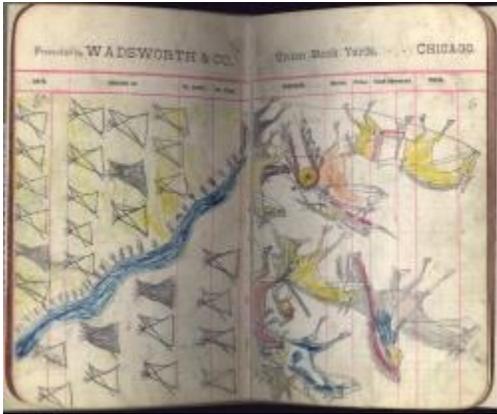


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Wadsworth Ledger book, pg. 5-6. Ayer Art Wadsworth.

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By Stanley Pargellis

[The following is a slightly revised transcription of an address given by Newberry Librarian, Stanley Pargellis, to the American Indian Ethno-historic Conference, Columbus, Ohio, November 2, 1956.]

The increasing interest which historians and ethnologists are taking in the history of the North American Indian provides the justification for this paper. It contains a word of warning, by one who makes no pretensions to expert knowledge in this particular area of study, for those who embark upon research in it without considering the basic problem of Indian history.

That problem, briefly stated, is this: in this country lived a people, divided into many tribes and those tribes divided into many groups, scattered over a large area, at war with one another, who kept no historical records themselves, and are known to us over some 500 years only from the accounts of more or less literate observers who belonged to another race, spoke another language, and had a different culture. These observers were for the most part unskilled, were often prejudiced, and were necessarily concerned with setting down surface descriptive accounts of Indian behavior, life, and customs. Only seldom, in the early days, as with David Thompson, did they attempt to tap the memories of old men of a tribe. Indians are able to remember the events of their own lifetime, but they seem to have little sense of time sequence even in their

dealings with these. Much less do they have it in dealing with their tribal memories. Some great event, some terrible catastrophe, may burn itself into the tribal consciousness, but the precise time of its happening will not be attached to its memory. Thus the Hopis of today remember, as if it happened yesterday, the savage efforts of seventeenth century Spaniards to Christianize them.

The chief reason for the Indian's lack of historical-mindedness, of course, is that he was illiterate. The possession of an historical memory runs with the ability to read and write. The ancient Achaeans, for example, could read and write, but lost that knowledge, and for several centuries all that came down to the Greeks, who rediscovered this essential of civilization, was in the form of myth. Almost the only documentation of Achaean life for us today is that which the archaeologists painfully and, for historians accustomed to a plethora of material, inadequately discover. And so it is, to a large degree, with the American Indian. What the archaeologists are doing for Indian history remains as remote and conjectural, and as fascinating, as most of the work of archaeologists who deal with prehistoric peoples.

One has to imagine here a vast timechart, most of it white terra incognita, and here and there, with dates from tree-rings or the measurements of Carbon 14, an isolated historical fact. Perhaps in time we will be able to piece together an agreed upon picture of the coming of the Indians to this continent and their adaptation to the American habitat in a period of time which may be as much as 25,000 years or more. I doubt it. Most Indian artifacts were perishable, and the hope must be rated as fanciful that the white spaces of the chart will be filled in enough to permit historical imagination to work upon them.

What we can try to do is to write the history of the Indian for the last 500 or so years, since the white man first observed him and recorded his observations. That would have to be, for the most part, a history of Indians as affected by whites. Woolen cloth, the gun, firewater, the missionary, the horse, the fur-trader, the continuing pressure of the advancing white man's frontier—it is the effect of these on the Indian that constitutes his documented history. We are prevented by the absence of data from conceiving of the Indian apart from the white man's influence.

