SURVEY ARTICLE

ETHNOHISTORY IN AN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT: INDEPENDENT DISCIPLINE OR CONVENIENT DATA QUARRY?

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... divided by other concerns, and with a great impetus to discover new countries than to study them, constantly moving when they should have stayed at rest, biased perhaps by those unjust prejudices that cast a slur in our eyes on savage societies, or at least, witness of our European indifference for them, they did not sufficiently devote themselves to bringing back exact and complete observations; they have met the invariable end of those who observe in a precipitate and superficial manner – their observations have been poor, and the imperfection of their reports has been the penalty of our carelessness ... the main object ... would be the careful gathering of all means that might assist him to penetrate the thought of the peoples among whom he would be situated and to account for the order of their actions and relationships.

Joseph-Marie Degérando – 1800¹

The use of historical literature as ethnographic source material has recently become as widely accepted by Australian prehistorians as by New Zealand and Pacific scholars. It has been so utilised since the nineteenth century in North America and for long by African historians and anthropologists. In all areas this probably stems from recognition of the wealth of information existing in the literature of the contact period. Such evidence often represents all that is known of many peoples, since certain groups did not survive physically, much less retain their traditional cultural forms, into the late nineteenth century when ethnographic studies began in earnest with an appreciation of the urgent need to record indigenous culture. Embedded in historical documents recording early settlement by Europeans and contact with the Indians are the only substantial accounts of the Huron and other tribes of north-eastern North America, as is the case in Australia for the Aborigines of Port Jackson in New South Wales as well as those of Tasmania. Many Australian prehistorians have been sensible of the value and importance of the source material available in the historical literature; few now ignore its evidence on the recent past. Historians also are directing attention to the problem of frontier contact history, of the interaction of Aboriginal and European groups in rural and urban communities, to Aboriginal history and the themes of race relations in Australian history.

All such studies, by prehistorians wishing to gain otherwise unobtainable data, and by historians hoping to illuminate a neglected aspect of Australian history, may be termed ethnohistory. They are often so labelled. Among Australian prehistorians 'ethnohistory' is now a well accepted part of ventures into reconstructing the Aboriginal past, but they often – and confusingly – refer to this as ethnography (the two words being used synonymously). Anthropologists use ethnography to mean descriptive accounts of a single culture, as opposed to comparative and theoretical

¹ Comments on 'the observation of savage people' written in 1800 to advise members of the 'Société des observateurs de l'homme' joining Baudin's expedition to the Pacific (Moore 1969: 64, 70). This tradition of advice to travellers continued in France during the nineteenth century. A sociological and ethnographic questionnaire for travellers prepared by the 'Société d'anthropologie de Paris' in 1883 was answered by Lumholtz in 1889 (Birtles 1976). The British Association for the Advancement of Science and the Anthropological Institute first published *Notes and queries on anthropology* in 1874 'to promote accurate anthropological observation on the part of travellers ...' (Colliver 1976; Urry 1972).

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studies. Further confusion is created by subsuming ethnohistory (in the sense of the use of historical evidence as data for creating historical ethnographies) under the activities of 'ethnoarchaeology'.² There remain further questions on the ultimate aims of ethnohistory in the Australian context, as well as on its theoretical basis and philosophy. Have the practitioners of this branch of historical/prehistoric research given thought to the theoretical framework of their discipline? Perhaps Bodin's comments on the practice of history in 1565 apply to recent Australian ethnohistory:

I have been led to write this book, for I noticed that while there was a great abundance and supply of historians, yet no one has explained the art and method of the subject. Many recklessly and incoherently confuse the accounts, and none derives any lessons therefrom.³

The present paper is concerned both to survey the practice of ethnohistory and its methodology in Australia and to raise certain theoretical issues relevant to the Australian context, particularly to prehistoric studies. The writer is convinced that such a survey is warranted by current theory and practice. One could argue that Bodin's comments do apply in this context, despite available exemplars in both theoretical and descriptive literature from the Americas and Africa. This is the more regrettable given the potential for ethnohistorical studies in this country. Further, ethnohistorical sources remain our major data base for large areas of temperate Australia, particularly the well-watered east coast which would have supported the majority of the Aboriginal population in the pre-contact period, with life styles markedly different from those of the ethnographically documented arid and tropical lands. We need the balance this data base can give our knowledge of culture and adaptation in Aboriginal Australia.

In this survey I have taken a broad view of ethnohistory, but my concerns are primarily with the significance for prehistorians and the prehistorians' use of ethnohistorical evidence. The ramifications of the subject as a whole are wide; there are problems needing deeper consideration than is possible in discussion constrained to the implications for prehistorians which have conditioned the lines of argument presented.⁴ As the major influences on prehistory in Australia stem from Britain and the United States I have concentrated on the practice and theory of these areas.

Some problems of practice

Before considering practice, problems of definition arise. Is ethnohistory an independent entity, a discipline in its own right, or does the specific title merely reflect the academic's wish to categorise, so a specialised branch of one larger discipline acquires a spurious individuality and the scientific aura of a name derived from classical Greek? Yet for ethnohistory is this 'larger discipline' history or anthropology? Denning argues that: 'Ethnohistorians pursue the same ends by the same methods as historians. Ethnohistory is only history writ polysyllabically'.⁵

In practice there seems considerable ambiguity — ethnohistory is referred to as a distinct study in its own right, but often seems regarded as little different from ethnography. In Australia many prehistorians show great interest in material they consider ethnographic evidence, though obtained by historical methods. Yet most local anthropologists show little concern for the potential of such records for the study of culture change over time. To North American practitioners ethnohistory is but part

² Jones 1978; Gould 1977:360.

³ Bodin 1945:14.

⁴ I should like to acknowledge here the assistance which I have had in clarifying my ideas, from discussions with Diane Barwick, Greg Denning, Niel Gunson, Campbell Macknight, E.J. Tapp and James Urry.

⁵ Denning 1966:23.

of the wider study of cultural anthropology, with a theoretical base and aims which are clearly anthropological. These ambiguities in practice raise fundamental questions of aims and methods. Also, one may doubt whether a sub-discipline can pursue the aim of one 'parent' by using the methods of another. Denning comments:

The discipline . . . is still unformed, a no-man's land between anthropology and history. An ethnohistorian tends to be a historian who is an amateur anthropologist, or an anthropologist who is an amateur historian, and in consequence the object of suspicion of anthropologist and historian alike. The ethnohistorian's prime concern is with the description of illiterate societies by literate observers at the time when contact between the two had not changed or destroyed the illiterate society. On every continent this period of contact and change has been caught in the journals and letters of explorers, administrators, traders and missionaries.⁶

Pacific and Australian prehistorians may have closer academic ties with history than their American or Canadian colleagues. The discipline has not developed here as part of anthropology (albeit its 'lesser part'),⁷ for the anthropological traditions of Australian universities stem from those of the structural-functionalist school of British social anthropology, largely unconcerned with historical questions of development.

Ethnohistorical work by Australian prehistorians seems more descriptive than that in the Americas, either as a source of comparative data, or as factual ethnography (distinct only in its derivation from historical rather than contemporary fieldwork sources). It is not yet appreciated sufficiently as a study requiring its own specialised techniques and conventions, nor is its source material recognised as requiring special assessment of a kind distinct from that applied to the ethnographic record produced by professional anthropologists. In a history of contact in Western Victoria⁸ Corris discusses this problem of sources, but he does not consider the theory of the subject itself. Should it be labelled history or ethnography, or does it sit uneasily in a no-man's land between the two, trying to achieve the aims of one discipline while using the evidence and techniques of the other as Denning suggests? The use of its data by some suggests that it is neither, merely a convenient source of useful information to be used for interpretative analogies. There is a grave danger here not only of a subject lacking a firm philosophical basis, but of serious misuse of historical evidence.

