



History of Anthropology Newsletter

Volume 2
Issue 2 *Summer 1975*

Article 4

1-1-1975

Crania and Conscientiousness: The Relation of Phrenology and Ethnology in Britain and America, c. 1840

Robert E. Bieder

George Combe

FOOTNOTES FOR THE HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY

CRANIA AND CONSCIENTIOUSNESS: THE RELATIONS OF PHRENOLOGY AND ETHNOLOGY IN BRITAIN AND AMERICA, c. 1840.

The following letters were written by George Combe, the Scottish phrenologist, to Samuel G. Morton, the Philadelphia physician and progenitor of the polygenetic "American School of Physical Anthropology" which was to achieve world-wide recognition in the 1850's. Combe had lectured in the United States in 1838, had examined Morton's collection of crania, and had offered to draw up some interpretive remarks for the Crania Americana which Morton published in 1839. Although Morton had signed a testimonial to Combe after hearing his course of lectures, and accepted "the fundamental principles of Phrenology", he was quite cautious in applying these to the interpretation of his crania, preferring to "present the facts unbiassed by theory." He printed Combe's essay, but as an appendix, rather than as an introduction. At this point Morton had not yet committed himself to polygenism, nor had the physical anthropological impulse clearly differentiated itself from the ethnological. Given Morton's obvious sensitivity to popular intellectual opinion, it is hardly surprising that he should have dedicated his English edition to Prichard, who was at this time clearly the leading ethnologist in Britain. Prichard's ethnology, although essentially monogenetic and diffusionist, presented itself as a "physical history of man", and was by no means unconcerned with the sort of data that Morton collected. Despite Combe's fears, Prichard's review of Morton's work in volume 10 of the Journal of the Royal Geographical Society was commendatory, and made no reference to phrenology. The letters are reprinted with the permission of the American Philosophical Society. For additional background, consult William Stanton, The Leopard's Spots (Chicago, 1960), and George Stocking, "From Chronology to Ethnology: James Cowles Prichard and British Anthropology, 1800-1850", introduction to Prichard, Researches into the Physical History of Man (Chicago, 1973).

1/13/1840

I am not gratified by learning that your English Edition is dedicated to Dr. Prichard. He has an excellent Intellect, and a well balanced head, with one exception, a deficient organ of Conscientiousness. I speak from observing his development. In regard to Phrenology, he has shown a lamentable defect of honest & fair dealing. A man of this kind is one who is a capital friend as long as it is his interest or inclination to be a friend; but no perfect reliance can be placed on his conduct where interest or inclination (vanity, for example, or ambition) dictate one course of action & duty another. He is much esteemed at Bristol, where he resides; and I hope no jealousy (sic) or other motive will render him unworthy of your regard. At the last meeting of the British

Association, Dr. Prichard asked money to procure specimens to enable him to illustrate the natural history of man. W. Hewett Watson asked him if he had examined the collection of national crania in the museum of the Phren. Socy. of Edin. when he was in that city. He answered No! W. Watson told him that he should use the materials within his reach before he asked for money to purchase more. Our collection is said to be the largest in Europe.

1/31/1840

W. Hewett Watson intended to purchase three copies of your work at his own expense & present them to public Institutions but when he read the dedication to Dr. Prichard, he abandoned his purpose! Dr. Caldwell, also, I find, regards Prichard as most disingenuous even on his own subject. Dr. P. I hope will not visit on you, now that he sees your Phrenological leanings, any of the transgressions which he thinks we have committed. He is, I believe, a Unitarian, & is the more inexcusable as he has not the excuse of bigotry for his hostility to the new philosophy.

CLIO'S FANCY--DOCUMENTS TO PIQUE THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

THE CLOSING OF THE FRONTIER IN AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY?

Curtis M. Hinsley, Jr.
Colgate University

The last decade of the nineteenth century was a strange period of transition and uncertainty in American anthropology. Not yet established in American universities, dominated by the aging figures of Brinton, Putnam and Powell, without a truly national journal of communication, the young science could not even promise livelihoods to students with an interest in the science of man, as the uncertain career of Franz Boas himself illustrated in the mid-1890s. To be sure, Washington, D. C., provided both an institutional nexus--through the Bureau of American Ethnology, the U. S. National Museum and the Anthropological Society of Washington--and a theoretical coherence of sorts in the unilinear evolutionism of Powell and his followers. But Powell's was a dying tradition. By the turn of the century, when the rugged outdoor life, exercise and the "Wild West" were being celebrated in American art and literature, the boundless, open frontier of Powell's generation of explorer/surveyors had already become a thing of the past.

The closing of the frontier--and the frontier mentality--in anthropology involved turning from the vigorous and indiscriminate data-collecting and loose generalizing that had characterized earlier American anthropology (and natural science generally) to concerns about