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THE PRESENTATION OF NATIVE AMERICANS FROM THE  
ICELANDIC SAGAS TO THE PRESENT DAY:  
A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH ESSAY

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KEVIN EDGAR

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Native Americans<sup>1</sup> have made significant contributions to the history of the United States. However, the extent of the contributions of Indian peoples has remained a point of contention in U.S. History classrooms. Throughout the years, Native Americans have been presented in textbooks as either bloodthirsty, soulless heathens standing in the way of American Manifest Destiny, or as children of the forest, living in harmony with nature, cruelly oppressed by white conquerors. The purpose of this paper is to examine the history of historians' attitudes towards Native Americans. By examining how authors have presented Native Americans, changing attitudes about the first inhabitants of the Western hemisphere can be understood. The author considered a number of textbooks while researching the historiography of Native American studies. Beginning with the earliest accounts, including an American history textbook published in 1827, and concluding with a U.S. history textbook published in 2008, the author examined six textbooks from the primary through the college level, along with other non-textbook sources.

The Vikings who sailed across the North Atlantic and explored the waters around the northeastern part of North America during the eleventh century made the first known encounter with the people of the Western Hemisphere. According to Scandinavian sagas collected by Rasmus Anderson in his 1906 book, *The Norse Discovery of America*, the Norse encountered a people they called *Skraelings*, which translates in modern Icelandic to "little men" or "barbarians."<sup>2</sup> Historians believe that the people encountered by the Norse explorers are the ancestors of the Inuit peoples of eastern Canada.

One of the first accounts of Native Americans comes from the Norse saga of Erik the Red, part of a codex known as the *Hauksbook*, named for the book's first owner, a Norwegian knight. The first to encounter the natives was one Thorfinn Karlsefni. The sagas, in typical conqueror style, derisively described the natives of Newfoundland: "They were swarthy men and ill-looking, and the hair of their heads was ugly. They had great eyes, and were broad of

cheek.”<sup>3</sup>

The saga presents the *Skraelings* as poor traders. According to the account, the Norse sailors were able to take advantage of the natives’ inexperience in trade: “In exchange for perfect unsullied skins, the *Skraelings* would take red stuff (cloth) a span in length, which they would bind around their heads.”<sup>4</sup> The saga tells of an incident between the *Skraelings* and the Vikings that began when a Viking bull bellowed and startled the *Skraelings*, scaring them away for three weeks. The *Skraelings* returned, and the result was the first military encounter between Native Americans and Europeans. During the encounter, Freydis, the pregnant sister of Erik the Red, rallied the Vikings by bellowing a war cry, baring her breasts, and slapping them with the blade of her sword. This action allegedly frightened the *Skraelings* from the field. In the skirmish, only two Vikings died, along with a “number of *Skraelings*.”<sup>5</sup> The sagas present the Natives as a primitive people, not nearly as worldly as the Norsemen. It is as though the Natives are scared, timid children who are in awe of the Norse and their steel weapons and aggressive women.

This view of the Natives continues over the next thousand years or so of contact between Europeans and Natives. One of the earliest U.S. history textbooks was published in 1827 by the American Academy of Language and Belles Lettres. The book, *History of the United States from Their First Settlement to the Close of the War with Great Britain in 1815*, written by Salma Hale, was chosen as a winner of a contest sponsored by the academy to select a “class book for academies and schools.”<sup>6</sup> The first mention of European contact with Natives comes early in the book in the section describing Christopher Columbus’s landing in Hispaniola:

The natives, who had assembled in great numbers on the first appearance of the ships, stood around the Spaniards gazing in speechless astonishment. The inhabitants appeared in the simple innocence of nature, entirely naked . . . They were shy at first, through fear, but soon became familiar with the Spaniards.<sup>7</sup>

Hale treated Columbus’s greeters as children gazing with dumb wonder at the superior Spaniards. The Indians that Columbus meets are innocents, stupidly giving far too much in trade for far too little. According to Hale, they received with “transports of joy, various trinkets, for which in return they gave such provisions as they had.”<sup>8</sup> Hale’s Indians greet the Spaniards with dumbfounded amazement, as if

they had just recently achieved self-awareness. Hale's book, written just forty years after the signing of the Constitution, continued to address the Natives only as they affect the progress of Europeans. Hale's children of the forest become merciless savages when the English encounter them in Virginia. The Indians in Virginia are ruthless warriors who are "cunning in stratagem and ferocious in battle."<sup>9</sup> An interesting observation of Hale's writing is that when he referred to the first peoples in a positive light (i.e. children of the forest) they were "Natives." When they were fighting against the white man, they were "Indians."<sup>10</sup>

