

## ETHNOHISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Bruce G. Trigger

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to consider what ethnohistory is and what its future role may be, particularly in relationship to archaeology. There is no better way to begin than by examining the origin and early development of ethnohistory.

### ETHNOHISTORY

It is a striking fact that neither ethnohistory nor anything closely resembling it has developed in Britain or on the European continent. Three disciplines study the former activities of human beings in Europe: folklore or European ethnology, history, and prehistory. Folklore deals with the pre-industrial traditions of Europe as they are preserved in modern peasant life, oral traditions, songs, dances, and material culture. History examines changes in many facets of European society and culture that are recorded primarily in written sources, while prehistory extends the study of human activities into pre-literate times largely by means of archaeological data. Since the latter part of the 19th century there has been a sense of close affinity between history and prehistoric archaeology in Europe. It is recognized that what archaeological data can tell us about the past is very different from what historical data can reveal; this becomes particularly obvious in fields such as medieval studies, in which the two approaches are used in a complementary fashion. In spite of this, archaeology has come to be regarded as a means of extending an understanding of European history into periods for which there are no written records. This sense of continuity exerts an important influence even in situations where it is clear that the prehistoric inhabitants of a region are wholly unrelated to the people who lived there in historic times. The avowed materialist V. Gordon Childe (1925: XV) regarded prehistoric Europeans as his "spiritual ancestors" and their achievements as part of his living cultural heritage.

In North America, historical circumstances have produced a different alignment of disciplines. History has been concerned almost exclusively with the activities of White Canadians and Americans. By contrast, anthropology has developed as the study of the continent's native peoples. Its traditional four branches were concerned with their indigenous cultures, prehistory, physical characteristics, and languages. The distinction between history and anthropology thus paralleled the distinction between "ourselves" and "all others," an attitude which when found among tribal peoples many anthropologists interpret as a manifestation of primitive ethnocentrism. Because it relegates the study of non-Western peoples of tribal origin to a separate discipline, anthropology has been fiercely criticized and rejected in many parts of the Third World in recent years. This is understandable but unfortunate, since the majority of scholars who in the 20th century have called themselves anthropologists have been cultural relativists. Whatever shortcomings critics now may detect in their political and social attitudes, these anthropologists fought harder than any other academics against racism and pejorative views of native peoples and their cultures.

The original program of American anthropology made no provision for the study of Indian history, apart from prehistory. In part, this may have reflected an implicit 19th century belief that Indians did not have their own history. Such a belief was a compound of many widespread prejudices. Some White people allowed that Indians might have history, but maintained that in the absence of adequate documentation there was no way that it could be studied. Others argued that prior to European contact Indian cultures had changed little and that what had happened since was a process of decline and assimilation that was of little serious historical interest.

In Canada, A.G. Bailey (1937) was encouraged by Harold Innis's (1930) investigations of the fur trade to write the first serious monograph on Indian history, in the form of a study of relations between Europeans and Algonkians in eastern Canada prior to 1700. Unfortunately this book was published in an obscure series and at a bad time and did not receive the attention it deserved. It therefore failed to stimulate more historical research. The present concern with Indian history is derived from an interest in acculturation that developed within American anthropology in the 1930s (Spicer 1968; Redfield, Linton and Herskovits 1936). Studies of acculturation aspired to be of practical value; by discovering how Indian culture had been affected by different forms of White domination, anthropologists could advise governments more knowledgeably and assist in formulating more humane policies for dealing with Indians. The paternalism of such an approach is now self-evident. What radical critics of this approach need to remember is that most of these studies were motivated by benevolent rather than by exploitative or Machiavellian intentions.

One beneficial result of studies of acculturation was that they made anthropologists aware for the first time of the importance of understanding the sequences of changes that individual native cultures had passed through since European contact. It also became obvious that the gap in anthropological knowledge between the prehistoric period, studied by the archaeologist, and the past, as recalled by the ethnologists' oldest native informants, was going to have to be bridged by historically-oriented research. Works such as *Perspectives in American Indian Culture Change* (Spicer 1961) and E.H. Spicer's (1962) *Cycles of Conquest* are milestones in the development of studies of acculturation into what already had come to be called ethnohistory. Since then, ethnohistory, though described as a method by many of its practitioners, has tended to be recognized as a significant sub-discipline within anthropology.