To most Australian prehistorians such historical research has been an adjunct to archaeological studies, used more to provide ethnographic analogy for interpretation of the material evidence recovered in excavation than data to be analysed and interpreted in their own right. Examples are numerous: Lampert's discussion of the bone points from the Durras North sea-cave;⁹ Brayshaw interpreting the human remains from rock shelters in North Queensland;¹⁰ Haglund those from Broadbeach;¹¹ Megaw and Poiner on the archaeology of the Sydney district;¹² and my own use of the local historical literature on Aboriginal material culture to explain certain features of the stone artefact assemblages from the most recent levels of the Whiteman Creek

⁶ Denning 1966:23, 25.

⁷ Willey and Sabloff 1974:131, 179.

⁸ Corris 1968.

⁹ Lampert 1966.

¹⁰ Brayshaw 1977:267, 300-311.

¹¹ Haglund 1976:77-86.

¹² Megaw 1967, 1969, 1974; Megaw and Wright 1966; Poiner 1976.

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rock shelter in the Clarence valley.¹³ Independent thematic studies based on the historical sources are rarer in Australia than these brief surveys of ethnohistorical data in relation to the archaeological material from one site or region. Yet this is an area where ethnohistory can develop considerable theoretical strength and make vital contributions to knowledge. Studies of this type for Australia include Hallam's book on the use of fire in the south-west,¹⁴ Lawrence and Poiner on subsistence economies,¹⁵ Jones on Tasmanian demography and use of dogs and Meehan's work on burial customs. In work on subsistence patterns and burial practices for the recent past my own research has drawn on ethnohistory and archaeological data.¹⁶

Brief surveys of the ethnohistorical evidence as summaries of the final phases of Aboriginal prehistory are also used to introduce regional archaeologies.¹⁷ What we lack as yet in Australia is a published literature of regional ethnohistories comparable to Tooker and Trigger on the Huron, Gunther on the North West Coast tribes or Hickerson on the Chippewa.¹⁸ Regional surveys have proved popular prehistory thesis topics at the BA Honours level,¹⁹ although they remain rare for higher degrees.²⁰ Among the latter, however, strictly archaeological studies often have a high content of ethnohistory, as in Allen's work on western New South Wales and Brayshaw's on the Herbert/Burdekin region of North Queensland.²¹ Regrettably many of these studies remain unpublished.²² Fewer still are the ethnohistorical studies undertaken independently of the degree-gaining training exercise.

Some problems of definition: the view from the Americas

Definitions are implicit not only in the expressed aims of a discipline, but also in what is seen by practitioners as its appropriate subject matter and proper scope. In North America ethnohistory first appeared in the form of summaries of the historical information on sites and localities introducing discussions of their archaeology. Ethnographic records of specific tribal groups were systematically compiled from the late nineteenth century; it was recognized that historical documents could provide the bulk of the raw data. These documents included a wide range of French, Dutch, English and Spanish historical sources from the colonial period. The term ethnohistory was first used in the sense of a distinct approach by Kroeber, in his work on the Californian Indians in the 1920s. Archaeological studies of Mesoamerica have also been historically oriented, with increasing use of the Spanish sources from the conquest period to supplement the material data from archaeology.²³ Some demand further development of this aspect:

¹³ McBryde 1965.

¹⁴ Hallam 1975.

¹⁵ Lawrence 1968; Poiner 1976.

¹⁶ Jones 1970, 1971; Meehan 1971; McBryde 1976 and 1974:136-153.

¹⁷ Flood 1973; McBryde 1974.

¹⁸ Tooker 1964; Trigger 1969 and 1976; Gunther 1972; Hickerson 1970.

¹⁹ Sullivan 1964; Brayshaw 1966; Allen 1968; Sabine 1970; Lane 1970; Ross 1976.

²⁰ Sullivan 1970.

²¹ Allen 1972; Brayshaw 1977.

²² Though see McBryde 1978c.

²³ Compare with Chase 1976 and Swadesh 1975.

Maya studies suffer from unbalance . . . many archaeologists seldom lift their eyes from their excavations, to see how colonial sources can supplement their findings, or are content to satisfy their curiosity with Landa's account of the Maya.²⁴

Yet in spite of practising a long established approach American ethnohistorians still seem concerned at ambiguities in aims and scope:

. . . If there are few ethnologically minded historians there are also equally few historically minded ethnologists. The reasons for the dearth in both cases is the same. Documentary study of American Indian groups has been tolerated, but not actively encouraged, in most of the anthropology departments in the land; ethnological study of the American Indians has been grudgingly allowed, if allowed at all, in history departments . . .²⁵

The North American literature on ethnohistory reveals divergent views: some writers see it as closely allied to anthropological description (ethnography), others as 'the study of the history of the peoples normally studied by anthropologists . . .'.²⁶ These diverse statements of aims and subject matter, do at least indicate that there is an awareness of philosophic issues, which often emerge in debates on the inter-relationships of anthropology, history, prehistory and archaeology. The interest has been sufficient to support a specialist journal (*Ethnohistory*) and to produce a large regional literature.

Sturtevant sees historians and anthropologists as differing on the question of using evidence derived from other disciplines. He views ethnohistory as combining two principal interests, the production of historical ethnographies and the historiography of non-literate cultures. 'Historiography' here is used to mean 'history' in general, with no theoretical implications. Other American scholars regard ethnohistory as a kind of 'anthropology with a time dimension', its ultimate aim being a controlled study of culture change during the contact situation.²⁷

This theoretical approach implies that the historical element in ethnohistory lies not so much in the specific nature of the resulting narrative or the documentary evidence on which it is based, as in its chronological framework. By implication history is seen as a discipline concerned with particular events in time. This view of history is also implicit in the stress by Lantis, and the contributors to her volume on Alaskan ethnohistory,²⁸ on the use of dated historical materials to document culture change. Diachronic and synchronic culture histories can thus be reconstructed. However this view of historical chronology is a limited one. Given the resolution of much historical evidence a precise chronological framework for events may not be attainable. For Lantis, ethnohistory comprises both ethnographies prepared on the basis of written historical documents and histories of particular groups reconstructed from their oral traditions.²⁹ Townsend emphasises 'the fusing of historical documentation with ethnographic materials of the same period to provide a more complete picture of a culture'.³⁰ The 'stuff of ethnohistory', according to Lantis, is the 'composite ethnography'.³¹

²⁴ Chase 1976:154.

²⁵ Voegelin 1954:2.

²⁶ Sturtevant 1966:6.

²⁷ G. and L. Spindler in the foreword to Hickerson 1969:viii.

²⁸ Lantis 1970:5. Compare with Van Stone 1970:50-51 and Townsend 1970:71.

²⁹ Compare Lantis 1970:5, 51.

³⁰ Townsend 1970:71.

³¹ Lantis 1970:39.

