

William Robertson: An 18th Century Anthropologist-Historian

[originally published in *American Anthropologist*, 62:648-655, 1960]

E. ADAMSON HOEBEL

University of Minnesota

I

VOLTAIRE, Montesquieu, and Condorcet, among others, have been accorded formal recognition for their contributions to anthropological theory as it was emerging from the great body of new thought created by the thinkers and writers of the Enlightenment. To date, however, no historian of anthropology has made note of the very important work of William Robertson (1721-1793), eminent Scottish historian, whose *History of America*, first published in 1777, deserves recognition as a significant landmark in the development of cultural anthropology.¹

Robertson was one of the great triumvirate of historians who represented the so-called "School of Voltaire" in Britain. Although his present-day reputation is less lustrous than that of either Hume or Gibbon, he was in his time a scholar of outstanding reputation. His scholarship, although not impeccable by modern standards of historiography, was careful and painstaking. He sought out and used many unpublished documentary sources to check and enrich what was previously known. He evaluated and assimilated with critical judgment the published works of significant chroniclers, historians, and philosophers. He possessed the literary skill to write with a sense of the movement of events and social tides, while at the same time holding a strict check on errant impulse to give rein to speculative fantasy and imaginative prose. But that which qualifies him

for an honored place amongst the founders of anthropology rests in the fact that:

He was one of the first to see the importance of *general ideas* in history. He saw that the immediate narrative of events with which he was occupied needed a background of broad and connected generalizations, referring to the social state of which the detailed history formed a part (Anonymous 1910:407).

William Robertson, son of a Presbyterian clergyman, trained for the ministry at the University of Edinburgh. He had his first church at the age of 22, became a member of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland at 25, and Moderator of the General Assembly at 42. Within three years of the publication of his first work, the *History of Scotland* (1759), he achieved academic recognition in his appointment as principal of the University of Edinburgh. The following year (1763), the royal sinecure of Historiographer to His Majesty for Scotland was revived for his benefit. His greatest historical masterpiece, the three volume *History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles the Fifth*; appeared in 1769, to be followed by memberships in the Royal Academies of Madrid, Padua, and St. Petersburg, as evidence of his European-wide reputation for learning and scholarship. The work which deserves to win for him the accolade of recognition as one of the earliest cultural anthropologists was published in three volumes in 1777; it had already run through ten English editions when the first American edition was published in 1812.

II

The *History of America* has five major foci: the explorations of Columbus and his epigoni in the west Indies, the conquest of Mexico, the conquest of Peru, the general anthropology of American aboriginal cultures, and – posthumously added to later editions – the histories of the colonies in Virginia (to 1688) and New England (to 1652).

In common with the thought of the Enlightenment, Robertson accepted the evolution of human society as the essential fact of primary

¹ It was my original purpose to write on the anthropology of T. R. Malthus (1766-1834). The second and much expanded edition of Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1811) denotes nine successive chapters to the checks of population in "the lowest Stage of Human Society" among the American Indians, the South Sea islanders, the "barbaric inhabitants" of North Europe, the "pastoral tribes" of the Middle East, the Negroes of Africa, and peoples of Siberia, India, Tibet, China, and Japan. Malthus, however, used ethnographic fragments uncritically to bolster his theory and made little contribution to the mainstream of anthropology as such. Let it not be forgotten, however, that he provided Darwin with his key concept! Although I abandoned Malthus' anthropology as devoid of sufficient significance to warrant a special commentary, I was led, through Malthus, to Robertson, upon whom Malthus drew heavily.

importance. In explanation of his concern with the American Indians he wrote:

In order to complete the history of the human mind, and attain to a perfect knowledge of its nature and operations, we must contemplate man in all those various situations wherein he has been placed. We must follow him in his progress through the different stages of society as he gradually advances from the infant state of civil life towards its maturity and decline (Robertson 1812:I: 262).

In the organization of his material Robertson used three stages of evolutionary typology: savagery, barbarism, and civilization in ascendant order. Savages have neither writing, nor metals, nor domesticated animals, he noted, thus treating most of the New World tribes under the rubric of savagery.