Like history, ethnohistory depends heavily upon written documents as sources of data. Some of these may be old ethnographies but most are chronicles, records, and reports, of precisely the same sort as are used by professional historians. Yet, if the documents used by ethnohistorians are of the same sort as those used by historians, the methods needed to study them are more complex and demanding. To do ethnohistory requires the same skills in textual criticism that are possessed by a professional historian. The ethnohistorian must be able to evaluate the accuracy and authenticity of primary sources. Variant copies of manuscripts must be investigated in detail and the amateur's temptation to prefer the version most congenial to his own interpretations must be avoided. A written document must not be assumed always to mean what it says. The bias and possible deceptions of authors and editors must be taken into account, as well as ambiguous wordings, mutilated or ill-copied manuscripts, improperly set type, and faulty editing.

Unlike the historian, however, the ethnohistorian normally depends upon documentary evidence that was produced not by the people he is studying, but by representatives of a radically different culture. The latter's understanding of what they were recording rarely could have been as detailed as that of a native and often it was grotesquely erroneous or deficient. As Spicer (1962:22) has pointed out, almost no direct evidence is available con-

cerning Indian viewpoints and feelings about the tremendous changes that contact was making in their lives until well into the 19th century. In order to evaluate and interpret this material, even in a perfunctory manner, the ethnohistorian must possess detailed ethnographic knowledge about the people he is studying. It is impossible to project behavioural patterns recorded at a specific time backwards or forwards with assurance that they have not changed. Nevertheless, a broad understanding of the ethnography of the group being studied and of related cultures, as these presently exist and as they were recorded in the past by professional ethnologists, will facilitate more perceptive and critical insights into the significance of historical documents than do the conventional methods employed by historians. It becomes possible for the ethnohistorian to see the significance to the Indians of behaviour that was not evident to the Whites who recorded it long ago.

The ethnohistorian also tends to rely more upon auxiliary sources of data than does the regular historian. Oral traditions are an important element in many studies and collecting these requires working closely with native informants. Archaeological data are relied on to supplement written documents for studying the nature of Indian cultures prior to European contact and in the early contact period. Linguistic evidence is important not only for tracing historical relations among different groups but also for studying various aspects of cultural change during the historic period. The use of these data to interpret and supplement fragmentary and often heavily biased historical records requires a broader range of skills than does history. It is, of course, impossible to be equally competent in all of these fields. Nevertheless, every ethnohistorian must know enough about them that he can recognize when different sorts of evidence will be useful to him in his work. He thus can knowledgeably solicit the assistance of specialists in these fields and understand their conclusions.

Methodologically, the ethnohistorian must utilize the skills of both historians and anthropologists. The ethnohistorian who lacks sufficient familiarity with the techniques of historical criticism will remain a dilettante, however well-trained in anthropology he may be. On the other hand, the historian who is unfamiliar with what anthropology has to say about Indian cultures, will be unacceptably handicapped in his efforts to detect and make allowances for the biases, misunderstanding, and deliberate distortions that inevitably colour most early accounts of relations between Indians and Whites. Ethnohistory cannot flourish without strong methodological ties with both history and anthropology. A professional historian cannot do useful ethnohistorical research without acquiring a competent working knowledge of anthropology; a professional anthropologist must acquire an equally competent knowledge of historical methodology and of aspects of White history relevant to his work.

In spite of this, the products of ethnohistorical research are essentially no different from regular historical studies, the resemblance to social history being particularly close. Although there is some debate about what the aims of ethnohistory should be, most ethnohistorians appear to be interested in using historical documents, oral traditions, and auxiliary sources of information to reconstruct and explain the history of non-literate peoples. Harold Hickerson (1970:7) sees this as being merely an initial step which provides data for the formulation of general laws about human behaviour. While this nomothetic characterization of ethnohistory might be used to claim a closer relationship between ethnohistory and anthropology than between it and history, this argument does not hold. Regular historical studies, no less than ethnohistorical ones, can be (and are) used as a basis for generalizing about human behaviour by all kinds of social scientists, including historians.