What have we in the way of materials for this history thus limited and defined? A vast amount is apparently available. In the Newberry Library, the Ayer Collection contains at least 30,000 volumes dealing in whole or in part with North American Indians. Manuscript collections, some as yet unexplored, have much to offer. By no means is all of this so-called source material of equal worth. Observers often produced highly emotional literature, much of it for propaganda purposes. Even sober administrative reports reflect both the deep-seated convictions and the accepted routines of men with a practical assignment to accomplish. Explorers, traders, missionaries, captives, Indian agents, and army officers had different business of their own with the Indian, and looked at him from different backgrounds. For some tribes, as those in the Iroquois Confederation, or those in Pennsylvania, or the five civilized tribes, there is comparatively much material, and much that is fairly accurate; for the more remote, the more hostile tribes, there is almost nothing in the way of records.

This material offers a peculiar challenge to the historian, simply because it is, as it were, one-sided. In the late nineteenth century the rise of a school of so-called scientific history produced

manuals of historical methodology, Seignobos and Bernheim, which formulated stringent critical rules for assessing the validity and worth of a piece of historical evidence. Documents which, if they were acceptable, contained facts of importance, were subjected to severe tests. Seignobos is not taught any longer in most graduate schools, and historians are being produced today to whom ruthless appraisal of the validity of a statement is an unknown art. Yet for Indian history, for which all the source materials are colored to a greater or lesser degree, strict attention to methodology would seem a primary desideratum. Without some agreement on the worth of an account, reached by long argument, if necessary, in the historical forum, I do not see how anyone dare cite it in evidence. A single statement of fact may stand up as worthy, and five other statements, even though they corroborate each other, may be dismissed. It is only in modern public relations work that five lies make a truth. Bibliographies attached to modern works on the Indian usually consist of lists of books only. There is seldom any appraisal, seldom any distinction between a work the author regards as trustworthy, and one he has used sparingly, if at all. Sometimes these bibliographies give the impression of being padded, as if the longer the list, the better the book based on them. The student who uses such lists has no guide to tell him to beware here, and use confidently there.

Suppose that he had, not a Columbus 1951 reprint, but a new edition of Thomas Field's *An Essay Towards An Indian Bibliography*, which included critical evaluation. Whoever, or whatever team, undertook the task of making such a bibliography would have to employ these stringent historical and ethnological tests. How far is the observer to be believed? In what, if anything, can he be trusted? Can any of his statements be accepted as accurate? This is no easy task. In the 1920's, after a spate of First World War memoirs had appeared in France, a French scholar undertook to separate them for the guidance of future historians into reliable accounts by participants, and fictitious works written for an avid market. If an author wrote that he belonged to such and such a regiment, and that that regiment was at such and such a place on such and such a date, his statements were checked against the official records, and if in those primary questions of fact an error was found, the book was dismissed as unreliable. This commendable labor of love and patience took a long time, but was not impossible of fulfillment. Would it be possible to check from other sources statements in narratives of Indians? The difficulties seem to me extremely great.

Let me illustrate by citing a few Indian captivities which went through many editions, and are included in some later collections of such narratives. One is the affecting history of dreadful distresses of Frederick Manheim's family, published first in 1793; a number of brief additional captivities are included in the thin volume. I spent some time, with the aid of a first-rate genealogist, trying to find in the records the names of various people mentioned in these accounts. There is no Frederick Manheim listed in New York deed records or in the wills or in the county histories. As far as I am concerned, the story of the stripping and torturing to death of twin 16 year-old sisters is wholly fictitious. Nor does Experience Bozarth, who is said to have killed two Indians with an axe, appear in the annals of her Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania. No Johonnat, relater of a third account, is in the census records of Falmouth, Maine, for 1790, nor do the families of his companions on St. Clair's expedition appear either in that census for the towns from which they were supposed to come, nor in any of the vital records of Massachusetts. On the other hand, the Reverend John Corbley, who lost a wife and three of his five children in 1782, is in the census eight years later with seven dependents; and there is a

Matthew Harbeson listed in Allegheny County, whose wife Mercy, or Massy, may well have experienced the six-day horror described in her deposition. Three out of five of these tales, therefore, are rendered suspect by the lack of evidence that the narrators or the victims were ever alive.