In tracing the line by which nations proceed towards civilization, the discovery of the useful metals, and the acquisition of dominion over the animal creation, have been marked as steps of capital importance in their progress. In our continent [the Old World], long after men had attained both, society continued in that state which is denominated barbarous. Even with all that command over nature which these confer, many ages elapse, before industry becomes so regular as to render subsistence [*sic*] secure, before the arts which supply the wants and furnish the accommodations of life are brought to any considerable degree of perfection, and before any idea is conceived of various institutions requisite in a well-ordered society (1812:II:176).

Nor was this long-range view of human development derived from speculative philosophy. Robertson was acquainted with archeological fact and explicitly recognized the significance of prehistoric stone artifacts a half century before Boucher de Perthes rocked Europe with his Abbevillean discoveries. He gave temporal priority to lithic cultures over bronze and iron three-quarters of a century before C. J. Thomsen worked out the sequence in detail.

It is a doubtful point, whether the dominion of man over the animal creation, or his acquiring the use of metals, has contributed most to extend his power. The era of this important discovery is unknown, and in our hemisphere very remote. It is only by tradition, or by digging up some rude instruments of our forefathers, that we learn that mankind were originally unacquainted with the use of metals, and endeavored to supply the want of them by employing flints, shells, bones, and other hard substances, for the same purposes which metals serve among polished nations. Nature completes the formation of some metals. Gold, silver, and copper ... were accordingly the first metals known, and first applied to use. But iron, the most serviceable of all, and to which man is most indebted, is never discovered in its perfect form; its gross and stubborn ore must feel twice the force of fire, and go through two

laborious processes, before it becomes fit for use. Man was long acquainted with the other metals, before he acquired the art of fabricating iron, or attained such ingenuity as to perfect an invention, to which he is indebted for those instruments wherewith he subdues the earth, and commands all its inhabitants (1812:I:309-311).

Mexico and Peru, by virtue of intensive horticulture, their urban centers, and relatively developed and elaborate social structure and arts, he deemed to represent advanced states of barbarism.

But notwithstanding so many particulars, which seem to indicate a high degree of improvement in Peru, other circumstances occur that suggest the idea of a society still in the first stages of transition from barbarism to civilization (1812:II:224).

What factors account for the diversity of cultures and their relative degrees of development? Race is ruled out. Mankind is one.

A human being as he comes originally from the hand of nature, is everywhere the same. At his first appearance in the state of infancy, whether it be among the rudest savages, or in the most civilized nations, we can discern no quality which marks any distinction or superiority. The capacity of improvement seems to be the same and the talents he may afterwards acquire, as well as the virtues he may be rendered capable of exercising, depend, in a great measure, upon the state of society in which he is placed. To this state his mind naturally accommodates itself, and from it receives discipline and culture It is only by attending to this great principle, that we can discover what is the character of man in every different period of his progress (1812:I:368-369).

This remarkably modern point of view reflects both the tolerance and empirical objectivity of the Enlightenment, although Robertson also found it in the Old Testament:

We know, with infallible certainty, that all the human race spring from the same source, and that the descendents of one man, under the protection as well as in obedience to the command of Heaven, multiplied and replenished the earth (1812:I:247).

Robertson's evolution is social evolution, not organic. Nonetheless, racial differentiation was recognized and accounted for in terms of climatic adaptation. Bodin, Montesquieu, and Voltaire, among many others, had antedated Robertson in an emphasis on climatic factors in human affairs. Our author was but a child of his times in laying great emphasis upon climate, to which he uncritically, to say the least, ascribed for America an enfeebling effect upon man and beast alike. Nonetheless, he was at the same

time responsive to contradictory fact which would not bend to fit the climatic theory. Robertson realized that the general racial uniformity of the American Indians bore little relationship to the wide variation of climates in the two western continents and that the high and low cultures were not to be correlated to any discernible climatic formula. Therefore:

It is not by attending to any single cause or principle, how powerful and extensive soever its influence may appear, that we can explain the actions, or account for the character of men. Moral and political causes ... affect the disposition and character of individuals, as well as nations, still more powerfully than the influence of climate (1812:I:382).