It generally is recognized that specific sequences of historical development cannot be predicted on the basis of general laws of human behaviour; for the same reasons that we

cannot predict the precise future development of our own society. This does not imply that human behaviour does not display regularities; instead it reflects the complexity of behavioural factors that influence a particular historical event, as well as the many external parameters of nature that affect human behaviour. Although a complete understanding of a complex historical process, in a predictive, positivist sense, is impossible to achieve, the partial understandings that historians can produce in the face of such difficulties are of considerable importance.

If objective historical studies are admitted to be of practical value, then it becomes doubly worth considering that the labelling of certain studies as ethnohistory, as opposed to simply history, serves to perpetuate an invidious distinction between non-literate and literate societies. Unwittingly the designation seems to give substance to the view that Indians have no true history, or that Indian history is different in some essential way from White history. While ethnohistory may designate the methodology needed to study the history of non-literate peoples, in my opinion it should not denote a special discipline serving this end. We should work toward the day when White North Americans will regard Iroquois, or Ojibwa, or Cree history as they do English, or Magyar, or Lithuanian history. We shall all be spiritually healthier when such studies, whether they are written by professional anthropologists or historians, will be accepted as un-hyphenated history.

### ARCHAEOLOGY

We are now ready to consider the relationship between archaeology and Indian history. Prior to the 1920s, archaeologists relied heavily on historical data, oral traditions, and ethnography to explain their data. For the most part, they used these auxiliary sources of information with little skill or ingenuity; indeed the main reason archaeologists relied on them was that too few archaeological data were available for interpretations to be based on such data alone. During this period evidence for cultural development tended to be under-rated, thereby making the archaeological record appear to confirm the belief that Indian cultures had not changed much in prehistoric times. Where change was obvious, as in the case of the cultural groups that built mounds, claims involving radical replacements of population were preferred to the delineation of developmental sequences.

By the 1920s, American archaeology had entered upon a new phase characterized by extensive stratigraphic excavations and by a strong emphasis on defining archaeological cultures and working out cultural chronologies. Much attention was paid to unravelling the prehistoric cultural development of particular regions; however, for several decades this historical approach seldom took archaeologists beyond defining cultural chronologies.

The acceptance of the New Archaeology has involved an explicit rejection of historical goals as having little more than a "...role in the general education of the public..." (Binford 1967:235). The basic use of archaeological data now was to test hypotheses concerning social and cultural processes in order to produce general laws that are useful for the management of contemporary society. Under the influence of this philosophy, many American archaeologists no longer have as their primary goal the understanding of the prehistory of specific regions but treat their data, much as social anthropologists treat theirs, as isolated case studies that can be used to test whatever hypotheses happen to interest them. In this manner American archaeologists seek to establish the credentials of their discipline as an integral part of the broader generalizing discipline of anthropology. By doing this, the New Archaeology has helped to increase the estrangement between history and prehistoric archaeology in America. In addition to the traditional distinction between anthropology, which concerns itself with Indians, and history, which concerns itself with Whites, there is now a dichotomy between history, which seeks to explain specific phen-

omena (if New Archaeologists are willing to grant that history explains anything at all) and, anthropology (including archaeology), which seeks to formulate and test general laws.

While European and in particular British archaeology has not failed to be influenced by the New Archaeology, these influences have not yet eroded the traditional ties between prehistoric archaeology and history. Archaeological data continue to be valued for the information they provide about the cultural development and ethnic history of Europe. It is perhaps not unfair to view the detached and ahistorical attitude that many American archaeologists have towards their data as the latest manifestation of the White archaeologist's unwitting alienation from the native peoples whose remains he studies. Such an archaeologist in good faith may view the native people's past as constituting a convenient "laboratory" for testing hypotheses about socio-cultural development and human behaviour. To the native people, however, who are showing increasing interest and pride in their past, such an attitude must prove extremely offensive. It intellectualizes to an unprecedented degree the lack of concern that in the past has permitted White archaeologists to excavate cemeteries and to display Indian skeletons and ceremonial objects in museums with no thought for the feelings of living native peoples.

