The Emperor's Mirror

Understanding Cultures through Primary Sources

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Prologue

In the third century, Qin Shi Huangdi successfully united China for the first time, founding the short-lived Qin empire. According to legend, the emperor had a mirror with extraordinary qualities. A person looking into this mirror would see not only the true reflection of his or her face, but also the innermost characteristics of will, experience, and personality.

This mirror is much like any document or most other evidence used to reconstruct the past. A document reflects reality in some sense, but also the author's will, experience, and personality. One job of the historian—or any other researcher studying the past—is to sift through these jumbled elements and winnow accurate description from the rest. With ethnohistory, where documents written by a member of one society often describe events in another society, the problem of segregating accurate reporting from distortion is especially difficult. One theme that runs throughout this book is how these distortions come about and how to recognize and interpret them.

This book is also an introduction to the practice of ethnohistory, one of the fields of study that examines and aims to foster understanding of the human past. It is designed to lead the reader through the distinctive concepts and methods of ethnohistory and to provide insight into the conduct of ethnohistoric research. Along the way, it discusses ethics, the virtues of using complementary sources of information, the importance of planning, and the relationships among concepts, methods, and strategies.

Part 1 is devoted to concepts in ethnohistory and presents the reality-mediation model, our way of conceptualizing both the accurate and the distorted description that makes its way into ethnohistoric evidence. The concepts that underlie this model are used throughout the book. Much of what sets ethnohistory apart from related ways of studying the past is its methodology, so it is appropriate that part 2, which is devoted to methods, be the longest part of the book. Part 3 discusses strategies: ways to make the practice of ethnohistoric research more effective and efficient.

An epilogue ties up the threads that have been introduced throughout the book, and appendices provide bibliographies and a proposed outline for ethical standards in ethnohistory.

A word of explanation is in order regarding some of our choices of terminology. We have tried to define any ambiguous or contentious technical terms, and we have avoided certain terms that we believe have acquired an entrenched but unfortunate meaning in the field. A variety of common terms, however, are more difficult to deal with, terms that have connotations that can be both passionately held and passing. The descendants of the original colonizers of the Americas, for example, have been called variously "Native Americans," "American Indians," and "Amerindians." Over the last few decades, each of these has enjoyed some level of currency for a while among scholars, the public, and the people described, as indicated by the variety of terminology incorporated into the titles of activist organizations. None of these names, unfortunately, is fully satisfactory. "Native American" commemorates Amerigo Vespucci, a European scholar; even more damaging, it is easily misunderstood. This is reflected in a recent questionnaire at the authors' university, where hundreds of students of European ancestry declared themselves "Native Americans" because they were born in the United States. "American Indian" not only commemorates a European, but it also perpetuates a misunderstanding that linked the inhabitants of the Americas to India. "Amerindian" is an awkward neologism incorporating all the weaknesses of "American Indian." The native inhabitants of the Americas had no term that encompassed all the tribes of which they were composed. In short, there is no choice that is culturally sensitive, historically accurate, well turned, and unambiguous.

Accordingly, we have opted to use terms that communicate well, so long as they are not overtly pejorative, recognizing the shortcomings of those terms. We have used "American Indian" in most cases, though synonyms have been used occasionally. When a specific tribe is designated, we have tried to use that tribe's self-designation, providing it will be intelligible to the reader and cannot be confused with the identical self-designation of a different group. (Both the Apache and the Navajo, for example, use the same native term for themselves.)

We have followed the same reasoning in our choices of other terms. We have eschewed "C.E." (Common Era) and "B.C.E." (Before the Common Era) as calendric designators; they are identical to the more well-known "A.D." and "B.C." and carry whatever Eurocentric implications are embodied in these latter terms—they simply don't communicate so well to most readers. Finally, we have used "Old World" and "New World" to designate Europe-Africa-Asia and the Americas, respectively. We often have used "the Americas" as a synonym for "New World," but there is no equivalent and simple expedient to replace "Old World"; at least there is some historical basis for these designations, since archaeological evidence indicates that human beings entered the New World at a much later date than their evolution in the Old World.

PART I

Concepts

Introduction

Many ethnohistorians would argue that their field of study is defined more by subject matter or methods than by concepts and theory. Nonetheless, every ethnohistorian uses certain assumptions, ideas, and principles to interpret evidence, and there is a high degree to which these are shared by the community of ethnohistorians. Building on that shared corpus, part 1 introduces the field of ethnohistory and some of its concepts.

Our goals are modest: We have not attempted to catalogue or synthesize all the various concepts or theories that are in current use in ethnohistory. Instead, we have restricted our efforts to more humble ends. In chapter 1 we discuss the scope of ethnohistory, tracing its formal definitions, its development in practice, and some of its more important concepts. Chapter 2 presents the reality-mediation model, a way to alert ethnohistorians to the potential for being misled by their information, especially documents, visual evidence, and oral accounts. Such a model, focusing as it does on the relationship between evidence and interpretation, is a particularly apt conceptual device for ethnohistory, where methodology arguably forms the backbone of the field. This chapter is a grounding for those that follow, providing ideas that recur in the more detailed methodological chapters of part 2.

The Scope of Ethnohistory

Over the relatively few decades that ethnohistory has existed as a recognized field, ethnohistorians have devoted a good deal of time and ink to defining themselves. This chapter will present some definitions of ethnohistory, discuss them, and offer a version that we will use throughout this book. In addition, it will discuss the basic concepts that underpin ethnohistory, the history of the development of the field, and the documents that are so crucial to it.

Curiously, the major professional society for ethnohistorians was founded before there was a consensus definition of ethnohistory itself. In fact, it could be argued that there still is no consensus among ethnohistorians about what makes their field unique. Despite this situation, ethnohistorians seem quite able to identify with the field and to recognize a piece of scholarship as essentially ethnohistoric. This seeming contradiction suggests that there is a common ground of ethnohistory, but that the definitions serve a different purpose than merely identifying it. Probably the activities of ethnohistorians best define what ethnohistory *is,* while the formal statements indicate what one or another definer thinks ethnohistory *should be.*

Ethnohistory Defined by Words

Ethnohistory has been defined over and again in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the course of reviewing these definitions, we discovered more than a dozen that were substantially different and almost fifty different wordings. (See Carmack 1972 for a review of many of the definitions of ethnohistory up to the time of his writing.) The field of study has been defined by historians, anthropologists, folklorists, geographers, philosophers, art historians, and scholars of literature. Most of the definers have been ethnohistorians, but some have been outsiders looking

at an unfamiliar field, and a few have even been antagonistic to the endeavor. But the best place to start is with the only definitions of ethnohistory that carry a quasi-official stamp.

Definitions from the Professional Society

The first issue of *Ethnohistory* appeared in 1955. Significantly, this scholarly journal was the first to be dedicated exclusively to the publication of ethnohistoric research; today it remains the principal ethnohistoric journal. It also is significant that *Ethnohistory* was sponsored by the precursor of the American Society for Ethnohistory (ASE), the first professional organization devoted exclusively to the advancement of the field. From its inception until the present, *Ethnohistory* has carried a brief statement of the journal's purpose on the inside cover or title page. These statements have changed over time and provide an entry point into the controversies that surround the definition of ethnohistory.

Up until 1966, the statement read:

> *Ethnohistory* is a quarterly journal devoted to original research in the documentary history of the culture and movements of primitive peoples, and related problems of broader scope.

The definition of ethnohistory included in this statement includes three important elements. First, documents are put forward as the sole source of evidence for ethnohistory; second, the subject matter of ethnohistory is "primitive" people; and third, attention is focused on these peoples' cultures and movements. This definition reflects many old-fashioned elements less popular today, but it is a good place to begin.

In 1966, the statement was amended to a form that was maintained through 1970:

> *Ethnohistory* is a quarterly journal of articles, original documents and reviews relating to general culture history and process, and to the specific history of peoples on all levels of sociocultural organization, emphasizing that of primitives and peasantries, in all world areas.

Here, the movements of peoples—an interest of nineteenth-century anthropology that had carried over into the early twentieth century but was no longer a major interest by the 1960s—was gone, replaced by a more neutral but anthropological phrase: "general culture history and process." The interest was broadened from just primitive peoples to include everyone, though interest still focused on primitives and their new bedfellows, peasantries. In this period, anthropology was ridding itself of the outmoded concept of primitiveness (and its attendant connotations of inferiority and simplicity), and this statement can be seen as a compromise between the older ideas and the newer ones. In addition, the earlier statement regarding the documentary basis of ethnohistory was excised. This is a very anthropological definition with only two clues—the phrases "original documents" and "specific history"—that this might not be a general anthropology journal.

In 1971, the statement changed again:

> *Ethnohistory* is a quarterly journal of articles, original documents and reviews relating to general culture history and process, and to the specific history of peoples on all levels of sociocultural organization, emphasizing that of non-industrial peoples, in all world areas.

The only change here was to remove the peasantries and offending "primitives" and replace them with a more neutral and modern phrase that meant much the same thing. This statement was retained until 1981.

In 1982, the statement was simplified to:

> *Ethnohistory* is a quarterly journal relating to the culture history of ethnic peoples throughout the world.

This skeletal statement removed nearly all the defining characteristics of the earlier statements. The term "ethnic peoples" is an interesting one, reflecting the usage current in ethnic studies and some other fields: non-White or non-Anglo. In anthropological terms, of course, everyone has an ethnicity, so the phrase could be construed to mean all societies.

In 1984, only two years later, the former definition was replaced with a new one:

> *Ethnohistory* is a quarterly journal relating to the past of cultures and societies in all areas of the world, emphasizing the use of documentary and field materials and historiographic and anthropological approaches.

The definition had expanded again, removing the suggestion that some peoples were excluded from ethnohistoric interest. The materials that support ethnohistory once again were delineated, this time including documents and enigmatic "field materials" (which could mean many things). Finally, this statement for the first time explicitly noted that ethnohistory was interdisciplinary, drawing on the concepts of both history and anthropology.

This statement fared little better than its predecessor, and it was amended after its second year. The statement adopted in 1986 and still printed in the journal is

Ethnohistory is the journal of the American Society for Ethnohistory.

After three decades of experimenting with definitions of ethnohistory, the journal's editors settled on the most minimal definition possible. This failure to settle on a common and detailed definition reflects differences in opinion on the nature of ethnohistory that characterized the field in these years and, to some extent, persist today.

Elements Toward a Definition of Ethnohistory

We located and analyzed dozens of definitions of ethnohistory from the literature in an attempt to ascertain their common ground. While that common ground was small, there were only eight assertions about the field that were incorporated into the various definitions, a surprisingly small number. No one definition contained them all, of course, and some pairs of assertions cannot logically coexist with one another. We present and evaluate these assertions in this section, and we will use many of them in the following section, where we assemble what we believe is an appropriate definition of ethnohistory.

