In this chapter we discuss the earliest professional anthropological fieldwork undertaken within the Canadian province of British Columbia, led by anthropologist Franz Boas of the Jesup North Pacific Expedition, focusing on the young archaeologist he hired. Boas’s pioneering expedition of 1897–1899, under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History, centered on two culture areas in British Columbia, the Northwest Coast and the Interior Plateau. The expedition involved ethnographic, linguistic, biological, and archaeological data collection on the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest. Boas employed Harlan I. Smith (1872–1940) on the expedition to direct the first archaeological fieldwork in the region.

Smith undertook three years of archaeological fieldwork in British Columbia in 1897, 1898, and 1899. He directed his fieldwork in the Interior Plateau to the Thompson River Valley between Kamloops and Lytton, but he also worked along the Lillooet River and on the lower Fraser River at the coast. His Interior Plateau work took him into the villages of the Secwepemc (Shuswap), Nlaka’pamux (Thompson), St’át’imc (Lillooet), and Halkomelem-speaking (Coast Salish) peoples.

This chapter reexamines Smith’s Jesup Expedition publications, along with his unpublished field letters and postcards, with the goal of listening to the unedited informal voices of people, both indigenous and not, who contributed to documenting indigenous cultures during the late nineteenth century. There
is reluctance within the indigenous communities of British Columbia today to embrace archaeology as a worthwhile endeavor, and I suggest that this has its roots in the Jesup Expedition. Smith’s field letters reflect the beginnings of important issues for archaeologists that persist to this day, including concern with cultural appropriation, ethical practice, community involvement, and patronizing colonial attitudes (Carlson 2005; Thom 2000, 2001).

Smith published several well-illustrated Jesup memoirs. He also wrote several letters and postcards from the field to Franz Boas, although only eight pages of field notes are archived. Smith was an accomplished photographer, producing several scrapbooks of photographs with notes and annotation. Many artifacts, skeletal collections, plaster “life masks,” and ethnographic objects were also collected and are still housed at the American Museum of Natural History in New York.

The letters that Smith wrote to Boas provide a firsthand, unedited, informal account of archaeology’s beginnings in the Pacific Northwest. Along with the photographs, they are a body of unedited material that provides insight into the early practice of scientific archaeology in North America and also into the early working relations with the indigenous communities. Building on my own archeological work in the region, I researched these documents with the goal of listening to the perspective of the communities on what archaeology might have meant to them.

An important aspect of the letters and photographs is how they portray the dominating influence of Franz Boas on Smith’s work. The letters reveal how the majority of Smith’s field time and funding went into either excavating human burials, photographing portraits of the Native peoples as specimens or physical types, or making and shipping plaster casts or life masks of peoples’ heads, all at the request of Boas. Physical anthropology, not archaeology, was what Boas was focused on. Consequently, the majority of archaeological artifacts recovered were grave goods.

Smith (1900:402–403) describes his 1897 excavations at Spences Bridge on the Thompson River: “At Spences Bridge a single grave was the most interesting site explored. . . . There are numerous old graves near by, which the Indians did not wish us to explore, while they assisted in exploring the first grave, which had been unknown to them.”

After Spences Bridge, Smith moved upriver to Kamloops, where he met with both the chief of the band, Chief Louie, and the local missionary, Father Le Jeune. In a postcard to Boas, Smith writes (June 18, 1897, AMNH accession no. 1897–27):
Dr. Boas, Indians here object to my taking bones away—They are friendly & will allow me to dig graves & take all but the bones. I have seen [the Indian] agent, and Indians are on the fence. We hope they will change their minds & allow bones to go to N.Y. for study not for joke as they fear.

The next letter in the files is from the town of Lytton. Smith describes how the issue of removing bones was resolved there with the help of the priest (July 14, 1897, AMNH no. 1897–27):

Both here [Lytton] and at Kamloops the site of work is on Indian reserves—at both places I was welcome to take stone, shell etc. but refused human bones. At Kamloops they, after holding a big council where my side was presented by the Priest [Le Jeune], telling them I came to get things to use to teach the people in N.Y. decided to let me have a few bones to teach with but I must cover up all I did not take so no bad white men would take them to make fun of the Indians.

What finally swayed the community was the promise that the bones would be used for teaching purposes. The community was shown photographs of the displays at the American Museum to convince them of this. Smith (1899:102) wrote:

Finally the confidence of the people was gained by the help of a number of photographs of the museum, in which it was shown how the people visited the halls in order to see the wonderful works of the Indians, and how they were instructed, by means of lectures, in regard to the meaning of all these objects, and from that time on they rather helped than resisted any endeavor to obtain collections.