Benson J. Lossing's *Primary History of the United States*, published in 1872, was written for students in the lower grades. This book, written and published after the passage of the Indian Removal Act<sup>11</sup> and four years before the battle of the Little Big Horn,<sup>12</sup> dedicated more discussion to the Natives. Lossing devoted ten pages at the beginning of his book to the pre-Columbian history of America. Overall, the sections on Indian history attempted to examine the history of Indians, but often, Lossing descended into derogatory and derisive comments. The sections became Eurocentric, and presented the Natives as an obstacle that must be overcome: "I will now tell you about the Indians who lived in *our country* [emphasis added] before any white people were here."<sup>13</sup>

Lossing presented the Indians as a homogenous group spread around the continent, similar in physical appearance. In his descriptions, Lossing made many sweeping statements about the Natives. According to Lossing, in all Native tribes, the men went to war while the women "planted corn and other things and did all the hard work."<sup>14</sup> Lossing treated the Indians as ignorant savages who were extremely sexist. According to Lossing, one of the major differences between Indians and whites was the attitude of the Indians towards women. Lossing never uses the word "Natives:"

The Indian men played ball, fired at the mark, danced, leaped, played games and had other amusements, but they would never let the women join them. They were not at all polite to the women. I am sure that no right-minded boy, when he gets to be a man, will let his mother, sister or wife do all the hard work, while he hunts, or fishes, or plays; and not let them have any of the fun.<sup>15</sup>

Lossing attempted to examine the differences of the various Indian nations

throughout the United States. He separated the Indians into eight nations and described the culture and tribal arrangements of each. Lossing described each nation according to how it related to the Europeans. He derided the Iroquois and Cherokee peoples for siding with the British during the Revolutionary War, while he described the Catawba nation as a friendly people who assisted the Americans during both the Revolution and the War of 1812. Lossing presented the Indians of the colonial period as savages lurking in the forest, waiting to pounce on the poor colonists. In his discussions of the various military encounters between the Natives and the white settlers, whites were always victims of mindless Native savagery. Lossing described Captain John Smith's encounter with the Natives in Virginia by stating, "With a few companions, he went up that stream, which the Indians called Chickahominy. While away from his boat, in the woods, some of the Indians, who had been watching the white people, sprang forward and made Captain Smith a prisoner."<sup>16</sup>



Figure 1 *Portrait of Tecumseh*. By Benjamin J. Lossing c. 1858.

Lossing attempted to present a balanced view of events concerning the 1830 conflict between the southeastern Indians and the United States, saying that the Indians "have given the white people a bit of trouble, but I must confess that the white people have been most to blame, because they have not treated the Indians fairly."<sup>17</sup> Lossing also expressed concern that European settlers would not allow the natives to live peacefully in the area allocated them in Oklahoma due to the movement of Europeans to the West. Lossing anticipated the impending Indian wars with the prairie tribes in the

conclusion of his section on Indian history. He described the tribes as fierce and warlike and conceded that they remained on the plains only because the “whites have not wanted it.”<sup>18</sup> Lossing continued, “But the white man will soon tell them to go further west, into the wilderness, because he wishes to raise grain, and build villages and cities where their cabins and wigwams now stand. And they will go.”<sup>19</sup> Lossing had good intentions. He attempted to treat the Natives as a group deserving consideration, but his attempts fell short. His Indians seemed to deserve the treatment given them by the whites. He was a product of the Jacksonian belief in Manifest Destiny. Natives, though most assuredly a culture deserving examination, were a quaint group on the way out. Lossing’s Indians were merely the people who were taking care of the land before Europeans came to live on it.