Assertion 1. Ethnohistory studies past human behavior. In most cases, that behavior is many years in the past, a fact reflected in the universal presence of this assertion in the definitions. Although none of these published definitions explicitly mention this point, some recent ethnohistoric studies deal with "current" issues and events; these can be conceived as dealing with very recently past human behavior.

Assertion 2. Ethnohistory studies the small-scale, non-Western peoples of the world. These are the "primitives and peasantries" of an earlier ASE definition, "the kinds of cultures and societies that social anthropologists study in their field work" (Hudson 1966), and "the ethnic groups ordinarily relegated to the shadows of the White man's view of history" (Dorson 1961:16). During the middle part of the twentieth century, such an assertion might have made sense, since historians (at least in the American sense of the word) usually restricted their research to Western civilizations, and anthropologists normally covered the rest of the world. This division increasingly broke down in the later years of the century, however, and historians today routinely study West African kingdoms or American Indian societies; conversely, anthropologists are fully at home studying day-care centers in Seattle and the meat diet of modern Irish, as well as their traditional studies in corners of the world remote from Western cities. Incorporating this assertion in a definition of ethnohistory would mean embracing the unacceptable notion that non-Western and Western peoples are somehow fundamentally different – that there is real history for Westerners, and ethnohistory for all the rest. Eric Wolf (1982: 19) and others have leveled persuasive criticism against precisely that notion. No definitions since 1970 have included this assertion.

Assertion 3. Ethnohistory is a method or an approach, not a theory or a philosophy. This common assertion appears in most definitions, as in that of Phelan (1959:viii–ix), who defines ethnohistory as "the effort to combine sound historical practices with some anthropological techniques." Accepting this viewpoint means that ethnohistory is characterized by the way it derives its conclusions, not necessarily by the nature of those conclusions, the way they are fit into larger syntheses of knowledge, or the underlying ideas about behavior that scholars bring to their research. We concur that methods are one of the major factors that unify ethnohistory, while it is very difficult to find a theory or philosophy that is unique to the field. We also recognize that the intricate interweavings of method and theory sometimes make it difficult to separate these two elements.

Assertion 4. Ethnohistory is based primarily on documentary evidence. Some definers have claimed documents as the sole basis for ethnohistoric research, but most have followed the more reasonable path of making them the most important basis for the field. Documents preserve testimony from the past in a way unlike almost any other medium, and it is with justification that historians and ethnohistorians usually make them central in their research. Individual ethnohistoric researchers or research projects, of course, sometimes rely entirely on nondocumentary evidence, though the field as a whole remains largely reliant on documents. Most ethnohistorians sensibly use any data source that is reasonable and available, whether it be documents, archaeology, or oral history; the utility of documents, however, means that they usually will be the primary data source.

Assertion 5. Ethnohistory is based primarily on oral accounts composed by the non-Western, indigenous people under study. This viewpoint is

espoused primarily by specialists in Africa (e.g., Fagan 1985:585), no doubt under the influence of the strong contributions that oral accounts have made to ethnohistory for that continent. Nonetheless, we maintain that in most places, including many parts of Africa, ethnohistory relies as much—and often more—on documents as it does on oral history. We do recognize, however, the importance of incorporating oral evidence whenever it is available, and chapter 11 discusses this source of information more fully.

Assertion 6. Ethnohistory is based on a partnership of disciplines. Most definitions incorporate some version of this assertion, although there is considerable disagreement about details. A minority view favors a multidisciplinary approach in which different disciplines maintain their independent coexistence; this viewpoint is expressed by Cline (1972:15), who has argued that the component disciplines within ethnohistory are inherently different in goals and approaches and therefore will ultimately lead to several distinct ethnohistories, particularly "historical ethnohistory" and "anthropological ethnohistory." Most definitions, however, favor considering the field interdisciplinary: sharing and merging the concepts and approaches of its component disciplines. To be truly interdisciplinary, ethnohistorians will have to step outside their disciplinary training and experiment with ideas and methods more usual for other fields of study. We believe this is an appropriate and distinctive characteristic of ethnohistory.

Among those who argue that ethnohistory is essentially interdisciplinary, there is some disagreement over exactly which disciplines are involved. By far the majority of definers consider history and anthropology to be the core disciplines (e.g., Jennings 1982). Others, however, have seen history and folklore (Dorson 1961) or history and archaeology (Baerreis 1961) as the primary partners. We view history and anthropology as the primary partners by virtue of volume of contributions to date, but we also recognize that ethnohistorians are drawn (and may in the future be drawn in even greater numbers) from many other disciplines. Each partner discipline has made, and will make, its unique contribution to ethnohistory.

Assertion 7. Ethnohistory is historiographic. Historiography is the study of the practice of history, focusing primarily on methodology and philosophy. In the sense used here, the term focuses on the critical use of documents, particularly in terms of their probable authenticity and accuracy. (This subject is covered as "source analysis" in chapter 7.) Saying that ethnohistory is historiographic, as Lurie (1961:80) and others do, means that ethnohistorians do not simply accept at face value every jot of information in a document. Literature in the mid-twentieth century repeatedly criticized ethnohistorians, particularly anthropologists, for uncritical acceptance of information in documents. Those criticisms were so effective that the historiographic nature of ethnohistory today is universally accepted by its practitioners.

Assertion 8. Ethnohistory is ethically neutral and relativistic. Cultural relativism refers to a philosophy of ethical neutrality that causes a person to resist interjecting moral judgments into the analysis of events or processes. This is essentially an anthropological concept in origin, although it can be traced back to philosophers before it became a bulwark of the anthropological approach. It has been incorporated into several definitions of ethnohistory (e.g., Sturtevant 1966). In the late twentieth century, cultural relativism has become much more common among nonanthropologists—particularly historians—than it was fifty years before. Here we have the same pattern of the previous assertion but with the disciplinary roles reversed: this time the idea was common in anthropology and spread to history. Accordingly, we see this assertion as basic to the definition of ethnohistory.

Assertions 7 and 8 form an interesting interplay. Some of the definers, particularly Lurie (1961), emphasize these points, and their definitions sometimes devolve to very simplistic formulas. An anthropologist who knows how to do source analysis becomes an ethnohistorian; a historian who is a cultural relativist becomes an ethnohistorian. While these distinctions might have been useful at one time, this reasoning would mean that most anthropologists and historians are ethnohistorians, making such simple equations virtually useless.

Our Definition of Ethnohistory

As stated earlier, formal definitions of a field of study probably are most useful in delineating what an individual believes *should* be the scope of that field, and our definition is no exception. It may include some research that other definitions might exclude and vice versa. It has the virtue of defining a field that, despite overlap with other fields of study, has distinctive subject matter and methodology.

We can construct the foundation of this definition of ethnohistory from the acceptable assertions of the previous section. Accordingly, we preliminarily define ethnohistory as an interdisciplinary field that studies past human behavior and is characterized by a methodology based pri-

marily on documents, the use of input from other data sources when available, and the incorporation of historiography and cultural relativism. This definition is fine as far as it goes, but we believe it insufficiently distinguishes ethnohistory from other fields—especially history and historical anthropology—in terms of subject matter.

Many of the distinctions that earlier definitions drew between ethnohistory and either history (as a whole) or anthropology have become blurred as historians and anthropologists have freely borrowed perspectives from one another. Historical anthropologists use documents, and historians of all sorts subscribe to cultural relativism. If ethnohistory is to have a distinctive niche of its own, it must be differentiated from the rest of history and the rest of anthropology. This brings us to some essential questions: Is ethnohistory different from other history? Is ethnohistory different from historical anthropology? Does ethnohistory actually exist as a discrete field of study, or should the term be junked?

We believe there is a difference that is rooted in the essential nature of the database for ethnohistory. Virtually all ethnohistoric research is focused on societies in contact and cultures in conflict. The interaction between two or more peoples is, therefore, a significant characteristic of ethnohistory. This interaction is reflected in the topics chosen (which often capitalize on the attendant conflicts between societies), the sources used (which most often are written by a member of one society about members of another), and by the relativist stance (which avoids taking sides in the conflicts). Accordingly, we incorporate this interaction criterion into our definition of ethnohistory. (The importance of this assertion was anticipated by Washburn: "I suspect that it will be precisely in the field of the relationship between European and non-European societies that the greatest utility of the ethnohistorical approach will be found" [1961:42]. Eric Wolf [1982:19] echoed this sentiment in his classic study integrating the histories of Europe and colonial lands.)

Taking all of this into consideration, we arrive at our definition of ethnohistory:

> Ethnohistory is an interdisciplinary field that studies past human behavior and is characterized by a primary reliance on documents, the use of input from other sources when available, a methodology that incorporates historiography and cultural relativism, and a focus on cultural interaction.

This definition doubtless declares some research ethnohistoric when its authors would have thought otherwise, and it probably excludes some research that normally would be considered ethnohistoric. Whatever shortcomings it may have, this definition avoids what we see as a greater fault: drawing an arbitrary division between ethnohistoric studies directed to non-Western societies and studies similar in nature but dealing with Western society. Whether the subject is Yankee gold miners in the multiethnic gold camps of California, or Chinese merchants in Indonesia, or Tupinamba encountering Europeans in sixteenth-century Brazil—any of these is fair game to ethnohistory as we define it. Similarly, a study of the functioning of Veddan society based entirely on Indian sources is no more ethnohistoric than a study of the Magna Carta based solely on English sources. To some extent, of course, good research is good research, and it matters little how we classify it; a field of study, however, profits from having well-defined subject matter.

Ethnohistory Defined by Actions

Formal definitions aside, ethnohistory is what ethnohistorians do. Looking at ethnohistorians, their research, and their scholarly output can provide an idea of how ethnohistory is defined in practice.

Training and Backgrounds

Most ethnohistorians have been trained in either anthropology or history, with slightly more probably coming from an anthropology background. A smaller number of ethnohistorians received their training in geography, art history, linguistics, comparative literature, and other fields. More and more ethnohistorians are earning graduate degrees from interdisciplinary programs that draw their faculty from the history and anthropology departments and sometimes from other departments as well.