In his second year of fieldwork in 1898, Smith brought his new wife, Helena, along. She was interested in the work of women in the communities, publishing a newspaper article for the New York Daily Tribune entitled “Mrs. Harlan I. Smith Makes a Study of the Indians.” Smith (1898) wrote that she was “much interested in the life of the Indian women of this dry interior region. . . . While the Siwashes [men] here . . . engage in irrigating and tilling their ranches, fishing for salmon, etc., the Klutchmans [women] are industrious in digging edible roots, making baskets, tanning deerskins and making them into moccasins.”

Bruchac (2014) has recently written about how Boas’s ethnographic work on the Northwest Coast largely marginalized the role of women in the First
Nations cultures on the coast of British Columbia, which is also true for the communities in the Plateau. Still, the Smiths did record women’s work. Harlan wrote to Boas on April 21, 1898:

While at the village I saw a little girl scraping a skin with a stone hafted in a handle about 3 ft. long similar to the one [James] Teit collected. Closer inspection showed 3 of these hafted scrapers & the skin stretched on a frame. I contemplate photographing her at work tomorrow and then buying the whole outfit for you as I think you will want it for a group [exhibit].

In the 1899 fieldwork at Lillooet on the Fraser River, Smith wrote to Boas about obtaining 16 skeletons, informing him of the secretive nature of his collecting (August 19, 1899, AMNH no. 1899–3): “By taking skeletons out on backs we got them out without Indians realizing the bulk & so free from objections but when the Indians return from fishing it would not be pleasant to be here.” Later in the season, Smith wrote again to Boas on various matters, including revisiting the problem of recovering the skeletons in the Lillooet Valley (September 16, 1899, AMNH no. 1899–3):

I consider that no trouble will arise from my work up the Lillooet, and yet as the work was done while only a few Indians were there, those who were absent and have since returned, might object. Those that were present did not comfort me much, and I feel that I would rather let the matter be digested by them before taking up more extensive archaeological studies which must of necessity to careful work and preservation of specimens be done more openly. The skeletons I collected there and at other places are evidence that I am not trying to get out of running some risks on small insurance.

In 1899 Smith traveled to the Nicola Valley, bringing copies of his complete monograph “Archaeology of Lytton” with him to show drawings of the artifact to the elders from several communities, for interpretation. He wrote to Boas: “I have shown the Lytton Memoir to Indians and have gotten nearly all doubtful points explained” (September 30, 1899, AMNH no. 1899–3). These interpretations were then published in Smith (1900) as appendix II. Smith (1900:440) wrote that the information on interpretation was obtained from “Baptiste[,] an old Indian shaman living in the valley; Michel, an intelligent old Indian of Lytton; Salicte, chief at Nicola Lake; and the brothers of the last named.” For example, he showed them a particular artifact: “This Baptiste considered to
represent an unfinished pipe. The theory seems plausible, although the pipe would have been very small. Michel of Lytton thought it represented a small hammer, to be hafted in a little handle and used by a slave or servant to crush food for a rich and toothless old person” (440). Another example was an artifact that “Baptiste and Mr. Teit agree was undoubtedly used for such purposes as chipping arrow-points, carving wood, and cutting out steatite pipes. They were not impressed with the opinion of Michel of Lytton, that it was used for cutting nephrite” (440–441).

Listening to sometimes differing or conflicting interpretations about material culture by individual community members creates a layer of complexity to the listening process that Smith felt compelled to present as an appendix to an unrelated volume.

Discussion

Despite the focus in the field on recovering human skeletons, Smith’s years at the American Museum following fieldwork, 1900–1911, were spent cataloguing, installing exhibits, and writing publications that focused on material culture. There is only a single paragraph in the Thompson memoir (Smith 1900) about the collection of burials. Smith was not a physical anthropologist, and Boas did not entrust the Jesup skeletal materials to Bruno Oetteking until 1913. None of the burials from the Interior Plateau were analyzed.

