INTRODUCTION

Short History of American Indian Historicity

> Many of us who have received formal training in how to follow the often subtle rules for determining what sort of evidence may be deemed reliable, and thus admissible, in this alien, European art form called history have come to love it as a discipline. We have also learned to distrust it. . . . A people's stories about themselves, their world, and their past may leave many things unsaid, but on the whole, the things that do get said, and the way they are said, give a clearer picture of that people than any work of history can give.[1]
>
> D. L. Birchfield, Choctaw

Visiting the back country where a lot of American Indian history took place and still unfolds can yield more than touches of local color. You enter the past in three dimensions, seasonal climate, and diurnal time. You recognize the topographical appeal of bygone settlement sites, the food-procuring or home-protecting attractions of creek side, estuary, floodplain or forest fringe, and the practicality of high grounds for surveillance or defensible draws in a skirmish. You are even tempted to deduce former aesthetic sensibilities. Then the places themselves talk back.

Longtime residents pull out old family photos and walk you to where their relatives lived and are buried. Tribal librarians escort you around former agency grounds. An elder personalizes with flair and irony the underside of events you thought you had down pat. Some physical reality

[1] D. L. Birchfield, "The Case Against History," in *The Oklahoma Basic Intelligence Test* (Greenfield Center, N.Y.: Greenfield Review Press, 1998), p. 105.

touched by the personalities of your research falls into your hands. Once I kicked through a second-growth pasture where the nineteenth-century protagonist of my first book, a Crow Indian warrior, chose to be photographed opening his sacred medicine bundles beside the twisted trunk of his favorite cottonwood. My boot caught a sliver of that very tree – seventy years after the old man sang his vision songs on the spot. As I tilted its distinctive bowed shape out of the matted grass, I heard the old man's stepson suck in his breath behind me, and I laid it back.[2]

First lesson about Indian pasts – they're often personal and ever present.

This sort of immersion processes its data through your senses, whose observational and analytic skills you have been honing ever since you first played hide and seek. Even when the sites have become tract housing or freeway, today's encounters with such places become springboards for sharper questions about why things happened the way they did, frequently with salutary effects on the narratives you produce. And when you have the good luck to saturate yourself in the grit and spirit of historical sites, and then read a classic work by someone who only conjured them up in their head, the extra mile legitimizes your entry into the conversation.

That was my experience living in Puebla, Mexico, when I was fifteen and reading William Hickling Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico*. Every night my imagination was swept by swashbuckling Spaniards and their triumph over the Aztecs. Half-blind when he wrote *Conquest* in Boston between 1839 and 1843, Prescott could not walk the Mesoamerican landscape where Cortez's ruthless few brought down Montezuma's shaky coalition of subordinated Central Mexican tribes. But among the conscious choices he made in his Bedford Street library was to suppress the nativist side of the story.

Although for an hour each day Prescott suffered his daughter's reading to him from the conquest chronicle of Alva Ixtlilxochitl, descendant

[2] National Park historian John Hussey recognized this experiential power of place in 1958: "The person who walks on the very field where Cornwallis surrendered receives a vivid impression, a thrill of *kinship with the past*" ("The Role of History in the National Park System," "Mission 66" file, History branch files, NPS, Washington, D.C., 1958, emphasis mine).

of a native prince, he had little patience for such Aztec intellectuals, who, from the early colonial period on, preserved in illustrated books and other writings their people's myths, religious poems, migration narratives, and historical perspectives. Prescott's journal on writing his *Conquest* betrays little awareness of the native texts that were anthologized shortly after the conquest by Fray Bernardino de Sahagun.[3] At one point he even confesses, "I hope my readers will take more satisfaction than I do in the annals of barbarians,"[4] and he adds in another entry, "nor do I think they will bear expatiating on to any great length. But the overturning of their old empires by a handful of warriors is a brilliant subject, full of important results, and connected with our own history."[5]

If my nights raced with Prescott's Spaniards, my days found me pursuing village festivals such as La Conquista at Huehotzingo to the north, where plumed Indian dancers made more of the Aztecs' initial defiance against the Spaniards than of their own ultimate defeat on the battlefield, or Los Tastoanes in Jalisco, where masked dancers evoked both the martyrdom of Spain's patron saint, Santiago, *and* sacrifices to their old deity, Xipe-Toltec, so as to mediate between the imported and indigenous halves of the Mexican soul. Most weekends found me in Cholula, where local Indians led me through cornfields to caches of pre-Columbian pottery shards and terra cotta heads with the goggle eyes and prominent fangs of their old rain god Tlaloc – the same visage that glared from pots that I picked up in local Indian markets.

