion of Jackson. Jackson's intense faith is clearly a reason to admire him in Robertson's eyes. While most descriptions of Jackson are in the superlative, many are in the words of those other than Robertson, making his esteem quite reasonable. One could fault Robertson for not exploring alternate assessments of Jackson. However, the article focuses on Jackson's absolute commitment to his faith. Jackson's religious sentiments would not likely be commented on by those who found them unremarkable. Furthermore, given the widespread respect for Jackson's faith, the only people who would have found his faith unremarkable would be those who found everyone's faith lacking. Therefore, it is foolish to expect Robertson to invent criticisms of

Jackson's character. The article most certainly expresses a pro-Jackson bias, but it is in all ways warranted.

The scale of this article is, again, rather small, though it has been slightly broadened. While Robertson now is focusing on the entire lifespan of Jackson, he is also attempting to limit the article to the role of faith in Jackson's life. Considering the huge role religion played in all facets of Jackson's life, this is not much of a limitation. The scale of the article remains fairly consistent. It focuses on Jackson as an individual with periodic mention of relevant occurrences in the war overall. These shifts are very brief and generally are just one or two facts or figures. Robertson avoids generalities for the most part when dealing with Jackson himself. Jackson's movements during the war are well documented and only the pre-war events of his life are explored broadly, for example, Robertson is able to give Jackson's time of death as, "… 3.15 on Sunday afternoon, May 10th, 1863…" (Robertson 2003, pg 7).

As for selectivity in the article, all of Robertson's choices in subject make perfect sense. Just as it made sense to write about Jackson's Catholic experience in Mexico, exploring his faith as a whole makes sense. One of Robertson's three opening quotes, this one from a Presbyterian cleric named Moses D. Hodge, remarks that, "To attempt to portray the life of Jackson while leaving out the religious element, would be like undertaking to describe Switzerland without making mention of the Alps." (Robertson 2003, pg1) Robertson covers the life of Jackson through the lens of his faith. He includes Jackson's two marriages to the daughters of ministers (Robertson 2003, pg3) and Jackson's belief that, "…the Civil War must be a religious crusade to regain the Almighty's favour." (Robertson 2003, pg4) Robertson makes it clear just how

important faith was to Jackson, and also emphasizes Jackson's importance to the war and Confederacy. In his final paragraphs, Robertson muses that, "…had he [Jackson] lived, the Southern nation would probably have won its independence." (Robertson 2003, pg7)

Religion and Revelry in Frontier Kentucky represents a change in subject and format for Robertson. Originally given as a speech, rather than a written article, the tone is somewhat different from his other works. Robertson tries to inject as much humor into the speech as he can manage. He chooses to recount the most amusing anecdotes and facts of life in frontier Kentucky. Robertson displays a slight bias in favor of the frontier Kentuckians. He turns derisive remarks from those living in the east into compliments and badges of honor. Most likely this stems, at least in part, from Robertson catering to his audience. The Kentucky Historical Society would probably much prefer to hear a speech praising their ancestors over a critical one. The bias is demonstrated mostly through the subjects on which Robertson speaks and the attitude he displays. Even the crude predilection for brutal fighting among frontier Kentuckians is admitted, but almost excused. Given the nature of the piece and that the flaws are at least admitted, Robertson's bias does not truly diminish the speech.

The scale of the speech is much larger than that of the previously discussed articles. Robertson is analyzing much of life in frontier Kentucky. Discussing the entirety of a state and many aspects of life, from religion to revelry as it were, encompasses quite a large chunk of history. In terms of changing his scale, Robertson does so frequently and adroitly in his speech. Robertson first introduces each topic's general significance in frontier Kentucky. He then recounts an amusing or otherwise interesting anecdote pertaining to the subject. He may then

return to general terms to expand upon the subject or he transitions to a related subject and starts the cycle anew. This pattern of shifting between general and specific examples works well. The speech flows and grabs the audience's attention.

The reasoning behind Robertson's selection of subject is rather obvious; his speech is intended for the Kentucky Historical Society. Since the occasion of the speech is Boone Day, the choice of life in frontier Kentucky is not odd. Robertson likely picked his specific topics with the desire to cover a broad range of subjects, but at the same time, limited himself to those for which he could find interesting and amusing stories. This meant subjects that were more likely to be documented, such as religious events, were more likely to be chosen. Also, Robertson likely took care not to pick any subjects that might offend or upset his audience.