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Hickerson, in his work on the Chippewa, also develops the idea of time depth and cultural change. He explicitly states his theoretical stance, and his aim, which is the explication of Chippewa cultural organization and culture change. This he considers will lead to the statement of hypotheses leading to general laws on the processes involved:

Let ethnohistory be viewed here as the employment of one of a number of historical techniques for the purpose of reconstructing given cultures of the past, the relationship of environmental factors to sociocultural change in such cultures, and the reconstruction of the movement and location of identifiable populations . . . Ethnohistorians, then, apply the methods of historiography to the cultures in which they are interested in the light of their general anthropological experience, to gauge change that has taken place in them and to comprehend the historical factors involved in and determining change. By grasping the content and dynamics of aboriginal cultures, that is, tribal cultures as they existed before contact with European and other civilizations, we begin to encounter the problems of development and change on an evolutionary level. At this level the anthropologist has no alternative but to direct his energies to the solution of general laws of culture change. Ethnohistory, then, is the sub-branch of ethnology which employs historiographic method to lay a foundation for the formulation of general laws; in a word, ideographic means to nomothetic ends.³²

Hickerson's aims are anthropological rather than conforming to the normally accepted particularistic historical model; he stresses the formulation of generalisations on culture processes. Yet he also recognizes that historical evidence makes historiographical demands on those using it. To him documentary research is one of many avenues open to the anthropologist, who must then become acquainted with the techniques of historical analysis as well as those of anthropology;³³ he must be rigorous in utilising historical archives, subjecting them to careful source criticism. Hickerson also stresses the potential of these sources: 'Anthropologists must, . . . turn more and more to history as the primary means to salvage ancient culture, not for nostalgic reasons, but in order to explain evolution, the foundation upon which all cultural activity is built'.³⁴ However he does not discuss the theoretical differences which may exist between the historian's narrative of related events in temporal sequence and the ethnographer's generalised 'functional' reconstruction of social relationships and structure.³⁵

Hickerson's theoretical stance represents one extreme. As in the 'New Archeology' of American prehistoric studies, its stress is on the 'covering law model'. Trigger's historical ethnography of the Huron,³⁶ produced in the same decade, represents a differing philosophy. It surveys and collates the historical evidence emphasising inter-relationships between the elements of Huron society as a working system. It is in effect an ethnography, though the writer claims it to be distinct from the comprehensive comparative ethnological work by Tooker.³⁷ Trigger relied on historical records, used 'as if they were oral informants'.³⁸ Whether this is a valid procedure might be debated. A comprehensive description of the society is presented,

³² Hickerson 1970:18 and 7; compare with 122-123.

³³ Hickerson 1970:2.

³⁴ Hickerson 1970:122.

³⁵ Compare with Hodgen 1974, chapter 1.

³⁶ Trigger 1969.

³⁷ Tooker 1964.

³⁸ Trigger 1969:32.

the level of analysis imposed carefully determined after critical assessment of the evidence's limitations. The description here is not generalisation in Hickerson's sense, but still could be said to be 'significant description' in the sense that an historical narrative may be seen as 'significant narrative', when it incorporates interpretative judgments on the events chosen for inclusion and their inter-relationships.³⁹ Description does not necessarily exclude analysis, nor imply a lack of awareness of more general cultural issues and the importance of explanation, as is often implied in the debates on the relationship between anthropology, prehistoric archaeology and history.⁴⁰ This point is relevant for the status of historical ethnographies in ethnohistory. The aims of the exercises represented by *The Chippewa* and *The Huron* differ (as do the underlying philosophies of their writers); they need not be mutually exclusive but rather are complementary. Both approaches, in my view, are relevant and worthwhile: they apply different sets of questions to the evidence to illuminate different aspects of the past. The important reservation is whether the evidence available can sustain their development.

Brumfiel in a recent review shows sensitivity on these issues, stressing that it is the use of evidence which distinguishes ethnohistory from other branches of cultural anthropology:

The ethnohistorian deals with written documents, documents which are actual artifacts of the cultural system under study, and documents which describe the cultural system as seen by outside observers. What separates these three fields of culture study (i.e. ethnography, archaeology, ethnohistory) is not the theoretical perspectives or research goals of the specialists involved: these may vary as greatly within a given field as between two of the fields. Rather each field can be distinguished from the others by the unique methods which it employs to acquire, evaluate and interpret its particular type of data.⁴¹

Brumfiel raises the question whether 'the stuff of ethnohistory' lies in the documents themselves or in the 'historically documented cultural systems', but emphasises two basic procedures for all who would use ethnohistorical data: firstly, 'the identification and location of relevant sources', and secondly, 'the development of "an adequate critical understanding" of these sources'.⁴²

Many would stress, as does Brumfiel, that ethnohistory can be defined only in terms of its methods, that it denotes a method or technique rather than a distinct discipline.⁴³ As Carmack points out,⁴⁴ ethnohistory faces the same dilemma as prehistoric archaeology in its status-struggles to maintain a separate identity within cultural anthropology. This is a problem applying particularly (and only?) to its practice in North America, a point not seen by Carmack. So, to him, there is a danger that its general theoretical framework will seem indistinct from that of the wider study of cultural anthropology.⁴⁵

³⁹ Walsh 1967:32.

⁴⁰ Willey and Phillips 1958; Binford 1972:20-32, 114-121; Plog 1968; compare Hodgen 1974 with Trigger 1970; Watson, Le Blanc and Redman 1971:166-169.

⁴¹ Brumfiel 1976:398, compare with Denning 1966:25.

⁴² Brumfiel 1976:403. Compare with Carmack's (1975:66) review of the same volumes edited by Cline.

⁴³ See the Fenton, Leacock and Washburn papers on this theme in the issues of *Ethnohistory* for 1961-62.

⁴⁴ Carmack 1972:230.

⁴⁵ Carmack 1972:231.

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Ethnohistory is a special set of techniques and methods for studying culture through the use of written and oral traditions. As methodology it is complementary not only to archaeology, but also to historical linguistics, ethnography and paleobiology.⁴⁶

These techniques are of course the historian's 'source preparation and criticism'. If the sources are oral tradition, as for example in Africa, then special problems emerge; these have been critically discussed by Vansina.⁴⁷ Nevertheless critical evaluation remains of paramount importance. If one were to define a discipline according to its subject matter (rather than either its aims or its methodology) then the chief concerns of ethnohistory, according to Carmack, are 'specific history, historical ethnography and folk history'.⁴⁸ Specific history in this context seems to include culture history,⁴⁹ and the documentation of change over time stressed by Hickerson. So his views on the aims and scope of ethnohistory lie within the range already established for North American practitioners. Indeed there seems consensus on the parameters of this range amongst American workers.

Some problems of definition: European views

Ethnohistory as a self-conscious academic activity is a peculiarly North American/Pacific development in anthropology and prehistory. Its nearest parallels in studies by European prehistorians lie in the use of folk custom to provide ethnographic analogies, or the culling of ancient literary sources for the same purpose when interpreting sites or artefacts from the Iron Age communities on the fringes of the classical world. For the first we may cite Grahame Clark's use of comparative evidence from the 'folk culture' of European peasant societies to aid interpretation of finds from Mesolithic and Neolithic sites, especially the fishing and trapping methods of north-western Europe and the agricultural equipment and methods of the south-east. This study has not been developed by Clark as either ethnography or ethnohistory in itself, but as a source of analogy, an illumination of the life-style of a particular type of society. Let us take one example of his use of this kind of evidence to assist functional interpretation of archaeological remains. When discussing pike fishing among the Maglemosians of northern Europe he posits the theory that the barbed bone points recovered from their sites served as leister prongs.⁵⁰ He refers to the numerical proportions of fish hooks and points in the deposits, together with ethnographic data on Lapland fishing to support the hypothesis. 'One is reminded', he says, 'irresistibly of Scheffer's description of fishing among the Lapps'.⁵¹ Yet (given the tenor of the argument) is the quotation irresistible or merely convenient, especially as it also offers suggestions towards seasonal use of the sites? Scheffer says:

Their way of fishing alters with the season, in the summer usually with drag nets, between two boats, or else with spears like tridents, but that they have more teeth. With these they strike pikes, especially when they lie sunning themselves near the top of the water: they do the same by night burning wood at the prow, by which light the fish are enticed thither.⁵¹

When Clark surveys the use of traps in the prehistoric hunting economies of northern Europe he again uses evidence from modern folk usage. This he interprets as representing survivals of very ancient methods and equipment. It therefore offers the

⁴⁶ Carmack 1972:232.

⁴⁷ Vansina 1965.