But nowhere did I see the lie put to Prescott's story of European triumph more persuasively, or the spirit of Mexican Indian survival

[3] Beyond the scope of this book are analyses of uniquely hybrid, indigenous historical genres produced in Mexico and South America, such as one finds in Elizabeth Hill Boone's "Migration Histories as Ritual Performance" in *Aztec Ceremonial Landscapes*, edited by David Carrasco (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1991), Frank Salomon's "Testimonies: The Making and Reading of Native South American Historical Sources," V. 3, Pt. 1, in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and *From Oral to Written Expression: Native Andean Chronicles of the Early Colonial Period*, edited by Rolena Adorno, Foreign and Comparative Studies/Latin American Series, N. 4 (Syracuse, N.Y.: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1982).

[4] C. Harvey Gardiner, editor, *The Literary Memoranda of William Hickling Prescott*, V. 2 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), p. 17.

[5] C. Harvey Gardiner, editor, *The Literary Memoranda of William Hickling Prescott*, V. 1 (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), p. 229.

exhibited with greater authority, than at the pre-Columbian pilgrimage center of Tepeyac. Located fourteen miles north of Mexico City, this sacred hill had witnessed human sacrifices to Tonantzin, a preeminent Aztec mother goddess associated with the moon and fertility. Only ten years after Cortez's victory, atop that promontory a brown-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe spoke in the Nahuatl tongue to an impoverished Indian convert we know as Juan Diego but who answered to "He Who Talks Like an Eagle" in his native tongue. She magically inscribed his *tilma*, a peasant cloak woven from maguey cactus fibers and tied at the neck, with her figure, floating above a crescent moon. Fusing Aztec and Catholic iconography, it remains the image of Tepeyac's brown virgin, not the lions of King Carlos V, that embodies the cultural legacy of the Hispanic Americas.[6]

More alert to the different agendas of white and Indian histories when I sought out the town of my birth near Lake Cayuga in the heart of upper New York State's Iroquois Indian territory decades later, I was leerier of Francis Parkman's master narratives that described the brutality and intellectual inferiority of local Indians. Despite ill health, Parkman had walked the grounds of his narratives and talked with Indians – Lakotas in the Black Hills, Penobscots in Maine, and Senecas in New York State. But his re-creations of their behavior still hewed to unflattering stereotypes of Indians drawn from Jesuit testimonies and popular literature. While scholars may credit Parkman's writings with a precocious display of "a sense of Native Americans as important historical agents," the man was even more explicit than Prescott about his disdain for Indian ways of history.[7] In 1861 Parkman wrote of Iroquois sources for their wars with the Erie Indians, "Indian traditions are very rarely of any value as

[6] See Stafford Poole, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: The Origin, and Sources of a Mexican Natural Symbol, 1531–1797* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995); Eric Wolf, "The Virgin of Guadalupe: A Mexican National Symbol," *Journal of American Folklore* LXXI (1958): 34–39, and Victor Turner and Edith L. B. Turner, "Mexican Pilgrimages: Myth and History," in their *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 40–103.

[7] Melissa L. Meyer and Kerwin Lee Klein, "Native American Studies and the End of Ethnohistory," in *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects*, edited by Russell Thornton (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), p. 183.

historical evidence"[8]; in 1877 he railed again that "Indian traditions of historical events are usually almost worthless."[9]