Robertson was less than an original thinker in arriving at this conclusion; Voltaire had forcibly advanced the same precept. Robertson's major difficulty was that he had no effective measures for critically determining at what points and to what degree climatic conditioning did operate. On a priori grounds he tended loosely and uncritically to overestimate its effect in a way that seriously inhibited his use of cultural analysis. In consequence, his treatment of the physical traits of the American Indian is unfortunately in large degree specious, and except in his comparative analysis of Aztec and Inca culture, he more often than not fails to carry through on the implications of his culturological theory.

As a scientific historian Robertson was critically aware of the bias and unreliability of much of the source material upon which perforce he had to draw.

It is extremely difficult to procure satisfying and authentic information concerning nations while they remain uncivilized. To discover their true character under this rude form, and to select the features by which they are distinguished, requires an observer possessed of no less of impartiality than discernment (1812:I:264).

Of the conquistadores:

Neither the age in which they lived, nor the nation to which they belonged, had made such progress in true science, as inspires enlarged and liberal sentiments... [they were] brave and enterprising in a high degree, but so uninformed as to be little qualified either for observing or describing what they beheld (1812:I:265-266).

Of the later Spanish colonists on the one hand, and the priests on the other:

We shall uniformly find that, accordingly as an author belonged to either of these parties, he is apt to magnify the virtues or aggravate the defects of the Americans far beyond truth. Those repugnant accounts increase the difficulty of attaining a perfect knowledge of their character, and render it necessary to peruse all the descriptions of them by Spanish writers with distrust, and to receive their information with some grains of allowance (1812:I:265-266),

Of the earlier natural philosophers:

They entered upon this new field of study with great ardour; but ... too impatient to inquire, they hastened to decide; and began to erect systems, when they should have been searching for facts on which to establish their foundations ...

When guided in our researches by the intelligent observations of the few philosophers who have visited this part of the globe, we may venture to decide. When obliged to have recourse to the superficial remarks of vulgar travellers, of sailors, traders, bucaniers [*sic*], and missionaries, we must often pause, and comparing detached facts, endeavor to discover what they wanted sagacity to observe. Without indulging conjecture, or betraying a propensity to either system, we must study with equal care to avoid the extremes of extravagant admiration, or of supercilious contempt for those manners which we describe (1812:I:268).

Robertson was thoroughly modern in his cognizance of the pitfalls and dangers inherent in the use of English – or other European – terms of denotation in cross-cultural reporting.

There is not a more frequent or a more fertile source of deception in describing the manners and arts of savage nations, or of such as are imperfectly civilized, than that of applying to them the names and phrases appropriate to the institutions and refinements of polished life (1812:II:204).

It would be allowing Robertson too much praise, however, if we were to convey an impression that his ethnology is truly refined, purged of distortion, free of bias and empirically satisfying in terms of contemporary standards. In the first place, Robertson looked with disdain upon the minutiae of culture which are the building blocks of any good ethnography. He held them to be trivia beneath the "dignity of history," a concept he is credited with originating (Black 1926: 131).

What he meant by the phrase was not merely that history should be written in a dignified manner, but principally it should be written about dignified events and characters.... It tended to rule out many facts altogether as too trivial to be noticed by history, to skim lightly over others as more or less negligible, and to concentrate almost entirely on those transactions which necessarily demand attention because of their inherent interest, or because of the instruction to be derived from them (Black 1926: 131).

In the field of anthropology this meant that Robertson could be disposed to write on a generalized level about the culture of the American Indians, while for the most part ignoring cultures. In his own terms:

In a general history of America, it would be highly improper to describe the condition of each petty community, or to investigate every minute circumstance which contributes to form the character of its members. Such an inquiry would lead to details of immeasurable and tiresome extent. The qualities belonging to the people of all the different tribes have such a near resemblance, that they may be painted with the same features. Where any circumstances seem to constitute a diversity in their character and manners worthy of attention, it will be sufficient to point these out as they occur, and to inquire into the cause of such peculiarities (1812:I:264).

The generalized summary of the savage tribes of the eastern American seaboard and the Caribbean that results is, in the main, dreary, flat, essentially accurate, yet markedly biased with unflattering value judgments. For Robertson, although a rationalist, was very much a Scotch Presbyterian moralist. His Indians were, therefore, loosely portrayed as feeble, indolent, improvident, lacking in the virtues engendered by developed property interests, intellectually unimaginative, devoid of love between the sexes, and near anarchists in civil affairs. It was only when he examined the aberrant, which forced him to treat of details, that this phase of his treatise acquired a descriptive quality of interest for the modern reader.