⁴⁸ Carmack 1972:235.

⁴⁹ Carmack 1972: 236.

⁵⁰ Clark 1952:46ff.

⁵¹ Clarke 1952:47. The Scheffer description dates to the seventeenth century.

'cultural continuity' regarded as so important by most users of ethnographic parallels in the Americas and Australia.⁵² His paper in *Aspects of archaeology in Britain and beyond* discusses the value of this approach,⁵³ stressing the dangers of using ethnographic parallels with points familiar to workers in hunter-gatherer archaeology of Australia, Africa and the New World. By including among the sources of analogy the descriptions left 'by earlier observers'⁵⁴ Clark adds historical evidence to that of ethnography.

Clark states that in writing *Prehistoric Europe* he hoped to bring into focus 'two distinct lines of vision, those of the natural scientist and of the historian'.⁵⁵ His main categories of evidence are archaeological, secondly ethnographic and ethnohistorical, and finally biological. He explicitly distinguishes observations or records by trained ethnologists from ethnohistorical data, described as 'uncritical but still useful records by early writers'.⁵⁶ In a 1974 paper Clark acknowledges the impact on his thinking of a period spent in New Zealand, 'a country with a strong ethnohistorical tradition'.⁵⁷

Yet in spite of Clark's demonstration in the 1950s that such an approach could yield vital and otherwise unobtainable clues to understanding the past, there was little development of it by other writers on European prehistory. Clark's influence has borne more fruit in antipodean archaeology. Old World scholars seem to prefer an approach (at least for stone age studies) which is entirely non-text-aided, reconstructing the past strictly from the evidence of archaeology. Otherwise the nearest European parallel to the ethnohistorical studies of African, American, Pacific or Australian prehistorians is found in European 'protohistory' which uses the evidence to be gleaned from the writers of classical antiquity relating to the Iron Age Celts, Scyths and Germanic peoples. The *Histories* of Herodotus is one of the finest ethnohistorical documents of any period with its descriptions of the culture of the Scyths and other non-literate peoples incorporated in, or peripheral to, the Persian and Greek world. For certain aspects of reconstruction, for example of social structure, religious beliefs and practices, the prehistorians of Iron Age Britain and Europe lean heavily on classical and Irish texts⁵⁸ to supplement archaeological evidence. They move from one data base to the other, without examining the discrepancies in detail, a process which could lead to rewarding investigations of the interface between the two. The use of the literary sources by Ross, Powell and Piggott⁵⁹ on the problems of Celtic religion closely parallels in practice that of Pacific and Australian ethnohistorians. Yet, perhaps because of the continuity between the ancient peoples being studied and the modern scholar of European cultural background, such investigations are not referred to as *ethnohistory*. They are researching the prehistory of their own land; the heritage is not seen as alien, as belonging to a distinct ethnic group. The usual distinguishing label is 'protohistory', used to indicate the existence of historical sources. Their aims are seen as coterminous with those of both history and prehistory; indeed most workers in this particular field would see little difference in aim between history and prehistory. Yet even in the field of Iron Age protohistory the use of archaeological and historical sources in combined studies could be more effectively

⁵² Peterson 1971:240; compare with Clark 1951:55-56.

⁵³ See especially Clark 1951:62; also Clark 1962:116-118.

⁵⁴ Clark 1951:64; compare with Clark 1974:40-44.

⁵⁵ Clark 1952:vii.

⁵⁶ Clark 1974:45.

⁵⁷ Clark 1974:54. At least two of his former students working in New Zealand and New Guinea acknowledge the stimulus of his emphasis on the use of ethnographic sources in his teaching (Bulmer 1977:184, Shawcross 1977:277).

⁵⁸ Jackson 1964.

⁵⁹ Ross 1970; Powell 1959; Piggott 1968.

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developed by both archaeologists and historians. There is scope for more interdisciplinary studies, for greater communication between classical historians and the Iron Age prehistorians, and above all, for more critical awareness of the potential of both categories of evidence.

Antipodean ethnohistory

The New Zealand tradition of ethnohistorical studies has produced excellent historical ethnographies, thematic investigations and archaeological interpretation.⁶⁰ Here there has been a concern with the quality of the evidence 'derived from the writings of people who had no training in the importance of accurate detail'.⁶¹ Doubts have been expressed about the value of the European historical evidence, particularly by Buck who in 1926 gave priority to Maori oral tradition, stressing '... there is no comparison between the inaccurate writings of a globe trotting European and the ancient traditions of a cultured barbarian'.⁶² According to Denning certain New Zealand historians consider that the historical sources are often misused by those with anthropological aims.⁶³ Such complaints indicate a sophisticated inter-disciplinary awareness yet to emerge in Australia.

Theoretical and philosophical problems are implicit in the study of cultures whose own concept of the past may differ from those of western traditions⁶⁴ of historical enquiry, and may even by their canons be considered ahistorical. Stanner has argued that the Aboriginal world-view largely precluded the development of interests in narrative history of the kind familiar in western cultures.⁶⁵ However there was an indigenous Polynesian and Maori interest in folk history, genealogy, oral tradition and the past development of local groups. This has been considered valid source material for historical and anthropological studies by both indigenous and European researchers.⁶⁶ Evidence from the European literature of the contact period can be integrated with such oral traditions to create broadly based reconstructions of the past. For most Polynesians maintenance of traditional history has been, and is now, a highly valued form of scholarship.⁶⁷ It has also of course achieved political significance, especially if land claims were involved. Traditional history is now of increasing concern to professional historians in Polynesia. They are involved not only as researchers, but also as teachers, responding to increasing local pressures on universities to develop courses in Pacific or regional history. New Guinea researchers regard the collection of local traditions and oral literature, with the later synthesis of these into a 'professional' historical format as of central interest.⁶⁸ It is a field yet to be developed in Australia, though recent years have produced moves towards realising its potential.⁶⁹

⁶⁰ K. Shawcross 1967; W. Shawcross 1977; Coutts 1969; Leach 1969; Groube 1977:80-84.

⁶¹ Buck 1926:182.

⁶² Buck 1926:182.

⁶³ Denning 1966:27.

⁶⁴ Munz 1971; compare with Davidson 1971.

⁶⁵ Stanner 1966.

⁶⁶ Maude and Crocombe 1962; Robertson 1962; Sorrenson 1977:460-464.

⁶⁷ King 1975; Sorrenson 1977:466-472.

⁶⁸ Bulmer 1971:43-44.

⁶⁹ Articles in the first two issues of *Aboriginal History* show that the realisation of this potential is beginning in Australia with the presentation of Aboriginal oral traditions as the basis for historical analysis.

Australia: contact history, race relations, culture clash and Aboriginal history

While prehistorians and archaeologists here are directing more attention to the gleaning of vital historical information relevant to their research, Australian historians are discovering the complexities of contact history. In the earliest histories of the colonial enterprise Aborigines were merely included in descriptions of the 'natural history' of the new land, brief surveys of 'native life and customs' being prescriptive for such accounts. So, as Harrison notes,

Historians have largely ignored the black man of Australia . . . he is incidental to the trend of events which, since 1788, have combined to produce the Australia of today . . . the saga of rum, convicts, squatters, gold, political development and industrial expansion; and into this narrative the black man has seldom intruded for more than a moment. In fact, the Aborigines have more often been regarded as part of the natural environment — like koalas, gum trees or Ayers Rock — their characteristics being described rather than their actions narrated.⁷⁰

Stanner has called this 'the Great Australian Silence'; he asserts that 'the dominance of European interest was total, unquestioned and inexpressibly self centred'.⁷¹ The general historian can no longer ignore the 'first Australians', and a substantial literature on contact history and race relations has appeared in the 1970s. There are major syntheses such as the first volume of C.D. Rowley's trilogy, entitled *The destruction of Aboriginal society*, monographs, theses at all levels, novels, articles, broadcasts, and a veritable flood of source books, as well as general accounts. The effect of this boom in contact studies may be assessed rapidly by scanning published bibliographies and recent review articles, for example those in volume one of *Aboriginal History*. The works cited by Markus⁷² relating to Australian race relations reflect the decline then resurgence of interest in the topic between 1900 and 1960. He lists five published before 1900, none up to 1920, three to 1940, 10 to 1960 and 85 after 1960. The sources of the indifference of earlier periods have been examined by Mulvaney and Stanner;⁷³ the reasons for the present change will provide fascinating studies for later scholars of twentieth century Australian society!

