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# American Indian Studies Center Fortieth Anniversary

Gary B. Nash

I am glad to contribute some comments on the past, present, and future of the American Indian Studies Center (AISC).

Little did I know when coming to UCLA in 1966 that within several years the seeds for AISC would be planted. But I was eager to participate, something of an activist inside and outside of my department. It did not surprise me that the Department of History offered no courses in Native American history (or in women's history, African American history, Chicano history, or Asian American history). No major university listed such courses, and none had a PhD program in these fields. But while in graduate school at Princeton University I had admired the work of a few pioneers of Native American history such as Angie Debo's *And Still the Waters Run: The Removal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (1940) and Randolph Downes's *Council Fires on the Upper Ohio: A Narrative of Indian Affairs in the Upper Ohio Valley until 1795* (1940). Both books were written during the Great Depression, and both had been published on the eve of World War II.

In graduate school my interest in American Indian history had been kindled when Wesley Frank Craven asked me to give a seminar report on Douglas Leach's *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War* (1958). I do not remember my high school history book recounting this bloody conflict in 1675 and 1676, in which the casualties, proportionate to population, were greater than any war in US history. But now, I read it eagerly, all the more

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because Samuel Eliot Morison, famous as the historian of naval warfare in World War II, wrote the preface. Trying to make the book relevant to the Korean War experience that had ended just three years before and the wars of liberation from former European colonies still in progress, Morison wrote: “In view of our recent experiences of warfare, and of the many instances today of backward peoples getting enlarged notions of nationalism and turning ferociously on Europeans, who have attempted to civilize them, this early conflict of the same nature cannot help but be of interest.”<sup>1</sup> This definitely got my juices going, inspiring me to see if I might contribute some kind of antidote to this kind of inflamed Eurocentrism.

In graduate school, we were also schooled from Daniel Boorstin’s *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (1958). Boorstin had not yet become head of the Library of Congress, but he was already an acclaimed historian. In the section “How the Quakers Misjudged the Indians,” Boorstin flayed the Pennsylvania members of the Society of Friends for their pacifism (which had made William Penn’s colony the one place on the eastern seaboard in the first 150 years of European intrusion that was not drenched in the blood of Native American and European people). Boorstin told a generation of college students and the public in general that this pacifism and determination to forge peaceful relations with Native people was a sickening mistake of naïve Quakers, who could not understand that Native Americans had blood thirst in their DNA and violence on their minds whenever they saw a European settler. “The Indian,” wrote Boorstin, “was omnipresent; he struck without warning and was a nightly terror in the remote silence of backwoods cabins. . . . Every section of the seacoast colonies suffered massacres. . . . [The Quakers’] views of the Indian was . . . unrealistic, inflexible, and based on false premises about human nature.”<sup>2</sup>

This was enough to fix my determination to teach undergraduates differently when I arrived from the East Coast to teach at UCLA. One year after the administration approved the AISC in 1970—the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* also began publication in that year—I teamed up with two colleagues in my department, Alexander Saxton and Stephan Thernstrom, to reorganize the US survey course so that History 6A, 6B, and 6C would tilt toward a history of ethnic, racial, and social interaction. Scrambling to write new lectures, I ransacked the research library for everything I could find on Native American and African history—the building blocks for a reconceptualization of the first two centuries of American history. Happily, Anthony F. C. Wallace had just published a book that took undergraduates by storm—his eye-opening *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (1970). This narrative of struggle and survival among the westernmost of the Five Iroquois Nations was the front edge of a swarm of studies to come.

In 1971, when the AISC was granted Organized Research Unit status, History 6A-B-C was attracting hundreds of students each quarter, and this encouraged me, in the height of the civil rights movement, to write a book that I hoped would synthesize what was known about the complex interaction of people from three continents who had converged in the Americas. It ripened into *Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America* (1974). Now in its sixth edition, it is the most far-reaching book I have written.

While *Red, White, and Black* was in the copy-editing stage, the time seemed right to propose to the Department of History that we offer courses in Native American history. My department had already created new faculty positions to teach African American, Mexican American, and women's history, placing UCLA at the forefront of the "new history." But the proposal to devote another full-time equivalent (FTE) to a hyphenated group fell like a wounded bird.