Ethnohistorians with different kinds of training often conduct subtly dissimilar kinds of research. Historians, for example, traditionally have focused their attention on certain aspects of human behavior such as politics, law, military affairs, and economics. These topics provide familiar terrain, and many historians will find them rewarding places to conduct research. Social historians in the last three decades or so have extended the breadth of historical study, but the greatest historical efforts remain in the more traditional arenas. Anthropologists, too, have their typical topics of traditional anthropological interest, such as contact between societies, religion, kinship and family organization, and subsistence. Geographers

tend to direct their focus more toward issues related to land use, resources, and the use of space; folklorists usually focus on oral accounts; and ethnohistorians from other fields also bring ideas of fruitful topics with them. As is befitting an interdisciplinary field, however, there is considerable overlap in the sorts of research conducted by ethnohistorians trained in different disciplines.

Topics of Research

A quantitative study of the contents of the journal *Ethnohistory* reveals interesting patterns in the kind of research conducted by ethnohistorians (Barber and Berdan n.d.). The entire run of this journal was examined, and its articles were sorted into different categories such as topic and approach. (This method is called "content analysis" and is discussed at some length in chapter 8.)

In the early years of the journal, virtually all of its contributions focused on American Indians of North America. Over time, however, the geographical coverage broadened, and articles appeared on peoples in the Swiss Alps, sub-Saharan Africa, the Marquesas Islands, and Peru. Today, there is still more research on native North American groups than on any others, but the geographical distribution of research is increasingly global.

Studies of the human past can be either synchronic (focusing on a single period and the unity within it) or diachronic (focusing on the change that takes place over time). Both history and anthropology are equally interested in the two kinds of studies, so it is not surprising that their offspring, ethnohistory, has always welcomed both as well.

The topics addressed by ethnohistorians run the gamut. A few titles of articles in *Ethnohistory* from the first half of the 1990s give a flavor of the range:

- "Maori Prisoners and Slaves in the Nineteenth Century"
- "Land Litigations in an Andean Ayllu from 1592 until 1972"
- "Shamanism and Christianity: Modern-day Tlingit Elders Look at the Past"
- "Contesting Authenticity: Battles over the Representations of History in Morelos, Mexico"
- "Images of Society in Klondike Gold Rush Narratives: Skookum Jim and the Discovery of Gold"
- "Continuity under Colonial Rule: The Alcalde System and the Garifuna in Belize, 1858–1969"

- "The Warrior and the Lineage: Jesuit Use of Iroquoian Images to Communicate Christianity"
- "Stages in the Historical Process of Ethnicity: The Japanese in Brazil, 1908–1988"
- "Voices of Disaster: Smallpox around the Strait of Georgia in 1782"
- "Shields and Lodges, Warriors and Chiefs: Kiowa Drawings as Historical Records."

These titles give a small indication of the broad range of possible topics addressed through ethnohistory. There are, however, subjects of enduring interest that continue to attract a large share of interest among ethnohistorians.

Acculturation, the taking on of the way of life of an alien society, is a common focus, probably because cultural contact and conflict are themes inherent in ethnohistory. Within the general field of acculturation, religious conversion and shifting economic patterns are particularly popular. Demography, especially population collapse in the face of introduced diseases, also attracts scholars. The interrelations of war, diplomacy, and law are the subject of many studies, as are the maintenance of ethnic identity and tradition in the face of changing circumstances. There are many such areas of ethnohistoric concern, but these are exemplary in that they are based on the interaction of peoples highlighted in our definition of ethnohistory.

Concepts

The primary goal of all ethnohistorians is to illuminate the past. Information about earlier human activities is hidden away in documents and elsewhere, and part of the ethnohistorian's task is to ferret it out, collect it, and make it available. The next step is to take that information and interpret it, trying to construct notions of how different factors interacted and brought about certain events or conditions. Ethnohistorical facts do not speak for themselves; rather, they have to be put together in plausible ways to try to explain something about human activity in the past: how something happened, and why it happened.

The tools for putting together facts in plausible ways are concepts. Of course, the variety of concepts used by ethnohistorians is enormous and ever-expanding, as each discipline and practitioner brings more to the collection; each piece of research draws on some subset of those concepts, many of which are in broad use in other fields, especially the social sciences.

Conceptual Building Blocks

Though the diversity of concepts used by ethnohistorians is great, certain basic and central concepts are so widely used in ethnohistory that they warrant special attention here. They can be divided into two sets: approaches and assumptions.

Approaches. When conducting research, a scholar makes decisions about how to conceive the problem and go about solving it. The researcher consciously makes most of those decisions while pondering the options, but some may be made less consciously, conditioned by the researcher's habits, training, experience, and culture. These choices constitute the scholar's approaches to that piece of work. It is critical to remember that these are choices between acceptable alternatives, selected in an attempt to optimize the likelihood of deriving interpretations that further knowledge.

One useful way to organize these approaches is into dichotomies: polar opposites that represent the end points of a continuum. These dichotomous pairs are presented here as mutually exclusive opposites, but a scholar often can choose an intermediate position between the extremes. One such dichotomous pair of approaches is synchronic-diachronic. Synchronic refers to a focus on conditions at a single point in time; diachronic refers to a focus on change over time. For example, a synchronic study of Jesuit proselytizing among the Iroquois might focus on efforts at the early missions in the 1660s, while a diachronic study might contrast early efforts in the 1660s with later efforts in the 1710s. As with all of these dichotomous pairs, each approach is perfectly valid, and an ethnohistorian's choice is purely a matter of opting for the one that appears most likely to be productive and that fits the researcher's personal preference.

Another dichotomous pair is emic-etic. These terms are derived from the linguistic terminology of "phonemic" and "phonetic," and they parallel them in meaning. Emic refers to a way of looking at the world based on the conceptions, perceptions, and beliefs of the people being studied. Etic, in contrast, refers to a way of looking at the world that is based on the analytic conceptions of the ethnohistorian; these sometimes are characterized as "objective," but (as discussed at length in chapter 2) such objectivity is impossible, or at least unconfirmable. A study of why the Tupinamba periodically relocated their villages could be either emically based or etically based; the former would focus on the reasons the Tupinamba gave and presumably believed, while the latter would focus on "deeper" reasons that the ethnohistorian believed were "really" at the root of the Tupinamba decisions. While most scholarship aims ultimately to come to some etic understanding of events and processes, the etic approach can be criticized as placing the researcher in an unduly privileged position as the arbiter of conceptual correctness.

A piece of research can also follow either the particularist or the nomothetic approach. The particularist approach involves studying a single case intensively, going into idiosyncrasies and specifics in great detail, and producing an interpretation of that single case. In contrast, the nomothetic approach (sometimes called the scientific approach) involves studying many cases to find their commonalities and draw a general conclusion that will apply to many (ideally, all) cases. An ethnohistoric study of seventeenth-century English courts in eastern Connecticut to assess and interpret discrimination against Native Americans is particularist; a nomothetic study might examine colonial courts in eastern Connecticut, Peru, Goa, the Dutch East Indies, Nigeria, and other places to assess and interpret patterns of discrimination against native peoples in colonial courts, producing a general statement.

Still another pair of approaches focuses on the importance of personal influence versus social forces. Research on personal influence (formerly known as "great-man interpretations") emphasizes how individuals, their personal qualities, and their decisions shaped events. Research that centers on social forces, on the other hand, draws attention to the ongoing processes in society that shape an individual's actions. A study that focuses on tactical decisions made by the leaders at the Battle of the Little Big Horn is following the personal-influence approach, while a study emphasizing armaments, supply lines, and attitudes regarding warfare takes the social-forces approach. Much ethnohistory that follows the biographical approach (e.g., Wilson 1983; Gough 1982) singles out an influential individual, examines that person's life, and interprets how personal decisions and actions shaped broader events. This is a classic application of the personal-influence approach; however, other ethnohistoric studies using the biographical approach (e.g., Boyer and Gayton 1992; Namias 1993) focus on "typical" individuals or even groups of individuals, following much more of the social-forces approach.

Some studies focus on a single factor in explaining a process or event, while others investigate a broader set of considerations. A single-factor interpretation has the advantage of theoretical elegance and simplicity of understanding; critics who find a single-factor interpretation to be oversimplified can incorporate other factors and develop a multiple-factor interpretation. A study that might examine the role of economics in Mor-

mon conversions among the Blackfoot would be single-factor research, while examining the roles of economics, social status, and factionalism in conversion would use a multiple-factor approach. Some scholars argue that almost no sociocultural phenomena relate to only a single factor and therefore multiple-factor studies are always preferable. Single-factor research, however, does not require accepting that only one factor is of importance. Rather, one could follow this approach to bring attention to a previously neglected factor or as part of research leading to a simplified model (discussed further in this chapter).

The final dichotomous pair to be considered is quantitative versus qualitative approaches. Some research is quantitative, concentrating on the measurement of factors and effects under consideration; other research is qualitative, using characteristics or properties without reference to measurement. A study of women's participation in Sioux politics is quantitative if it uses numbers to measure how many women have been involved or how strong their involvement has been; it is qualitative if it relies entirely on narrative or anecdotal information that does not include measurement. Much ethnohistoric work is qualitative, sometimes because the evidence makes it difficult to do quantitative research, sometimes because of the preferences of the ethnohistorians, and sometimes because of the nature of the problem being studied. Quantitative research is the ideal of the sciences since it provides more powerful modes of analysis than qualitative research, and many researchers studying sociocultural phenomena follow the lead of the natural sciences and apply the quantitative approach.

Every piece of ethnohistoric research is shaped by the researcher's choices in terms of these approaches. The researcher may choose an approach that lies at either end of the continuum represented by the pair, but intermediate positions that may better suit the researcher are possible in most cases. Nevertheless, it is difficult to conceive of a study that does not require making some sort of choice in each of the six pairs discussed above.

Assumptions. The paired dichotomous approaches discussed above represent strategic options available to a researcher in ethnohistory. In other words, a researcher typically considers which options—all of them reasonable and acceptable—will be *most* useful for the research at hand. The next set of concepts to be discussed differs in that a researcher may reject some alternatives as simply inappropriate for *all* research.

Assumptions are conceptualizations of how the world operates. All interpretations in ethnohistory (or any other field) are based on a scholar's assumptions about what things are important and how they interrelate. These assumptions shape interpretations profoundly as one or another factor is discarded or showcased and potential connections are drawn or erased. In the next paragraphs we discuss a few assumptions that are important in ethnohistory, again using the format of dichotomous pairs.

