ETHNOHISTORY: AN HISTORIAN'S VIEWPOINT

by

James Axtell
College of William and Mary

ABSTRACT

Although Ethnohistory is a disciplinary hybrid, anthropologists have dominated its definition and practice. In recent years, however, frontier historians and practitioners of the "new" Social History have moved strongly into the field. Their different but complementary approach to Ethnohistory needs to be recognized by their anthropological brethren. Signs of closer cooperation can already be seen in a number of recent works that betray little of their authors' disciplinary origins.

In the not-so-distant past, the small number of historians who wandered into ethnohistory must have felt like trespassers in a foreign land. Not only were its first and most successful practitioners members of the anthropological tribe, but the initial definitions of ethnohistory reflected the anthropologists' recent experience in Indian claims work and their own disciplinary habits. They tended to see ethnohistory as the use of written documents only for the study of special people — "primitive" people — that is, the use of non-anthropological evidence for their own anthropological purposes. Understandably, ethnohistory was considered an exclusive "sub-branch of ethnology" or "sub-discipline of cultural anthropology" (Euler 1972:202; Hickerson 1970:7). If an historian wished to practice ethnohistory, he virtually had to undergo a rite of passage in which he transferred his professional identity and fealty to anthropology.

Today, however, historians with a bent for ethnohistory no longer feel obligated to alienate themselves from their own discipline. Indeed, their numbers and their contributions to the field have grown to the point where their anthropological colleagues must sublimate their feudal tendencies and
admit that, since history is half the essence of ethnohistory, historians are invaluable partners in its definition and practice.

Since the symposium on the nature of ethnohistory in the society's 1960 meeting at Indiana, the definition of ethnohistory has been broadened and refined by a variety of practitioners.\(^2\) Historians and anthropologists now have no difficulty agreeing that ethnohistory is essentially the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and causes of change in a culture defined by ethnological concepts and categories.\(^3\) Whether we consider ethnohistory a form of cultural history or a sub-discipline of cultural anthropology, we can agree that it represents a common-law marriage of history and ethnology, whose purpose is to produce scholarly offspring who bear the diachronic dimensions of history and the synchronic sensitivity of ethnology. Each partner may use the other for his own purposes, but as long as the marriage works and precocious progeny result, we should not only countenance the union but encourage our disciplinary colleagues to go forth and do likewise.

That historians and anthropologists can share the new definition of ethnohistory without fear of subinfeudation should be clear from a brief look at its elements. The first element is the subject of study — culture. Like anthropologists, ethnohistorians ideally focus on the whole culture of an ethnic group or society as a developing entity over time and space. Even when they lay particular stress on one aspect of the culture, their analysis is still ethnologically oriented by their assumption that no part is to be understood without reference to its place in the whole. While there is some disagreement about the nature of culture, most anthropologists seem to agree that culture is an idealized pattern of meanings, values, and norms differentially shared by the members of a society, which can be inferred from the non-instinctive behavior of the group and from the symbolic products of their actions, including material artifacts, language, and social institutions.\(^4\) The concept assumes that the members of a society behave in patterned ways. The task of the ethnohistorian is to determine just what the patterns are in a particular society over time and how the individual parts — whether actions, beliefs, or artifacts — together constitute the functional whole.

Both history and anthropology — as they are actually practiced — tend to focus on one society or culture at a time, and ethnohistory shares the same tendency. Indeed, the consensual definition of ethnohistory is barely distinguishable from that of the branch of anthropology known as historical ethnography — the reconstruction of the ethnographic past of a single culture. But many, perhaps most, of the historians who have taken to ethnohistory in recent years have come from the study of frontiers, in which a two-culture focus is a necessity as well as a virtue. It is there — in the
reciprocal relationship between two or more cultures in contact — that historians have found the greatest utility and most distinctive contribution of ethnohistory. By emphasizing that each culture must be understood in its own terms, as these change over time, ethnohistory ensures that the history of the frontier will cease to be (in one traditional historian’s words) the short “pathetic” story of the “inevitable” triumph of a “booming” White “civilization” over a “fragile” “primitive” culture (Sheehan 1969:269, 272, 283-285).

