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Historical myths

Sometimes things we all believe to be true are actually false. Here are some historical examples. Which did you think were true?

Eve ate an apple

An apple a day might keep the doctor away, but they have still had bad publicity as the "forbidden fruit" that Eve tasted in the Garden of Eden. Yet nowhere in the biblical story of Adam and Eve is an apple mentioned. It is simply called "the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden" (Genesis 3:3). It COULD have been an apple, but it could have been a banana too.

Newton was hit by an apple

Sir Isaac Newton was under a tree, minding his own business, when an apple fell on his head, providing him the inspiration for the laws of gravity – or so the story goes. But while the falling apple is a good story, it probably never happened. The story was first published in an essay by Voltaire, long after Newton's death and was almost certainly an invention.

Walt Disney drew Mickey Mouse

One of the world's most famous cartoon characters, Mickey Mouse, is credited to Walt Disney. However, Mickey was the vision of Disney's number one animator, Ub Iwerks. Disney was not a great artist but, fortunately for him, Iwerks was known as the fastest animator in the business. He single-handedly animated Mickey's first short film, Plane Crazy (1928), in only two weeks. (That's 700 drawings a day.)

Marie Antoinette said "Let them each cake"

In 1766, Jean Jacques Rousseau wrote of an incident he recalled from some 25 years earlier, in which "a great princess" was told that the country people had no bread. "Then let them eat cake," she replied. When Rousseau wrote of this, Marie Antoinette was an 11-year-old child in Austria. The French Revolution would not begin for another 23 years. The myth that she spoke these infamous words was probably spread by revolutionary propagandists.

Napoleon was a little corporal

Some people believe that Napoleon's domineering ambitions were to compensate for being so physically small. Not so. True, Napoleon was called Le Petit Corporal ("The Little Corporal"), but he was 5 feet, 7 inches tall - taller than the average eighteenth-century Frenchman. In fact, early in his career, soldiers used it to mock his relatively low rank, not his height.

Edison invented the electric light

Thomas Edison is known as the world's greatest inventor, with 1,093 patents to his name. Astonishing, except for one thing: he didn't invent most of them. Most Edison inventions were the work of his technicians - and his most famous invention, the electric light, didn't even belong to his laboratory. Long before Edison was born Sir Humphry Davy invented carbon filament lighting. The achievement of Edison's lab was to find the right filament that would burn for days on end. A major achievement, but not the first.

George Washington was America's first President

Everyone knows that Washington was the first American President. However, during the American Revolution, the Continental Congress chose Peyton Randolph as the first President. Washington was appointed commander of the Continental Army. Randolph was succeeded by John Hancock and after Washington defeated the British, Hancock sent him a note of congratulations. Washington's reply was addressed to "The President of the United States". Washington became the first popularly elected President but the FIFTEENTH overall!

Questions

1. Which "historical myth" did you think was true?
2. What other historical myths do you know about?
3. Why do you think such myths become accepted?
4. Does Japan have historical myths?
5. Do you think these myths serve a useful purpose? What?
6. Which of these historical myths was most surprising to you? Why?

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