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Dearth and Bias: Issues in the Editing of Ethnohistorical Materials

PATRICIA GALLOWAY*

In North America the work of ethnohistorians interested in reconstructing the history of Native American groups prior to European contact must concentrate on the evidence from the period just before and during the earliest contact, before the native peoples themselves began to leave surviving verbal records of their own. For this reason the only documentary sources for pre-contact North American ethnohistory are the accounts of European-Indian relations written by European explorers and colonists. For North America these resources are not negligible, but neither are they vast; most Indian activities were, after all, tangential to the central concerns of colonial governments. Nor can such material usually be easily segregated from the mass of colonial paperwork. The South Carolina "Indian Books"¹ and the Jesuit Relations² are exceptional in their focused concern, and even they do not contain all the relevant information for the periods they cover. Memoir accounts, such as those of Adair and Le Page du Pratz for the southeast,³ are so rare that they treat only a tiny fraction of the number of tribes extant when European explorers entered North America. More usually, material of ethnohistorical interest is embedded in governmental and commercial papers, where it is not always easy to find or even to recognize. The first factor defining the plight of the ethnohistorian with reference to sources, then, is dearth. The shortage of information is only made worse by the lack of an overall guide to existing materials.

As for the documents that exist and can be found, they embody the ethnohistorian's second nemesis: bias. Indian societies and Indian activities were described by Europeans whose attitudes usually ranged from fear and hatred to loving contempt, and only rarely were Indian lifeways described by observers who even began to understand what they were seeing. Inevitably, their ethnocentrism made it impossible for them to ask the right questions of their observations, even when they were otherwise inclined to do so. This means that when the ethnohistorian does find one of these windows on Indian life and history, he also finds that it is covered by a far from translucent film.⁴

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It is in these two problem areas, lack of material and ethnocentric bias, that the historical editor can best offer help to the ethnohistorian. The importance of any single early colonial document containing description of preliterate peoples in North America is almost incalculable. In some few instances our knowledge of the very existence of individual tribes rests upon such a single document.⁵ For this reason the historical editor should consider the needs of ethnohistory when he is choosing documents to edit for publication. The modern growth of interest in social history has broken the hold of the "Great White Men" bias in historical editing, and Native Americans are among those groups which have suffered from this kind of neglect in the past. But just as is the case with documentary materials which give us more information about the lives of women, blacks, and the poor, ethnohistorical materials make a solid contribution to a more complete history, and this reason alone offers adequate justification for paying special attention to them.

While the editor's options permit him to make selections of documents which can be helpful, his responsibilities do not end with selection. The ethnohistorian's other difficulty, bias, can also be approached by the historical editor through the choices he makes with regard to annotation. By and large the ethnohistorian, though he is obliged to be concerned with the veracity of the author-observer of an ethnohistorical description,⁶ will not possess as thorough a knowledge of the context of the document as does the historical editor. Issues of attitude and reliability of observation can best be addressed in the first instance by the editor, whose acquaintance with what is actually a far more vast collection of documents than those that will actually be published places him in a unique position to evaluate those issues. Though modern standards of annotation and the realities of publishing budgets argue against extremely elaborate scholarly annotation, it is still possible for the editor who has an eye to the ethnohistorian's needs to render significant interpretive aid in a small space.

For a closer look at these problems and the solutions sought for one project, I will draw upon my experience as editor on the Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion project at the Missis-

Mississippi Department of Archives and History. The prehistory of the project goes back to 1906, when the first Director of the Department, Dunbar Rowland, began the collection of transcripts from European archives. The considerable body of transcriptions obtained from the French archives consisted primarily of selections from the Archives des Colonies C13A series of reports, sent from the Louisiana colony to the Minister of the Colonies in France, 1694-1819. From these transcriptions Rowland selected and A. G. Sanders translated three volumes of documents covering the years 1701-1743. These three volumes were published in 1927-1932.⁷ Another two volumes were planned and a rough translation was completed when the means required to publish them failed, and during ensuing years the typescript was lost. Found again in 1974, it was discovered to be in need of extensive editing. This provided the opportunity for bringing the selection of documents and the annotation into line with modern practice and also for amplifying the volumes' emphasis on the ethnohistorical materials in which the documents are so rich.