Narratives that outsiders deem irrelevant to one historical discourse may remain of central significance in another. As I photographed old log cabins in the Indian hamlets that extend across northern New York State, I was aware that some front lawn figurines carved out of wood were not simply Indian equivalents of pink flamingoes. They displayed the matrilineal clan totems of resident families, an ancestry that derived from the first of three grand narratives that established the Iroquois sense of an intermingled heritage, identity, and destiny. When I drove down the old Iroquois Trail from Buffalo to Albany – today's Interstate 90 – I already knew how this route played its metaphoric part in their second epic story, the founding of the Iroquois League, in which their entire territory was analogized as a gigantic, protective, multi-tribal longhouse with this trail as its central corridor. Then a follower of the Longhouse Religion with whom I chatted on the banks of the Allegheny River Resevoir pointed to the old location of the Cornplanter Grant (now inundated by Kinzua Dam) where the prophet Handsome Lake underwent his vision in 1799. Handsome Lake's life and teachings produced their third guiding narrative, the "Good Word," which is still recited each year. Nor did this stacking of "main stem stories" prevent the Iroquois from maintaining other documentary memories of localized history of the type that Francis Parkman collected but then buried in small-print footnotes.

Over the years, such realizations persuaded me that any accounts of Indian–white relations deserved multiple representations. If we were to truly tell these stories "in the round," how could they not reflect contrasting or overlapping vested interests, differing modalities of accounting

[8] Francis Parkman, *The Jesuits in North America in the Seventeenth Century*, Part Second (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1930 [1867]), p. 545. As if unwittingly undercutting his adamancy, immediately after this comment Parkman cites an Iroquois account to authenticate their antipathy for their Algonquian foes, which "historical evidence" does substantiate.

[9] Francis Parkman, *Count Frontenac and New France Under Louis XIV*, V. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1897 [1877]), p. 164. What makes this attack on Indian credibility especially ironic is Parkman's own falsifications of data, exposed by Francis Jennings and others, which supported his positioning of Indians on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder (*The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire* [New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984], p. 19, fn. 24).

and interpreting, and culturally divergent senses of what it all meant? And while one was drawn to periods of cultural contact that highlighted those contrasts, I also asked, why should we not explore indigenous historical thoughts for their own sake, even as they might illuminate the years before any Euro-Americans were around? To approach these questions, a review of our belated interest in native attitudes about the past seems appropriate.[10]

The Prescott–Parkman "school of suspicion" regarding Indian historical traditions was nothing new. "What can a nation that has not letters tell us of its origins?" asked Dr. Samuel Johnson, "I have always difficulty to be patient when I hear authors gravely quoted as giving accounts of savage nations, which accounts they had from the savages themselves."[11] And speaking of origin narratives of the Creeks, Choctaws, and Algonquians, the nineteenth-century evolutionist Daniel G. Brinton complained that "Sifting them all, we shall find, in them, little to enlighten us as to the pre-historic chronology of the tribes, though they may furnish interesting vistas in comparative literature."[12]

But Brinton's tacked-on qualification reminds us that equally rooted in the American grain was a "school of empathy" toward Indian cultures, aesthetics, and oral traditions.[13] Among the few holdouts for an Indian ability to record history accurately was the late-eighteenth-century missionary John Heckwelder, who spent nearly forty years serving Christianized members of the Delaware Tribe and transcribed their accounts of white arrival and intertribal relations.[14] Another was the

[10] For an overview from a Native perspective, see Dean Morrison's "In Whose Hand Is the Telling of the Tale?" in *American Indian Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Contemporary Issues*, edited by Dean Morrison (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), pp. 5–25.

[11] Quoted in Clement W. Meighan, "Ethnohistory and Rock Art," *Journal of New World Archaeology* 4(2), May 1981, p. 1.

[12] Daniel G. Brinton, *Essays of an Americanist* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1890), p. 24.

[13] I borrow this "suspicion–empathy" dichotomy from my colleague at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Frank Salomon, who used it to characterize approaches in the anthropology of religion.