Investigations of relations between communities of Aborigines and other Australians, and biographies of Aborigines, have not been seen as topics of priority in Australian historical studies. Corris stressed both aspects in his 1969 survey of ethnohistory in Australia, commenting that 'the bulk of the vast literature on the Australian Aborigines . . . has been innocent of emphases which could be called ethnohistorical'.⁷⁴ We urgently need a series of regional contact histories testing the broad generalisations about culture conflict against carefully collated contemporary evidence on relations between Aborigines and settlers in the frontier districts. Much recent work however, as Reece points out, suffers 'from the general tendency to rush into print on an increasingly fashionable subject' and history is seen 'only as a grab bag for polemical argument'.⁷⁵ Further, it has a certain guilt-ridden quality, as if to exonerate the present by blackening the past. This approach is often at the expense of valid historical interpretation; it is unlikely to be productive. As Stanner reminds us: 'we can neither undo the past nor compensate for it'.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Harrison 1978:17.

⁷¹ Stanner 1969:12, compare with 13 and 17. For a discussion of the American situation see Prucha 1976:2, and his comments on the 'Indian barrier' to settlement in North America.

⁷² Markus 1977.

⁷³ Mulvaney 1958; Stanner 1969, 1976, 1977.

⁷⁴ Corris 1969:201.

⁷⁵ Reece 1979:268, 267.

⁷⁶ Stanner 1969:44. See also Prucha 1976 for discussion of similar themes in United States contact history.

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Contact histories must be careful, rigorous studies researched with an awareness of anthropological as well as of historical issues. The historians should become familiar with the general anthropological literature as well as their local historical sources, to understand the economic basis and values of Aboriginal society. The issues resemble those discussed by West for colonial Pacific history.⁷⁷ Appreciation of the values of both cultures is essential, nor can the researcher assume that because the literary evidence derives from the European party to the conflict, that Aboriginal motivations or perceptions are therefore either unimportant or unknowable. Aboriginal history has long been neglected in local historical and anthropological research. However some recent studies by anthropologists and linguists show how more information on Aboriginal perceptions may be elicited from the documents.⁷⁸ The current enthusiasm for contact history has produced works showing neither knowledge of Aboriginal reactions to the conflict nor awareness that other versions may await definition and expression.⁷⁹ These alternative versions when discovered may prove surprising, as both Sharp and Stanner found in investigating traditions of conflict situations.⁸⁰

Aboriginal researchers as well as other scholars must be involved in developing Aboriginal history. Aboriginal oral tradition, individual life histories and group experience must contribute, expressed within the framework of Aboriginal concepts of the past as well as in terms of western 'historical reconstruction'. Such histories lie within the scope of ethnohistory as defined by scholars working in the Americas, Africa⁸¹ and the Pacific; they should form a recognized strand within Australian studies. We must admit however that the practice of written history is a western tradition. Aboriginal historians may choose expression in other forms, or conform to the western conventions of historical writing but present differing evidence and differing viewpoints. Varying traditions of viewing and presenting the past (e.g. the mythological as against the chronological narrative and analysis) are relevant here; there may also be differences in concepts of time, of what constitutes historical truth, of historical relationships between events or what Vansina calls 'historical development'.⁸² Stanner has summarised Murinbata thought thus:

Earthly life was supposed to cycle between mystical source and mystical goal, but there was no first cause or final end . . . Neither individual nor total life was supposed to move towards an end that would consummate history; indeed there was no true sense of history at all.⁸³

He also notes that traditions about the past were neither created nor conceived as historical in our sense:

If one could speak of Murinbata tradition at all it had to be as the product of a continuous art of making the past consistent with an idealized present. There had been 'history' in the sense of events of both change and development; one thing had led to another, but 'what really happened' must rapidly have ceased to signify in important respects. There had been a continuous compounding of history.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ West 1961.

⁷⁸ Barwick 1972; Bell 1978; Beckett 1958, 1977, 1978; Hercus 1977; Mathews 1977; Merlan 1978; Stanner 1977.

⁷⁹ Urry (1977) attacks many of these problems in his discussion of the difficulties of writing 'Aboriginal history'.

⁸⁰ Stanner 1966:139-140; Sharp 1968:83-84.

⁸¹ Phillipson 1974; Vansina 1965.

⁸² Vansina 1965:99-105.

⁸³ Stanner 1966:138-139.

⁸⁴ Stanner 1966:140. See also Charbonnier 1969:39.

Stanner found among the Murinbata differences in the perception of time: 'It is a painful wrench for a European mind to have to deal with so shallow a perspective on time and with mentalities that are ahistorical in outlook while asserting the contrary'.⁸⁵

Thus the 'Aboriginal history' that will emerge from Aboriginal tradition and oral sources may differ substantially from western Aboriginal history. As history in our sense it may prove unattainable just as Smail is convinced that a truly autonomous history of modern South East Asia by Asian scholars written outside the traditions of western scholarship must ever remain elusive.⁸⁶

The Australian evidence and its use

For most Australian prehistorians the use of ethnohistorical evidence is now an accepted aspect of the total attempt to reconstruct the unwritten Aboriginal past, utilising historical evidence relating to indigenous culture found in the documents of the contact period. Though the Australian literature rarely concerns itself with theoretical questions, the implicit aim seems to be to supplement the ethnographic record, which is meagre for so much of the continent. That is, the historical evidence is used as ethnographic evidence.

There is the obvious danger of using the literature uncritically as a source of convenient ethnographic parallels, or to build unstable reconstructions on selected evidence. The need for strict source criticism⁸⁷ can easily be neglected or by-passed when the historical sources are mined as information quarries to provide basic material for comparative studies. Both Corris and Lawrence give theoretical consideration to the problems posed by their specialised evidence, particularly its fragmentary nature and lack of detail. They do not question the validity of this approach, though Lawrence comments that his work aims at:

... marshalling the available literature on various aspects of the subject and arranging it in such a way as to bring diverse observations to focus on a newly conceived problem.⁸⁸

In the practice of ethnohistory the major problems seem to arise from the nature of the evidence. Historical evidence so difficult to evaluate sets special requirements for its effective historical or ethnographic use. Major sources are the accounts of explorers and early settlers. The explorers were trained observers who had only brief opportunities for recording native peoples' behaviour whereas the settlers were for the most part untrained but made observations over long periods. In assessing both types of material we face the problem of evaluating the observers' perception of the observed. Nearly two centuries ago Degérando summarised clearly the inadequacies inherent in the record of the explorer, however conscientiously compiled.⁸⁹ His strictures deserve serious attention.

The evidence on which ethnohistorical studies are based necessarily conditions the scope and quality of the resulting work. The evidence for the most part is fragmentary and non-comprehensive. Descriptions of Aboriginal culture were commonly incidental to the recording of other information; they were never intended to be comprehensive, balanced accounts. They should not be treated as such, especially in regard to negative evidence. The incomplete nature of the information applies to its representation over both time and space. The total range of evidence for

⁸⁵ Stanner 1966:148.

⁸⁶ Smail 1960.

⁸⁷ Corris 1968.

