

Whose Version of History, and What Is Relevant?

Leo Pettipas

Ignorance

At the root of many contemporary social problems world-wide is ignorance, basically definable as “the lack of awareness of, or knowledge about, something.” Even misunderstanding and unintended falsehoods can be forms, or at least expressions, of ignorance.

Dealing with Ignorance

A logical incubator of movements aimed at dispelling ignorance is the university, and programs are planned or in place across the country to that end. Locally, the University of Winnipeg’s initiative in proposing an Indigenous-course requirement, and the University of Manitoba’s 2015 “Decolonizing the University” initiative under the aegis of the school’s President are, theoretically, logical steps toward overcoming the ignorance that underlies the racism and resulting difficulties faced by Aboriginal people, not only on campus but within society at large. Initiatives such as these are surely laudible; there are, however, some interesting cross-cultural challenges facing the achievement of the desired outcome.

History

Both proposed U of W and U of M programmes call for, among other things, the study of Indigenous *history*. “History,” writ large, is the sum-total of everything that actually happened in the past. Today, most of history is unknown and unknowable – it is forever beyond our reach because a record of it has not been preserved. Nonetheless, the study of history (historiography) is invariably mentioned as an important ingredient in university-level, activist, social-justice programming (Hatherly 2015:5; Botelho-Urbanski 2015:B3).

How do we become aware of the past? The simple answer is, we seek out and interpret the sources of relevant historical information. One school of thought maintains that the human history of Manitoba dates back 11,000 years. If that is so, then we are talking here of a history that began far in advance of the arrival of Europeans and their custom of record-keeping through the use of alphabetic writing. According to this multi-millennial model, 97% of Manitoba’s human history is entirely and solely Aboriginal. How relevant is that ca.10,600-year-long stretch of Indigenous history to the cause that is being espoused by university students, advisors and faculty toward the neutralisation of socially harmful ignorance?

Two Versions of History

Today, the full scope of perceived history takes the form of a very large number of story lines, or themes, about the past, and these make up the substance of what is likely to appear in our history text books. Our perceptions of Manitoba's Indigenous long-term history derive from two sources of information – (a) the internal or autochthonous ("emic"), and (b) the external or Euro-Canadian ("etic").

The internal/autochthonous source comprises the fund of teachings (stories) generated and passed on as oral tradition within the Indigenous community itself down through the ages. Typically, these stories begin with the words, "Long ago in the past" or some such, thereby indicating considerable time depth and hence an ancient historical context. They form part of what is frequently referred to as "the Aboriginal perspective." A great many of these stories – so-called "myths" -- are being translated into English and published in book form.

My understanding of the term "myth" derives from that of ethnologist Åke Hultkrantz (1981:10): "it takes place at the beginning of time, its acting personages are gods and mythic beings like the culture hero, primeval man, and the prototypes of animals, and the scene for action is the supernatural world."

The Euro-Canadian source comprises the assemblage of hypotheses and theories (stories) generated through the application of the "scientific method" whose roots lie within the 17th Century Age of Enlightenment in Western Europe.

More often than not, the Indigenous account dealing with a given historical topic differs radically from that generated by the scientific method. Probably the most familiar instance is the advent of human beings in North America. The standing scientific story/theory/hypothesis is that the First People to occupy this continent did so via a migration from Siberia to Alaska and the subsequent adaptive radiation of their descendants southward into the continental interior. The Indigenous account, on the other hand, envisages a series of spontaneous tribal creations on the continent by a spiritual, supernatural Creator Being. Under this model, no inter-hemispheric, west-to-east migration of human beings was involved.

Two Solitudes

These two accounts are mutually exclusive, and the opposing perceptions are rejected by their respective proponents. This incompatibility occasionally manifests itself loud and clear within the educational environment. Probably the most forceful objection to Western scientific historiography is Professor Vine Deloria's book "Red Earth, White Lies:

Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact.” The “lies” referred to here are the archaeological interpretations of the ancient Indigenous past.

The following is another outspoken traditionalist’s emic reaction to the above-mentioned migration theory and scientifically-based cultural-historical reconstruction as sometimes taught in the school system. It was promulgated by the Canadian Alliance in Solidarity with Native Peoples (CASNP) that “we resent squandering students’ time on pre-historic ‘theories’ (which are contrary to Native oral tradition) and supposed ‘Stone Age’ activities” (Verrall and McDowell 1990:32).

Truth

The sentiment expressed in the CASNP statement conveys a disdain for the scientific approach to the study of Aboriginal history. It implies that scientifically-derived notions of the Indigenous past are inherently deficient compared with those that originated within Indigenous culture itself. The traditionalists regard their “home-grown” stories as bona fide *truth*; they are not hypotheses, theories, metaphors, or parables, but are genuine historical accounts that are to be taken literally.

An excellent statement to this effect is provided by Anishinaabe scholar James Dumont (1992) of Laurentian University. His contribution is drawn from the post-contact era, not from mythic time. It tells of an event from the War of 1812, when a pair of pro-British Odawa (Ottawa) fighters transformed themselves into bats (*Myotis lucifigus*) so that they could spy on a camp of American soldiers. With the intelligence so gathered, the Odawas were subsequently able to launch a surprise attack and defeat the Americans.

Mainstream scientists and historians would be hard put to accept that men could have shape-shifted themselves into bats; but “the event did take place *in Native history*, and any attempt to work around it by making out of it a simile or metaphor (where the Odawa were as inconspicuous to the enemy security as bats in the evening) or such like, is an outrageous and unacceptable tampering with the ‘facts’” (Dumont 1992:77).