The Continuing Battle of Gettysburg: An Essay Review is an analysis of the then most recent publications debating the Gettysburg question. Robertson explains that the question of which Confederate general is responsible for losing the Battle of Gettysburg has been fiercely and constantly debated since the battle itself. The impetus for the article is the publication of a book by Glenn Tucker called High Tide at Gettysburg. In this book Tucker dared to defend the popular scapegoat for the battle, General Longstreet. Robert describes the incredulous reaction of other historians and the vitriolic reviews. Robertson also reveals that he is not an unbiased spectator in the debate. The same year, he was the editor of a republication of Longstreet's memoirs. In the introduction Robertson defended Longstreet, claiming that he had been unfairly picked as a scapegoat. While Robertson does a fair job concealing his bias, ultimately it shines through. When comparing Tucker's book to one that attacks Longstreet, Robertson claims that,

> Tucker, utilizing far more research and detail presented Longstreet as a man with 'bulldog tenacity, insensibility to danger,' and 'the faculty of stirring his soldiers to unusual responsiveness.' (Robertson 1974, pg279)

Robertson paints his side as that of reason and that it is opposed more for its break with tradition than due to established facts. His assessments of other Gettysburg themed books seems somewhat fair, he avoids totally condemning any single work. Robertson concludes stating that as long as historians study Gettysburg there will be conflict, implying that he is willing to tolerate the alternate viewpoints. While Robertson's bias certainly affects the article, like with the previous works, its impact is minimal.

Given the nature of the article, Robertson does not shift scale between generalities and specifics. Since he is simply talking about different published works and their effect on the field, no scale really exists. In terms of selectivity, Robertson has most likely selected which published works are most notable or relevant and mentioned them. In the active field of Civil War History books and articles are published every year and the Battle of Gettysburg is a particularly popular subset. Mostly, the books he chooses to mention are either those that present unique points of view or those that are in some other way remarkable. Both this trend and his defense of Longstreet suggest that Robertson, as a historian, is very interested in different points of view. Whether he just enjoys looking at all issues through an unorthodox lens or if he simply disagrees with the blame placed on Longstreet's shoulders is unclear.

Why the Civil War Still Lives was originally an address given to the State Historical Society of Missouri. Robertson explains why the Civil War resonates so vibrantly with the

American people, even today. As an individual who has devoted his life to studying the Civil War, Robertson is both qualified to speak on this and at the same time biased. He obviously feels that the war is important and his passion for it resonates throughout the piece. Robertson is able to catalog a truly impressive myriad of reasons for the war's place in the popular imagination. His breadth of knowledge is demonstrated by the piece; he enumerates the many innovations and changes brought on by the war. In this opinion piece his goal is made clear, however bias can be multi-layered.

As a Civil War historian, Robertson is most likely biased in favor of one of the two sides of the conflict. Robertson is not an ardent supporter of the South, claiming that, "The way the Civil War ended was a blessing for all Americans…" (Robertson 1993, pg127) However, he also does not seem unsympathetic to the South's complaints. Aside from his satisfaction with the end result, Robertson appears to be rather impartial and unbiased towards either side in this speech. He is able to balance the compliments and complaints between both sides quite well. This objectivity may simply be how Robertson is or it may be a product of this being a speech intended for an audience which Robertson did not wish to offend.

The speech has a very broad scale, covering the entire Civil War and its aftermath. The scale does not shift too much; it stays fairly broad in describing generalities of war. Since Robertson is speaking about the overall impact of the war he needs to stay focused on the big picture. However, specific stories and quotes cause the scale to regularly tighten. Most often, the scale zooming in occurs when Robertson uses quotes to accentuate his point. For example, when speaking on the prevailing pre-war attitude on both sides of supreme confidence Robertson

reports that one southern politician bragged that, "…this won't be much of a contest for one Southerner can lick ten Yankees with cornstalks any day!" (Robertson 1993, pg 109-110) As his scale is so broad, Robertson does not need to be that selective in his choice of topics. However, when choosing which examples to use, he has a very large selection to choose from and must decide which are the most effective. When he speaks of legendary speeches and works of literature the choices are more obvious then when attempting to impart the massive loss of life or industrial advances.

Robertson makes effective use of simultaneity in this speech. In order to convince his audience of the impact the Civil War had on the nation he must, by necessity, discuss other events to compare them. He compares the military methods of the Civil War to that of previous wars to show how warfare was revolutionized and the casualties to those of every other conflict in which the USA was involved. The fact that Robertson really only utilizes simultaneity in the one article he must, implies that he prefers not to do so. He seems to prefer keeping to a single subject. Since he favors the use of primary documents, Robertson might avoid drawing parallels to outside events because finding useful primary documents in areas other than his specialty is difficult. Alternatively, this pattern could be attributed to the choice of articles and not actually be an accurate representation of Robertson's methods. He may very well adapt his technique based off of the purpose and subject of a particular article.

James Robertson is a talented and passionate Civil War historian. He is able to, for the most part, set aside bias when writing. His writing is clear and informative. Robertson's speeches are particularly well written. They flow well and he is skilled at injecting humor and

amusing anecdotes while remaining informative. The speeches also work quite effectively as written articles. His articles tend to be focused on a single topic and he rarely deviates from that subject. Robertson's recognition in the field of Civil War history is well-deserved for both his accomplishments and technique.

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