Inconstant Companions: Archaeology and North American Indian Oral Traditions, by Ronald J. Mason, 2006. Tuscaloosa (AL): University of Alabama Press, ISBN-13 978-0-8173-1533-7 hardback £31.80 & US$50; xi+298 pp.

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There was a time when archaeology had little if any political significance. Certainly in Nazi Germany or the Soviet bloc there were political implications (and consequences) and there has always been a certain amount of nationalistic jingoism. But for most of us, particularly in North America, the only people that cared much about our conclusions were other archaeologists. As such, archaeologists were trained to be rigorous in their excavation techniques and material analyses, but identifying prehistoric cultures and linking them to living descendant groups was merely speculation with little serious consequence. The new interest in aboriginal rights, and associated land claims, repatriations, and special concessions such as casinos, has suddenly made cultural identification a very high stakes game. Concurrently, and not without some justification, there has been a backlash against archaeology's claims of sole authority for making such statements about the past. One concrete manifestation of this reaction has been legislation, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in the USA, which explicitly requires that oral tradition and belief be given equal consideration with scientific evidence in the determination of cultural affiliation.

While such a requirement sounds properly sensitive to cultural diversity, it poses tremendous difficulties in practice. Researchers are trained to weigh evidence, critique it and reserve a healthy scepticism; but how do you balance a proper scientific scepticism with a claim of traditional knowledge, which amounts to religious belief? With a historical text we can undertake source criticism, but deconstructing the claims of an elder would be seen as insulting.

This is the starting point for Ronald Mason's book. Mason believes that, in the rush to be sensitive to Native peoples and to right the injustices they undeniably have suffered, the integrity of our understanding of the past is being jeopardized. Not only is the literal truth of limitlessly malleable and pragmatically self-interested oral tradition being uncritically accepted but archaeologists are urged (and, in the case of government employees or cultural resource management archaeologists, more than just urged) to ensure that their results conform to such traditions. For example, a proposed amendment to the Society for American Archaeology (SAA) Principles of Archaeological Ethics would require that archaeologists acknowledge the primacy of indigenous knowledge.

Mason's core argument is that the academic study of archaeology and history is fundamentally different from oral tradition because it is critically reflexive and bound by evidence. As such, it is incomparable and incompatible with faith-based forms of knowledge. Having set out this position, Mason systematically builds the argument in the first half of the book with a series of chapters examining the nature of history, the nature of memory and the nature of oral tradition. For those not trained in the history of anthropology, the salience of early debates by Robert Lowie, Alfred Kroeber, June Helm and others may come as a surprise. So too may be the pioneering work of Jack Goody examining the reproduction of ritual and the changes that occur with the advent of literacy. The argument is persuasive. While most of Mason's examples are drawn from North America, Chapter 4 applies the same critique to a series of cases from Western tradition where oral accounts of places and events have been frozen into text, including the Icelandic Vinland Saga, the Iliad and Biblical studies. As Mason acknowledges, his treatment of these cases is superficial, but he includes them to demonstrate the non-parochial character of the issues.

In the second half of the volume, Mason moves from theory to practice and presents a series of extended examples from North American archaeology and ethnohistory, his area of research expertise. Chapter 6 critiques attempts by archaeologists, historians and ethnographers to sift out reliable history from traditional accounts, citing the case of Mide migration accounts among the tribes of the Upper Great Lakes and the traditional history of the Dogrib of the Canadian subarctic. Chapter 7, 'Mammoth Remembrances', deconstructs Native claims of knowledge concerning Pleistocene geological events and animals. Mason critiques efforts to impute the meaning behind material remains in Chapter 8, 'On the Historicity of Symbols and Symbolic Praxis'. Here he critiques both the naiveté of archaeologists attempting to 'emote' the embedded meaning in mounds and imagery, and the veracity of contemporary Native accounts of such symbolism. For the latter he particularly emphasizes the frequency with which modern 'traditional' accounts contradict traditional accounts recorded in earlier times. While these

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examples for the most part are well reasoned, the presentation occasionally exhibits a condescension and smugness which seems at odds with the even handed scholarship Mason hopes to promote.

The final substantive chapter, Chapter 9, is titled 'On the Central Siouans before J. Owen Dorsey'. Where, in the previous chapters, Mason points to logical flaws or to contradictions with earlier written records, in Chapter 9 the accuracy of various Siouan origin tales and migration stories are contrasted directly with the archaeological record. Unfortunately, this is probably the weakest chapter in the book. While Native origin stories are discounted as contaminated and fantastic, the archaeological alternative Mason offers seems equally mysterious and conjectural. If the earlier chapters of this volume provide a useful review of debates within anthropology during the earlier half of the twentieth century, Mason's discussion in this chapter allows one to observe at first hand the kind of culture history that provoked the development of the New Archaeology.

Mason's choice of the Central Siouans is an interesting one. The movement of Siouan peoples begins in later pre-Columbian times and, during the Contact era, gradually results in the emergence of numerous distinct tribal groups stretching literally from Louisiana to North Dakota. During this same period, there is a rapid replacement of many native made artefacts, particularly ceramics, by European manufactured goods. The inability of archaeology to successfully link prehistoric manifestations with particular historic tribes during this time period continues to be a major problem, and is often cited to illustrate the ultimate futility of the 'direct historical' approach.

Mason's archaeological search for prehistoric Siouan tribes rests on the assumption that the tribes of historic times had similar pre-Contact manifestations. Where contemporary anthropological archaeology worries about the complex process of ethnogenesis and the variable uses of material culture to assert or obscure identity, Mason is stuck in a 'direct historical' time warp; seeking to associate specific pottery types, 'archaeological signature' in Mason's terms, with ethnic cultures. Unfortunately they are not isomorphic. Furthermore, Mason assumes that if he does not find this archaeological signature at the time and place described in traditional accounts, then the accounts must be wrong. This is asserted without any positive evidence that a unique archaeological signature even exists. Further, he makes no effort to show where the missing tribe might actually have been. Ironically, the traditional accounts which describe a process of tribal groups gradually crystallizing and moving into their modern-day locations is probably a more accurate representation of events than the alternative offered by Mason.

While all this undermines Mason's archaeological demonstration, it does serves to illustrate his larger point. Under repatriation laws, such as NAGPRA, museums are required to affiliate remains with present day, federally recognized tribes. How can one honestly affiliate prehistoric remains with social and political entities that did not exist prior to European Contact?

So what should we make of this volume? Mason's fears are well founded. If academic archaeology is to have any legitimacy or usefulness in the modern world, it is essential that we maintain a basic scholarly (and I would argue ethical) standard of critical self-awareness and a willingness to follow the evidence where it takes us. It does not really matter whether we do this in opposition to a totalitarian state or in the face of right-thinking political advocacy: the standard must be the same.

We must respect both kinds of knowledge, and recognize the primacy of each within its own domain. Archaeology is about building up a view of the past that is as accurate and objective as possible, but it will never be perfect or complete or absolutely certain. The role of oral tradition is to support and affirm traditional belief and practices. It will always be complete and true, but it will also be inconsistent, contradictory, and constantly changing. Both forms of knowledge tell us interesting things about the past and about the working of culture; but they really are different. Neither deserves primacy beyond its own realm. Neither should be imposed upon the other, and there should be no expectation that they will necessarily agree.

It is refreshing to see these arguments discussed rationally in public, rather than muttered in private, and Mason is to be commended for having the courage to bring these issues out into the open. Despite its shortcomings, I believe this is an important book for our time and strongly recommend it for any archaeologist or historian that is interested in understanding the contentious relationship between scholastic and traditional understandings of the past.

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