It is apparent from both the letters and the published memoirs that Smith, lacking strong research questions of his own, was led entirely by Boas’s agenda. In his subordinate position to both Boas and Jesup (who was funding the expedition), combined with his unfamiliarity with the indigenous people in whose villages he was trying to collect, dig, photograph, and cast, Smith sometimes found himself in conflicting and tenuous circumstances. Collecting burdened him with many logistical and ethical challenges. The correspondence only provides hints of the degree of complex cultural negotiations that Smith found himself engaged in. He felt that he needed to collect large numbers of specimens to ensure his job security, produce substantive written materials, and provide adequate specimens for museum displays.²

Smith realized that disturbance of Indian graves was probably controversial in every community where he worked. Sneaking out skeletons at considerable risk in Lillooet was ethically problematic for him. Constantly in negotiations with the Native people, Smith was most successful in Kamloops and Lytton/
Spences Bridge and the Nicola Valley, where he was able to rely on the priest Father Le Jeune and Boas’s ethnographer James Teit (who was married to an indigenous woman) to function as cultural intermediaries. Long after the publication of the Jesup results, Smith (1913:4) wrote of these sensitive issues:

In the same way that we desire to cling to the property of our ancestors, so the Indians revere and guard the land of their forefathers. It was sometimes difficult to persuade the Indians who owned the land where most of the explorations were conducted to allow the work to be carried on. But when the purpose of the investigation was explained to them, some of the Indians highly appreciated the work; in fact they favoured it more than many of our own people do.

It is apparent that Smith labored under difficult circumstances to accomplish the goals of the Jesup Expedition. He proceeded with limited funding, minimal and untrained field helpers, and occasional bouts of ill health. He must have been frustrated that he did not entirely share Boas’s interest in physical anthropology and coastal archaeology and that the coastal people strongly objected to having their heads cast. He clearly distinguished skull collection from doing archaeology, as noted in a letter about Lillooet (August 25, 1899, AMNH no. 1899–3): “If it had not been that skulls were wanted from there could I have gone for archaeology?”

Smith was aware that he was taking much away from the traditional territories and that he lived in danger of being seen as a “grave robber” like George Dorsey, his competition from the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History. He was cognizant that he not only was removing artifacts from these ancestral villages but was also removing them from the Dominion of Canada. These concerns may explain why he wanted to get assurance from Boas that the people of Spences Bridge, for example, got their own copies of the photographs. Although Smith’s letters indicate that he valued the interpretations of material culture from the elders, his published material is largely descriptive and lacking interpretation. It is not known if Smith sent copies of the published memoirs to the chiefs of the villages; his 1913 monograph notes only: “Over one hundred copies [of the memoirs] were given to leading libraries and learned societies in all the great countries of the world” (Smith 1913:4).

The standards of field practice set by Boas greatly influenced the development of the discipline of anthropology in the late nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. The legacy of the “Boasian tradition” has had an
enormous influence on the creation of scientific knowledge of indigenous cultures. In the final analysis, Smith’s “series of explorations” introduced archaeology to British Columbia’s First Nations peoples. Given the strength and continuity of oral history in the First Nations communities today, combined with a reverence for their ancestors, it is not surprising that their nineteenth-century view about what archaeologists do (they steal from graves) persists today.

One of the characteristics of scientific practice is to dismiss old or pioneering studies as obsolete. For archaeology, this practice of dismissal has resulted in obfuscating the political impact of the Jesup legacy on current indigenous views of contemporary archaeology. The early methods of collecting have created a lasting and generally negative view among the First Nations about the practice of archaeology in British Columbia today.

The nineteenth century witnessed the development of an array of new sciences and the beginning of professionalized practitioners of these new fields of study, including anthropology, then in its infancy. Morris Jesup had the goal of making “a museum organized for science” (Freed 2012:60) and turned to vertebrate paleontology and anthropology as two sciences worthy of development in a museum setting. I think that it is important to recognize that the formation of anthropology as a scientific department at the American Museum followed the same path as vertebrate paleontology, with its similar research and collections goals. Both of these sciences were well suited to the amassing of specimens for exhibit.

The publications derived from the first anthropological field projects are in a genre of dispassionate empirical scientific discourse that was intended for an academic audience. The scientific discourse of that time had its own particular powerful genre, a style of writing that persuasively classified and described the natural world with greater accuracy, formality, and authority. Due to that formal and authoritarian style of nineteenth-century scientific writing, one that privileges the scientific approach, the “informal” voices of both the indigenous peoples and their anthropological practitioners are not generally embedded within the published scientific discourse—and, if they are, then only as a brief footnote.

The Jesup publications, along with other anthropological texts, became the privileged authority on how knowledge of indigenous culture was presented to nonindigenous settlers and their governments and are the ethnographic roots of the histories of First Nation culture into the contemporary world. While formal authority was a major goal of the emerging scientific practice, the result
was that the indigenous peoples themselves were not listened to and eventually came to feel as if they were treated as mere specimens. As a consequence, archaeology is still viewed with suspicion and misunderstanding in the First Nations communities today.