There was already an established principle for document selection used in the first three volumes and intrinsic to the thematic intention of the series: the documents selected had to bear in some way upon the history of the lands and peoples that were finally to become the state of Mississippi. Since the most numerous residents of the state's area in the French period were the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians, an increased ethnohistorical focus was obviously justified; the first volume of the series, indeed, had concentrated on Indian diplomacy. The only geographic extension of the original principle of selection was the decision to include reports of Indian activities beyond the bounds of Mississippi when the Indians in question were her aboriginal inhabitants, no matter how far-ranging their travels might be.

Another principle which was consciously adopted as a result of this decision to highlight ethnohistorical data was that primary reportage of events involving Indians would be selected wherever found in preference to secondary summaries. Finding it, however, proved to be rather difficult. The reasons for the rarity of such accounts can be explained through a description of the process involved in the creation of the C13A collection. Commands and royal policies were dictated from France and communicated to the governor and commissary general by the Minister of Marine and Colonies (these documents appear in a separate series with which we shall not be concerned). These two highest officials in turn formulated their commands and policies in

local terms and sent them out either directly to the post commanders and warehouse-keepers or through the higher level district commanders at the Illinois post and Mobile (these documents are lost or irretrievably scattered except in one unusual case, that of governor Vaudreuil's letterbooks). Reports of actions taken would then come back to the governor and commissary general from their subordinates at the posts (these documents are mostly lost), and completing the cycle the governor and commissary general would write the reports which were sent to France, basing them upon the reports received from the field.

Had this system worked in a regular way there would be almost no direct reportage of Indian affairs from Louisiana at all except for the events directly observable by governor and commissary general and such items as they chose to incorporate verbatim from the field reports. But fortunately conflicts of personality and the hazardous contingencies of colonial settlement did not allow the system to work regularly. The actual interface between the French colony and most of its Indian neighbors was made up of the personnel of the smaller and more distant posts among the Indians, of missionaries living in their villages, and of deerskin traders traveling and living among them. These are the people who were most ideally situated to report valuable observations on Indian life and behavior, and thanks to difficulties and rivalries some of these reports attained to inclusion in C13A. There could be several reasons for this: a governor forwarding a first-hand report of military disaster in order to disculpate himself; a dissatisfied post commander writing directly to the Minister, bucking for promotion; a missionary writing to a superior in France; a trader complaining to the Minister about government-supported monopolies. In some instances whole journals were sent in this way. An understanding of this system and how it did or did not work, vital to an editor of these documents, also provides crucial insight into the reliability of the reports themselves. For where a choice between two documents reporting Indian activities must be made, reliability of observation should be the deciding factor.

The level of reliability in these matters is at least partly a function of the system itself. The first consideration is directness of reportage. Obviously the report of a subaltern who accompanied an Indian war party on an expedition has a better chance for accuracy than a governor's two-sentence summary of the expedition. This is clearly demonstrated by a journal from August 1742, written by the cadet Canelle reporting on his participation in a raid on the Chickasaw Indian villages by the French-allied Choc-

taw.⁸ The journal details the stages of the attack, casualties, taunts hurled at the Choctaw by the Chickasaw, the political currents within the Choctaw force. This journal was sent to Paris by the district commander at Mobile, Louboey, in December;⁹ the cover letter gives the background of the attack and offers an evaluation of it, but counts on the journal to provide specifics of the circumstances. It is also evident in Louboey's letter that the background details had been supplied by Canelle's commander at Fort Tombecké, a post near the Choctaw nation, though his letter is lost. Later on, Louboey even sent a list of casualties drawn up by Canelle.¹⁰ In contrast, the governor's summary does actually take only two sentences.¹¹ As a rule of thumb, then, the first-hand report will always be preferable to any other, but if this is lost, the nearest version to that of the original testimony,¹² in terms of both rank and function of the witness, is to be preferred.

A second factor, ideological bias, also must be taken into account in judging reliability. The larger the political investment a commentator has in a set of events, the more likely he is to view them from a fixed and inflexible position, and it was very easy for a European to get away with reporting almost anything of Indian peoples because of their accepted strangeness to the European view. In 1746 governor Vaudreuil reported to the French authorities that three Frenchmen had been murdered at the behest of the Choctaw chief Red Shoe in order to restore his credibility with the English after three of their Chickasaw allies had been killed while on an embassy by pro-French Choctaw.¹³ What he does *not* say, and what is revealed in his correspondence with the posts¹⁴ and in Adair's *History of the American Indians*,¹⁵ is that one of the murdered Frenchmen had been accused of raping Red Shoe's wife, and that Vaudreuil had not only not bothered to investigate, but had merely suggested that the subaltern in question be more circumspect in his conduct in future.¹⁶

