

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2008

**Review of *Inconstant Companions: Archaeology and North
American Indian Oral Traditions*. By Ronald J. Mason**

Rodger Echo-Hawk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Echo-Hawk, Rodger, "Review of *Inconstant Companions: Archaeology and North American Indian Oral Traditions*. By Ronald J. Mason" (2008). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 944.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/944>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Inconstant Companions: Archaeology and North American Indian Oral Traditions. By Ronald J. Mason. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. ix + 298 pp. References, index. \$50.00 cloth.

In the age of dichotomized either/or culture war allegiances, it makes perfect sense to frame issues of scholarship as a matter of choosing sides and casting votes. This strategy exploits the fact that scholarship exists as both process and practice, and typical practice is too often a matter of democratic popularity rather than an outcome of logical process. This social reality explains the motivating purpose behind Ronald Mason's *Inconstant Companions*. Mason intends to show why archaeologists must vote against uncritical acceptance of Indian oral traditions as a source of historical evidence.

The problem with Mason's assumption is that every serious scholar of oral documents already accepts the idea that critical analysis must form the basis of the scholarly use of documents, whether written or oral. The challenge lies in developing useful tests and analytical procedures that can yield the most valid results.

But Mason sees the matter as one of declaring allegiance to scholarly values versus declaring allegiance to Native American values. He argues that scholars should stay true to Ivory Tower belief systems, and Indians ought to confine their belief systems to the reservation. Never the twain shall meet. This strategy of intellectual polarization effectively serves to embalm inquiry into ancient American history in the deadening fluids of racialism.

One is either a committed scholar, or one is a committed Indian.

Framing his story as one of belief in scholarship versus belief in Indian tradition, and as a tale of value-driven scholars versus value-driven Indians, Mason reifies a faith-based belief in race as an appropriate guiding foundation for academic discourse. To be sure, the promotion of racialized discourse typifies archaeological practice in America. But even though belief in race operates as a central tenet of American archaeological practice, race is not justified in science.

In short, Mason wishes us to see *Inconstant Companions* as a defense of science and scholarship, but he does this by constantly promoting an antiscience acceptance of race. Moreover, this is a book that aims at discouraging rather than enhancing scholarship.

Science and scholarship are valuable academic endeavors because they offer a transcendent perspective on human doings. In other words, these modes of inquiry establish a kind of common ground that crosses cultural boundaries. If any common ground exists among varying culture-specific oral traditions, and if any shared truths exist between the study of oral traditions and archaeological inquiry, conscientious scholarship ought to look for them. *Inconstant Companions* offers no help to those scholars who want to know whether oral tradition and archaeology can conjointly shed light on ancient human history. Clearly, Mason wants us to accept his position that this ought to be a culture war issue, and real scholars will steadfastly vote no against Indian oral traditions. **Roger Echo-Hawk**, *Longmont, Colorado*.