⁸⁸ Lawrence 1968:10.

⁸⁹ Degérando 1969:64-70.

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the whole continent will not be comparable from area to area. So the hope that a careful sifting of all available historical sources will enable us to compensate with ethnohistories for our missing regional ethnographies may prove illusory. The fullest accounts are those of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when detailed accounts of new colonial endeavours were readily published and when Europeans showed intense intellectual concern with the life and culture of primitive peoples.⁹⁰ This is also the period of the majority of highly qualified observers: Cook, Collins, Hunter, Oxley, Sturt, Mitchell. Examples include the documents of the First Fleet historians for Port Jackson, the early historical records of Tasmania, and the journals of explorers given a special brief to record native customs (such as the literature from Cook's *Endeavour* voyage or Baudin's expedition). The concentration of the comprehensive accounts in the earliest period of frontier contact, and the apparent diminution in both quality and quantity thereafter is equally a feature of sources on North American Indians. One is forced to conclude that there is adequate evidence for but part of the continent and for that for but a limited period. Moreover much of the extant evidence is not based on first-hand observation. Some workers have attempted to overcome this by distinguishing between direct or first-hand record and the reporting of local traditions or 'gossip' information.⁹¹ Such discrimination has obvious value, but it has been unevenly applied.⁹² Further, it is not the only criterion of quality to be invoked in evaluating ethnohistorical evidence.

The documentary evidence is often frustratingly inadequate in its ethnographic information, with tantalising gaps and omissions. I may quote Oliver Fry, Crown Lands Commissioner for the Clarence District of New South Wales, when he estimated that the region still sustained an Aboriginal population of at least two thousand:

The manners and customs of the primitive inhabitants of New South Wales are so generally known and so similar that I consider it superfluous to allude further than to such distinctions as appear to me to exist between the tribes on the Clarence, and those I have known in other districts . . .⁹³

Obviously the recording of Aboriginal life was incidental to other aims held by most writers, and the volume of evidence, even when a number of sources exist, may well be very small for any particular region or time period. Assuming that contact accelerated cultural change, close chronological and strict geographical controls are essential.⁹⁴ Yet even so the evidence may be too scanty to sustain effective reconstruction, too diverse in quality to justify the 'pooling' process, the building up of a composite picture by matching the fragments of various writers in a giant ethnographic jig-saw game. Such a process can only be valid if the matching is of like quality with like, after careful source criticism. Lawrence, for example, argued that as few areas of Australia were sufficiently well documented to allow depth studies of a particular community, the viable approach was to cover large areas and so gain a substantial body of data. He admitted that the resulting picture lacked detail.⁹⁵ But I would submit that the composite picture lacks resolution and is subject to distortion.

⁹⁰ Smith 1960; Mulvaney 1958.

⁹¹ For example Meehan 1967-68; Allen 1968.

⁹² Compare Meehan's (Hiatt 1967-68) work on Tasmania and her study of mortuary practices (Meehan 1971).

⁹³ Fry 1843.

⁹⁴ For example, see Flood's (1973) study of the Southern Tablelands for which the ethnohistorical evidence is sparse. Flood was forced to cast a wide geographical net to build a generalised reconstruction.

⁹⁵ Lawrence 1968:10.

For historical objectivity there should be a rigorous search through both published and unpublished literature to gain the widest possible range of data.⁹⁶ Yet for some geographical areas and for some time periods sufficient evidence may not be recorded. Chance determines the survival of evidence, especially for periods and areas where there has been little pressure to preserve historical records, and which never attracted the attention of professional historians. In rural areas the survival of local records still often depends on the enthusiasms of a few concerned amateurs. The library of the Richmond River Historical Society in Lismore would not be so rich in regional source material if Louise Daley, an American immigrant who strongly believed in local history, had not devoted herself to its collection in the 1950s. Tasmanian studies now rely heavily upon the magnificent volume of Robinson's Journals edited by Plomley,⁹⁷ a medical researcher. The documentary evidence which the Australian ethnohistorian is forced to use makes special demands in terms of source criticism, and the evaluation of evidence, the heart of the historian's task. There are problems in applying the standard conventions of source criticism to such intransigent material and such elusive (even at times unknown) authors. The problems curiously parallel those of the classical historian, whose evidence, and knowledge about his writer's background and total work, are often comparably insubstantial.

The major difficulty facing the workers in the field of ethnohistory is the quality and character of this source material, and how to use it effectively; many have tried to evade this problem or even ignore it. Such evidence must be evaluated in terms of internal study of the documents themselves for objectivity, coherence and consistency, then an assessment of the authors' objectivity, capacity and qualities. The acceptance or rejection of certain items must be consistent and unambivalent,⁹⁸ to avoid the dangers of evidence selectively used. Difficulties of course arise. Even when the writer of a document is known by name, the facts of his life and the kind of personal details which allow one to estimate the validity of his statements and any likely bias, may not be available. Researchers must be ever-conscious of the following characteristics of ethno-historical sources:

- (1) That the bulk of the evidence is not the synthesised results of the investigations of trained historians or trained ethnographers, but the raw material from which history is made by the application of careful historical assessment and critical testing;
- (2) That not all observations (even those that are direct and first hand) are of equal value as historical evidence, nor are all observers equally perceptive or reliable;
- (3) That we must be mindful of the problems of perception, record, bias, and personal interests, that are all relevant to the use of any historical account. These include coarse variations in accounts written from an overt standpoint (such as missionary or official records) and the more subtle variations reflecting current attitudes or barely selfconscious bias. They also include variations resulting from disparity in writers' capacity to observe and record, as well as in opportunities for observation and long term contact with Aboriginal groups.⁹⁹ The experience of modern ethnographers, who admit that their early field-notes often need revision in the light of understanding acquired over time, counsels caution. The perceptions of Aboriginal life by runaways or 'castaways' such as Buckley, Barbara Thomson, Clark or Morrell must differ from those of explorers like Mitchell or Cunningham, or those of missionaries such as Threlkeld, Robinson or William Thomas. What aspects of the total lifestyle and

⁹⁶ Compare with Hallam 1975. One wonders what further information awaits in the unpublished material for south-western Australia.

⁹⁷ Plomley 1966.

⁹⁸ Bowdler 1976: compare 252 and 253.

⁹⁹ Compare references to Aborigines in Bride 1898 with those of Anon. [Telfer] n.d. and Robinson (Plomley 1966); see also Brayshaw 1975.

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culture are recorded? Why do we learn so little about the activities of women and their role in Aboriginal society? And so little about food-gathering, daily camp activities, tool making, and exchange, compared with tribal fights, burial customs and certain ceremonial activities? Is it the bias of male observers — or merely the lure of the exotic to mid-Victorian observers?