Robertson displayed his logical rigor and capacity for independent thought at their very best when dealing with the question of the origins of the American Indians. He contemptuously dismissed prevailing theories and speculations as "so wild and chimerical, that I should offer an insult to the understanding of my readers, if I attempted either minutely to enumerate or to refute them" (1812: I: 248). Constructively he moved on to evaluate the several reasonable possibilities and tentatively to formulate what has subsequently become the accepted answer.

First, general similarities between the life-ways of American savages and ruder peoples of the Old World were declared to be the products of parallelism and limited possibilities rather than the consequences of historical connection. To wit:

The character and occupations of the hunter in America must be little different from those of an Asiatic, who depends for subsistence on the chase. A tribe of

savages on the banks of the Danube must nearly resemble one upon the plain washed by the Mississippi. Instead then of presuming from this similarity, that there is any affinity between them, we should only conclude, that the disposition and manners of men are formed by their situation, and arise from the state of society in which they live. The moment that begins to vary, the character of a people must change (1812:1:249-250).

Yet, far from holding to any uncompromising theoretical dogma of unilinear evolution to the absolute exclusion of diffusion, Robertson took cognizance that

There are ... among every people, some customs which, as they do not flow from any natural want or desire peculiar to their situation, may be denominated usages of arbitrary institution. If between two nations settled in remote parts of the earth, a perfect agreement with respect to any of these should be discovered, one might be led to suspect that they were connected by some affinity. [Nonetheless] the instances or customs, merely arbitrary, common to the inhabitants of both hemispheres, are, indeed, so few and so equivocal, that no theory concerning the population of the New World ought to be founded upon them (1812:I:250-251).

Second, he argued effectively that the original migrants were derived from peoples of low culture and did not represent degenerate descendants of civilized peoples.

If ever the use of iron had been known to the savages of America, or to their progenitors, if ever they had employed a plow, a loom, or a forge, the utility of those inventions would have preserved them, and it is impossible that they should have been abandoned or forgotten. We may conclude then, that the Americans sprung from some people, who were themselves in such an early and unimproved stage of society, as to be unacquainted with all those necessary arts, which continued to be unknown among their posterity, when first visited by the Spaniards (1812:1:252).

In addition, the ancient civilizations of north Africa and the Middle East, as well as of China, were ruled out as sources of origin not only on the basis of the absence of iron tools and the plow amongst the Indians, but also because: "In all America ... there is not one animal, tame or wild, which properly belongs to the warm, or even to the more temperate, countries of the ancient continent" (1812:1:253).

Third, in considering the distribution of wild mammalian forms, Robertson noted that the denizens of tropical America are entirely different from those of corresponding regions of the Eastern Hemisphere, while those of the northern forests of North America are essentially the same as those of North Asia and Europe. From this he concluded: "It seems to be evident,

then, that the two continents approach each other in this quarter, and are either united, or so nearly adjacent, that these animals might pass from one to the other" (1812: I: 254). The voyages of Behring and Tschirikow in 1741-44 had come close to substantiating this view. Robertson cited Russian evidence of Siberian native traditions of intercourse with tribes living across the seas not too far east of their own coasts, of trees not native to Siberia coming to Russian shores as driftwood from the east, and of Siberian offshore islands from which the Alaskan mainland may be descried. From these facts he suspected that "the American continent is separated from ours only by a narrow strait, and all the difficulties with respect to the communication between them would vanish" (1812: I: 259). He stated the probability that future navigators, by steering farther to the north than the Russians had done, might find that America approaches much nearer to Asia than was then known to be the case. Exactly one year after Robertson's publication, Captain Cook confirmed Robertson's prediction.

As for the peopling of the Americas, Robertson's tentative inference from these considerations was then as follows:

Some tribe, or some families of wandering Tartars, from the restless spirit peculiar to their race, might migrate to the nearest islands, and, rude as their knowledge of navigation was, might, by passing from one to the other, reach at length the coast of America, and give a beginning to population in that continent (1812:I:258).