The second characteristic of ethnohistory is its emphasis on socio-cultural change, an emphasis it shares with history and with some anthropology. American anthropology began with the synchronic structural study of Indian tribes in the “ethnographic present,” as if the cultural patterns found in the 19th century accurately mirrored pre-Columbian patterns. Today, the “ethnographic present” has found valid new uses and the old mistaken assumption has given way to the use of the “direct historical approach,” a technique originally devised by archaeologists to reconstruct the culture history of a group by working backward from identifiable historic sites to proto- and pre-historic manifestations of the same culture. Uniting archaeology, ethnology, history, and linguistics, this diachronic approach has generally become known as ethnohistory. Its primary aim, like that of history but unlike that of the functionalist school of social anthropology (which tends to prefer static synchronic analyses of a society’s interrelated parts) is to gauge the degree of change that occurs in cultures and to comprehend the historical factors involved in and determining change. This goal can best be achieved in the long perspective of history because it allows us both to detail specific changing variables (because of the time depth) and to control our comparison of variables (because the same cultural tradition is under study).

At the same time, since change and persistence are but two sides of the same process, ethnohistory offers the best opportunity for “testing theories of pattern growth and decline, for demonstrating cultural change, and for explaining stability” (Fenton 1952:335-336). Such a service is of considerable value to both history and anthropology because historians tend to assume too much change and anthropologists too little, especially in the cultural study of small societies.

The third aspect of the ethnohistorical approach is the use of historical methods and materials. In the infancy of ethnohistory, “historical materials” were usually equated with written documents, a natural reduction in light of conventional practice. Today, the documentary record of cultural history is seen even by traditional historians as encompassing a far greater variety of sources than books and manuscripts. Both historical and anthropological
practitioners have discovered the utility of maps, music, paintings, photographs, folklore, oral tradition, ecology, site exploration, archaeological artifacts (especially trade goods), museum collections, enduring customs, language, and place names, as well as a richer variety of written sources.

Despite their new-found wealth of sources, ethnohistorians still rely primarily upon the written record, largely from the pens of non-native Western observers. These sources, of course, require the rigorous criticism customarily applied by historians but often neglected by anthropological practitioners in the past. Equally necessary is the evaluation of these sources from an ethnological perspective. Ethnohistory differs from history proper in that it adds a new dimension — “the critical use of ethnological concepts and materials in the examination and use of historical source materials” (Fenton 1966:75). For ethnohistorians have learned from their field experiences to evaluate the reliability of documentary “informants” for their own purposes and beyond the methods of ordinary historical assessments. They can bring to bear “special knowledge of the group, linguistic insights, and understanding of cultural phenomena” which allow them to utilize the data more fully than the average historian (Lurie 1961:83).9

The ethnohistorical strategy is to remain rooted in historical concreteness, eschewing large generalizations until sufficiently detailed groundwork has been laid. Like most historians, ethnohistorians are interested primarily in low-level, fact-specific generalizations of a comparative nature, not unlike those of Louis Hartz on the founding of new societies, David Brion Davis on slavery, and Fernand Braudel on the material foundations of capitalism. They find — again like most historians — that the detailed, long-range plowing of one culture yields more theoretical fruit than the scratch-hoeing of a vast area of different soils (Leacock 1961:258-259).

For ethnohistorians working in frontier studies, the social sciences, particularly anthropology, offer an abundance of theory about acculturation and the related processes of social change, revitalization, diffusion, innovation, conversion, and socialization. This body of theory provides working hypotheses, avenues of approach, and problem areas to be refined and tested by ethnohistorical analysis of specific cultures. Such detailed studies, in turn, can generate more accurate generalizations and hypotheses about social stability and change, which is no mean service in a day of theoretical consciousness.

Although historians and anthropologists share a theoretical understanding of ethnohistory and its general methodology, it is clear from their respective contributions to the literature that they sometimes differ in style and orientation. If, as William Fenton suggests, “a lot of what we call theory is a rationalization for kinds of experimental or research situations,” then
historians can be expected to make a large contribution to the on-going discussion about the nature of ethnohistory and how it can most fruitfully be pursued (Fenton 1962:11). In the past few years a distinctive “historical” style has emerged which offers some new possibilities or, perhaps more accurately, some new emphases to the students of ethnohistory.