One important pair contrasts ideationalist and materialist assumptions. The ideationalist assumption maintains that human behavior is primarily shaped by ideas, ideologies, and values. The materialist assumption, in contrast, maintains that human behavior is molded primarily by the need to assist survival, whether the human actors realize this or not. The taboo on the eating of pork among Jews and Muslims, for example, can be explained using either assumption. An ideationalist might say that pigs are considered unclean because they fall between traditional Middle Eastern categories of animals, having a cloven hoof yet not chewing the cud; the idea system (the categories produced by language and culture), therefore, is at the root of declaring the pig odd, dangerous, and taboo. In contrast, a materialist might say that eating pigs in the Middle East is basically inefficient anyway, since pigs compete with people for similar food; by this interpretation, the pork taboo is an effective means of protecting people from unwise behavior, though the people involved may not recognize this effect. Clearly, choosing the ideationalist or materialist assumption often shows an individual scholar's outlook on the world and reflects that person's conclusion regarding its dominant processes. Sometimes, however, an individual might find a materialist interpretation compelling in one case and an ideational interpretation persuasive in another.

The second set of assumptions to be considered here is conflict versus consensus. A scholar subscribing to the conflict assumption believes that individuals or groups working for their self-interest will struggle with one another, forming the driving force for human behavior. Scholars accepting the consensus assumption, on the other hand, believe that people usually cooperate, focusing on common interests and submerging their self-interests to bring about actions that promote the common good. For example, through the eyes of the conflict assumption, the establishment of prices in the California gold rush was the result of selfish merchants maximizing their profits in a condition of scarce goods, while the consensus assumption would see this as a good-faith attempt to provide goods in a time of need, despite the problems of supply and consequent high prices. As with ideationalist and materialist assumptions, a scholar may adopt an across-the-board acceptance of either conflict or consensus as dominant in the world or select different assumptions for different cases.

Finally, the determinist assumption maintains that the same factors produce the same results every time; the stochastic assumption maintains that chance plays a role, permitting the same conditions to produce potentially different results. The determinist assumption has produced spectacular results in many of the physical sciences, as with Newtonian physics. In the study of human activities, however, it has a less successful history. Environmental determinists of the first half of the twentieth century, such as Ellsworth Huntington (e.g., 1915, 1945), exemplified some of the shortcomings of interpreting human behavior utilizing this assumption, particularly the poor fit between predicted and observed occurrence of sociocultural forms in specific environmental zones. In contrast, the stochastic assumption is in keeping with various conceptions of human free will and chaos theory. It does not assume, however, that there is no patterning in events or behavior whatsoever, since the chance factor usually is considered relatively small, permitting general (though imperfect) patterning to be recognized.

Many more assumptions underlie interpretation in ethnohistory and related fields, but these suffice as examples of choices each researcher makes to guide interpretation—choices that can profoundly affect interpretation.

Interpretive Frameworks

Interpretive frameworks are conceptual structures designed to help scholars interpret evidence, and approaches and assumptions are the building blocks of these frameworks. Sometimes these interpretive frameworks are formalized: written down and published. Sometimes they are informal and implicit, perhaps not entirely consciously worked out. Sometimes they lie between these extremes. In any case, every interpreter of ethnohistoric evidence has some kind of interpretive framework that directs the process. Although of different kinds, these frameworks often are divided into paradigms, theories, and models.

A paradigm is a more or less integrated and consistent set of approaches and assumptions that forms the basis for drawing conclusions. A paradigm, in a sense, is a way of seeing things: a general system of ideas about how the world operates that colors our modes of interpretation. Different paradigms, of course, produce very different interpretations of the same evidence. Partially because ethnohistory draws its practitioners from such diverse backgrounds, there are many paradigms in use at once. This is a source of strength for the field, but ethnohistorians subscribing to different paradigms may have difficulty appreciating one another's work if they are separated by too wide a divergence of assumptions and approaches.

An example of one of the many paradigms of ethnohistory is the evolutionary paradigm, which seeks to recognize regular patterns of change over time, often defining stages that occur in sequence. This paradigm can be applied to a great diversity of topics, including artistic expression, politics, settlement, acculturation, and many others. The evolutionary paradigm is assembled from the following approaches and assumptions: diachronic, etic, and nomothetic. Stated differently, ethnohistorians who follow the evolutionary paradigm are interested in change over time, creating and using their own analytic categories to compare different cases, and searching for general patterns that characterize a range of cases. An example of the evolutionary paradigm used in ethnohistory is Christopher Reichl's (1995) study of the Japanese of Brazil, in which he discusses stages in the evolution of ethnic identity; Reichl argues that these stages are similar to ones through which immigrants and their descendants elsewhere pass.

A theory is a more specific system of approaches and assumptions linked together by a logical argument and framing the way evidence is interpreted. Theories may be relatively broad, covering a wide range of topics, or quite specific, focusing on a single topic.

One of the broad theories that serves as an example of its class is functionalism, which argues that many or most behaviors prescribed by value systems serve some useful purpose ("function") for the society. While those behaviors may not have originally arisen to meet the needs of society, they serve in that manner. Some versions of functionalism argue that the success of the community that adopts a functional behavior ensures that the behavior will survive, a process analogous to natural selection in biological evolution. Most modern theories of functionalism recognize that not every behavior has a function, and that some behaviors are neutral or counterproductive. Another important facet of functionalism is that the function of a behavior may not be recognized by the people who practice it. Functionalism, then, draws on the following approaches and assumptions: synchronic, etic, particularistic, and consensus. In other words, it examines a process at a single point in time, uses analytical categories, discusses particular cases, and assumes that society works for the overall benefit of its members.

Functionalism has been criticized on a variety of grounds. First, it produces what many believe to be a false impression of causation: that societal need automatically produces the behavior to meet that need. Sec-

ond, it has been denounced as the intellectual equivalent of the mother who says, "Everything always works out for the best"; in other words, functionalism relies heavily on the consensual assumption, which some scholars reject. Third, it focuses attention on a static view of a society, diverting attention from diachronic and other issues that some scholars find more significant or interesting.

Despite these criticisms, functionalism remains a vital part of the theoretical arsenal of the social sciences and is widely used in ethnohistory. Donald Messerschmidt's study of the Thakali of Nepal (1982), for example, discusses religious and ideological orientation in the twentieth century as ways to cope with broader social problems, particularly political ones. In another example, William Starna, George Hamell, and William Butts (1984) conducted a study analyzing reasons why the Iroquois shifted the locations of their villages regularly. They looked at soil depletion, diminution of firewood supplies, and insect infestations of fields and concluded that these ecological factors acted in concert to encourage regular village removal.

Another class of interpretive frameworks is the model: a picture, in words or visual images, of how or why a process operates. The model should provide a simplification that permits us to better understand how the process might work, drawing our eyes to relationships that are critical and central, omitting whatever appears to be mere detail or masks essential patterns. In selecting what to include in the model, the creator risks two errors: a model overburdened with detail becomes cumbersome, obscuring more than it reveals; on the other hand, a model that is oversimplified may leave out significant elements and relationships. In a sense, every model is oversimplified, since it *must* leave out elements that have a bearing on the overall process. A successful model strikes a productive balance between these two pitfalls.

Models can serve different purposes. Those that focus on how a process operates are descriptive models, while those that concentrate on motivations or underlying causes are explanatory models. The links between a model's elements cannot be observed and often cannot be verified in any way, so it is a mistake to attribute more significance to a model than it warrants. A model is not a presentation of reality or anything like it; rather, it is a scholar's construction of how or why a process might occur. As such, it is an interpretation, not a fact. Consequently, the way to judge a model is by its utility: how well it helps us conceive of something and examine it. A good model will suggest connections that might not otherwise be obvious, draw attention to central factors, and strip away camouflaging detail. Sometimes a flawed model will draw attention to new relationships that had been previously overlooked, leading to its refinement.

Models are common in ethnohistory. David Jenkins (1995), for example, provides an intricate, formal, and self-identified model that suggests that Andean status systems were structurally parallel to the Inca myths that legitimized them. As another example, David Meyer and Paul Thistle (1995) discuss the locations of seasonal congregation centers of the Cree along the Saskatchewan River, relating subsistence, band structure, and the spacing of these congregation centers in what is a model, despite the fact that they do not label it as such. (Indeed, models often are not identified explicitly by their creators.) Chapter 2 of this book also presents a model of ethnohistoric description.

There is a vast literature on concepts and interpretive frameworks in the social sciences, and the interdisciplinary nature of ethnohistory ensures that most of these have made or will make their way into ethnohistoric research. This section certainly has made no attempt to describe all of them; rather, it has presented a discussion of a few basic conceptual elements and how they combine to produce interpretive frameworks.

A Brief History of Ethnohistory

No one yet has written a thorough history of ethnohistory, and this brief treatment will not remedy that situation. It will, however, provide a concise synopsis of several trends, processes, and events of significance to the development of modern ethnohistory. It draws heavily on various articles from *Ethnohistory* (especially articles from the Symposium on the Concept of Ethnohistory, published in 1961) and general reviews of ethnohistory published about once per decade in the *Annual Review of Anthropology* (Carmack 1972; Spores 1980; Krech 1991). These latter articles are particularly rich in bibliographies of ethnohistoric research.

To trace the history of ethnohistory, it first is necessary to define terms. On the one hand, this can be the history of the word itself, in which case the history will be relatively brief but straightforward. Alternatively, it can be the history of the concept as defined here, in which case the history will dip back millennia and be quite varied. Finally, it can be the history of the modern, self-identified field of study, in which case the history will extend back only about half a century.

The Word

The word "ethnohistory," or a variant of it, apparently was first used in 1909 by Clark Wissler (1909:xiii). At that time it was used as a two-word phrase, "ethno historical," and it described documents that dealt with American Indian history. For the next three decades, the term appeared sporadically, always referring to the evidence, not to a specialized field studying the evidence. By the 1940s, "ethno-history" was used widely to describe both the act of interpreting the evidence and the resulting interpretations. Finally, by around 1950, "ethnohistory" began to be used as a nonhyphenated term with its modern meaning.

The Concept

The concept of ethnohistory, divorced from the term, has a much greater time depth. Given the definition of ethnohistory adopted in this chapter, Herodotus, Ibn Battuta, Xenophon, and many other scholars of antiquity were ethnohistorians: they used documents and other sources with at least some historiography and relativism to understand past cultural interactions. In their times, however, they viewed themselves simply as historians or, even more basically, as scholars. The idea of segmenting scholarship into distinct fields was ill-formed in their times. Indeed, setting ethnohistory off from the rest of history is parallel to the racial and ethnic segregation of the formative era of the field. It is just possible that prejudice was one factor in the development of ethnohistory as a distinct and named field.

There were, however, historians as early as the eighteenth century who devoted themselves particularly to the histories of interaction between Euro-Americans and American Indians. In the mid-eighteenth century, for example, Cadwallader Colden wrote a history of the Iroquois of northeastern North America (Colden 1747). Its table of contents reads like that of any other history of the era: wars, treaties, and negotiations. Admittedly, the well-developed diplomatic system of the Iroquois might have encouraged this approach, but Colden focused on the same issues that contemporary histories of France, Russia, or Italy emphasized.

