It seems timely, in our new world of ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake news’, to re-examine our relationship with secondary sources. Do we place too much trust in them? Are we too willing to use secondary data uncritically? If so, how should we interrogate such data?

There is nothing new about ‘alternative facts’. In this presentation, Professor Leach will take a historical example to illustrate the ease with which a false meta-narrative can be created out of small distortions or omissions of facts and then perpetuated through an uncritical reliance on secondary sources.

Drawing on primary research about Britain’s first Christian mission to Africa (established in 1808 in the slave trading region to the north of Sierra Leone), she will show how easily women - both European and African - were airbrushed out of history, and how the myth that the mission’s origin was a uniquely male and European endeavour has been sustained over two centuries.

Professor Leach uses this example as a springboard for discussion on how we can avoid the pitfalls of misrepresentation through an over-reliance on secondary sources.