The longest account in this little book concerns that Peter Williamson, who about 1740, as a “rough, ragged, humleheaded, long, stowie, clever, growthie boy,” was kidnapped by a professional gang in Aberdeen, sold in America, had certain adventures there, wrote a book about them when he got back to London in 1757, prosecuted his kidnappers and got Ezoo, compiled the first city directory of Edinburgh, installed the first penny post there, kept a tavern where he was known as Indian Peter, occasionally dressed in Delaware Indian costume to amuse his friends, and died in 1799, a by no means unrespected citizen. All the above statements I am willing to accept as true; there is as much evidence for them as for most eighteenth century minor figures about whom data can be turned up from other sources than their own stories. But as for the facts in Williamson’s book, I have grave doubts. He mentions in it no less than a dozen names of Pennsylvanians who were massacred by Indians in 1755 and 1756. Not one of those names appears in the Colonial Records of Pennsylvania or in the Pennsylvania Archives. Williamson may have been drafted into Shirley’s 50th regiment of foot, but his career in that regiment reads as if much of it were taken from the newspapers. He sounds very much like a deserter, and his account of the summer of 1756 at Oswego could scarcely have been written by one who was there, for it breathes none of the tension that French scouting and marauding parties over many weeks instilled in a garrison occupying an untenable fort. To write in a new edition of Field the exact evaluation of Williamson’s book would take more time and money than I now possess; it would mean journeys to California and to London.

It would be difficult, but not impossible, for a thorough scholar to do a careful job of analysis on every captivity, not only those which were published but those in the official or semi-official reports. After the captivities had been investigated and scrutinized, or before, there would be the accounts of all the others, the explorers, the traders, the missionaries, and so on, who wrote about Indians. In every case, if a definitive job of evaluation were to be done, as much as possible would have to be found about the life and character of the author. A sly man writes a sly book, or has someone write it for him. Every book, of course, has a history of its own: Why was it written? From what was it written: notes, diaries, or, long after, from memory? Did new editions contain new material? How well did it sell? The historians on the team would try to answer such questions. And the ethnologists would keep a sharp eye to see whether the author’s account deviated from their own understanding of the patterns of Indian behavior, and decide whether such a deviation, a century ago, was perhaps possible. Even this kind of investigation might not be enough. Perhaps a man who was wrong about the Sioux was right about the Osage. I can foresee a good many hours spent in argument as to how much, if any, of a particular book is to be accepted as valid.

After this gigantic task was accomplished, and the thousands of pieces of literature had been assessed, how much would remain that could be accepted as trustworthy? 10 percent? 25? Surely not 50? I omit the results of modern field work; its value in the writing of a history of the Indians is to provide the historian with tests that he would not have known without them, and to suggest questions that he would not otherwise have thought of. My guess would be that so little would

survive as authentic, trustworthy source material, that every scholar, even those with less than the usual scholar's bank account, would be able to find room for it on his own library shelves.

The next step would be the adaptation of IBM techniques to this surviving material. A history of a single tribe is scarcely good enough; we want also the relations between tribes. One would like to date, and to locate on the map, which would doubtless necessitate the help of geographers, every time that a war or scouting party appeared outside its rough territorial limits, and was seen and recorded by some observer. From such scattered facts, for scattered they would have to be, the historian might be able to draw some inferences about the comparative strength of tribes at different periods in its history, and to hazard some guesses in assigning reasons for the change. Other factors—famine, sickness, a bitter winter—might play a part; or perhaps some defect in social or political organization prevented survival or recovery. The punchcard technique seems to be able to control masses of apparently unrelated fact better than the traditional system of cards and cross-references.

Now, let us suppose that we have discovered the trustworthy data, and have it arrayed in up-to-date form. Who can make use of it? I am told that in a great state university, not in Ohio, a member of the department approached the chairman and suggested that a chair of Indian history be established. "Not a bad idea," said the chairman. "What qualifications should he have?" "Well, he ought to have thorough training, at the advanced research level, in history, ethnology, archaeology, and linguistics." "Fine," replied the chairman. "You find him, and I'll have him appointed."

