

ATG Special Report — In Indian Territory

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To determine what was characteristic of any culture that is no longer intact, there is no substitute for examining every type of evidence, but one type is especially valuable and has been neglected: Conclusions about cultures that are themselves primary sources of information are among the most valuable statements ever made about the ways of life of independent groups including Native Americans.

Indian territory belonged to Indians, and as long as they were independent, they lived as they thought best. This article is about primary sources of information recorded by travelers who visited Indian territory rather than about the secondary accounts of anthropologists who visited reservations.

Early travelers who took the trouble to record their observations were usually intelligent and conscientious, but the traveler who visited a group of Indians only once did not know how typical the incidents were that he recorded. When evaluating travel accounts, it is important to distinguish between casual observations and well-informed conclusions. Casual travelers were often more likely to notice anything unusual and their observations were often recorded immediately, but they are more likely to exaggerate and to misinterpret. Conclusions by the best informed travelers are more reliable than eye-witness accounts by travelers who did not know Indian languages, but they need to be supplemented by every available primary source.

The following accounts are by explorers who made the earliest contacts with Indians and by later travelers who lived among Indians long enough to be able to summarize their customs accurately. The later traveler often knew more, but arrived after significant cultural traits had disappeared. Even so, the best summaries in later accounts are often more incisive and accurate than poorly documented explorations. Any primary source is of greater value than anthropological writings that are distorted by theory.

All of the following accounts of Indians are worth reading fully, but since some sections were written separately, they can be used separately either as an introduction to a way of life or for comparison with another group. The dates given are the years represented by the travels rather than dates of publication. The accounts discussed relate primarily to the Southeast and the Northwest, but what is significant about them has wider application.

Garcilaso de la Vega's history of the DeSoto Expedition, 1539-1543

Garcilaso's history is one of the four principal accounts of the expedition of **Hernando de Soto**, and it is by far the most comprehensive history of the expedition. It was based on at least three eye-witness accounts by members of the expedition, and it was vividly and intelligently written by an author who was half-Indian and half-Spanish and who tried to be fair to both sides.

De Soto traveled from the west coast of Florida to South Carolina, crossed the Appalachian Mountains, and got as far as the Mississippi River before being killed. Members of his expedition tried to reach Mexico by land, and failing to do so, they returned to the Mississippi and constructed ships that enabled them to sail to Mexico. Only a small portion of the approximately 700 Spaniards who went on the expedition survived, and four of them left narratives that largely substantiate what **Garcilaso's** informants told him. The value of his history is independently confirmed by other types of information including enlistment lists and a list of the survivors of the expedition.

The great value of all of the accounts of this expedition and particularly of **Garcilaso's** is that they record the first contact of Europeans with tribes throughout the Southeast. No comparable accounts exist for most tribes of the interior of the region until more than a half-century later, and in the meanwhile, disease caused such loss of population that many tribes had to combine and to substantially change their ways of life. **Garcilaso's** account deserves to be read by every college student for what it tells about Indians when they were first encountered by Europeans and for the insight of its author.

John Lawson's "New Voyage to Carolina," 1700-1701

Lawson was an Englishman seeking adventure, and he decided to travel through the interior of the Carolinas. He went by boat from Charleston along the coast and into the Santee River, then followed Indian trails north of the Santee and east of the Wateree River into the present state of North Carolina, and finally went downriver to the coast. Altogether he traveled several hundred miles through tribes of independent Indians, and he kept a journal of his trip that is consistently informative and well written and often amusing, but had he written nothing else about Indians, his account would be ethnohistory rather than ethnology. He so liked the coast of North Carolina that he decided to settle there. He became its Surveyor General and traveled widely as part of his professional duties. He had good scientific as well as literary training, and he later wrote a detailed summary of the customs of Indians and of the natural history of North Carolina. His journal and history have remained in print almost continually since.

Other travelers had previously been through the same parts of the Carolinas, but recorded little or nothing of what they saw. **Lawson** left by far the best and earliest account of Indians, plants, and animals in the area. He recorded and compared vocabularies of Indian languages and summarized almost every conceivable aspect of their ways of life. Except during his travels, he often did not distinguish between one group of Indians and another, but he did record specific and highly valuable information about the eastern Sioux. His generalizations provide a reliable basis for comparison with other accounts.

James Adair's "History of the American Indians...," c. 1750-1770 (Southeast)

Adair was one of the principal Indian traders in the Southeast before the American Revolution, and he wrote a largely useless book trying to prove that Indians were the Lost Tribes of Israel. He is a rare example of a knowledgeable primary source who distorted his evidence to fit a theory. In addition to the theoretical main part of his book, he appended a summary of what Southeastern tribes had in common, and none of his conclusions about what was characteristic can be dismissed without better evidence. His summary deserves to be published together with **Lawson's** earlier summary and **Bartram's** later summary to facilitate comparison.