In the preface to John O’Hara’s *A History of the United States*, published in 1919, the author wrote what he referred to as a “causal history.” O’Hara did not beat around the bush when he told the reader in his preface that a “considerable amount of material of traditional knowledge but of small intrinsic importance has been omitted” so that he could place more emphasis on events of “greater significance.”<sup>20</sup> One can only assume that Mr. O’Hara was the sole judge of what is of “great significance.” O’Hara continued Lossing’s tradition of dedicating early chapters to the discussion of the Natives, and it was evident that some cultural study of Native Americans has taken place in the years between their accounts. O’Hara was less Eurocentric than his predecessors were, but occasionally a derisive comment found its way into the text. O’Hara admitted that the Indians were not the homogenous group presented in earlier writings: “They had many different languages and different ways of life.”<sup>21</sup> O’Hara examined the different tribal groups of Natives according to geographic cultural areas and discussed the customs and culture of each area. In a section entitled “Relations between the Indians and the Whites,” O’Hara expressed an appreciation for the contributions made by Natives to American culture, but the contributions were limited to agricultural lessons: “Tobacco, another gift of the Indian, was of the highest value to the early colonists, giving them a commodity that soon commanded high prices in Europe.”<sup>22</sup> O’Hara dedicated the second chapter to examining the different approaches made by the Spanish and the French to convert the Natives to Christianity. The Spanish attempts in the Southwest stalled when the Natives they were trying to convert met the missionaries with hostility. No mention is made of why the Natives were hostile to conversion. O’Hara described French attempts in

the Northeast as much more successful; however, his description contained European arrogance, as he stated, “The missionaries taught the Indians the arts of civilized life as well as the truths of religion.”<sup>23</sup> O’Hara, too, described the Indians of the colonial time as brutes of the forest who were dedicated to disrupting colonial settlement. O’Hara described King Philip’s War in Massachusetts in 1675<sup>24</sup> as a senseless attack on settlers by Natives. The subsequent loss of crops led to a brutal famine. O’Hara’s attitude seemed to be that the war happened because that was just how Natives were: brutal, ruthless, and willing to attack Europeans without provocation.

In his discussion of the Indian Removal Act, O’Hara presented the tribes of the Southeast as victims of a cruel United States Government. The tribes were “compelled in great measure by force and fraud, to leave their old homes and cross the Mississippi.” O’Hara stated, “Their expulsion was an act of brutal aggression.”<sup>25</sup> O’Hara examined the Indian Wars of the northern plains which were being fought at the time Lossing was writing his book. O’Hara described the wars as a fight for existence and food supply as white settlers entered the western United States. That encroachment onto tribal lands led to the extermination of the buffalo and forced Natives onto reservations. The officers who led the conflicts against the Natives were products of the education they received at the hands of writers such as Lossing and Hale. American soldiers were described as “competing with the Natives in savagery, refusing at times to give quarter, often killing women and children.”<sup>26</sup> General George Armstrong Custer was described as a victim of Indian trickery, defeated because Sitting Bull concealed most of his force. According to O’Hara, Custer lost because the Indians did not fight fairly. When discussing the policies of President Ulysses S. Grant, O’Hara presented the discriminatory Indian Peace Policy, which settled Indians on reservations and forced them to give up traditional ways of life as a consolation gift to the Natives. O’Hara attempted to present the Natives in an objective light. His discussions on the diversity of Indian culture were fair and balanced, but he sometimes descended into Eurocentrism and generalities when discussing Natives of early colonial American history. He showed a little more objectivity and attempted to report the facts of the situation when discussing events that happened in the past hundred years, presenting both Natives and American policy makers in a more accurate light.

*The Oxford History of The American People* by Samuel Eliot Morison was written for a college level class and according to the author “for his fellow citizens.” A weighty tome of over a thousand pages, it claimed to be a cultural history, “putting pugilists cheek by jowel with presidents.”<sup>27</sup> Morison lamented the lack of data on early inhabitants of America in 1965 and described the attempt to write the history of the continent before Europeans came as “trying to put together a puzzle with only one percent of the pieces.”<sup>28</sup> But, as Morison declared, “New discoveries are being made almost yearly.”<sup>29</sup> Morison stated on his first page that his history of the American people was to be the history of European immigrants. But, he said, “We can’t ignore the Indians.”<sup>30</sup> Morison separated the Natives of North America into the now familiar language and cultural groups. Morison’s Native Americans were distinct groups, each with its own culture, traditions, and origins, rather than the homogenous Indians of prior writers. Europeans, he wrote, could settle the New World without encountering general Indian hostility. Some tribes were hostile to Europeans, while others welcomed the settlers. In fact, it was the help of some tribes that allowed European settlements to flourish on the continent. Morison placed the importance of Native American contributions to American history on the same level as those of immigrant Americans: “There is no reason to regard the North American Indian as an inferior race. Backward in many respects he was, but he has proved to have every potentiality common to other human beings.”<sup>31</sup> Indians were, in some respects, superior to Europeans and African-Americans according to Morison. Due to their long standing resistance to European pressure, the Native was more “rugged” than the alleged individualists of European descent. According to Morison, Natives were better Christians than Europeans: “As children of the nature . . . who give their last bit of bread to an unknown guest, the Indians follow the New Testament better than men who profess and call themselves Christian.”<sup>32</sup>