Commentary on Harlan Smith, Franz Boas, and Their Struggles with Science

Alice Kehoe

Carlson’s characterization of the academic style of pioneering professional archaeology opens up a major issue still festering in archaeology: whether writing as a scientist requires a dispassionate, abnegating style. Part of postcolonial positioning calls for recognizing the cultural bias carried by imperial powers’ designated scientists. Writing in the objective third-person style of scientific discourse not only precluded reflexivity by authors regarding their reactions and emotions but conveyed a positivist impression of unassailable reporting.

Harlan Smith’s grave robbing poisoned relations between British Columbia First Nations and later archaeologists, yet his letters make it clear that he keenly felt himself to be a young recent hire, obliged to follow his employer’s orders if he wished to continue in his chosen profession and support a family. He left the American Museum in 1911 to join the Dominion of Canada as an archaeologist, managing data from all over Canada until his retirement in 1937. In an obituary, a colleague wrote that “‘recording the facts’ was another of his great enthusiasms, and he made the most detailed record of all specimens, all photographs” (Leechman 1942:114). During his tenure supervising archaeology in Canada, he admitted to W. B. Nickerson, funded to work in Manitoba, that “I have enough other things to do that interest me more, so that I would not miss it if I never gave any attention to Manitoba or for that matter to archaeology” (Dyck 2016:204); nevertheless, he performed the duties of his office as he had carried out Boas’s directives, with energy and effort.

So, if Harlan Smith had little choice but to follow Boas’s directives, what was Boas up to? No ghoul, Franz Boas led liberal attacks on the racism ruling the United States, most famously in his measurements of immigrant children’s heads that demonstrated that residents in the United States correspondingly developed broader heads than their parents. Anthropometry, particularly of the skull, was a basic technique of scientific anthropology in the nineteenth century,
making skulls the most important data to be collected (Little 2010; see Boas letters in Stocking 1974:202–218). Boas began his employment with the American Museum in 1896, after nearly two years without a job; he, like Smith, had a young wife to support. As Smith had to fulfill Boas’s expectations, Boas had to fulfill those of his boss, Morris K. Jesup, president of the American Museum, banker, and philanthropist, who was actively interested in Arctic exploration. Jesup funded the North Pole expeditions of Robert Peary, along with the North Pacific anthropological expeditions bearing his name, which were organized and participated in by Boas. Jesup’s patronage was a prize that enabled Franz Boas to establish himself as more than merely a scientist, as a power figure during anthropology’s development as a credentialed discipline (Freed 2012:70–72).

Anthropology is somewhat of an anomaly among the sciences. Because it is involved with human beings, it cannot manipulate its research objects. These have the same length of life and needs for space and freedom to move as the anthropologists who study them, in contrast to scientists whose fruit flies or mice or even chimpanzees produce generations during the span of the observers’ studies and can be caged. How should anthropologists demonstrate that they are scientists, that their work should be counted in this prestigious profession? Boas and his successor at the American Museum, Clark Wissler, knew quite well that they and their colleagues must adhere to writing in the style of the genre science.

In a frequently cited paper, rhetorician Carolyn R. Miller (1984) argued for “Genre as Social Action.” Form and rules in a genre of discourse identify a community; those who wish to participate in that community, in this case the community of recognized scientists, must adhere to the genre’s standards. Miller emphasizes that genres are historically and culturally situated, changing over time (Miller 1984:158). From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, scientific discourse was required to look objective by omitting information on the personal experiences and emotions of the science author. Science writing was descriptive, displaying only factual data that, in principle, any other scientist could examine directly. Abundant illustrations, accurate drawings, or photographs did, in fact, allow readers’ virtual witnessing of data.

The Anthropological Papers of the American Museum during Boas’s and Wissler’s tenures carefully present factual descriptions in standard educated English (Wissler [1913] wrote a paragraph in Latin in his monograph on Blackfoot ceremonies, when Horn Society initiation entailed coitus to transfer power). To include experiences and feelings such as Harlan Smith did in his letters, even to include his detailed accounts of negotiations with First Nations
communities, would have jeopardized recognition of his work and reports as science. Morris Jesup supported many humanitarian agencies, but the American Museum was a scientific institution objectively displaying objects. Skeletons of First Nations’ great-grandparents were no more privileged than those of whales and dinosaurs.

Notes

1. All letters cited are from the American Museum of Natural History archives, with three different years, as noted in the text for each quotation.
2. Contemporary with museum-sponsored fieldwork to collect specimens, a number of merchants in western North America purchased indigenous craftwork and artifacts to sell to museums, private collectors, and the public. They created a new market for items that had not had prior commercial value (Koffman 2012:175).

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