Not content with having eliminated the ancient peoples or the Mediterranean and with having established the probability or north Asia as the source or origin, he moved on to consider the alternative possibility or northwest Europe, with Greenland or the Shetlands as stepping stones to North America. The consanguinity of the Greenland and Labrador Eskimos and their distinctiveness from the Indians of the Americas were duly recognized by Robertson. Among all the Americans he held that they alone bore any resemblance to North Europeans (Lapps?), wherefore he opined that they may have been derived from Scandinavia. (The wide distribution of the Eskimos across arctic America was not yet known in his day.) But for all the others, even while recognizing that each tribe has something peculiar which distinguishes it, he observed that in their common traits or physical character they have some resemblance to the tribes scattered over northeast Asia, but almost none to those settled in northernmost Europe. "We may,

therefore, refer them to the former origin, and conclude that their Asiatic progenitors, having settled in those parts or America, where the Russians have discovered the proximity or the two continents, spread gradually over its various regions" (1812:I:261). Robertson, in arriving at this conclusion, built upon the reasoning of Fray Joseph de Acosta, to whom belongs the great distinction or having first formulated the scientific and currently generally accepted theory or the origin of the American Indian (Archo 1959).

Finally, and equally notable, although a lineal evolutionist in theory, Robertson was fully cognizant of the distinctive qualities characteristic of cultures on comparable levels or development. Psychological and behavioral characteristics were always foremost in his interests. When comparatively analyzing the Aztecs and the Incas he advanced a clearcut configurational theory in terms of the distinctive "genius" (1812:II:207), the very word used by Boas 179 years later in an identical context (Benedict 1934:xiii), and in terms of "national character" (Robertson 1812:II:214). He comparatively contrasted in considerable detail the social institutions and personalities of the two nations as reflecting fundamental differences in value orientations in their respective religious practices and world views (1812:II:206-227). He did it in terms of the internal features or the whole cultures, in a way remarkably sound and accurate, so far as it went.

III

Robertson's anthropology anticipates Tylor's, and especially Morgan's, at many points. We are uninformed as to whether either Tylor or Morgan may or may not have been directly influenced by Robertson, but in view of circumstance, they very likely were. In any event, a comparison of Bidney's summary of Tylor's orientation and theoretical formulations (Bidney 1953: 183-208) with those of Robertson will quickly bring the parallelism into focus. Although many 17th and 18th century writers embraced the idea of human progress from a lower to a higher social state, none saw it so clearly in empirical terms or treated the problem with such a close approximation of the natural science approach as did Robertson. His total divorce from metaphysical considerations and the way in which he set his Presbyterian theology (if not morality) to one side as implicitly irrelevant to the consideration of his

problem are truly remarkable, especially so if one contemplates his official position in the Church of Scotland. He advanced far beyond Voltaire, whose universal history was too universal to be manageable. He worked with a limited segment of the primitive world, that part of the Americas on which there was usable knowledge of some worth. He strove to give meaning to the life-ways of the Americas by use of a theory that was relevant and congru[e]nt to the facts. By so striving, he gave the world its first comprehensive ethnology of the Americas and, at the same time, laid a number of solid foundation piers for later development of anthropology.

REFERENCES CITED

ANONYMOUS

- 1911 Robertson, William. Encyclopedia Brit[ann]ica 23:406-407. Eleventh Edition.

BENEDICT, RUTH

1934. Patterns of culture. New York, Houghton Mifflin Co.

BIDNEY, DAVID

- 1953 Theoretical anthropology. New York, Columbia University Press.

BLACK, JOHN B.

- 1926 The art of history: a study of four great historians of the eighteenth century: New York, F. S. Crofts & Co.

JARCHO, S.

- 1959 Origin of the American Indian as suggested by Fray Joseph de Acosta (1589). Isis 50:430-438.

MALTHUS, T. R.

- 1811 An essay on the principle of population: or, a view of its past and present effects on human happiness; with an inquiry into our prospects respecting the future removal or mitigation of the evils which it occasions. 2 vols. London, John Murray.

ROBERTSON, WILLIAM

- 1812 The history of America. 2 vols. First American, from the tenth London edition. Philadelphia, J. Bioren and T. L. Plowman.