[14] John G. E. Heckwelder, *An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations*, Transactions of the Committee of History, Moral Science, and General Literature of the American Philosophical Society 1, Philadelphia, 1819, and "Indian Traditions of the First Arrival of the Dutch at Manhattan Island," *Collections of the*

early-nineteenth-century anthologist James Jones, whose childhood exposure to the Gay Head Indian community on Martha's Vineyard "early led [me] to place a greater value upon the traditions of the Indians than has been attached to them by those who do not view them as a series of authentic annals. For myself, I hold them in the light of historical records, mixed up indeed with much that is fabulous, but not in greater degree than the early annals of other unenlightened nations, who could not perpetuate them by means of letters."[15] And the conversion experiences and cultural profiles by Chippewa Indian author-missionary George Copway also placed strong store on the reliability of old Indian oral histories.[16]

Positioned somewhere between the two camps regarding the viability of Indian historical narratives was the explorer-artist George Catlin. Although he, too, praised Indian traditions, he had in mind their artistry, not their empirical accuracy. Assuming his customary Indian-friendly tone, in 1832 Catlin reported that the Mandans of the Upper Missouri took "great pride in relating their traditions, with regard to their origin; contending that they were the first people created on earth." Yet his very next sentence undercut the Indian claim: "Their existence in these regions has not been from a very ancient period."[17]

Against what historian Francis Jennings has characterized as Parkman's "venomous type who did not hesitate to falsify his source materials to make them support his Social Darwinian preconceptions,"[18] one might position what Philip S. Mason praises as the "great understanding and sympathy for the Indian"[19] displayed by early Indian agent

New York Historical Society, 2nd Series, V. 1 (New York: Printed for the Society by H. Ludwig, 1841).

[15] James Athearn Jones, *Traditions of the North American Indians*, V. 1 (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), pp. xiv–xv.

[16] George Copway, *Indian Life and Indian History, by an Indian Author: Embracing the Traditions of the North American Indians Regarding Themselves, Particularly of That Most Important of All the Tribes, the Ojibways* (orig.: *The Traditional History and Characteristic Sketches of the Ojibway Nation* [1850]; reprint, New York: AMS, 1978), and *Life, Letters & Speeches of George Copway*, edited by A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff and Donald B. Smith (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 7.

[17] George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Conditions of the North American Indians*, V. 1, 3rd ed. (London: published for the author by Tilt and Bogue, 1842), p. 80.

[18] Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, p. 19.

[19] Philip P. Mason, "Introduction" to *The Literary Voyager or Muzzeniegun* by Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. xx.

and folklore collector Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. If Parkman's Indians were brutish, menacing, and uncivilized, Schoolcraft's were amiable and colorful, and exhibited expressive talents.

Schoolcraft's voluminous compilations – what Mason considers "probably the first 'oral history' program in America"[20] – commenced in 1822 after Michigan Governor Lewis Cass mailed questionnaires to traders, military men, and Indian agents requesting information on "the earliest incident they recollect in their history" and their knowledge of migrations, memorable events, and tribal wars. With the Iroquois evidently in mind, Cass was especially curious about "what belts have they, by which these wars, or any other events in their history are commemorated."[21] After he married into an eminent mixed-blood Chippewa family, Schoolcraft provided data beyond Cass's wildest dreams.

Schoolcraft praised Great Lakes Indian speeches and stories for their poetic charm. But he, too, blew hot and cold as to whether they constituted reliable history. Even his Indian mother-in-law had her doubts. Whites probably possessed "the truth, because you had things past and present written down in books," she confided to Schoolcraft's wife, "[but] the stories I have heard related by old persons in my nation, cannot be so true, because they sometimes forget certain parts and then thinking themselves obliged to fill up the vacancy by . . . their fertile flights of imagination. . . ."[22]

And while Schoolcraft allowed that Indians were an "intellectual people," he was more responsive to the artistic "allegories" he discerned in their narratives. Some may have "concealed part of their historical traditions and beliefs," he wrote in 1845,[23] but a year later he sided with his mother-in-law: "a people who live without letters, must expect their history to perish with them. Tradition soon degenerates into fable, and fable has filled the oldest histories of the world with childish incongruities. . . . To restore their history from the rubbish of their traditions is a hopeless task." Yet in the same speech to the New York

[20] Mason, "Introduction," p. xvi.
[21] Excerpted in Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Schoolcraft's Indian Legends*, edited by Mentor L. Williams (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1956), p. 289.
[22] Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *The Literary Voyager or Muzzeniegun*, edited by Philip P. Mason (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1962), p. 6.
[23] Schoolcraft, *Schoolcraft's Indian Legends*, p. 305.