William Bartram's "Travels," 1773-1778 (Southeast)

Bartram was primarily a botanist, and he gives the scientific name of almost every plant he saw, but apart from frequent lists that can be skipped, his text was so well written that it was widely read in Europe in the 18th Century and was highly praised by the English poet **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**.

Bartram was interested in everything he saw, and he kept detailed records about botany, zoology, geography, and anthropology. He included well informed conclusions about topics as wide-ranging as the migration of birds and Indian settlement patterns. Like most naturalists (including **Lawson**), **Bartram** considered Indians part of natural history, and he wrote about them with the same objectivity and detachment that he used for his other studies. The accounts of his travels throughout the Southeast are of great value for anthropology as well as natural history. In addition to his narrative, he appended separate summaries of the customs of the Creeks ("Muscogule") and of the Cherokees. His account of the Cherokees is especially valuable because the settlements he described were soon afterwards destroyed during and soon after the American Revolution. The Cherokee had sided with the British. **Bartram** later wrote a separate article entitled "Observations on the Creek and Cherokee Indians," and it is even more incisive.

Alexander Mackenzie's "Voyage from Montreal," 1789-1793 (across Canada)

Mackenzie was the first European to cross North America, and his published account helped to persuade **Thomas Jefferson** of the need for a major American expedition. **Mackenzie** was a Canadian trader who hoped to find an all-water route to the Pacific, and although he failed to do so, he discovered the Mackenzie River and followed it to within the influence of Arctic tides; he mapped much of central Canada; and on a second attempt he crossed the Rocky

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Mountains and reached the Pacific. During these expeditions, he encountered numerous nations of Indians, and his summaries are ethnologies rather than ethnohistories.

In a lengthy preface to his principal travels, **Mackenzie** gave the history of the fur trade in Canada, summarized information about the Indians of Canada, and discussed the customs of two major linguistic groups: the Algonquin-speaking Knistenaux and the Athapaskan-speaking Chepewyan. His book has been reprinted almost continuously since it was first published, and it is one of the great travel accounts of all time. All of it deserves to be read, and for anyone interested in Indians, his essays on two major northern tribes are essential reading.

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's "Journals," 1804-1806 (along the Missouri River to the Pacific)

In his instructions, **Jefferson** stated that the main object of the **Lewis and Clark Expedition** was "to find the most direct and practicable water-communication across the continent for the purposes of commerce." The leaders of the expedition were instructed to keep detailed journals and to prepare accurate maps. They were to record everything notable about Indians including their names, areas, relationships, languages, traditions, monuments, food, and trade. Their discussions of each group they encountered are concise, but highly informative, and they included an appendix summarizing locations and population size for 84 tribes or nations. As instructed, they also made notes on soils, animals, extinct animals, minerals, climate, furs, and possible locations for ports on the Pacific.

To prepare himself to identify plants and animals by scientific name, **Lewis** (**Jefferson's** secretary as President) studied under some of the leading American naturalists. **Clark** was chosen as a well known military leader and a skilled surveyor and mapmaker. During the expedition,

Lewis and Clark were greatly aided by Indian guides including **Sacagewa**, who translated information crucial for finding the best way through the Rocky Mountains. Many other Indian informants provided invaluable information about geography and natural history.

The expedition is well known to have accomplished all of its objectives in an exemplary manner, but most of the results were not published until long afterwards. In 1814, the manuscript journals of **Lewis and Clark** were combined and edited by **Nicholas Biddle**, who purposely omitted natural history with the expectation that another volume would be prepared soon afterwards. In 1893 **Elliott Coues** added back natural history and produced a four-volume edition of the principal journals with comparative material from journals kept by other members of the expedition and with extensive and valuable notes. **Coues** omitted little of importance from the approximately 3,000 pages of manuscripts in the 1,300 pages of small type of his printed edition, and he greatly enhanced the narratives with his own expertise in natural history and his first-hand knowledge of the areas visited by the expedition. Part or all of **Coues's** notes can be skipped as secondary to the original accounts, but they are in many cases primary sources in their own right. Starting in 1983, every word of every journal kept during the expedition was published in an 11-volume edition by the **University of Nebraska**, and its edition includes a folio volume that reproduces the manuscript maps that were long the best available.

From where the Missouri River enters the Mississippi to where the Columbia River enters the Pacific, the nations of Indians encountered by **Lewis and Clark** were recorded in more detail than had previously been done and in some cases that could be done afterwards. Many individual tribes were later recorded in greater detail, but with increasingly less of their original cultures intact.

George Catlin's "North American Indians," 1832-1839

Catlin single-handedly created the most accurate and comprehensive visual record of the American Indians ever created, and he recorded

some of the nations he visited more fully than anyone else. He was a lawyer who taught himself to paint, and he traveled widely throughout the Louisiana Territory, but especially on the Missouri River. His narrative starts slow, but become vivid as he depicts the still intact cultures of the Assiniboin, Blackfoot, Crow, Cree, Ojibwa, Dakota Sioux, and especially the Mandan. He was the only outsider ever to see and record secret ceremonies of the Mandan, and he recorded all aspects of their culture more fully than anyone in both writing and painting, but his skill as a painter was greatly surpassed by **Karl Bodmer**. Shortly after **Catlin** and **Bodmer** visited the Mandan, they were so nearly destroyed by smallpox that they ceased to exist as a culture. **Catlin's** two volumes of text was illustrated by 360 engravings made after his paintings. The customs of the Mandan were among the most unusual for any Indian nation ever recorded, and the chapters he wrote about them can be read separately.

