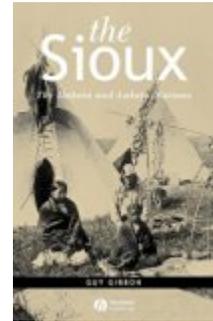


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Guy Gibbon. *The Sioux: The Dakota and Lakota Nations*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2003. xii + 311 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55786-566-3.

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Filling a Void in Tribal History

When perusing the professional scholarship, major events in Dakota (Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota proper) history tend to stand alone and isolated from each other, unconnected to the general flow of a larger national historical narrative. Upon initial consideration, this seems odd. After all, the Dakotas (popularly known as the Sioux) have received much more scholarly attention than the vast majority of Native nations. Nonetheless, there has not been a full-fledged attempt by an academic to offer a comprehensive tribal history. This vacuum in the literature is pointed out to us by none other than Raymond DeMallie on the dust jacket of University of Minnesota anthropologist Guy Gibbon's *The Sioux*, a new book that seeks to fill the void.

The Sioux offers an interesting, non-traditional approach to its topic matter. Gibbon's methodological leanings are arguably the most important factor shaping his book. Consequently, while this is the first full academic history of the D/N/Lakotas, it is by no means a traditional academic tribal history. The author's goal is not to craft an authoritative meta-analysis. Rather, he seems geared towards creating a volume that combines the skeleton of history and the meat of intellectual inquiry on the broadest level. In the preface he goes so far as to assert that his book "is not a 'grand narrative' written by an 'authority'" (p. xi). Thus, his recounting of "Sioux" historical development is interspersed with discussions on an array of topics that include (but are hardly limited to):

-the nature of culture; -William Fenton's upstreaming ethnography (and the implications of downstream-

ing); -the role of maps as historical source material; -the naivete of realism in mapping; -proto-capitalistic commodification versus indigenous cultural trade; and, -the problematic process of translating source material.

In this vein, chapter 1 begins with a thoughtful discussion of post-modern influences on history and ethnography. Gibbon himself is a sensible advocate of post-modernism who is open to a wide variety of source material and very flexible notions of history. Perhaps the true grace of his post-modernism then is his humility; not often is it that one encounters an author who openly admits to the obvious shortcomings of his or her book's title ("Sioux," of course, is a word of French origin). But Gibbon is also in fact, despite the denial in his preface, an authority on early D/N/Lakota history. And this is a good thing. He is one of a handful of people who has dedicated a large portion of his life to excavating early D/N/Lakota sites in Minnesota. This is of course what qualifies him to write *The Sioux*, the latest installment of Native nation history monographs in Blackwell's *The Peoples of America* series, Alan Kolata and Dean Snow, general editors.

The Sioux is a welcome addition to the literature for two very important reasons. First, as mentioned, there has never been a scholarly history of all three closely related nations commonly known as the Sioux: the Dakota-speaking Ishanti (or Santees), the Nakota-speaking Ihanktunwan (or Yanktons), and the Lakota-speaking Tetonwan (or Tetons). Gibbon's work fills that glaring omission. Second, this is a very good book.

Opting for a chronological approach, the meat of the

book is the last seven of its eight chapters, which follow D/N/Lakota history from 9500 BCE to the present. The first of these (chapter 2) is the poorly named “The Prehistory of the Sioux, 9500 BC-AD1650.” This reviewer prefers the usage of the secular Common Era dating system to the liturgical BC and AD. These terms seem particularly inappropriate since the years in question predate any D/N/Lakota contact with Christianity. The word “pre-history” is also problematic. The term, which often connotes dinosaurs and such to the lay person, reflects the Euro-American bias towards written records. The implication (and to some it is downright explicit) is that there is no “real” history without written source material. This is of course quite ludicrous. The history of events is very real regardless of the existence of written records. Simply because written records are absent from an era does not mean that people did not live, things did not happen, and those people do not have history. That is to say, we can still hear the tree falling in the forest, even if no one there wrote about it. But while there are whiffs of stodginess in the chapter titles, such is generally not the case with their content. Gibbon, after all, employs archaeology, skeletal biology, and historical linguistics with great aplomb to show the history of what he ironically labels prehistory.

The issue that will have other scholars debating this book is not the quality of its scholarship, but the quantity. The topic is a massive one, stretched over little more than 200 pages of text. And on top of this, it must compete for space with the author’s intellectual probing into other matters. These sidesteps are well written, thoughtful, and interesting. However, they do deprive the book of the

opportunity to cover more material from its vast, multi-epochal subject matter. We are, after all, talking about nearly 12,000 years of history concerning people possessing three major dialects and spreading over thousands of square miles. For those then who were hoping for a fuller devotion to the immediate issues, *The Sioux* will be disappointing at times. But those readers who believe that such intellectual endeavors should be rightly incorporated into narratives (or looking to introduce their students to such issues), the tone of this tome will ring true. For the book is, on its own terms, a very good one. It simply comes down to what you want.

There are still some stumbles along the way, however. For example, “The warlike Lakota” is a phrase that finds its way into an endnote (p. 234, n. 34). While it appears during a discussion of the prevalence of warfare in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Lakota culture, the term is nonetheless loaded with the baggage of racist stereotypes that were once common in a professional literature that was teeming with the justifications of manifest destiny. And by way of comparison, will historians of the future (or even critical observers of the present) casually speak of the “warlike Americans” who cannot seem to go more than a generation without getting embroiled in a conflict of epic and/or global proportions? In other words, perhaps “martial,” “expansive,” or “imperial” would have been better modifiers.

In sum, though, Guy Gibbon’s *The Sioux* is a success, particularly in refocusing the parameters of academic inquiry. A slender volume given its scope, it is a thoughtful, sensitive account of a people’s history with appropriate academic rigor and an exhaustive bibliography.

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