The birth of anthropology in the mid-nineteenth century siphoned off a great deal of potential interest in American Indians that otherwise would have been directed to history. Scholars who might have become historians of American Indians chose instead to be anthropologists and devoted major attention to material culture, kinship, and other traditional concerns of anthropology. As a result, Indian history largely languished, with the exception of a small contingent of historians, most of whom dealt with issues of local historical interest only.

Finally, in the second quarter of the twentieth century, interest in American Indian history reawakened in North America. The prominence of anthropology in the study of American Indian societies encouraged historians to turn to anthropological literature for assistance, bringing ideas — especially cultural relativism — into American Indian history and sparking the movement toward the modern field of ethnohistory. As anthropologists began reading the output of these historians, the potential of documentary evidence as a source for anthropological studies became clear. At this point, a cadre of dedicated scholars from both anthropology and history began welding together the modern field of ethnohistory.

The chronology in Latin America was similar. Following a period of initial interest shortly after the Spanish conquest, historical research into native societies and their history dwindled until the mid-twentieth century (Spores 1980:577–578). While ethnohistorians have been active in all Latin American countries, Mexico and Peru have received the most attention.

As did the Americas, Africa got off to an excellent start in history (ethnohistory, by the definition of this book), then languished. The Muslim world contributed such great scholars as Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century (Niane 1984:7 ff.), but these efforts mostly died out by the sixteenth or seventeenth century. The slackening of interest in African history lasted until the revival of the 1920s, from which time interest has continued into the present (Kense 1990:140–141). African ethnohistory in the sense of relativistic interpretation, however, developed largely in the second half of the twentieth century.

Ethnohistory in other parts of the world developed even more slowly than in North America, Latin America, and Africa. Intensive ethnohistoric research in Oceania began in the 1970s, largely as an attempt to supplement ethnological and archaeological information (Spores 1980: 578), and most ethnohistoric research in Oceania to this day has been conducted by ethnographers. In Asia, as well, modern ethnohistoric research largely postdates 1970 (Barber and Berdan n.d.). Today, however, ethnohistorians study the inhabitants of all the continents, both native and immigrant, in all historic periods.

While the roots of the modern concept and practice of ethnohistory can be traced further back in time, ethnohistory clearly is a child of the mid-twentieth century. Arising almost simultaneously in Africa, North America, and Latin America and a bit later elsewhere, it was part of the

expansion of scholarship that followed the end of World War II. The 1950s were a time of considerable experimentation in the crossing of traditional disciplinary boundaries, and ethnohistory grew out of the resulting hybridization. The historical climate of that period, too, encouraged study of non-Western subjects, as the Western world became more aware of and linked to the non-Western world.

The Field of Study

The development of a body of scholars who identified themselves with this new, hybrid field marks the beginning of ethnohistory in the third sense: a self-conscious field of study with adherents, formal organizations, journals, and conferences. By 1950 the planning that would lead to the founding of the American Society for Ethnohistory was well underway.

The forerunner of the American Society for Ethnohistory was the Ohio Valley Historic Indian Conference, founded in 1954. Its name was changed first to the American Indian Ethno-Historic Conference and then, in 1966, to the American Society for Ethnohistory. Under its various names, this organization published the journal *Ethnohistory* and sponsored an annual conference at which research papers were presented. The journal's early issues resonate with the enthusiasm that many of the founding members of the society brought to the infant organization.

Much of this mid-century North American interest in ethnohistory seems to have been linked to archaeology, which already was an established, semiautonomous field within anthropology. Because of archaeology's ambiguous position — within anthropology yet somehow set apart — graduate students were expected to specialize in archaeology yet pass general examinations that included the rest of anthropology. As a result, archaeologists became familiar with historic and other sources of information and frequently looked to historical records to help them flesh out their reconstructions of prehistoric societies.

An important development in this era was William Duncan Strong's (1935, 1940) direct historical method: a means of linking up historic peoples with prehistoric archaeological sites and cultures. Working in the North American Plains, Strong reasoned that the Late Prehistoric tribes there must have become the historically known ones. He therefore advocated locating sites historically identified with known tribes, excavating the sites and characterizing the material culture of that tribe, and then working backward from historic sites to prehistoric ones. As progressively earlier sites were excavated and linked to one or another tribal sequence, Strong and his followers were able to trace ethnic/tribal sequences back in time.

This method was very well received in archaeology, since it provided archaeologists with a way to flesh out the skeletal reconstructions of prehistory by borrowing information known about historic descendants. This stimulated research into both historic archaeology and ethnohistory, but it is important to note that the intrinsic interest was in prehistoric archaeology; these other specialties were seen primarily as supporters of that main enterprise. In this sense, much of archaeologists' initial interest in ethnohistory as a field was derivative.

This archaeological legacy is evident in the contents of *Ethnohistory* during its first several years. Many articles were concerned with defining the nascent field; some pursued topics that fit squarely into today's vision of the field, but many were really archaeological in nature. In addition to articles applying the direct historical method, many articles were devoted to ethnoarchaeology, the use of historic and ethnographic information to aid interpretation of archaeological remains. (Ethnoarchaeology is a form of analogy, discussed in chapter 13.) Articles on ethnoarchaeology are scattered through *Ethnohistory* in its early years, and as late as 1973 an entire issue was devoted to a symposium on ethnoarchaeology (Adams 1973). In retrospect, these efforts appear somewhat out of place in an ethnohistory journal, since modern scholars more typically view ethnoarchaeology as a part of archaeology, with goals of improving and expanding archaeological interpretation, not primarily assisting in ethnohistoric understanding. Nonetheless, the presence of these articles helped establish a strong base of support for the society, its journal, and the new field of ethnohistory. Indeed, many of the founding members of the Ohio Valley Historic Indian Conference were better known for their archaeological research than for their ethnohistoric contributions.

Another factor encouraging the growth of ethnohistory was the waning of an antihistorical tradition that had developed in anthropology. Under the influence of certain functionalists, particularly A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski, the discipline of anthropology had moved away from historical studies, instead focusing more on synchronic studies. The well-known biases of these individuals had a powerful effect in stultifying diachronic studies and those based on historical evidence. By the mid-twentieth century, functionalism was becoming less dominant in anthropology, and more historically minded practitioners were taking the places of Radcliffe-Brown and Malinowski. Anthropology then began opening up toward more historical studies, stimulating the growth of ethnohistory.

Still another source of interest in ethnohistory was the rise of Indian land claims (Spores 1980:577). Following World War II, there were hun-

dreds of Indian legal claims for the restitution of, or compensation for, lost land. The U.S. Indian Claims Commission held hearings at which anthropologists and historians figured prominently as expert witnesses. The immersion in historic documents required for this testimony promoted ethnohistoric research in general and was the foundation of some ethnohistorians' expertise. Various articles in *Ethnohistory* were based on research stimulated by land-claim testimony, and all the articles in one early issue (Ray 1955) were from a symposium on ethnohistory and Indian claims litigation.

By the late 1960s, much of the preliminary defining work for the field had been accomplished, and ethnohistory was established firmly enough to be able to devote itself to the business of conducting ethnohistoric research. Most articles treated some issue of American Indian ethnohistory, often descriptions of cultural characteristics or analyses of acculturation.

In the 1970s, several shifts are obvious in the articles in *Ethnohistory*. First, the geographical distribution of articles was becoming more global. True to its initial goals, *Ethnohistory* and its sponsoring organization were originally devoted primarily to North American Indian topics. By the 1970s, the North American emphasis of earlier years was giving way to a broader spectrum of regional coverage, still largely devoted to North America but increasingly including articles discussing Latin America, Africa, and the rest of the world. Second, the number of authors was increasing. In the early years, much of the burden of writing articles was carried by relatively few authors; by the 1970s, the field had grown to the point that the task of conducting research and writing articles was shared more broadly. Third, the early focus on articles dealing with definitions of ethnohistory and its relationships to other fields was passing. As the field matured, such self-examination occupied a smaller portion of attention, and most articles reported substantive ethnohistoric research.

Through the 1980s and into the mid-1990s, ethnohistory has continued to grow, both in the numbers of practitioners and the breadth of their interests. The fusion of its component fields, especially anthropology and history, has progressed far enough that Krech (1991:349) has written of the "interpenetration" of ideas from these fields. By this he means that concepts and perspectives from both history and anthropology are so widely known by practitioners in both fields that they can draw on them freely, regardless of which discipline they originated in. Clearly, since most ethnohistorians were trained in either history or anthropology, this means that their shared body of concepts is considerable.

While most ethnohistorians believe that significant disciplinary characteristics persist, it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify an author's "home discipline" on the basis of the ideas, methods, or knowledge that went into a piece of research. Difficulty in identifying "home disciplines" is a characteristic of a mature interdisciplinary field whose members are fully familiar with the ideas and practices of the component disciplines that have forged it. We hope and expect that this trend will intensify in the future.

Documents

Because ethnohistory is so dependent on documents, it is wise to discuss them a bit and establish a terminology. Documents consist of any materials that include a written message or depiction on them. This very broad definition includes handwritten or printed written texts, scrawled notes, drawn maps or pictures, paintings, photographs, and anything else designed to communicate a message visually. Most documents are on paper, parchment, or some similar substance, but others are engravings on rock, photographs on film or glass, inscriptions on coins, and a pledge of undying love scratched into a fence post.

A few specialized words denote certain forms of documents. *Manuscripts* are hand-written documents, often unpublished. A *codex* (plural *codices*) is a special kind of manuscript, often incorporating both words and pictures and sometimes folded accordion-fashion or in some other manner; the term is used almost exclusively for Mexican and medieval European documents. A *book* is usually a manuscript that has been reproduced by printing or hand-copying and has been bound into a volume. *Inscriptions* are writing or pictures in relief, such as the words and images cast or stamped onto a coin, an engraving cut into a rock face, or a message scratched into the plaster of a wall. *Graffiti* are word messages painted or drawn onto either walls or small pieces of broken pottery. Originally defined for ancient Italy, graffiti occur in some form over most of the world. *Illumination* refers to the carefully drawn graphics, particularly ornamental letters, that adorn some manuscripts designed for the elite. The term is used primarily in reference to Islamic and medieval European examples.