A similar case of bias obtains when the viewpoint is a religious one, so that missionary observations, though they will usually be richer in commentary on ethnohistorical matters, will view them from an angle which suffers from predictable blind spots and which must itself be evaluated.¹⁷ Crosscutting both reliability factors, nearness of testimony and ideological bias, is the problem of personalities, the degree to which a description of events may itself be a weapon in its author's pursuit of private purposes. This is a particular problem with presentations of data gathered by someone other than the writer, which is almost never reported gratuitously.

Selection and annotation can both be brought to

bear to deal with these problems. In the new *MPA-FD* volumes the principle of selection for ethnohistorical materials is clearly biased in favor of first-hand accounts, including restatements or elaborations of these reports only when they add to or contrast significantly with the eyewitness observations or when they occur in a document which includes an expression of official reaction to the events. Annotation is used for further clarification in several ways which simultaneously serve other editorial purposes. First, as far as is possible, all persons who write or appear in reports are identified in terms of their rank and their position in colonial hierarchy or tribal structure. Second, any known personal affinities or dislikes which may influence interactions between persons portrayed in the documents are mentioned when they are not made obvious by statements in the document texts. This is possible because in many cases these prejudices will be more clearly stated in some document which could not be chosen for publication. Finally, the experience which forms the background of a person's actions is briefly indicated where known, again appealing to other documentary materials. In this way it is possible to contextualize documentary evidence for Indian history in the brief space of a biographical note without indulging in lengthy genealogical or psychological speculation. Such a focus helps direct the choice of materials for annotation so that a picture of the European and Indian intentionalities which meet in the context of an event can emerge. Similarly, in the case of the author of a document, such annotation aids in the reconstruction of the attitude the author brings to his material. None of this goes beyond what the historical editor would normally expect to make clear, but its special importance in the case of ethnohistorical observations cannot be stressed too much.

Once the reliability of a document has been established by means of such annotation, there are several other problems which must be dealt with in the same way but which spring from cultural rather than individual bias. For the purposes of this discussion I will use the example of linguistic problems because they can be treated in a highly specific manner. The first of these has to do with the large issues of orthography and phonetic systems. Whenever the European came into contact with a native culture, his first problem was to assimilate its language or at least to learn enough of it to get along in whatever capacity he had to serve. The difficulty was that of two phonetic systems in confrontation. It is a truism of phonetic observation that an adult learner of a foreign language is distinctly handicapped because not only does he have difficulty in pronounc-

ing some of the new phonetic combinations, but it is always the case that the expectations of his own phonetic system prevent his even hearing many distinctive features in the new one, some of which may be crucial for distinguishing meaning in the target language. When he attempts to write the native words he hears, he will usually write them in the phonetic system of his own language, which will be the best that one can hope for but which one can expect to be inconsistent not only from writer to writer but within the writings of a single observer. There will be three reasons for this variability: the orthographic system of the observer himself may be none too firmly fixed; the observer may improve in his hearing of the language; borderline phonemes may be heard one way at one time, another at the next.

French colonial policy was actually quite aware of at least the language-learning problem, and it was usual to send very young cadets, often less than twelve years old, to live in Indian villages and learn the languages. Young boys sent out in this way at the beginning of the Louisiana colony¹⁸ would later serve for many years as the first generation of interpreters. But only very rarely do we have documents written by the interpreters themselves;¹⁹ most usually the documents which record Indian words for us were written by officers who used these interpreters. Such is the case of a subaltern ordered to travel among the Choctaw and set up trade with them in 1729-1732, Régis du Roulet. Régis was so totally ignorant of Choctaw that he was unable to judge his interpreter's competence,²⁰ and certainly must have had an extremely bad ear for languages in any case, since his spellings of Choctaw village names vary wildly and include phonemes which did not exist in Choctaw. Yet his lists of village names as found both in formal lists and in the texts of his journals, constitute the most complete source for such names at that period.²¹

Lack of familiarity with Indian languages is a problem with documents like these, and it can be increased when the documents we have are not the originals written by the men in the field, but copies made by secretaries sitting safely at home in the colony. In all these cases, however, if the historical editor has provided enough annotation for the linguist to estimate the writer's acquaintance with the language and the document's distance from the original transcription, his only other obligation will be to provide the original transliterations exactly as found in the documents so that the linguist can disentangle the phonetic interference of the writer's mother tongue. It is worth remarking here that the linguist is often able to reconstruct the original

Indian phonetics on the basis of a consensus of variant spellings.