Francis Parkman's "Oregon Trail"

Parkman went west in 1846 specifically to study Indians, and he lived for several weeks among the Dakota Sioux during the last years before their way of life was changed radically by settlers moving west, the Gold Rush, railroads, and the slaughter of buffalo. Through translators, he was able to communicate with numerous members of the Ogillallah branch of the nation and to question them about all aspects of their lives. He kept detailed notes, and as **Herman Melville** noted in a review, what **Parkman** wrote was "obviously truthful." He found much to admire and much to condemn, particularly torture. He lamented the endless cycle of revenge, but after watching small fish devour one another, he reflected that "from minnows to men, life is incessant war." He encountered various other nations of Indians, but what he wrote while living among the Sioux is an essentially separate and coherent whole and is among the best of all writing about Indians.

Publishing Opportunities

The incisive summaries by **Lawson**, **Adair**, and **Bartram** for the Southeast; by **Mackenzie** for Canada; and by **Lewis and Clark**, **Catlin**, and **Parkman** for the West deserve to be made available in one volume to facilitate comparison. All of them could be reprinted in one volume of about 600 pages, and together, they would provide eye-witness assessments of representative cultures that were contacted successively from east to west in North America during the century and a half from 1700-1846. Despite their wide distribution and the differences in time, all of these groups have much in common, and all of the conclusions about them by writers who knew them best are basically similar.

All of **Garcilaso's** earlier account is readily available and needs to be read. I know of no comparable early summary for a Southwestern group. Although the **Coronado Expedition** covered much of the Southwest at the same time, the narrative made of it is more history than ethnohistory. Many Spanish accounts of the Indians of Central and South America contain information of great usefulness for ethnohistory, but the cultures they recorded were too advanced to be comparable to Indian nations north of Mexico, and these accounts can be considered separately.

The most accurate and useful early illustra-

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Recommended Editions

Adair, James. 1775 [1930] *Adair's History of the American Indians*. Edited by Samuel Cole Williams. New York : Promontory Press (reprinted, 1974)

Bartram, William. 1791 [1996] *Travels, and Other Writings*. New York : Library of America.

Catlin, George. 1844 [1973] *Letters and notes on the manners, customs, and conditions of the North American Indians; written during eight years' travel (1832-1839) amongst the wildest tribes of Indians in North America*. 2 v. (with reproductions of about 250 paintings instead of prints). New York: Dover Publications.

Garcilaso de la Vega. 1605 [1967] *The De Soto Chronicles : the Expedition of Hernando de Soto to North America in 1539-1543*. Edited by Lawrence A. Clayton, Vernon James Knight, Jr., and Edward C. Moore. 2 v. (volume 2 contains all of Garcilaso's history). Tuscaloosa : University of Alabama Press, 1993.

Lawson, John. 1709 [1967] *A New Voyage to Carolina*. Edited by Hugh Talmage Lefler. Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press.

Lewis, Meriwether, and William Clark. 1814 [1893] *History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. Edited by Elliott Coues. 4 v. in 3. New York : Dover Publications (reprinted 1979).

Lorant, Stefan. 1591 [1946] *The New World : the first pictures of America / made by John White and Jacques Le Moyne and engraved by Theodore de Bry [1591] ; with contemporary narratives of the Huguenot settlement in Florida, 1562-1565, and the Virginia colony, 1585-1590*. New York : Duell, Sloan & Pearce.


Mackenzie, Alexander. 1801 [1955] *Journal of the Voyage to the Pacific*. Ed. by Walter Sheppe. New York : Dover Publications, Inc.

Parkman, Francis. 1883 [2002] *Oregon Trail*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc.

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tions were made in the 16th Century by **Jacques LeMoyne** of the Indians of the South Atlantic Coast and by **John White** of the Indians of North Carolina, and the work of both artists were engraved and made widely available by **Theodore de Bry**. These illustrations and related texts were brought together in one volume by **Stephan Lorant**, whose edition deserves to be made available as a paperback and kept in print. The works of **LeMoyne** and **White** provide the most valuable illustrations of Southeastern Indians made during the 16th Century, and they were rarely equaled.

All of the travel accounts listed in this article deserve to be kept in print indefinitely in hardback editions for libraries and in paperback editions for students. No introduction or notes are needed (or if present need be read). What all of these accounts have in common is that they are primary sources, that they document vanished ways of life, and that they were recorded by highly intelligent and skillful writers. They should be allowed to stand on their own merit. 

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