Documents, regardless of their form, are divided into two major types. Primary documents are ones composed by a person who was present at the time and place being described or discussed. A letter written home by a Chilean miner discussing the rigors of nitrate mining is a

primary document, as is Sir Richard Burton's description of the plants he encountered on his explorations of East Africa. Secondary documents, on the other hand, are documents composed by a person who is collecting or commenting on the original information provided by primary documents. A scholarly book that uses the Chilean miner's letter as part of its sources and discusses life in nitrate mining camps is a secondary document; a newspaper account based on an interview with Sir Richard Burton is a secondary account of his explorations in Africa. (Of course, the newspaper account could include primary information, too, such as what Burton wore during the interview, his mannerisms, and the timbre of his voice. These primary data, however, relate to the interview, not Burton's travels.) Secondary documents often, but by no means always, were written long after the events or conditions being discussed had occurred; primary documents often, though not always, were composed shortly after the events transpired.

Many documents include both primary and secondary sections. A traveler's account of Japan in the late nineteenth century, for example, might include primary information about the celebrations that the traveler observed, but it also might include secondary information about what the rituals represented, information gleaned from a guidebook or from discussion with a local missionary. As will be discussed at length in chapter 7, earlier authors did not always feel compelled to reveal which portions of their accounts were primary and which were secondary.

The distinction between primary and secondary sources is traditional in history and ethnohistory, and we will use it throughout. Nonetheless, some critics prefer not to make the distinction, believing that it obscures more than it illuminates. As they see it, the authors of ethnohistoric documents were rarely fully aware of where ideas and information came from and almost never were interested in trying to separate the two. Documents, therefore, are an inextricable tangle of primary and secondary elements. By trying to project our ideal dichotomy onto a real document, we force that document into one or the other camp; once it is labeled, we have expectations of a document and are less likely to be wary of its snares and shortcomings. To be sure, the distinction between primary and secondary documents is analytic, not inherent, and it is unwise to place too much significance on the designation of a document as one or the other. Rather than discard the concept completely, however, we prefer to use it with caution and recognize its limitations.

Both primary and secondary sources are important to the ethnohistorian. The value of the primary sources lies largely in their potential to

provide factual (though, perforce, incomplete and selective) information on the past. They are usually the best sources for collecting descriptions of events, conditions, and activities. While they often include the authors' opinions about why things happened as they did, these may be wildly unlikely. For example, Louis Hennepin (1698) attributed what he saw as the Indian inclination to violence to the fact that they ate a great deal of meat. Although this explanation made good sense to a seventeenth-century Frenchman coming out of the medieval European medical tradition, it makes little sense in light of modern nutrition and medicine. Thus Hennepin's explanation casts considerable light on historic French attitudes regarding humoral medicine, but does little to illuminate the relationship between Indian diet and personality.

Secondary sources, in contrast, are strongest at providing interpretations. Interpreting the example above, a modern scholar might attribute violence to the effects of European liquor, the competitive demands of the fur trade, or some other factor deemed more plausible in modern thinking. These explanations benefit ethnohistorians by giving them ideas to criticize or refine, often in light of how well an interpretation accords with their own data sets. While a well-researched secondary source will report facts (derived from primary sources) accurately, there always is a possibility that facts will become distorted in the retelling. Even if the facts are represented perfectly, the writer of a secondary source has selected facts that serve his or her needs, and some of the facts not included might be the ones that would be of greatest use to the reader. Consequently, there is no substitute for consulting primary sources to collect facts.

Because of these relative strengths and weaknesses of primary and secondary sources, ethnohistorians must use both. It usually is considered sensible to read a variety of secondary scholarly sources early in a research project to get a general idea of what is known about the subject and what interpretations ethnohistorians have offered to date. Scholars then usually turn to the primary sources, checking the facts on which others have based their interpretations, looking for other facts whose significance might not yet have been recognized, and digging into the limits of extant information. After gathering the data or while poring through them, ethnohistorians may come up with novel interpretations, permitting them to write documents (books or articles) that extend the fund of secondary sources in ethnohistory.

Of course, the diversity of documents used by ethnohistorians is tremendous. While no list can be complete, ethnohistorians commonly use the following types of documents:

- Journals and diaries
- Letters
- Accounts by travelers (both foreign and domestic)
- Published books of the period in question
- Government reports
- Censuses (both published reports and raw data)
- Court records
- Wills and probate documents
- Laws, regulations, and executive orders
- Military records
- Religious records (including baptismal, marriage, and death records)
- Newspapers
- Native chronicles
- Maps, plans, floorplans, and elevations
- Visual images (including drawings, paintings, engravings, and photographs)
- Scholarly books and articles

Most of these sources usually would be considered primary sources or would include sections that could be considered primary sources. The scholarly books and articles are, of course, secondary sources that might include excerpts or translations of primary source materials.

While ethnohistory, by our definition, always involves interaction between societies, it is common for the documentary evidence to be unequally divided between those societies. Ethnohistorians working in North America, for example, often find that most of their documentary sources were written by Europeans and reflect European cultural viewpoints. DeMallie (1993) shows that Native American accounts provide a valuable counterpoint and often are more numerous than researchers assume.

As ethnohistorians conduct their research, they often find it desirable to tap other sources of information. These may include oral accounts, folklore, historical archaeology, experimentation, and whatever else might shed light on the issues they are exploring. So long as an ethnohistorian can make an argument for why information is relevant, it is fair game to use.

The Reality-Mediation Model

This chapter presents a model to describe how an author processes information to produce a document or oral account. Like any model, it is an ideal picture of how its creators conceptualize something, not truth incarnate. The utility of a model is not measured in terms of how close it is to truth, since that can never be known; rather, its value lies in how useful it is in assisting people to understand a process and look analytically at its components. The components of this model all have been presented by others before, but this chapter brings them together in a systematic, integrated way.

The reality-mediation model, as we have named it, offers a vision of the act of description, which it depicts as a complex interplay between the author and reality, not as the simple, almost mechanical, recording process it is sometimes assumed to be. In this sense, the documents of ethnohistory are akin to the images in Qin Shi Huangdi's mirror, described in the prologue: they are reflections shaped by the authors' experiences, convictions, and desires.

The value of the reality-mediation model, as we see it, is to structure our conception of historical description. By delineating the various forces that can mold a historical description, it focuses our attention on those forces, permitting us to better recognize their effects. It directs our skepticism regarding the accuracy of historical evidence.

Description, Interpretation, Facts, and Etiologues

In the normal course of writing an account, most authors make use of two processes: description and interpretation. These processes are closely interrelated but conceptually distinct in significant ways.

On the one hand, most accounts use description: the process by

which events, actions, and conditions are perceived by sensory means and recorded. It is description, for example, when Henry Stanley (1982) observed in his correspondence to the *New York Herald* that a nineteenth-century Cheyenne village he visited was horribly smelly and could be detected downwind for miles. Similarly, it is description when Ezana (in Davidson 1964:55–56), the fourth-century king of the Ethiopian Axumites, told of a battle where his troops destroyed the grain and cotton of his enemies and drove them into the Seda River. Each of these accounts presents information that could have been collected by an observer using the input from vision, hearing, and the other senses.

On the other hand, written accounts typically also include interpretation: the drawing of conclusions on the basis of information obtained from description. For example, Stanley did not stop at a description of the smells of the Cheyenne village; he went on to conclude that the foul smells were the natural outgrowth of what he believed to be the Indians' slovenly character. Ezana also incorporated interpretation into his account when he wrote that the reason his enemy was driven into the river was their terror at his awe-inspiring Axumites. Whenever an author draws conclusions — particularly ones related to causation, motivation, or intention — that writer is using interpretation.

Although description and interpretation are conceptually distinct in the ideal, they are intermeshed, and sometimes almost indistinguishable, in real thought and writing. In his account of the battle at the Seda River, Ezana did some interpretation. His senses told him that grain and cotton were destroyed, but only through interpretation could he attribute ownership to his enemies.

The situation is complicated by writings that are ambiguous in terms of what is being presented. Consider, for example, the following quotation from Bayard Taylor, a journalist during California's gold rush in 1849, discussing restaurants there: "The latter [Chinese restaurants] are much frequented by Americans [Anglo-Americans], on account of their excellent cookery" (1850:89). Taylor clearly ate at the restaurants, so we can assume that he could observe how many Anglo-Americans dined there, but the reason for their dining there is a bit more obscure. He may have asked several of them why they chose that spot, and they may have said that they liked the food; in that case, his presentation of the reason for their patronage is really a veiled description of their statements. Alternatively, he may have liked the food himself and assumed that others shared his opinion and ate there for that reason; in that scenario, the second part of his statement is clearly an interpretation.

Another description of Chinese restaurants in the gold rush exemplifies a related difficulty of differentiating description from interpretation. William Kelly, an Irish writer who spent about a year in California, wrote in 1852 that "amidst the host of competitors, the Celestials carry off the palm for superior excellence in every particular. They serve everything promptly, cleanly, hot, and well cooked" (1852:151). Here, objective observation and judgment are merged, particularly in the criteria for excellence. Whereas Kelly's nineteenth-century Irish palate may have judged a meal to be cooked appropriately, an Italian patron (or a modern American) might have judged the meal an overcooked mess. Similarly, promptness, cleanliness, and heat all must be judged relative to one's experience and standards. Thus simple description often is blended with interpretation of various sorts, but despite the occasional difficulty of deciding whether an assertion is a description or an interpretation, there are very good reasons for making the distinction.

Description, as we conceive of it, is rooted in reality. By this statement we mean that the phenomenon being described actually exists (or existed) in some sense, and that it really has (or had) certain characteristics that could be perceived by human sensory apparatus. Clearly, Cheyenne villages had some olfactory characteristics, as do all human communities, and Stanley's nose presumably would have been capable of discerning them. Ezana had enemies that he met in battle, and his eyes could see the outcome.

This point may seem basic, but not all scholars agree that reality is a crucial factor in description or even that it exists. Michel Foucault (1970), for example, maintains that "truth" is constituted solely by those beliefs that attain a high level of acceptance by a society and are confirmed by their cultural system; resemblance to reality is not even entertained as a reasonable criterion. From Foucault's point of view, reality is somewhere between irrelevant and imaginary. Most scholars, however, agree that there is some set of events that really transpired. Many scholars maintain that it may not be easy or even possible to describe them in a satisfactory manner (e.g., Collingwood 1946, 1965), but they accept that the events themselves had some kind of reality.

Philosophers frequently identify three major schools of conceiving reality: idealism, phenomenalism, and realism (Blackburn 1994). Idealism focuses on the construction of reality through our mental processes, the ways in which human cognition places its stamp on the way it perceives the universe; phenomenalism emphasizes how human sensation experiences the world; and realism argues that there is some sort of exter-

nal reality that human beings perceive with greater or lesser degrees of imperfection. The important point here is that very few scholars actually deny the existence of reality, though they may deny our ability to perceive it. More frequently, idealists and phenomenalists simply find it more interesting or fruitful to focus on their chosen emphases, but this does not necessarily mean denial of all reality. There is, after all, a substantial logical difficulty of denying the existence of an external reality: the persons doing the denying find themselves existing in the very world whose existence they deny. Consequently, although the concept of reality cannot be simply assumed innocently, we believe it does (and should) underlie the historical enterprise.