There are certain items of Indian vocabulary to which the historical editor should pay special attention, because they are connected with deeply important issues in cultural anthropology and ethnohistory and his vigilance may bring a valuable item to light. Under this head comes first the abstract terminology of kinship systems, social organization, and the sacred. These components of "cognitive anthropology" are normally inaccessible *except* through early documentary accounts. A neat example of the ethnographer's need for editorial aid in this regard is shown in John Swanton's interpretation of governor Kerlérec's honorary title, *Youlaktimataba*, given him by the Choctaw in 1753. The governor reports that the meaning of the title is "the greatest of the first race" (*le plus grand de la première race*).²² Swanton, without reference to the context of the naming, supplied Dunbar Rowland, the original *MPA:FD* editor, with the comment that it really means "the chief who is a support," taking the *Youlakt-* (*oulacta* or *bolabta*) element to mean "chief."²³ Yet this word is also the name of one of the moieties of the Choctaw, and this moiety had dominated the pro-French faction which won the Choctaw civil war that ended in 1751. There is an additional statement, made by a leading Choctaw chief of this moiety, that the two moieties are "the two first races" (*les deux premières races*) of the Choctaw; the *oulacta* is named first of the two.²⁴ Swanton did not refer to, and indeed at that time could not have known about, the details of the civil war, since most of the documents were not then available. But its result would make Kerlérec's interpretation *de facto* correct in 1753, and this would have serious implications for the effect of the war on Choctaw social structure.

The concrete terminology connected with subsistence and lifeways is also important, but as such practices are susceptible of reasonably accurate description on the part of the European observer, terms with concrete referents are not so desperately sought as those from the abstract conceptual vocabulary. It should be stressed that terminology of either sort is equally interesting, though more difficult of interpretation, when it occurs in loan-translation, which will be more frequent by far. This is the case in a document of 1756 in which the chiefs of the Quapaw, a nation long associated with the French, asked for clemency for some French deserters whom they were returning to French custody. Through an interpreter who was a Fleming by birth, they claimed that the deserters, who had managed to take refuge in the Quapaw "sacred cabin, where they practice their religion" (*cabanne de Valeur, ou ils*

exercient leur culte),²⁵ had thus come under the protection of the “chief of the sacred cabin” (*chef de la cabanne privilegiee*) and were entitled to sanctuary.²⁶ The reader should know additionally that French missionaries had been instructing the Quapaw for more than fifty years by that time, and that the earliest reports of the Quapaw claimed that they had no institutionalized religion. The context, however, suggests that however influenced by Christian teachings this concept of sanctuary may have been, the religion being practiced was an Indian one. There is no other such report extant regarding the Quapaw; the historical editor, by noting facts like these, can help to rescue them from obscurity by pointing out such loan-translations. It is up to the specialist to discern the details of the meshing and overlap of the European and Indian category-sets, but if the editor does not call attention to the presence of the words the specialist may have nothing to work with.

What all the foregoing observations come down to

1. William L. McDowell (ed.), *Journals of the Commissioners of the Indian Trade, 1710-1718; Documents Relating to Indian Affairs, 1750-1754; Documents Relating to Indian Affairs, 1754-1765* (Colonial Records of South Carolina, series 2, vols. 1-3), Columbia: South Carolina Department of Archives and History (1955, 1958); University of South Carolina Press (1970).
2. Reuben G. Thwaites (ed.), *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents . . .*, 73 vols., Cleveland, 1896-1901.
3. James Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1775. Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, 3 vols., Paris: De Bure, Delaguette, Lambert, 1758.
4. William T. Hagan, “Archival Captive—The American Indian,” *American Archivist* 41 (1978), 135-142; 137.
5. John R. Swanton, *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico* (Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 43), Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911; 274.
6. David C. Pitt, *Using Historical Sources in Anthropology and Sociology*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972; 46-62. Also see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.
7. Dunbar Rowland and Albert Godfrey Sanders (ed. and trans.), *Mississippi Provincial Archives: French Dominion*, 3 vols., Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1927-1932. The remaining two volumes, under the same title and revised and edited by Patricia Galloway, will be published by the Louisiana State University Press. Abbreviated *MPA:FD*.
8. Archives des Colonies, série C13A, vol. 27, ff. 176-177v. Hereafter abbreviated AC, C13A, followed by volume and folio numbers. Most of the documents cited in these examples will be included in the forthcoming *MPA:FD* volumes.
9. Loubouey to Maurepas, December 7, 1742, in AC, C13A, 27: 142-143 and 148-149v.
10. Loubouey to Maurepas, February 8, 1743, in AC, C13A,