As I look over the recent books on the Indian, I am impressed with the work that the ethnologists are doing. Ewers' *The Horse in Blackfoot Indian Culture* carries weight with me as an historian. He combines fieldwork and his knowledge of culture patterns with judicious use of historical sources. An historian untrained in ethnology could not have written this book. Moreover, Ewers analyzes his sources, finding corroboration in tribal tradition of Saukamaupée's story of the first horses the Blackfoot had ever seen, and criticizing less careful users of those facts. Fenton is another ethnologist who starts with the present-day pattern and works backward, testing "early descriptions of Indian behavior against a knowledge of how Indians behave as persons," a process he calls "upstreaming." I have no objection to such a method, when it produces such good results. The historian, as such, is of course less interested in the details of the Iroquois Eagle Dance than in the changes which took place in its performances over the years, in its evolution and in its spread. His first question, which Fenton also recognizes, is "Why? Why the changes?" Perhaps this, the basic question of historiography, cannot be answered; but we are further along on the road towards answering it because of such studies as Fenton's. Also I can mention as good ethno-history, though I know less about it than I would like, the extraordinary work being done by Erminie Voegelin in connection with Indian Claims cases. Out of biased incomplete documentation, she is establishing a series of facts that are accepted in a court of law.

There is no reason for despair, or for maintaining that Indian history cannot be written. Much of medieval history remains misty, and the historian, by the use of the disciplined imagination, must often piece scattered facts together to make a pattern. Indian history is misty also, but the scattered facts emerge slowly into some semblance of order.

There is another field in which good work is being done today, and in which much more remains to be done. That is the field of the relations between white men and Indians. That is a story definitely told from the white man's point of view. It can be religious history, political history, diplomatic history, administrative history (which would utilize the mass of materials in the Bureau of Indian Affairs), or educational history. It should be and is being written by historians, who have a large area still to explore. In evaluating the wisdom of this decision or that on the part of administrators, historians find themselves in need of understanding Indian behavior. They could make good use of the ethnologist's specialized knowledge. Ethnologists, in reading books by historians, find their assumptions about Indian behavior disconcerting, to say the least.

Whether the ethnologist and the historian can be combined in the same person, as in that fanciful chair of Indian history, I do not know. They are, at the moment, seeking different ends. Many ethnologists, but not all, are trying to establish patterns of culture behavior, without much regard for the "why" of those patterns. The historian is concerned, not with pleading that every event in history is *sui generis*, as some social scientists seem to think, but with charting developments and changes in the history of mankind, asking why they occurred, and what effects they had. The historian is a more humble person than the social scientist, or the ethnologist, not because he sees a longer range, but because he is, perhaps, more aware of the multitudinous factors which produce change. He really is concerned at the high level, as the ethnologist is also concerned, with the question of the treatment of alien races by a more powerful white race. We are pretending to exercise some leadership in the world today, a world in which by far the great majority lives beneath our standard in material things, and over whom our material dominance gives us, for the time being, dominance in power. I am still enough of an idealist, in matters of truth, to hope that the team of ethnologist and historian, though I cannot see them united in the same person in my lifetime, may produce something on Indian history and on the history of relations of white with Indian that will be of some service in our dealings with non-whites in the rest of the world today.

What I am after is a much more complete history of the Indian and of the white man's dealings with the Indian, a history that shall at last be, after the emotions and prejudices and fears of the nineteenth century are over, a calm, sober, truthful, objective narrative. Maybe we are not up to it yet. From what I know of the two disciplines involved, we are far from it. Stupid jealousies still inhibit the cooperation of the two, which seems to me, for all the reasons I have cited, to be essential if we are to do this job.

In conclusion, and with my tongue in my cheek a little, I will pose you a problem: what has been the effect of the Indian upon the white? We are almost the only nation in the civilized world which descends to fisticuffs to prove an argument. No European would ever dream that he could win an intellectual argument by knocking his opponent down. Yet in the United States, as demonstrated in most TV shows, and backed up by thousands and thousands of newspaper stories, we still think that the strongest guy, proved in hand-to-hand battle, is the rightest guy. We are a strange nation, we Americans, a unique nation. How much, in our development as a unique race, have we been influenced by the red man against whom we fought? Did we acquire the habit of knocking people down because we had fought against the red man for some three centuries?