Once we accept the notion of reality, we can conceive of it as an ideal about which we can never attain full or completely accurate knowledge. But we can try to construct a reasonable picture of reality through descriptions, each of which provides an approximation of that reality. The descriptions probably differ greatly in how closely they resemble reality, but there often will be some level of agreement. When scholars agree that certain descriptions are probably accurate renderings of reality, they are called facts. Facts, of course, can be found to be wrong and can be revised, but—at least for the period of their currency—they are considered to be accurate.

Interpretation, on the other hand, lies in very different philosophical terrain. It is unclear that causation, motivation, and intention have anything akin to the reality-grounding of description. Sensory input is the basis for the observation that underlies description, but the reasoning that underlies interpretation is far more dependent on the assumptions, mental processes, and experience of the interpreter. For example, ten observers from radically different personal and cultural backgrounds could be asked to observe a volcanic eruption and produce reports of what they sensed. Despite the differences among their reports, we could expect a certain core of similarity in description: the air was hot and sulfurous, there were winds blowing up the cone, red-hot molten material was flowing down the slope, birds were soaring overhead. Interpretations by the same observers, however, would be likely to vary tremendously, ranging from plate tectonic to mythological paradigms.

It is always tempting for scholars to assume a privileged position, presuming that their own paradigm is more rational or useful or modern or correct than those of others, but there is no justifiable basis for this presumption. We may be wedded to the notion of tectonic movements and the inexorable forces of physics, but another observer may be equally committed to Pele and the caprices of that Hawaiian volcano goddess. Without any clear objective reality to anchor interpretation, its nature is necessarily more variable than description. Therefore it is unreasonable to discuss the results of interpretation as facts; rather, we will call them *etiologues,* suggested causes believed to produce phenomena. While interpretation is a process, an etiologue is the result of that process; the relationship between description and fact is parallel to that between interpretation and etiologue.

Plato's famous allusion of the shadows in the cave may assist in grasping this. For Plato, reality was like something inside a cave, beyond the observer's view. There were, however, shadows cast on the irregular sides of the cave, flickering as a fire flared and subsided. These shadows, while not reality themselves, were reflections of reality, though the reality itself could not be seen: these shadows are the facts produced by the act of description. This conception is similar to ours, with a true reality extant but inaccessible, able to be sensed only indirectly. Foucault, in contrast, might say either that there was nothing casting the shadows or that he did not care what it was. In contrast, those who believe that a complete knowledge of objective reality is attainable would argue that the shadows bear no distortions and are perfect images of the object that casts them. Should the shadows stimulate a viewer to guess why the something in the cave behaved as its shadows suggested, these guesses would be etiologues produced through the process of interpretation.

To sum up, then, description is the process of trying to characterize reality as perceived through the human senses. Successful descriptions, or the distilled commonalities of several descriptions, are widely accepted and considered facts, at least until further information dislodges them in favor of new or different facts. Interpretation, on the other hand, is the process of assigning causation and understanding relationships through the drawing of conclusions based on facts; these conclusions, of course, are shaped in part by the background of the interpreter. Since it is unclear that there is any objective basis for interpretation, causal explanations vary more greatly than facts and are given a distinct name: etiologues. We may feel very comfortable with a particular etiologue and be convinced of its truth, but an equally rational person may reject it because of the premises that underlie the conclusion. Facts may be so well agreed upon that there is very little likelihood that they will be overturned, but there always is a greater level of uncertainty with etiologues. This is in keeping with our

view that facts are discovered (though perhaps in distorted forms) and etiologues are constructed.

Reality Mediation

Our primary concern in formulating the reality-mediation model is to produce a picture of how a description comes to differ from the reality it supposedly portrays. The set of processes by which an author converts information into a description (which necessarily differs from reality) is called *reality mediation.*

As we conceive this process, an observer receives sensory stimuli in enormous numbers. Some are ignored, while others are taken into the observer's mind. The observer then processes the stimuli in his or her mind, rejecting some as insignificant, making others central in significance, and placing others somewhere in between. The stimuli are integrated into meaningful patterns, and these are then examined in relation to what the observer already knows or believes to be true.

As an example, our observers at the volcanic eruption would be assaulted by sensory stimuli including heat, light, movement, air pressure, sound, smells, and perhaps pain. Out of this jumble of sensory stimuli, each observer would start assembling a picture that was coherent in terms of the observer's own view of how the world operates. While each observer would receive more or less the same sensory stimuli, how they interpreted those stimuli could vary tremendously. A geologist, for example, would be likely to see an intimate physical-chemical relationship, so that the smell of sulfur, the presence of lava, and the feeling of heat all would be part of the same phenomenon; birds soaring near the eruption would be seen as taking advantage of convection currents to make their flight effortless. The geologist's perception of this phenomenon would be colored by the simultaneous interpretation of an eruption based on the current paradigm in the geological sciences and more broadly in physics. The Pele worshiper, however, would sense about the same stimuli but might reject the presence of birds as unimportant, while focusing on the shaking and rumbling that Pele's adherents interpret as the result of her movements.

What are the differences between a description and the reality on which it is based? They vary tremendously, of course, from case to case, and our inability to ever really know reality prevents us from being able to answer this question satisfactorily. We can, however, list four ways that

mediation affects the content of a description during reality mediation: selection, emphasis, transformation, and fabrication.

Selection refers to the process by which certain portions of reality are excluded from a description. In some places, soaring birds use rising air currents over a hot lava flow to keep them aloft, but our observers of the volcanic eruption might not have included the behavior of birds in their descriptions. Reasons could be various: one observer might be nearsighted and not see the birds, another might be enthralled with the drama of the eruption itself and not even notice the birds, and still another might see and notice the birds but decide they were not part of the event and therefore not relevant to the description.

Related to selection is *emphasis,* the placing of greater importance on some elements of a description than on others. While selection deals with the presence or absence of something in a description, emphasis deals with the degree and ways in which the thing is treated. One observer might simply note that soaring birds took advantage of the updrafts, while another might go into detail on the species, behavior, and numbers of the birds. Once again, sensory ability to observe, the focus of the observer's attention, the assignment of significance relative to the central issues of the description, and other factors could affect how much emphasis an element receives in a description. In a sense, selection could be considered the ultimate in emphasis, whereas other elements are deemphasized to the point that they disappear from the description altogether.

In *transformation,* an element of reality is included in a description but is modified in some way. One observer of the eruption might be a member of Bat Conservation International, and wishful thinking might incline this individual to interpret the birds as bats. Another observer might misjudge and misreport the birds' number or color because of faulty vision. Still another might be so impressed by the temperature of the eruption to consider that no creature could seek that heat, therefore leading the observer to believe that the birds really were farther away from the volcano. Special interests, divergent goals, and different experience can cause observers to report an event very differently. The modes of transforming information in a description are very diverse and can be insidious in their subtlety.

Finally, *fabrication* is the making up of information to include in a description. Purposeful lying is one process through which fabrication can distort a description, and self-delusion is another. One observer of the volcanic eruption entertaining ideas of selling an account to a tabloid newspaper might consciously invent sordid details to make the story more

marketable; a Pele worshiper might see Pele herself walking through the molten lava, presumably a result of self-delusion.

Fabrication is naturally of great importance to ethnohistorians, since recognizing it is crucial to their research, and examples of fabrication are many. Samuel de Champlain, for example, wandered away from his party and was lost north of Lake Ontario for four days in 1615. In explaining how this occurred, he wrote: "I lost my way in the woods, having followed a certain bird that seemed to me peculiar. It had a beak like a parrot, and was of the size of a hen. It was entirely yellow, except the head which was red, and the wings which were blue, and it flew by intervals like a partridge. The desire to kill it [to examine it more closely] led me to pursue it from tree to tree for a very long time, until it flew away" (Champlain 1907:299). No bird of this description exists today in the region, and it is doubtful that any ever did, but Champlain probably felt the need to produce such a lure to explain how a seasoned explorer became so thoroughly lost.

An author can also fabricate within a description without any conscious intent to delude the reader. When André Thevet, a sixteenth-century French geographer, described the death and mutilation of Jean Ribaud, a French captain, at the hands of the Spanish, he wrote that "his face with his beard, which was very long, his eyes, nose, and ears they cut off when he was dead and sent them all to the Isles of Peru to exhibit them" (1986:152). Thevet almost certainly was wrong about the Spaniards mutilating Ribaud's body (Lowery 1911:425–429; Thevet 1986:152 n. 55), but he probably believed this was true, since it fit a common French stereotype of Spanish military behavior. Even with no evidence to support a belief, an author who is convinced that something is true may include it in a description; the author may not see this as lying, but merely as filling in a gap in the evidence.

Selection, emphasis, transformation, and fabrication modify the information presented in a description, further distancing it from reality. The factors that can produce this modification are many, and some have been introduced in the examples above. Taken as a category, those characteristics that reside in the describer's mind and affect description we define as a *mind-set,* and they include the following:

- Knowledge of language and nonverbal communication systems to permit the understanding of communication
- Linguistic categories and structures that encourage certain modes of thought, which in turn condition the way an event is perceived
- Cultural knowledge that permits the understanding of persons' actions and their significance in cultural context
- Expectations and prejudices conditioned by culture, experience, and personality, including stereotypes
- Vested interests that may promote prevarication
- An author's ability to express a description in written form

These factors span the entire process of perceiving an event, conceptualizing it, and creating its description. Mind-set bears some similarity to worldview, a long-established term, but differs in a crucial sense: "worldview" often is used to refer to a view of the world that is more or less shared by the members of a community or society, whereas "mind-set" is designed to refer to an individual's personal set of characteristics. The relationship between mind-set and worldview, therefore, is analogous to the relationship between personality and culture.

In addition, failures of the senses — conditions making it impossible for the observer to properly receive stimuli — can further distort the picture produced in a description. A near-sighted or blind person cannot be expected to see distant scenes well, and even a person's stature can affect ability to see events if there are intervening obstacles.