All the considerations discussed above affect the quality of the record, hence the usefulness of the observations in it as historical source material. For example we may have a valid, clearly recorded observation made by a Mitchell, Sturt or Cunningham, but because of the brevity of the explorer's contact with the Aborigines the fact recorded was not recognised — by him or those who use the source — to be atypical. One is reminded here of Degérando's eight 'faults in the observations made up to the present'. This is a cautionary note for the ethnohistorian who wishes to build a generalised historical ethnography from the composite diverse and brief comments of a variety of observers rapidly passing through an alien landscape recording the particular activities of its people at one point in time.¹⁰⁰

Granting all these aspects, can one test the validity of a reconstruction based on ethnohistorical evidence? This question is a genuine one with serious implications. I suspect it can only be considered in terms of the internal consistency of the source being used and of the qualities of its author. Independent yardsticks may not be available. In *Records of times past* I presented a study of material culture in the Richmond River district of northern New South Wales based on museum collections and the ethnohistorical sources, which are rich for this area, though largely unpublished. An interesting aspect of this study was to compare the range of evidence in the two:¹⁰¹ did they both present the same array or were there discrepancies? If there were discrepancies, how were these to be explained? Could the museum collections be used to test the literary accounts? In the museum collections one met some of the problems we have already seen in connection with literary evidence; they were not acquired in systematic research aimed at presenting a comprehensive collection representing the totality of items in use. Rather they represent casual acquisitions and souvenirs. Only Miss Bundock's collection made in the 1880s and early 1890s at Wyangarie (comprising half the total) can be described as comprehensive or made with an ethnographic aim, while her written account is one of our major sources, so limiting the value of the text. In surveying the museum collections we find them heavily weighted towards equipment concerned with fighting and hunting (about 64 per cent of the total); a further 27 per cent is made up of camp equipment (such as dilly bags, baskets and water vessels). The bias is heavily towards male equipment, with women's tools such as digging sticks poorly represented, also items concerned with the food quest and daily activities some of which do not feature at all (e.g. fishing nets, climbing vines, hunting nets, stone and shell knives, bone tools). So the material collection is not comprehensive; it could be said to reflect limited contact with the Aborigines especially as regards 'traditional' subsistence activities, and a bias towards weapons and fighting.¹⁰² An analysis of the literary evidence (which belongs to the same period of contact as the collections) shows the same emphases on hunting and fighting gear, and a similar stress on equipment for carrying goods and storing food or belongings. Personal ornaments and clothing get greater attention, but the paucity of references to women's equipment exactly mirrors the bias in the collections. It seems

¹⁰⁰ See Macknight's (1974:146 note 1) comments on this point. Compare with Bulmer 1971.

¹⁰¹ McBryde 1978b:185-187 and Tables 2, 3 and 4.

¹⁰² On the Northern Rivers (in contrast to many other parts of south-eastern Australia) the rugged terrain in the foothills country, and the non-intensive settlement by pastoralists, allowed a greater degree of independent co-existence of the two societies and a greater retention of links with the Aboriginal past than elsewhere.

that the collectors and the recorders were reflecting similar ranges of preoccupations, bias, and interests, and similar ranges of opportunities for detailed observation. So, though the collections proved a satisfactory independent check on the literary sources at one level (that of the description of particular items which was shown to be very accurate), at another level, that of testing their comprehensive qualities in portraying a whole aspect of culture they added little information.

In this Richmond River study and in a study of New England subsistence economies¹⁰³ the literary evidence has been analysed numerically, as a test of general impressions and concerns of the writers. However this practice must be regarded with caution. Because of the specialised nature of the evidence, it should not always, in my view, be subjected to statistical analyses or quantification, especially as the sample will generally be so small as to give a spurious exactitude to most results. The 'mentions' of writers and other historical sources cannot each be regarded as comparable items composing a 'population' in the statistical sense. To look for, and document, trends discernible in the whole body of available evidence, however, is valuable, indeed essential, if one is to avoid the criticism of selecting from the total data what is convenient for the present argument. The ethnohistorian, as any historian, must endeavour to search all available evidence and base his conclusions on evaluation of this broad information base.

When deriving ethnographic data from the historical literature in the practice of ethnohistory one is deriving the general from the particular, looking for data to make general statements on cultural behaviour. Often this particular evidence has insufficient breadth of relevance for this kind of extrapolation. It may not be amenable to the type of constructs the ethnohistorian wishes to place upon it. We often find evidence relating to particular events and circumstances extrapolated as the norm, not only for that place at that time, but for other places and at other times. Macknight is the only worker to show explicit awareness of this problem in published discussion.¹⁰⁴ It could well have been considered by Hallam in her study of man, fire and ecology in south-western Australia.¹⁰⁵ In such use of evidence the ethnohistorical document first becomes 'ethnography' (as if written by a person trained in modern anthropology), and then is seen as directly applicable to the pre-contact or remote past (see Bowdler's discussion of coastal economies).¹⁰⁶ Hence a house of cards may arise composed of generalised statements about past behaviour on the basis of particular evidence from one present instance. Even more unstable structures arise when the prehistorian adds a few layers derived from archaeological data, and moves from one evidence base to the other, then back again.

The 'house of cards syndrome': A Victorian case study

The researcher is faced with what I call the 'house of cards syndrome' when attempting a 'total' cultural study for a region, utilising the information bases of archaeology, ethnography and history. Lourandos is engaged in work of this kind for south-western Victoria,¹⁰⁷ with very rich and detailed documents in the Victorian journals of George Augustus Robinson. My own regional study of New England also used all three categories of evidence to supplement one another. To use evidence from such different sources can pose fascinating theoretical questions, but the practice involves accepting many statements (whose validity cannot be tested fully) as of equal

¹⁰³ McBryde 1976.

¹⁰⁴ Macknight 1975:146 note 1.

¹⁰⁵ Hallam 1975.

¹⁰⁶ Bowdler 1976.

¹⁰⁷ Lourandos 1977.

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value. These 'house of cards' problems have been ever present for me in studying the exploitation of greenstone quarries as sources of material for ground-edge artefacts and the distribution of their products. This study is not only aiming at information on spatial distribution using petrological analyses, but also at a reconstruction of social and exchange inter-relationships between groups.¹⁰⁸ Archaeological data on the distribution of artefacts from known quarry sources can be interpreted in non-text-aided analyses of spatial distribution and distance decay curves. An added dimension emerges however when these are matched against the ethnographic and historical information. We have an interesting material expression of the ethnographically documented division between Kulin and Kurnai groups of tribes in the distribution of artefacts derived from the Mt. William and Mt. Camel quarries (located in Kulin territory). These artefacts are rarely found in Kurnai Gippsland. There is also a neat match between the ethnographic and historical statements on the extent and direction of their distribution. This also applies to the Geelong quarries. The three categories of evidence produce confirmatory evidence; what then of discrepancies?

Some quarries with substantial archaeological distributions are not documented at all in the ethnographic or historical literature (notably the sites at Berrambool and Baronga on the Hopkins River). Their use perhaps belongs to the prehistoric period, and so was not known to the settlers of the Western District or Robinson's contacts? Or perhaps the lack of knowledge merely reflects the intense hostility between the two societies in this particular area of Victoria, and the severe mortality in the Aboriginal population recorded by Barwick!¹⁰⁹ Dated excavated examples have some antiquity, but more evidence is needed before accepting the convenient explanation that these sites were not used in the post-contact period.

Problems of evidence emerge more strongly in assessing the situation for north-western Victoria. According to Howitt¹¹⁰ axes were brought to this area from a quarry at Charlotte Plains (near Maryborough) for exchange at the meetings at Wirren-gren Plains and Lake Hindmarsh. His source was an Aboriginal man with direct links to those involved, Sergeant Major (c. 1838-1903), described in the Howitt Papers as 'a Jajowrong (from his father) of the Pine Plains-Inglewood-St Arnaud district' and also as 'a Wotjoballuk of St Arnaud', who settled at Coranderrk during the 1880s and was Howitt's informant on 4 July 1902.¹¹¹ Gregory discusses the site, and references corroborating Howitt are found in local historical sources.¹¹² The distribution patterns for Mt. William and Mt. Camel axes, in the sample studied to May 1978, seemed to show a blank for the Wimmera/Mallee similar to that for Gippsland. I concluded that here we had another neat co-incidence of evidence from different bases.

As the Charlotte Plains site had never been located, and as Massola's conclusions that it lay near the Loddon in an area now flooded could be questioned on historical grounds, field studies were undertaken in 1978. With local advice we located the sites of the two oldest Charlotte Plains homesteads and the adjacent early bridge, landmarks to Howitt's informant. We searched all nearby stone outcrops but found no indications of quarrying nor of lithologies matching Gregory's identification. This result was perplexing, as Howitt's statement created the impression of a quarry comparable in importance to Mt. William. We then carried our investigations into the Wimmera/Mallee. If a large quarry near Maryborough did serve these regions (which themselves lacked suitable stone resources) then its products should be represented in the lithologies of

¹⁰⁸ McBryde 1978b.