The ethnohistorical study of cultures can move both forward and backward in time. Anthropologists usually work back from the cultural knowns of the present to the unknown past. This approach, which Fenton has called “upstreaming,” rests on three assumptions: (1) that major patterns of culture remain stable over long periods, producing repeated uniformities; (2) that these patterns can best be seen by proceeding from the known ethnographical present to the unknown past, using recent sources first and then earlier ones; and (3) that those sources that ring true at both ends of the time span merit confidence. For most anthropological practitioners, “the essence of the ethnohistorical method is distilled from concepts arrived at in working with the cultures of living societies in the field” (Fenton 1957:21-22, 1966:75).

Historians, on the other hand, tend to work with the flow of time, “downstream” from the past toward the present. While they are willing to use the abundant ethnographic literature for clues to significant cultural facts and patterns, as checks on weak historical documentation, and as documents in their cumulative evidence, by adhering to chronology they attempt to minimize the risk of anachronism and its attendant evils — special pleading, glorification of the present, and ethnocentrism.

Although personal experience is usually superior to vicarious experience, historians need not feel unduly sensitive about their lack of personal research among contemporary tribal cultures. Often the descendants of their historical subjects no longer survive, or, if they do, have lost much of their historical cultural character. Moreover, as Evans-Pritchard observed, it is sometimes forgotten that the anthropologist “relies on direct observation only in his role as ethnographer” in one or two cultures, and that when he begins to make comparative studies for theoretical purposes, “he has to rely on documents, just as the historian does” (Evans-Pritchard 1961:5; also Sturtevant 1966:18). At the same time, most historians have done something akin to field work by living in contemporary and studying both contemporary and historical Western cultures, experience that is not to be dismissed lightly when ethnohistory frequently, perhaps optimally, deals with the contact of two or more cultures in a colonial setting.

Historians also differ from their anthropological colleagues when their sources on a particular group run dry, grow sparse, or become insolubly clogged with ethnocentric bias. In such situations many anthropologists turn
to general ethnological theory — for example, on band societies, peasants, stone-age economies, ecological adaptation — or to abstract models of sociocultural change. Most historians, however, look to two historical sources: (1) descendant cultures of the earlier group, on the assumption that major patterns of culture remain stable over long periods, and (2) relative cultures in the same general culture area, preferably in the same period, which may be expected to share cultural traits (Sturtevant 1976).

All ethnohistorians face the literary problem of how to artfully blend synchronic analysis with diachronic narrative and description. The sequence of change must be shown in detailed narrative, but the causes of change must also be analyzed. Since cultural change cannot be understood without knowing what aspects of the culture persisted unchanged, some synchronic analysis is required either of the whole culture early in the narrative or of its constituent parts throughout.

Historians, traditionally preoccupied with the demands of chronological narrative, tend to forego the functional analysis of the whole culture, except, perhaps, in a brief introduction. Commonly, they begin with a narrative of the events leading to change, interrupting the flow only long enough to analyze the aspects of the culture that change, seldom those that persist. In other words, the ethnohistorical work of an historian tends to be divided into chronological sections, with synchronic analysis added within the sections where necessary. This structure has the advantage of immersing cultural analysis in a steady narrative flow that attempts to convey the passage of time and events as they actually occurred. If it is successful, the reader is carried much closer to the past than he would be by a more analytical style.

Anthropologists, on the other hand, traditionally devote a major portion of their work to synchronic analysis in an attempt to reconstruct general cultural patterns and the relationship of the culture’s parts to the whole. Their works are often organized topically by constituent cultural parts, each topic receiving chronological treatment in its separate place. In recent years, however, several anthropologists have written ethnohistories that bear a strong resemblance to the work of their historical colleagues. Anthony Wallace’s Death and Rebirth of the Seneca (1970), Bruce Trigger’s Children of Aataentsic (1976) and James Clifton’s Prairie People (1977) feature strong chronological narratives endowed with sensitive and sweeping analyses of cultural patterns and functions. By meeting the narrative obligations of the historian, they have produced enduring works of historical art as well as models of anthropological acuity.

Although historians seldom do field work, they seem in some ways to be more engaged with the present than do anthropologists. Many of the subjects they select emerge from contemporary problems that have historical
roots or from present interests that have analogues in the past. More than most anthropologists, except the practitioners of “applied anthropology,” historians write for their own generation, addressing its questions and concerns about the past. They believe that the meaning of an event is perpetually open to revision, that its meaning for successive generations will differ from its contemporary meaning or its causes. For historians the commonplace view that “each generation must rewrite the histories of its predecessors” is the simple truth, however frustrating it might be to their scholarly quest for immortality (Gay 1974:212).