is the assertion that the historical editor who is faced with documents rich in ethnohistorical data should be aware first of the importance of the data and then of his need to familiarize himself with some of the problems and methods of ethnohistory in order to do justice to it. This is not to say that he should become an ethnohistorian or cultural anthropologist, but simply that by bearing in mind the questions that such scholars will ask of his documents, he can help them to estimate the reliability of the testimony. The continuing argument over the appropriate scale of annotation for historical documents seems to have settled for the present at a reasonably explicit level, but there is also agreement that the historical editor’s task is not pre-interpretation.²⁷ I would argue that the sort of attention to ethnohistorical materials I have advocated does not fall under this ban. I would term the procedures *pro*-interpretation, and I would stress again the serious need that exists for more of it.

28: 140-143v.

11. Bienville to Maurepas, February 4, 1743, in AC, C13A, 28: 31-39. The two sentences: “In the month of last September [*sic*] as they had promised me our allies raised a force of fifteen to sixteen hundred men to go and cut the grain of the enemies. They ravaged more than a league of country, killed six men, took thirteen prisoners and carried off twenty horses” (*MPA:FD* III, 774-775).
12. The terms “testimony” and “witness” are used as they are developed in Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, except that here we are generalizing to include the eyewitness account not as a proto-testimony but as a testimony; and to treat, obviously, written accounts. This translates Vansina in a sense, but his theoretical treatment of reliability and the context of different versions seems so pertinent that it is hard to resist using the notions.
13. Vaudreuil to Maurepas, November 20, 1746, in AC, C13A, 30:76-84.
14. Preserved in the Vaudreuil letterbooks vol. III, Huntington Library, Loudoun ms. 9:III.
15. Pages 313-319. Adair was a trader among the Chickasaw at this time.
16. See Patricia Galloway, “Louisiana Post Letters: The Missing Evidence for Indian Diplomacy,” *Louisiana History* 22 (1981), forthcoming.
17. And those blind spots might not always be so predictable. During his nearly twenty years as missionary to the Choctaw, Father Baudouin never seemed to make any appreciable number of conversions, but he was a very effective spy and kept a warehouse of trade goods in the Chickasawhay village where he lived.
18. Boys were sent to live among the Indians in Louisiana as early as 1700. See Marcel Giraud, *A History of French Louisiana*, Vol. I (trans. Joseph Lambert), Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974; 84-85.
19. There are a few documents extant by the interpreter Huché; the “Anonymous Relation” (Newberry Library, Ayer ms. 530), printed by John R. Swanton in *Source*

Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians (Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 103), Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931; 243-258, is doubtless by an interpreter/trader.

20. See Régis du Roullet, Journal, 1729, in AC, C13A, 12:67-99; the passage confirming this is published in *MPA:FD I*, 21-22.

21. Compare the two lists of village names given by Régis in 1729 (AC, C13A, 12:67-99; list in *MPA:FD I*, 41-44) and 1732 (Archives Hydrographiques, V. LXVII,² No. 14-1, portefeuille 135, document 21; list in *MPA:FD I*, 150-154) for the variant spellings. For the importance of these lists, see Swanton, *Source Material*, 58-76.

22. Kerlérec to Rouillé, August 20, 1753, in AC, C13A, 37:66-76v.

23. This is in accord with his judgment in *Source Material*, 120, on the longer version of the title in Kerlérec to De Machault d'Arnouville, December 8, 1754, in AC, C13A, 38:122-129v.

24. Dupumeux to Beauchamp, June 18, 1751, in AC, C13A, 35:354-360.

25. "Where they practice their religion" is probably a gloss by the interpreter, Grevemberg, who had been personally involved in trade with the Quapaw.

26. Minutes of a Council of War, June 20, 1756, in AC, C13A, 39:177-180.

27. Frederika J. Teute, "Views in Review: A Historiographical Perspective on Historical Editing," *American Archivist* 43 (1980): 43-56.