¹⁰⁹ Barwick 1971 and personal communication; Corris 1968.

¹¹⁰ Howitt 1904:690 and Howitt Papers.

¹¹¹ For information on Sergeant Major I am indebted to Diane Barwick.

¹¹² Gregory 1907 I:212-213; Flett 1956:3; Smyth 1878 II:154-155; Massola 1966:271.

artefact collections. No large independent group has emerged from analyses for the area in state museum holdings, but in case collector bias was relevant here, we looked at artefacts in local museums and several large private collections in the Wimmera/Mallee. This group of approximately two hundred specimens produced not a new dominant lithology but large numbers of Mt. William and Mt. Camel artefacts; an unexpected result requiring rethinking of all previous interpretation. Howitt's informant may well have had direct knowledge of axe stone from Charlotte Plains being taken to Wirrengren Plains and Lake Hindmarsh for exchange in his lifetime, but this can hardly have been part of a long established or extensive practice. Yet the quality of Howitt's reporting is comparable to that for the Mt. William site and its far-reaching distribution networks. Its testing has come not from any internal evidence, but from archaeology and petrological analyses. More knowledge of the personal experience and qualities of Howitt's informants (and of the nature of Howitt's questioning!) would also assist assessment. Often independent testing of information against that of another category of evidence is not possible and evidence must be either totally accepted or totally rejected.

Evidence, aims and future directions in Australian ethnohistory

This leads to consideration of the ideographic discipline as compared with the nomothetic, the particularising versus the processual. Such concerns raise philosophical questions which have been fully aired elsewhere,¹¹³ as well as arguments on the relative qualities and scientific credibility of the two approaches to the past. They need not be reviewed here, but they are relevant; their significance in terms of the collection, use and interpretation of evidence cannot be ignored. They should also be considered here because the debates on aims and methods in archaeology raised by the 'New Archaeology' are vital to the practice of prehistory and cannot be ignored. Both the particular and the generalising approaches have their own intrinsic validity and can give us insight into different dimensions of the human past. However they involve rather distinct procedures which should not be interwoven nor confused. They make different demands of their evidence. This may well be the heart of the matter for the ambiguity in the practice of ethnohistory. Evidence in the historical documents relevant to the Aborigines, usually relating to particular circumstances, may not be amenable to the type of generalising constructs the nomothetic ethnohistorian in his guise of historical ethnographer wishes to build upon it. One should point out however, that to describe history as the 'capturing of the unique' as does Hodgen¹¹⁴ (quoting Isaiah Berlin) is to leave much unsaid. Many anthropologists¹¹⁵ and prehistorians of the New Archaeology School attack history as concerned only with the particular. Setting up a 'straw man', they emphasise the 'idealist school of historians' and Collingwood's view of history as the science of past human actions whose subject matter is that which can be re-enacted in the historian's mind and thus is a study of thought. In this sense history captures the unique; but Collingwood would also stress that such thoughts must have qualities of universality to be the subject of history, so in a sense not unique. Hence the processes of nature to Collingwood were not the subject matter of history, being essentially ahistorical.¹¹⁶ There is no need to labour the point that strong schools of social and economic history exist, as much involved with the recurrent and with general propositions as is ethnography. History of all kinds, I would submit, is concerned with explanation.

¹¹³ Binford 1968, 1972; Clarke 1968; Taylor 1948; Trigger 1978:1-53; Watson, Le Blanc and Redman 1971.

¹¹⁴ Hodgen 1974:11.

¹¹⁵ Hodgen 1974:7, 9; Rousseau 1975:34, 36; Kroeber 1936:154, 158-160.

¹¹⁶ Collingwood 1946:282-314.

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Given the intractable nature of ethnohistorical evidence, the difficulties of reconstruction, and current debates on the aims of prehistoric research, in summary there seem three likely lines of approach for those concerned to produce historical ethnographies: a purely descriptive approach, which aims at the collation of information encapsulated within the historical documents, but does not venture beyond the factual elements, giving little source criticism or ethnographic analysis; or work primarily concerned with the needs of archaeology or ethnography, which leaves the documents themselves unstudied; they serve merely as convenient 'data quarries'. In this approach ethnohistory itself is not seen as an independent discipline with its own contribution to history, ethnography, or prehistory. More congenial to the historian would be a third approach which develops rigorous and systematic studies based on the totality of evidence along thematic, tribal, or regional bases. Such studies must involve critical source assessment of a high level, combined with strict controls on chronology and location, so that the dangers of generality and vague comparison are avoided. Here the ethnohistorian may be faced with a choice of theoretical aims. Either (content with a reconstruction of certain aspects of Aboriginal culture) he produces an 'historical ethnography' or he can aim at eliciting hypotheses or even ultimately laws on the 'decay of tribal society', or elucidating the time dimension of cultural change and adaptation in recent Aboriginal society. It may be many years before Australian ethnohistorians wish to take a stand on these theoretical issues, but they must eventually do so. In the meantime we could well give serious thought to the specialised nature of the ethnohistorian's documentary evidence, and the best way of making effective use of what it offers in terms of otherwise unobtainable ethnographic data. Both historian and ethnographer must be willing to become conversant with the basic tenets of the other's discipline if this is to be achieved. These 'basic tenets' involve not only procedures and methodology, but also the philosophy and fundamental assumptions of each discipline.

Is ethnohistory therefore condemned to be little more than a descriptive collage of historical snippets, or a quarry for the convenient ethnographic analogy? Not necessarily so. Admit that of its nature (derived from its sources, methods and aims) it must always straddle other disciplines as indeed does also history. Admit further that perhaps it should not be regarded as an independent entity itself, as we saw from the problems encountered in defining it in terms of practice or content. Its contribution, however, can still be real, individual and analytical, particularly for Australia. In Australian studies so far the stress has been on the historical ethnography and on contact history. These are obvious and vital areas, but ethnohistory can be expanded to include fields already developed elsewhere and very relevant to Aboriginal studies. Social anthropologists have the opportunity for analytical processual work on culture-change, given the chronological control of historical documentation. There are also the possibilities for histories of individual tribal groups or communities, as well as personal biographies. A genuine Aboriginal history could emerge, even admitting the problems discussed above. We would hope for an active Aboriginal participation in this. The collection of oral traditions and folk histories could be part of this programme, which might indeed be seen as a project of urgency and priority. Bulmer claims a priority for this aspect of New Guinea ethnohistory above that for archaeological investigations.¹¹⁷ From such strands there could emerge culture-contact histories that examine the perceptions of those on both sides of the conflict, contributing to historical and anthropological research. Such studies require full data-bases in the sense of access to documents and sources. The discovery, editing and publishing of the basic historical manuscript resources is thus a project that deserves urgent attention from archivists and historians.¹¹⁸ We need more primary sources as meticulously edited as Plomley's Robinson journals and Gunson's Thelkeld papers.¹¹⁹ The paucity

¹¹⁷ Bulmer 1971:44.

¹¹⁸ See McBryde 1966.

¹¹⁹ Plomley 1966; Gunson 1974.

of evidence cannot be ignored. Ethnohistorians should develop a programme of co-operation with Australian historians in general, and in particular with those who are working in the field of local history to ensure that the vital documents and oral evidence in danger of destruction or loss are salvaged and made accessible to scholars. Our present ethnohistories are largely a response to the fact that serious ethnographic studies for much of our continent began too late; let us ensure that we are not too late also in acquiring the source material (both written and oral) for 'fully developed ethnohistory.

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