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The Closing of the Frontier in American Anthropology?

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Harlan I. Smith

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?

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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

methodology and subjectivity; from an informal system of education by personal example and field experience to structured university accreditation (although the personal model, as with Boas, still remained prominent). For some the changes did not come easily. Powell had meant to "organize" anthropology in America, not professionalize it; he died in 1902, just at the onset of university anthropology. Some younger men, however, caught in the changing patterns, felt the new standards and criteria more acutely.

Young Harlan I. Smith, son of a Saginaw, Michigan, real estate developer, spent all his spare time as a student at the University of Michigan visiting nearby Ojibwa villages, and he dreamed of a career in anthropology. In the early 1890s he followed closely the debate between William Henry Holmes in Washington and Frederic Ward Putnam at Harvard over the antiquity of man in North America. At the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 he met Boas, and three years later followed him to New York. After a year or so of tutoring with Boas in linguistics, Smith joined the Jesup Expedition for three years, eventually returning to the American Museum of Natural History. In 1895, however, Smith's future was cloudy, and he expressed the doubts that others must have shared to Washington anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing, a self-made scientist of the older generation:

...Will this work for which I have given my time and study now for a number of years earn for me from now on a living and at the same time afford a chance for study and improvement? Will the subject of anthropology require so many men as are fitting for it? Will it offer them a living? Can I fit myself well enough to hold a place or is the number of men having better facilities and early advantages so great that I will be crowded under and have to turn to another occupation? I often fear that my culture and intellectual (sic) capacity will not stand comparison with eastern men that are coming on. While I feel that my ability for manual labor, technology, frontier work, hard study, and scientific accuracy will compare with any field worker or museum assistant I ever knew personally. (sic) There is very little about camp life and frontier work whether in the woods or on inland waters which I have not tried. And it is the same with museum laboratory work, photography, cast making etc. My training in methods of biologic work with the microscope and knife has given me an idea of careful methods and the value of true seeing which I hope will prevent me from making such mistakes as some of my friends, workers in museum & field, have made by carelessness or hasty concluding. On the other hand I feel very weak in booklearning. I know how to learn better than many but know less of the results of learning than most. Now I fear I have gone too far and been too free with private matters, however I feel sure you will not allow my confidence to go where it will do harm. Will you not advise me of the outlook for such an one as I, as well as suggest how I may soon get a situation where the bread and butter side of life may be assured. . . .

(letter in W. J. McGee Papers, Library of Congress)