



Afb 1: Francis S. Drake, At an Iroquois Council Fire in "Indian History for Young Folks", 1919. Source: Wikimedia Commons, <https://bit.ly/3FUbkRA>.

A New Approach for a New History

John Healey

In this Inzet, John Healey advocates for an open dialogue between historians and indigenous North Americans to create a more well-rounded, inclusive historical debate. This dialogue can also broaden the perspective of new historical work and deepen personal understanding.

The widespread acclaim for Dr. David Graeber and Dr. David Wengrow's 2021 work, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, speaks to the overwhelming need for a revision in how we think about prehistory and the rise of systemic inequality. A detailed review of this book is provided by Omar Bugter in the previous edition of the Aanzet; here, I would like to present an important methodological component for those that choose to carry out this 'new history' based on my own unique experiences.

Fundamental to several of Graeber and Wengrow's main arguments are case studies of indigenous peoples in North

America. Crucially, the immense diversity in societal structures among these groups – from the autocratic, bellicose Calusa to the peaceful, wealth-focused Yurok – is used to demonstrate the creativity and flexibility human beings are capable of mustering in order to create a society that they view as correct. This concept is central to the book's thesis: that we aren't necessarily doomed to suffer horrible inequality as a by-product of modernization; that there are ways to reinvent ourselves if we only have the courage to experiment. The authors furthermore point out that the dialogues which took place between these indigenous peoples and the European

settlers they encountered in the seventeenth century shaped the very way we conceptualize inequality. The so-called 'indigenous critique' of European society held tremendous weight to modern thinkers like Rousseau, who – by giving voice to this critique – would spark a debate about the meaning of 'human progress' and 'egalitarianism' that persists to this day. Over time, however, some authors began to use the indigenous perspective as a means to gain credibility – putting their own words into the mouths of imaginary indigenous people, like author Madame de Graffigny does with fictional Zilia. They thus gave their work the impact of coming from an unbiased outsider, without having to do the work of actually speaking with indigenous people. Overall, it is clear that the emphasis placed on analyzing indigenous American groups in this 'new' study of history cannot be overstated.

The question, then, is how to go about writing on these groups. Graeber and Wengrow point out that there is a tendency among historians to treat indigenous people as either angels or devils, and that in doing so we discard the possibility of having a meaningful dialogue about their past. Rather, they argue, we ought to treat them simply as humans, with all the baggage and complexity that comes with the title. How best to acquire such a nuanced view? Enter my two cents: by speaking with indigenous people.

It is crucial to consider to whom you give voice

For simplicity's sake, I've distilled my reasons for preaching (and practicing) this approach into three core principles, which I'll explain before giving some advice on how to put it into practice. First: it is a valuable historical methodology. As historians such as Dr. Sarah Maza have pointed out, oral history has gained increasing acceptance in the field over the past several decades; the bias inherent to oral accounts actually forming an important part of a history when

appropriately addressed.¹ Graeber and Wengrow's description of interactions between French settlers and indigenous groups in modern Nova Scotia and Quebec provides an example that suffers from the absence of this approach. In describing these encounters, the authors chose to cite exclusively the accounts of Jesuit settlers – the great bias held by many of whom need not be demonstrated here.² If we are willing to accept these records as valid historical evidence while acknowledging their questionable reliability and ulterior motives, perhaps we could extend the same courtesy to the oral histories passed down through generations of indigenous oral historians.

Secondly, to witness the recounting of history as it is done by indigenous groups is a unique and powerful experience. Even if you choose not to include these oral histories as sources for your research, there is still much to be gained from witnessing how they are communicated. I personally had the privilege of experiencing a Mi'kmaw 'blanket exercise', in which participants live through the 'settling' of Canada from an indigenous perspective.³ The purpose of such an exercise is not to gain new information for the historical record, but to deepen your own understanding of indigenous history – to make yourself a more well-rounded historian by seeing things from all sides. This is a crucial process for those intent on making a meaningful contribution to the study of these groups.

¹ Sarah Maza, *Thinking About History* (University of Chicago Press, 2017) 153.

² See for example, Daniel N. Paul, *We Were Not The Savages: Collision Between European and Native American Civilizations*, 4th ed. (Fernwood Publishing, 2022).

³ For more information on the Mi'kmaw people, see the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre: <https://www.mymnfc.com>.

Finally, I wouldn't think to pretend that there is no political aspect to this approach. Spending most of my life in Canada, I've witnessed first-hand the lack of representation indigenous people receive in society at large. Examples of this are innumerable, but perhaps most illuminating is the way in which their stories are so often completely ignored by press and authorities. The presence of a mass grave at the site of the former Kamloops residential school, for example, was known in local oral history for many years, yet was only confirmed with ground-penetrating radar in 2022 – and only then received national attention.⁴ This example speaks to the overwhelming need for a revision in what we consider valuable evidence. Whether or not you choose to be political in writing history, it is a political act. If you choose to study and write about indigenous history, it is crucial to consider to whom you are giving a voice.

Of course, not everyone lives within driving distance of the indigenous peoples whose history they want to study, and I wouldn't want to imply that attending something like a blanket exercise is a prerequisite to good research. My point is that by putting in the effort to open a dialogue, and taking every opportunity you get to witness such unique transmissions of history, you not only broaden the perspective of your work, but also deepen your own personal understanding of what you study. On that note, my advice is simple: indigenous groups often provide easy means of getting in touch because in many cases, they want to have these discussions. It is as easy as going to their website and

finding their email address, or filling in a form. No matter your existing level of knowledge, it can only help to reach out. The pursuit of a new history of humankind presents us with the opportunity to do things differently; let's put our best foot forward and try to do them right.

John Healey is a first-year history student most interested in intellectual and indigenous history. Born and raised in Canada, he has long been exposed to the harmful legacy of colonialism, and is eager to share the message of awareness and reconciliation.

⁴ For more information, see: Ian Austen, "Horrible History": Mass Grave of Indigenous Children Reported in Canada." New York Times. 28 May, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/28/world/canada/kamloops-mass-grave-residential-schools.html>.

Koninklijk Nederlands
Historisch Genootschap

WORD GRATIS LID VAN

Jong KNHGG

De jongerentak van de
beroepsvereniging voor historici

Meld je snel aan en geniet heel 2023 van je
studentlidmaatschap met gratis toegang
tot KNHGG congressen!

Daarna kost een lidmaatschap slechts €20 per jaar

Aanmelden?

knhg.nl/studentlidmaatschap