In practice, by contrast, most anthropologists act as scientists interested in achieving timeless explanations of cultural uniformities. Understandably, most of their data come from living cultures experienced at first hand. Their interest in past cultures tends to be less intrinsic, as it is for most historians, than instrumental in providing additional data for their working hypotheses. Even after recognizing the difference between emic and etic explanations, few anthropologists will admit that their cultural theories might be valid for only a limited time and perhaps only their own culture.

Yet to the extent that anthropologists assume the role of ethnohistorians, they must admit the possibility, even likelihood, of such a humbling fate. By committing themselves to serving the larger audience of history, they must be prepared, like their historical colleagues, to interpret the past for their contemporaries. They must not only explain the cultures of the past in their own terms, but lead their contemporaries to responsible answers to their urgent questions about their place in time and space, about their own cultural roots and realities. By providing an accurate narrative-analysis of cultural change in the past, ethnohistorians help the present generation understand its own cultural origins and thereby to cope with the present, without pandering to the popular demand for panaceas or prostituting their scholarly ideals.

Finally, historians differ from anthropologists by allowing that moral criticism of the past is not only possible but desirable. They assume that if people have purposes, motives, and intentions, they are perforce moral beings and suitable subjects for moral criticism, largely by the standards they set for themselves. But the historian’s aim is not to chastize the actors of the past, who are mortally incorrigible, but to let himself and his contemporaries be judged and instructed by the past.10 The central issue in moral criticism for most historians “is not whether something had to happen, but whether it has to happen again” (Jennings 1975:i-x). They are simply concerned that what we approve by our silent consent in past conduct will be repeated in the future. As students and teachers of one of the humanities, they are not willing to separate their everyday moral lives from their professional lives, as
most scientists can (though less and less easily) when dealing with non-human nature.

It should be emphasized that moral criticism or judgment is not to be confused with moralizing, which means to furnish with overt moral lessons, as in a sermon. “History is a preceptor of prudence,” said Lord Acton, “not of principles,” and most historians would not dissent (Acton 1948:52). They do not feel compelled — or free — to ramble over the past handing out assignations of “guilt” and “innocence,” “good” and “evil.” When moral criticism is called for, which it rarely is, the historian need not and should not be obtrusive but merely descriptive, using the normative language of everyday speech. Eschewing the antiseptic, often technical vocabulary of scientific objectivity, “the historian,” as John Higham has written, “commits to moral criticism all the resources of his human condition. He derives from moral criticism an enlarged and disciplined sensitivity to what men ought to have done, what they might have done, and what they achieved. His history becomes an intensive, concrete reflection upon life, freed from academic primness, and offering itself as one of the noblest, if also one of the most difficult and imperfect, of the arts” (Higham 1962:625).

Ethnohistorians face their most difficult problem when they treat the contact of two cultures, each with its own value system. For they must not only judge the conduct of each people “by their success in acting in accordance with the ideals they have chosen” themselves, but they must “recognize the conflicting values and attempt to give an accurate history within the conflicting value setting” (Redfield 1953:159; Washburn 1961:36). They must not only see the ethnocentric biases and motives in each culture, but understand the reasons for them. If this duty is performed fully and well, moral criticism beyond that provided by our value-laden vocabulary is seldom necessary. The past will be cast in its own light and the lessons for the present will be clearly but subtly drawn.

The rub, of course, is to ensure that each culture is treated with equal empathy, rigor, and discernment. If we are to understand the total contact situation, we must fully understand the motives and actions of both groups. But as Bruce Trigger has warned, mere sympathy may not be enough because sympathy does not always lead to understanding, and without a clear understanding of people’s motives, respect is impossible (Trigger 1975:55). Bleeding-heart nativism will alienate the intelligent reader as quickly as anti-colonial iconoclasm; neither approaches the standard of ethnohistory.