A classic example of the effect of mind-set on description comes from the reports of anatomically fantastic people in the early years of Europe's exploration in sub-Saharan Africa, the lands bordering the Indian Ocean, and the Americas. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, European travelers reported seeing or hearing of various bizarre forms of humanity, including dog-faced people, people whose heads were below their shoulders (with facial features in their chests), and the sciopods ("umbrella-footed people"), a race with a single spatulate foot that was held over one's head when seated, as a parasol. In 1499, for example, Sir John Mandeville (1964:105) described several of these human forms, including the sciopods, whom he located in Ethiopia and — on the basis of his wording — whom he may have observed for himself. The most interesting feature of these reports is not that they are so odd, but rather that they mirror descriptions of fantastic races discussed by Herodotus in the fifth century B.C., revived by Pliny in the second century A.D., and preserved by a variety of medieval European writers. Sciopods and other monstrous races were a part of the European worldview at the time of the voyages of exploration, and they became part of individuals' mind-sets, resulting in their inclusion in accounts of those voyages: what was expected was realized. Grafton (1992) explores in depth the impact of European world-

view (and, by extension, mind-set) on their perceptions of new lands and peoples encountered during these voyages.

While the effects of reality mediation may be quite visible and recognizable in a document, we doubt that it is possible to determine whether the distortion was purposeful or inadvertent. As we see it, the characteristics of mediation, regardless of whether the author was consciously trying to deceive or was deceived by his or her own mind-set, will be similar. For those who wish to indict authors they believe have been deceitful, we suggest that convincing arguments will be rare.

The core of the reality-mediation model, in summary, is that various personal and cultural factors make it impossible for any observer to perfectly capture reality in a description. Every description, rather, is the result of the interaction between reality and the author's mind-set.

One way to visualize the effects of reality mediation is through various physical metaphors. We can think of an object (reality) being rendered as a photograph (description), with a filter (mind-set) between the object and the photographic film selectively screening out some of the light that otherwise would register on the film; this metaphor emphasizes the exclusionary function of the mind-set, pointing out the effects of selection and emphasis in mediation. We also can think of a buffet (reality) from which the author chooses items to fill a tray (description) based on the author's diet, hunger, preferences, and values (mind-set); this metaphor also highlights the selection and emphasis effects. Alternatively, we can conceive of an object (reality) producing a reflection (description) in a mirror with imperfections (mind-set); this metaphor emphasizes the transformation effect that can creep into description without the knowledge or will of the author. Finally, we can envision an artist who paints a convincing foreign landscape (description) from imagination (mind-set) while seeing only local urban squalor (reality) from the studio window; this metaphor emphasizes the fabricative effect of mediation. None of these metaphors conveys the totality of the reality-mediation model, but each communicates a portion of our vision of it.

Goals and Deconstruction

The reality-mediation model suggests the inadequacy of the ingenuous assumption that documents simply report the truth and can be straightforwardly mined for facts. Rather, it presents an image of documents as

stews in which reality, authorial mind-sets, and audiences' expectations swirl about, intimately mixed and blended with one another. This section discusses how to separate these different components.

Content-Oriented and Source-Oriented Goals of Analysis

In a sense, we can see a document as a stretch of sand, its surface blown smooth by the wind. On this sand are the traces of two who have passed by: reality and the author's mind-set. The clumsy tracker might confuse the two or think that all the tracks were from a single creature. The skilled tracker, however, can analyze the tracks, factoring out those from each source.

Similarly, the ethnohistorian can look at a document in two profoundly different ways. In one case, the ethnohistorian is seeking to understand something more about reality and is trying to focus on evidence relevant to this goal; we call this the *content-oriented goal.* This is contrasted with the *source-oriented goal,* where the ethnohistorian is primarily interested in understanding more about the author and the author's mind-set.

Consider, for example, the following quotation from an oral account given in the 1930s by Arnold Gragson, a freed American slave, recalling slavery days: "I was born on a plantation that b'longed to Mr. Jack Tabb, in Mason County, just across the river, in Kentucky. Mr. Tabb was a pretty good man. He used to beat us, sure, but not nearly so much as the others did, some of his own kin people, even" (quoted in Mellon 1988:263). Ostensibly this account is telling us about Jack Tabb, and it certainly does so. We learn that Tabb owned a plantation and slaves, and we learn that he beat his slaves less than most owners. But it also tells us a great deal about Arnold Gragson. The fact of placing "Mr." before Tabb's name (when no one else in Gragson's account warrants a title), the acceptance of beating as a background phenomenon to be expected even of "a pretty good man," the studied avoidance of using any term that might legitimize the claim of ownership by the slave masters — these points paint a vivid picture of the author and his mind-set.

Just as the Gragson account can be studied with either the content-oriented goal or the source-oriented goal in mind, so can any document. Both goals are time-honored and valuable purposes of ethnohistory, and this text will discuss them throughout.

Deconstruction

The first step in pursuing the source-oriented goal of analyzing a document is recognizing that an author's mind-set can produce significant effects in that document. Used in its broadest sense, *deconstruction* refers to the process of identifying the conscious choices and unconscious consequences of the author's mind-set that help shape a document or other account. Unfortunately, the euphonious sound of this term has inspired scholars of various persuasions to define "deconstruction" in widely divergent ways and to quarrel vociferously with one another over which definition is proper. Following the broad sense used here, deconstruction has been a part of scholarly activity for centuries, although its formal definition and detailed examination began in the mid-twentieth century.

For some scholars, deconstruction is an end in itself. By their reasoning, the effects of mind-set are so overwhelming that there is no reality reflected in a passage; consequently, readers can assign any number of meanings to it. According to Leitch, "most texts can be made to generate an almost infinite set of refined statements about meaning . . . meaning is belated production" (1983:58). From this viewpoint, the author takes on an almost passive role, while the reader is the active agent creating meaning in a passage. If a text can be read so many ways by different readers, its reflection of reality becomes (at best) suspect, and a sensible scholar will shift attention to the more dominant—and presumably more important—enterprise of disentangling the intentions of the author and the unintended consequences of the author's mental state. To these scholars, deconstruction thus becomes the only reasonable purpose for examining a passage.

Other deconstructionists, however, have a less pessimistic view of how much reality is reflected in a passage. For them, the effects of mind-set are significant but not necessarily overwhelming. Consequently, they advocate using deconstruction for mixed purposes—sometimes as an end in itself, and sometimes as a means to factor out authorial effects, leaving a residue of description that has some basis in reality. It is to this latter tradition that we align ourselves.

Deconstruction, then, can become a powerful tool in evaluating descriptions presented in documents. By working backward simultaneously from the document and from what is known of its author, the deconstructionist can draw tentative conclusions about the author's viewpoints, biases, knowledge, and motives: these often are known as *subtexts*. Thoughtfully carried out, deconstruction can provide a portrait of an author to guide the evaluation of a description he or she has provided.

As with most powerful tools, however, there is potential for abuse. Used less carefully, deconstruction can be little more than an excuse to impugn an author, attributing any manner of nasty motives or attitudes with little or no justification. A self-indulgent deconstructionist can carry out character assassination in the name of "reading the text." Self-restraint and scrupulous attention to a balanced and fair reading of the evidence are the protections against such abuses.

The Intellectual Heritage of the Reality-Mediation Model

The previous discussion has gone into considerable detail to paint a picture of how we believe documents and oral accounts are shaped. These categories constitute the majority of historical evidence in most scholarship, and we believe that their importance justifies the detail of the discussion. We have endeavored to produce a consistent and systematic model, devising several terms in the process. The danger in all this is that we might (falsely) convey the impression that we have invented these ideas or written about them for the first time.

Let us be very clear: the reality-mediation model does not comprise new concepts in ethnohistory. Some substantive studies, such as those by Neumann (1991) and Trouillot (1996), are based on implicit assumptions that are quite similar to those of the reality-mediation model. The ideas and relationships in the reality-mediation model are mostly ones that are current in history, ethnohistory, and the various historical disciplines. We have merely systematized these ideas (elaborating on them a bit), presented them in an integrated manner, and drawn attention to their consequences.

Historians and ethnohistorians have not been very forthcoming in constructing models of their disciplines, evidence, and activities. We have found no other model that covers the ground of the reality-mediation model, although the treatments by C. Behan McCullagh (1984), Michael Stanford (1986), and Patricia Galloway (1991) deserve mention.

McCullagh, a philosopher of history, is concerned with how historians can hope to construct rationally justified interpretations of history, recognizing the inherent flaws in the factual data on which those inter-

pretations are based. He founds his discussion on empiricist assumptions similar to ours: there is a reality, and there are methods that can produce reasonable probabilities of recognizing it. From there, he expands on modes of inference regarding the truth of a historical description. He directs some discussion to the roles of bias and an author's linguistic usages, but the main thrust is toward a philosophical understanding of the logical strategies that historians use in their research. In this sense, McCullagh's work covers some of the same ground as the reality-mediation model, but from the opposite direction. McCullagh's discussion focuses on historians and their activities as the central issue, with the authors of primary sources only of secondary interest. The reality-mediation model, in contrast, focuses on the authors of primary sources and the process of description, relegating scholars to a secondary position.

Stanford, also a philosopher of history, sketches out what he considers the "structures" of historical activity. These structures are relationships between elements that have effects on the structure of the whole. In history they include structures that characterize the events that took place in the past, as well as the processes whereby those events are translated into historical evidence and the evidence is subsequently interpreted by the historian. In a sense, the reality-mediation model is a depiction of the structure of the translation between events and evidence. Stanford aimed to present the broad view of history in abstract, leaving it to others to explore narrower issues in greater detail (1986:190).

Galloway couches her conception of the relationship between ethnohistoric data and reality in terms of "text formation processes." These comprise all the processes that shape ethnohistoric data and are analogous to the "site formation processes" that Michael Schiffer (1987) defined and discussed for the formation of the archaeological record. Galloway (1991: 457–467) carries the analogy further and refers to "excavating" a text by inferring the formation processes that have shaped it. Her basic conception is very similar to the reality-mediation model, but it has not been elaborated in such detail.

Our version of the reality-mediation model has taken advantage of various writings that have come before it. It has been shaped in particular by various streams of contemporary thought, some in history and some outside. The basic conceptualization of the process that produces a document as a form of communication comes from information theory, where such a process often is modeled as a channel along which information travels. As the information moves along, some is lost, noise is introduced, and other modifications in the information take place. The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, the hermeneuticists (Heidegger 1977), and the deconstructionists (e.g., Foucault 1970; White 1978) also have made an impact with their insistence that all historical evidence is distorted communication, though we have rejected the conclusion that logically follows their reasoning: that all interpretations of a communication are potentially equally valid. Finally, we have incorporated ideas from critical historiography (e.g., Clark 1967), the branch of historical study that evaluates documents for shortcomings and misleading information. Critical historiography has come of age in the twentieth century and now is a part of virtually every historical endeavor. All of these streams of thought have come together in the reality-mediation model.