Traditionalists’ confidence in the truthfulness of Indigenous tradition is bolstered by the fact that the archaeologists are always changing their minds; “every time an archaeologist finds a new artifact, it [the inter-hemispheric migration scenario] keeps on being dated even further back in time. [But] we were always here. Our Creator put us here. We never walked across no land bridge between the old and new worlds” (Demas 1993:3).

And indeed, the archaeologists know full well that their own *modus operandi* inherently brings with it the prospect that their ongoing research will *disprove* – not support -- their

hypotheses! But how can any given hypothesis be an expression of the truth if it stands a good chance of being disproven tomorrow with the very new and better material evidence that the archaeologists themselves are always looking for?! The inherent truth of oral tradition, on the other hand, needs no such scrutiny and mind-changing by its adherents ... for them, Truth, as originally conceived and perceived, is Eternal.

Talk about an award-winning example of culture-clash!

An Impasse?

It should come as no surprise, then, that the above-cited CASNP evaluation pronounces the outsiders' (etic) version of ancient Aboriginal history as essentially irrelevant and dismisses it out of hand. Perhaps even more significant to the CASNP position is the "host of historic and contemporary issues which affect all Canadians today" -- in other words, the relatively recent history that has played out within the past 500 years commencing with the arrival of the Europeans and the catastrophes that it has engendered among the Indigenous populations ever since. Ancient, exclusively Indigenous, historical reconstruction as conceived via the Western "rationalist" approach is of negligible import or of no importance at all in today's real world of the struggle against social injustice.

For their own part, scientifically-oriented historians (specifically, archaeologists) see no value in looking to beliefs in mythic-creationist and spiritually-generated events that they do not believe actually happened to begin with. Their dismissive attitude was articulated under no uncertain terms by American ethnologist Robert Lowie a century ago when he stridently wrote, "I cannot attach to oral traditions any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever" and "Indian tradition is historically worthless." To what extent this point of view is still held within the academic community in Manitoba would be interesting, and indeed important, to know if the scientific approach is to be marshalled by an anti-racism consortium.

For testable hypotheses of past human behaviour, or for data against which their hypotheses can be tested, archaeologists look to field data ("proxy indicators") recovered from the ground surface or sub-surface by standard field techniques, complemented with models of human nature and systemic cultural change. The scientists acknowledge their hypotheses as being ultimately unprovable but nonetheless as reasonable approximations of past reality that can be tested for their reliability as reflections of actual, real-world happenings of long ago, without having to invoke "non-existent" supernatural beings.

University Resources

It has been noted in the media that over 100 courses are already in the U of W's programme calendar that could fulfill the new requirement. Some of these are History or Anthropology courses, and their subject matter is certainly germane to an awareness of various facets of the Aboriginal past. However, they do not appear (to me) to have been specifically designed to combat racism (they are, judging from their calendar entries, descriptive and non-problem-oriented). It would not be sufficient to simply deliver these courses in the classroom in their present configurations, and to let the students themselves sort out how they might be used to fight racism. Some kind of explicit, hands-on professorial guidance, if not dedicated new courses altogether, would surely be in order. The phenomenon of racism must be challenged actively and head-on, not passively with neutral information.

A Matter of Choice

So, when the designers of the University of Winnipeg's Indigenous Credit Requirement come to decide which version of history will suit their purposes and at least partially succeed in dispelling hurtful and socially-destructive ignorance, which will they choose? Will they opt for the scientific version, which happens to be of non-Indigenous origin that would no doubt resonate with a majority of people within the U of W non-Aboriginal student body, but would be less-well received by an Aboriginal audience,

or

will they choose the traditional, emic, largely sacred teachings espoused by generations of Indigenous people long before European contact, but which would likely be regarded by mainstream, sceptical students as "simply myths" and not "genuine" history.

or

will they attempt to somehow reconcile, and tailor their handling of, these polar opposites? Predictably, a broad consensus of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars would no doubt argue that such an effort would be like trying to mix oil and water; nonetheless it can be done if the program designers have a comprehensive knowledge of both traditional teachings and the current academic synthesis of deep-time history, along with a clear objective of societal betterment in mind. The archaeologists would have to step outside the box of rigid scientific method and theory, and assume the role of story-tellers using well-thought-out hypotheses currently in hand. At the same time, Aboriginal educators with a strong traditional background would have to grant some level of acceptance of scientifically-derived historical

thematics and set aside the kinds of negative opinions articulated by CASNP and Professor Deloria. Some sort of meeting of minds would have to take place.

This idea is not new: Decades ago, archaeologist Alan D. McMillan (1988:18) wrote: "Archaeologists have much to learn from these [Indigenous] traditions, since limited insights into past behaviour through material remains lack the richness and human dimension of oral histories. A synthesis of traditional native knowledge and scientific data gathered by archaeologists may best illuminate the native past." Indeed, a number of traditional stories coincide rather well with archaeological hypotheses, and a meshing of them can prove to be a most interesting exercise in scholarship. This approach has been attempted in book form several times within the past two decades here in Manitoba (Pettipas 1994, 1996, 2011), predictably with questionable success.

Conclusion

But before all that, a more fundamental question must be asked: does ancient history – however conceived – have any useful role to play in the diminishment of socially-problematic ignorance and the achievement of the vital, all-important objectives of community harmony, fairness, mutual respect, and overall well-being?

What, for all practical intents and purposes, is, and is not, "relevant" history?

References

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