In the past several years, the advent of the new “Social History,” which takes many of its models from the social sciences, and the growing anthropological awareness of the historical dimensions of culture have created
many exceptions to the foregoing generalizations about the two disciplines. Many historians practice what can best be called “retrospective cultural anthropology,” and many anthropologists – more than formerly, at least – pursue what is still called “historical ethnography” (Hughes 1964:22-41; Fenton 1952). Similarly, although I have emphasized the differences between the historical and anthropological styles of ethnohistory and these have been accentuated, much recent work exhibits a happy convergence of styles, blending the strengths of each into a distinctive hybrid. It is a style strong on narrative, causative analysis, and chronology, but no less sensitive to cultural nuance and the need for impartiality. Remarkably, the books and articles written in this style give little or no clue to the departmental affiliation of their authors. Perhaps we are closer to realizing the ideal and method of ethnohistory than we think. If so, I would like to think that the recent contributions of history are in no small way responsible..

NOTES

1. This essay was first presented at the 1977 meeting of the American Society for Ethnohistory in Chicago. I would like to thank Nancy Lurie, Tim Breen, Jim Ronda, and Bill Sturtevant for their constructive criticism and encouragement.

2. Two issues of *Ethnohistory* for 1961 carried the proceedings of the symposium (Baerreis 1961; Dorson 1961; Lurie 1961; Washburn 1961) and the comments of Ewers (1961), Leacock (1961), and Valentine (1961).

3. The methodological literature on ethnohistory is vast. I have found the following most helpful: Fenton 1952, 1962, 1966; Hudson 1966; Sturtevant 1966; Cohn 1968; Fontana 1969; Walker 1970; Carmack 1972; Day 1972; Euler 1972; Fogelson 1974. See Olien 1969, for an early bibliography.

4. This definition derives from my understanding of Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952; Birdsey 1953, chs. 2-5, 9, 14; Kluckhohn 1963; Singer 1968; Berkhofer 1969, chs. 5-7; Geertz 1973, ch. 1; Schneider and Bonjean 1973; Keesing 1974; and Schneider 1976.

5. See, for example, Macleod 1928; Trelease 1960; Graymont 1972; Nash 1974; Morgan 1975; and Jennings 1975. I have reviewed these books (except the first) in Axtell 1978. See also Forbes 1968.

6. Steward 1942; Strong 1953; Wright 1968. I am grateful to Nancy Lurie for a long letter describing some of the heuristic uses of the “ethnographic present.”


8. See also Fenton 1953; Nisbet 1969, chs. 7-8; and Ray 1957.


10. Washburn 1957, 1969; Higham 1962; Pearce 1974; and Wright 1976, discuss the role of moral criticism in history.

11. For a comparison of historians and anthropologists in general, see Cohn 1962.
REFERENCES

Acton, Lord

Axtell, James

Baerreis, David A.
1961 The Ethnohistoric Approach and Archaeology. Ethnohistory 8:49-77.

Berkhofer, Robert F., Jr.

Biden, David

Carmack, Robert M.

Clifton, James A.

Cohn, Bernard S.

Day, Gordon M.

Dorson, Richard M.

Euler, Robert C.

Evans-Pritchard, E. E.

Ewers, John C.

Fenton, William N.

Fogelson, Raymond D.

Fontana, Bernard L.

Forbes, Jack D.
Gay, Peter

Geertz, Clifford

Gellner, Ernest

Graymont, Barbara

Hickerson, Harold

Higham, John

Hodgen, Margaret T.

Hudson, Charles

Hughes, H. Stuart

Jennings, Francis

Keesing, Roger M.

Kluckhohn, Clyde

Kroeber, A. L. and Clyde Kluckhohn

Leacock, Eleanor

Lurie, Nancy Oestreicht


Macleod, William Christie

Morgan, Edmund S.

Nash, Gary B.

Nisbet, Robert A.
Olien, Michael D. (ed.)
1969 Ethnohistory: A Bibliography. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia, Department of Anthropology.

Pearce, Roy Harvey

Ray, Verne F. (ed.)

Redfield, Robert

Schneider, David M.

Schneider, Louis and Charles M. Bonjean (eds.)

Sheehan, Bernard W.

Singer, Milton

Steward, Julian H.
1942 The Direct Historical Approach to Archaeology. American Antiquity 7:337-343.

Strong, William Duncan

Sturtevant, William C.
1976 Comment on two papers on new approaches in Indian history. Organization of American Historians, St. Louis, April 9, 1976.

Trelease, Allen W.

Trigger, Bruce G.

Valentine, Charles A.

Walker, Deward E., Jr.

Wallace, Anthony F. C.

Washburn, Wilcomb E.
Wright, Gordon
Wright, J. V.

Submitted: January 1, 1978
Accepted: March 3, 1978