Sometimes when the front door is slammed shut, the side door is the point of entry. The recourse was to appeal to Executive Vice Chancellor David Saxton for an "opportunity" FTE. His advice was to try the course out in UCLA Extension, and that led to the first course at a University of California campus about American Indian history. Offered in the spring of 1973, it was titled "The Dispossessed: Indian Cultures in American History, 1560–1930." I organized it as a series of topics rather than a chronological history of Native Americans. This allowed for sessions conducted by the few Indianists at UCLA and others by Native Americans in or around Los Angeles. Among those featured in the ten-week course were Rita Kashena (Menominee), from theater arts, on "The Stereotyped Indian in American Culture"; Sanford Smith (Ute), an independent lawyer, on "Land and Political Independence: The Iroquois Case"; Vine Deloria, an independent scholar and highly visible Native American activist, on "Indian Coalitions and Resistance Movements"; and Robert Egerton, from anthropology and psychiatry, on "Alcohol and Drunkenness in the European-Indian Contact." I gave three lectures on "Confrontation of Cultures after European Arrival," "The American Revolution through Indian Eyes," and "Indian Nations and Jacksonian Democracy."

To everyone's amazement, people from all over the Los Angeles basin enrolled in the extension course, coming in the evenings to participate in spirited exchanges between the audience and the lecturers. The history of Native Americans was now off the ground at UCLA. By this time, I had joined the faculty advisory committee of the center, joining a slowly growing cadre of faculty members devoted to research and teaching Native American studies.

One year later, in 1974, the University of California obtained a large grant from the Ford Foundation to fund four ethnic centers at UCLA for twenty-five years. The centers came under the administrative umbrella of the Institute of American Cultures. During the following year, impressed by the success of

the extension course given in successive years and prompted by an additional FTE provided by Vice Chancellor Saxton, the Department of History created a full-time position in American Indian history. George Phillips, Kenneth Morrison, and Melissa Meyer held this position during the next thirty-five years with visiting professors such as Donald Grinde and Roger Buffalohead also teaching undergraduate and graduate students. Norris Hundley, historian of the American West and editor of the *Pacific Historical Review*, also became the mentor of a number of students pursuing doctoral degrees with an emphasis on Native American history.

Like an acorn slowly developing into a mature oak tree, AISC grew by fits and starts, and nobody involved claimed that the process was easy. Finding a director for the AISC who was of Native ancestry was far from easy because the number of scholars nationwide was small. But Charlotte Heth, an accomplished ethnomusicologist and tenured member of the Department of Musicology, accepted the appointment as director—a position she held for more than a decade. Another example of growing pains was constructing a master's degree program in American Indian studies and getting it approved by the Graduate Council and the University of California office in Oakland. The gestation period for this exceeded that of elephants, but it was finally approved in 1982 after Ken Lincoln, a pillar of Native American literature, and I redrafted earlier proposals and negotiated with the graduate council to craft an acceptable advanced-degree program. For the last twenty-eight years, hundreds of students, including many from overseas, have completed the Master of Arts in Native American studies.

By the time Charlotte Heth stepped down as director in 1987, the center was arguably the best of its kind in the nation. By now, notable works about Native American history and Indian-European relations were commanding wide attention; by the early 1990s a trickle was becoming a stream. Widely used across the country were such books—to mention only those in my field of early American history—as Neal Salisbury's *Manitou and Providence: Indians, Europeans, and the Making of New England, 1500–1643* (1982); James Merrell's *The Indians New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (1989); Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991); Ramon Gutierrez's *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (1991); and Daniel Richter's *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (1992).

Today we have much in which to take satisfaction. American Indian history, as well as Native American literature, sociology, musicology, law, and related fields, are taught at hundreds of colleges and universities. Almost

without exception, college- and high school-level US history textbooks begin not in 1607 with the English arriving at Jamestown, Virginia, and the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, but with ancient Indian societies as they developed in the Americas for centuries before Columbus crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Eurocentrism still seeps from many books to be sure, but books on Indian-centered history come off academic and commercial presses regularly. For some years now, one could not pick up the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the *American Historical Review*, or the *Journal of American History* without finding a review of a new book by a historian of Indian America. Hardly a year passes without a book on some aspect of Native American history and culture winning a major prize from the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians. In Ken Lincoln's marvelous harvesting of forty years of scholarship on Native Americans from the center's *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, one finds only a sprinkling of historical essays. But that is mainly, I think, because the editors of flagship journals of the history profession haunt conferences when Indianists are presenting papers and bombard them with requests to submit their essays for publication.

Meanwhile the D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History at the Newberry Library and the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania are buzzing with young historians whose passion is Native American history. Regrettably, few Native Americans enter doctoral programs and write works of their own on Native American experiences or become the professors of Indian history in higher education. The reason is well-known: law, education, medicine, public health, and business attract most of the Native Americans who look for ways to serve their people after graduating from college.

Nonetheless, we have come a long way from the neglect and disparagement of Native Americans in the way American history is written and taught. UCLA's American Indian Studies Center has been part of this transformation for forty years, which has involved nothing less than the reorientation of a nation of several hundred million in the face it turns to "the First Americans."

## NOTES

1. Douglas Edward Leach, *Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), vi.

2. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York: Random House, 1958), 348.