The dogmatism of the New Archaeology on this score is the more regrettable because of the considerable advances that it has pioneered in understanding the significance of archaeological data. This work has laid the foundations for far better interpretations of an historical sort than were possible previously. If it is agreed that the study of Indian history is of value, it becomes logical to use archaeological data to extend that history back into prehistoric times and also to help free it to some degree from the limitations and biases of its largely White documentary sources. Archaeological data make it clear that native cultures were not static prior to the arrival of the Europeans. In many cases they also suggest a higher level of political and economic development than is apparent from the earliest historical and ethnographic accounts of cultures that already had been disrupted as a result of direct or indirect European contact. Changes in the late prehistoric period may be important for understanding the responses that specific native groups made to White contact. Elsewhere I have argued that the initial responses that various Iroquoian tribes made to European contact followed the pattern of changes that had been going on within these societies in late prehistoric times. Disruption or re-orientation of the native culture occurred only where existing patterns of change proved wholly unadaptable to new circumstances (Trigger 1976). Archaeological data are valuable not merely because they provide an extension of history but also because they help to understand more fully the early historic period.

Ethnohistorians already routinely use archaeological data in this manner, while archaeologists use ethnographic data as the basis for what has been called the direct historical approach, whereby an ethnographically-documented culture is traced progressively further back into prehistoric times using archaeological data. Archaeological data clearly have an important role to play in the study of Indian history, especially for the prehistoric period. This does not mean that archaeological data should not also be used as a basis for generalizing about human behaviour. What it signifies is that archaeologists should be prepared to recognize that the employment of archaeological data for historical purposes is a useful scientific enterprise.

### *INDIAN HISTORY*

A comprehensive study of the history of the native peoples of North America from earliest times to the present is highly desirable both as a scientific enterprise and for its social value. The methodology that has been developed within the framework of ethno-

history is essential for dealing with all but the most recent documentary evidence. Pre-historic archaeology and the study of oral traditions also have prominent roles to play, while various auxiliary disciplines have a more important role than in studies of White history.

To realize its full potential, Indian history must aspire to the highest standards of objectivity and scientific skill. Little of lasting value will be accomplished if callous and often hostile accounts of the Indians' role in history are replaced by shallow works of a sentimental or apologetic variety; especially ones that seek, consciously or unconsciously, to present Indian behaviour in terms of stereotypes that are pleasing to liberal White opinion. True understanding and respect for and by Indians will be achieved only when the same high standards are established for the analysis of the historical role played by native people as are found in studies of White history. This will promote an understanding of Indians as people who have had worthy ambitions of their own and who, in the face of overwhelming difficulties, have been able to conduct their own affairs and to interact with Whites in as competent a manner as that of so-called civilized peoples. It is also essential that native people should receive professional training and employment as historians and archaeologists. They will bring important new perspectives as well as a deeper sense of relevance to the study of Indian history.

The successful expansion of historical studies to embrace the native peoples of North America, not as appendages of White history but as groups worthy of study in their own right, will assist in giving these people the same pride in their past that the study of history has conferred on other peoples throughout the world. It also should provide Indians and Whites alike with a better understanding of the factors that have molded the present circumstances of native peoples. Accurate knowledge should allow Indians to strive more effectively to overcome their present disabilities.

Sometimes it is argued that it is not possible for history to be an objective scientific discipline. It is claimed that at best history provides a mythological charter for societies or political factions; at worst it is a dangerous form of propaganda. While historical studies often do reflect the political and religious convictions of their authors, either wittingly or unwittingly, these prejudices have exerted a no less baleful influence over the activities of other social sciences. The multiplicity of viewpoints that have gone into the writing of history over a number of generations and which presently flourish in democratic countries tends to expose biases and thereby to endow history with a degree of objectivity that refutes its most determined critics. Yet it cannot be denied that the study of Indian history is fraught with special problems of objectivity. For several hundred years, historical writing has ignored the important role played by native peoples in the development of Canada and the United States and has drawn upon and reinforced stereotypes of native peoples that are themselves largely products of hostility and ignorance. More recently these have been matched by counter-stereotypes, many of which seek to impute to traditional Indian cultures values of which Whites approve. This does not, however, rule out the possibility of histories being written about native peoples that are subject to the same rigorous standards as those concerning any other peoples.