Of the years of Indian removal, Morison presented President Andrew Jackson as a ruthless leader who did everything in his power to move Natives off land coveted by land-hungry whites in Georgia. That theme continued in the portrayal of the Indian Wars. Morison drew a picture of a wave of white settlers pushing the Natives before them. Morison presented the Indian Wars as a war of genocide. Disease, starvation, and outright slaughter by the U.S. Army systematically destroyed the Natives. Morison made the claim that had the various tribes been able to unify, they might have been able to wear down the Army, but in the face of overwhelming force, the Natives were doomed to failure and

extermination.

Was Morison any better than the writers of the earlier books? His Indians could do no wrong. They were the victims of an overwhelming white force that conquered everything in its path to spread white culture at the expense of Native cultures. No longer were they savages who ruthlessly murdered Europeans, nor were they innocent children of the forest, gazing dumbly at the advance of superior European civilization. Morison's Indians were noble warriors, struggling to preserve their culture in the face of overwhelming odds, doomed to failure, but still fighting against the decadent ways of the white man.

Modern high school textbooks are not written by a single author as the textbooks of the 1800s were. Today's books are a group project with several authors, accuracy panels, teacher reviewers, and differentiated instruction consultants. This serves to take the individual perspective out of the book and attempts to remove any appearance of bias or slant. The book used for many high school Junior U.S. History classes is Pearson Education's *United States History*. It includes a variety of teaching tools, study questions, activities, and online supplementary material to assist the teaching of American history.

The authors dedicated the first section, much like Morison and O'Hara's books, to the study of pre-Columbian North America. The authors described the lands inhabited by the different tribes as "culture areas," separating the various groups along the lines of resource management and religion as influenced by the area in which they lived. The authors described each culture in terms of how they gathered resources in each particular area and introduced the idea of the Columbian Exchange, a term coined in 1972 to describe the transfer of goods, ideas, and people between the hemispheres. The notion is that both groups, Natives and Europeans, contributed to this exchange equally. Pearson's authors attempted to present the Natives in a neutral light. Some groups were hostile to the arrival of Europeans, while others welcomed the opportunity to expand their trading opportunities. The book presented Columbus as a victim of his time. "As the representative of a Christian nation, Columbus believed he had the right and duty to dominate the people he found."<sup>33</sup> Pearson's authors followed Morison's lead in examining the different ways that Europeans interacted with Natives. The differences boiled down to philosophy and economic need. Spain, remembering the success it encountered with the enslavement of Africans, enslaved the Natives it encountered, using a combination of force and Christianity to subjugate them.

France, which needed the assistance of the Natives to collect furs, befriended the Natives. England, in Virginia, at first befriended the Natives, then after conflicts over trade, was forced to go to war against them.

The Trail of Tears is a sad chapter in the history of the United States, but once again, it is the ignorance and greed of the whites that led to the relocation: “In 1829, white settlers discovered gold on Cherokee lands in northwestern Georgia. It was only a matter of time before the government decided to relocate the Cherokee and other natives living in the southeast to other lands.”<sup>34</sup> It was the drive of national expansion and mob mentality of southern whites that led President Jackson to sign the Indian Removal Act. The voters who vaulted him into office expected him to drive the Indians off the land so that white farmers could use the land.

Pearson’s authors attempted to provide a balanced view of the story of Native American conflict with Europeans. Natives were sometimes aggressors, sometimes victims. The textbook was mostly without bias and takes a “just the facts” attitude towards the story. The authors presented neither side as overtly good or bad. The story of American history was a series of causes and effects with no attempt made at a judgment of the morality of the story or the people involved.