Historical Society he held out hope. "Who shall touch the scattered bones of aboriginal history with the spear of truth, and cause the skeleton of their ancient history to arise and live? We may never see this; but we may hold out incentives to the future scholar to labor in this department."[24]

But the "suspicious" school would not accept fence straddling. Parkman blasted the Delaware Indian stories collected by missionary Heckwelder regarding their troubles with the Iroquois as "utterly unworthy of credit."[25] Prescott, likewise, judged Heckwelder "too obviously & intentionally an apologist for the Indians to merit implicit confidence."[26] As for Schoolcraft's anthologies, Parkman found them "stuffed with blunders and contradictions, giving evidence on every page of a striking unfitness either for historical or philosophical inquiry."[27] Of Copway's rendition of Ojibwa history and legends he had only scorn, dismissing the Indian author as "endowed with a discursive imagination and facts grow under his hands into a preposterous shape and dimensions." Within a few years, the third of the nineteenth-century's master narrators, Hubert Howe Bancroft, contributed his doubts about finding usable material among the "Wild Tribes by whom most of our territory was inhabited" (in contrast, Bancroft meant, to the "Civilized Nations" of Mesoamerica, whose chronicles he found "not altogether mythical"):

> These fables lack chronology, and have no definite historical signification which can be made available. . . . Myths are mingled in great abundance with historical traditions throughout the whole aboriginal

[24] Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, "Incentives to the Study of Ancient American History," *New York Historical Society Proceedings*, Appended Address (1846), reprinted in part in *Schoolcraft's Indian Legends*, p. 303. Schoolcraft's appreciation for the poetics of Indian oral tradition did not transfer to his tougher critiques of Indian writers who put those traditions in print; for instance, he felt that Tuscarora writer David Cusick's claim of thirteen sequential Iroquois leaders who presided at Onondaga in northern New York State was "a mere excursion of a North American Indian into the fields of imagination" (quoted in Scott Michaelsen's *The Limits of Multiculturalism: Interrogating the Origins of American Anthropology* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], p. 48).

[25] Francis Parkman, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada*, V. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1901; Preface to First Edition written August 1, 1851), p. 34.

[26] *The Literary Memoranda of William Hickling Prescott*, edited and with an Introduction by C. Harvey Gardiner (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), V. 1, p. 230.

[27] Parkman, *Jesuits in North America*, p. 76.

> period and it is often utterly impossible to distinguish between them, or to fix the boundary line beyond which the element of history is absolutely wanting. The primitive aboriginal life, not only in America but throughout the world, is wrapped in mystery.[28]

This polarization between the suspicion and empathy perspectives echoed Euro-America's ambivalent projections about Indians in general, which abides to the present day. Whether Indians are regarded as benighted savages or nature poets continues to say more about some binary opposition in our national psyche than about anything intrinsic to Indian culture or character, past or present. As rendered in the discourse over historical consciousness, however, no voice of the late nineteenth century asked whether the hidden motivations, rhetorical strategies, or nationalistic presuppositions that informed their own historical compositions, which Prescott confided to his journal and Parkman held even closer to his chest, might also underlie what they derided as the entertaining fabulations or illogical distortions of native narratives.[29]

A more grounded appreciation for Native historical consciousness soon percolated from the field studies of Frank Hamilton Cushing, James Mooney, Alice Fletcher, and Frances Densmore, among others. From the late nineteenth century on, as these ethnographers listened to living tribespeople, their notes touched upon Indian ideas about history without necessarily highlighting them as such. In northern Montana, where George Bird Grinnell tried to reconcile contradictory migration stories about Blackfoot origins, he translated their toponyms for historical clues and then supplemented his argument for northerly origins with supportive folklore from neighboring tribes.[30] The Omaha scholar Francis La Flesche maintained that among his eastern Plains brethren, "The burden of memorizing and transmitting with accuracy, from one generation to another," fell to specially designated individuals chosen from key social

[28] Hubert Howe Bancroft, *Primitive History*, Vol. V, *The Native Races of the Pacific States of North America* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876), p. 135.

[29] Francis Jennings deconstructs these premises for Anglo-American historiography in his pithy essay "On the Undoing of History," Appendix C, pp. 398–406 of *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*.

[30] George Bird Grinnell, "Early Blackfoot History," *American Anthropologist* V (April 1892), pp. 153–164.