Prehistoric archaeology has much to gain from being associated closely with a broadly-based historical study of North America's native peoples and itself seeking to do history. This emphatically does not mean the abandonment of explanatory objectives and a return to the simple, but important cultural chronology that characterized North American archaeology prior to the New Archaeology. The New Archaeologists' claim that history and cultural chronology are synonymous would be incomprehensible to a European prehistorian, who regards the explanation of the archaeological record as being his principal

objective. Within an historical context, laws or regularities are not sought as ends in themselves but as a means of explaining specific sequences of socio-cultural development.

Through a closer association with Indian history, prehistoric archaeology can gain a sense of relevance to modern problems that greatly exceeds the exiguous claims made for the relevance of the theoretical formulations of the New Archaeology. Because of the greater proximity of prehistoric times to the present in North America than in Europe, prehistoric archaeology has more immediate relevance for understanding contemporary native American culture than for understanding European culture. Yet, as a source of information about regional development, even European archaeology is recognized as having ecological and cultural importance. If the prehistory of Canada and the United States can come to have personal value rather than ethnological interest to White North Americans, this will greatly benefit society.

North American prehistoric archaeology also stands to enrich its theoretical perspectives through an association with the discipline of history, with which it has almost no ties at present. This too would be a net gain, since existing ties with anthropology would continue to be important. It is true that this relationship would be based more heavily on a common interest in the native cultures of North America and less on an avowed common interest in generalizing about the nature of culture. Yet even the latter activity might be stimulated rather than diminished by an historical approach to prehistory that was also truly explanatory.

An historical orientation also would encourage a more holistic approach to studying prehistoric cultures. As archaeological data cease to be regarded solely as laboratory material for the testing of a miscellaneous collection of hypotheses, archaeologists will be encouraged to elicit as much data as they can about every aspect of culture that will enable them to understand better the prehistoric development of the region they are studying. Data acquire value from their relevance for understanding a specific and therefore a unique historical sequence.

Finally, although I have stressed that chronology is not an end in itself, an historical approach would help to revive an interest in chronological problems, which have tended to be taken for granted by the New Archaeology. To a large degree the New Archaeology has imitated social anthropology in ignoring temporal frameworks and treating its data as if they belonged to an atemporal "ethnographic present" (Sterud 1976:85). Only a few archaeologists, such as Mark Cohen (1977) in his recent comparative study of the origins of food production, have displayed a sensitive awareness of the potential significance of chronological factors. An historical approach should help to encourage a concern with chronological factors and their significance.

### CONCLUSIONS

I began this paper by asking what ethnohistory was and what its relationship to archaeology ought to be. I have argued that while a distinctive group of methods for studying the history of non-literate peoples can be isolated and labelled as ethnohistory, there is no reason to differentiate the study of the history of non-literate peoples from that of literate ones. The term ethnohistory seems to imply that Indians and other formerly non-literate groups lack real history. I would prefer that the term ethnohistory be abandoned and that what has been called ethnohistory be referred to simply as history.

I also have argued that the findings of prehistoric archaeology have an important role to play in studying the history of the native peoples of North America. I am not suggesting that archaeologists should not seek to use archaeological data to test general hypotheses

about human behaviour; but only that these data also should be used as a means of extending and enriching Indian history. Doing this may lead prehistoric archaeologists to ask novel questions and to see hitherto unsuspected significance in their data. The active participation of ethnohistorians and prehistoric archaeologists within the broader framework of Indian history will help to eliminate the White Man's dichotomy which has defined history as studying himself and anthropology as studying other peoples.

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Department of Anthropology  
McGill University  
Montreal, Quebec H3A 2T7