The story of Native American history has been a story of conflicting cultures and people. From the first writings of the Vikings, authors have attempted to tell the story of the meeting of European and Native American cultures, some with a greater degree of success than others. The story, like all of history, has its good guys and its bad guys. Who is good and who is bad depends on who is telling the story and who is the intended audience.

In the textbooks from the 1800s, arrogance suffused the story. Lossing and Hale presented the Indians as a homogenous group and placed Natives firmly in the position of the aggressor, ignorantly standing in the way of American Manifest Destiny. As the writing of American history progressed, authors presented Native Americans as separate cultures, each with its own aims and goals when it came to interacting with Europeans. In the late twentieth century, white guilt replaced European arrogance. It appeared that the authors attempted to make up for the slights of the past by presenting Indians as noble savages, waging a war that they are destined to lose.

Modern textbooks take a balanced approach as their authors attempt to present the Indians as distinct cultures. According to modern textbooks, Native

Americans—Columbus’s innocents—had no clue what the next five hundred years held for them. They attempted to repel European invasion, but ended up losing their culture at the hands of an unstoppable juggernaut of technology and philosophy. Writing about Native Americans has been a challenge for authors of American history. The presentation of Native Americans has been an evolving process, and after generations of half-truths, lies, and racism, it will be a long struggle to find an honest, truthful, unbiased presentation.

## Notes

1. The author used the terms “Native American,” “Native,” “American Indian” and “Indian” interchangeably throughout this paper. Most Native people prefer to be identified as “American Indian” or by their tribal membership.

2. Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary* (November 2001), accessed 2009, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=Skraeling>.

3. Rasmus B. Anderson, *The Norse Discovery of America* (London: Norrena Society, 1906), 54.

4. *Ibid.*, 56.

5. *Ibid.*, 57.

6. Salma Hale, *The History of the United States from Their First Settlement as Colonies, to the Close of the War with Great Britian, in 1815* (New York: Collins and Hannay, 1827), 3.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 10.

9. *Ibid.*, 16.

10. *Ibid.*, 9, 17, 19.

11. The Indian Removal Act, signed by President Jackson in 1830, removed Cherokee Indians from ancestral lands in the southeastern United States and forced them to march along the Trail of Tears to reservations west of the Mississippi. Thousands died of starvation, disease, and exposure.

12. The US 7th Calvary, under the command of General George Armstrong Custer, suffered a massive defeat at the hands of the combined Lakota and Northern Cheyenne forces, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse.

13. Benson J. Lossing, *A Primary History of the United States* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1872), 7.

14. *Ibid.*, 8.

15. Ibid., 9.
16. Ibid., 35.
17. Ibid., 15.
18. Ibid., 16.
19. Ibid.
20. John P. O'Hara, *A History of the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), v.
21. Ibid., 29.
22. Ibid., 34.
23. Ibid., 38.
24. Michael Tougias, "The History Place," *The History Place* 1997, accessed 2010, <http://www.historyplace.com/specials/kingphilip.htm>. Natives accused of murder were hanged by a Massachusetts jury, sparking a conflict between residents of Plymouth and members of the Pokanoket tribe. Natives burned several English towns and killed over a thousand English settlers representing the single largest per capita loss of life in American history.
25. O'Hara, 274.
26. Ibid., 245.
27. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), vii.
28. Ibid., 3.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid, 15.
32. Ibid.
33. Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, Peter B. Levy, Randy Roberts, and Alan Taylor *United States History* (Boston, MA: Prentice Hall, 2008).
34. Ibid.

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History has become a passion for Kevin Edgar. He has taught High School History and Social Studies for 10 years. He is currently teaching at Bingham Academy in Blackfoot, Idaho. The 8th child of James and Kathleen Edgar, Kevin grew up in Butte, Montana and graduated from Butte Central Catholic High School in 1990. He married the author Laurel Immonen in 1994. They have two children, Melanie and Morgan. Kevin received his Bachelor's degree in Liberal Studies with a focus in History and Literature from Montana Tech of the University of Montana in 2005. He graduated from American Public University in 2013 with a Master's degree in American History. In 2014, Kevin was named the Montana Class C Speech coach of the year by the Montana Forensic Educators Association. This is Kevin's second paper to be published in the Saber and Scroll Journal. His paper *Mining Picks and Baseball bats: the Unique Sports Culture of Butte, MT* appeared in the Summer 2013 issue.