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Prologue

Ephraim George Squier and the History of American Anthropology

The anthropological career of Ephraim George Squier is an intriguing mixture of exploration, adventure, and original scholarship. Whether investigating the prehistoric Indian mounds and earthen enclosures of Ohio and New York, the stone idols once worshiped by the indigenous groups of Nicaragua, the vocabularies and migrations of the Nahuatl-speaking peoples of Central America, or the ruins of ancient Peru, Squier pursued his researches of aboriginal America with audacity, enthusiasm, and seemingly boundless energy. Beginning with the publication of *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* in 1848 and ending with the appearance of his long-awaited *Peru* in 1877, his writings earned the accolades of contemporaries and made him a valued correspondent of scholars and learned societies throughout the United States and Europe. Over the course of thirty years, Squier zealously promoted the study of the American Indian through his fieldwork, publications, and activities in the American Ethnological Society.

Squier and his contemporaries conducted their archaeological and ethnological inquiries in an era when American anthropology lacked an infrastructure. There were no paid positions, reliable sources of funding for research, specialized journals, professional associations, or standards of professional training and practice. The boundaries between ethnology and archaeology were imprecisely drawn, and the idea of anthropology as an integrated approach to the study of man was just beginning to emerge. The term *anthropology* itself occasionally appears in the literature of the early and mid-nineteenth century, even though its occurrence is rare and its meaning subsumed under the period's largely undifferentiated banner of historical and natural sciences. Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, for instance, described anthropology in 1832 as the philosophical basis for the study of philology and ethnology.¹

The term *ethnology* was, however, more commonly used in the early and mid-nineteenth century to describe what is today known as anthropology. Luke Burke, editor of the *Ethnological Journal* in London, defined ethnology in

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1848 as “a science which investigates the mental and physical differences of Mankind, and the organic laws upon which they depend; and which seeks to deduce from these investigations, principles of human guidance, in all the important relations of social existence.” The terms *ethnology* and *ethnography* were often used synonymously, but in their broadest sense they were understood to mean “the natural history of man.” While the science of ethnology sought to know everything organically connected with the natural history of man, its historical branch inquired into all facts of the past that illustrated the physical characteristics and the presumed moral and intellectual traits of the various races. Historical ethnology concerned itself with determining the early seats, migrations, amalgamations, modifications, and social conditions of the races and with establishing their “position in the social scale.”²

Ethnologists in the United States and Europe in the mid-nineteenth century saw the need for a more comprehensive and integrated science that examined humankind in all of its physical, psychological, material, historical, and linguistic characteristics as well as its corresponding social relations and institutions. The disciplinary specialization and professionalization that gradually reconfigured American anthropology in the last quarter of the nineteenth century occurred as the avocational anthropologists of Squier’s generation were rapidly passing from the scene. Several of the leading points of inquiry that define ethnology and archaeology as anthropological disciplines were, nonetheless, being advanced and strenuously debated both in the United States and Europe from the 1840s through the 1870s. Squier was at the center of many of those debates and developments. He consistently articulated the need for a more holistic and integrated approach to the study of man, and he did so explicitly as early as 1849.³ His views were part of a larger discourse about the direction of ethnological investigations in the United States and Europe, within which are to be found the germs of ideas and methods that later defined and gave structure to physical and cultural anthropology and their various subfields and areas of specialization.⁴

American anthropology during Squier’s era was far more democratic than it would ever be thereafter. The specialization, professionalization, and consolidation of the discipline in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century changed those conditions significantly, even though the avocational tradition in archaeology is still alive and well. Anthropology in Squier’s day was a great commons in which anyone could declare oneself to be an archaeologist or ethnologist. As William R. Stanton has noted, “America, with its Indians, its Negro slaves, and its varied populations of whites, tended to make every citizen, if not an ethnologist, at least a speculator on matters of race.”⁵ But the more empirical and systematic of the early investigators certainly merit

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close attention. Squier was often critical of the unsubstantiated speculations that passed for archaeological and ethnological inquiry, and he devoted a good deal of ink and energy in combating popular notions about the pre-Columbian colonization of America by Europeans.⁶

Squier's pious affirmations of the need for a more scientifically exacting approach to the study of man were neither hollow rhetoric nor mere posturing. He sought to remove the leaden thrall of biblical ethnology from American archaeology and ethnology. Anthropologists, moreover, would continue to wrestle with some of the same issues and problems that confronted Squier and his contemporaries for years to come, albeit on different terms and a far different set of assumptions. The preprofessional figures in anthropology's past "shared the attributes that characterize the discipline of anthropology in any age – a reliance on systematic explanations constructed with a self-assurance that masks the fact that its foundation and conclusions are period- and culture-dependent."⁷ Few anthropologists in the mid-nineteenth century were more self-assured than Squier, and few produced works that provide more insight into the socially and culturally bound constructions that defined the anthropology of his day.

A distinct set of ideas and concerns guided Squier's analysis of archaeological and ethnological evidence and shaped the theoretical dimensions of his writings over his long career. Unity of thought and recurrence of theme link *Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley* (1848), *Aboriginal Monuments of the State of New York* (1851), *The Serpent Symbol, and the Worship of the Reciprocal Principles of Nature in America* (1851), and his related minor writings. Squier took an enlarged view of his subject in all three of those works, and he regarded them as intimately connected. His subsequent fieldwork in Central America and Peru resulted in several publications that are as distinct from his earlier works in tone and character as they are in setting. The two-volume *Nicaragua* (1852), *Notes on Central America* (1855), *The States of Central America* (1858), and *Peru* (1877) were significant departures from his earlier works in many ways. His writings on Central America in particular are encyclopedic in their scope and a mixture of empiricism and polemics. Yet in his anthropology Squier continued to develop a common set of ideas, interests, and themes, even though the continuities between the earlier and later phases of his career have yet to be integrated into an in-depth analysis.

The American anthropological community as an organized network of professionals did not begin to emerge in the United States until the late nineteenth century, while professionally trained anthropologists did not arrive on the scene until the early twentieth century. Squier's investigations and those of his compeers in the American School of Ethnology occurred

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within a comparatively inchoate network of intellectual relationships and institutional affiliations. But the emerging discipline of anthropology in the United States was well on its way toward differentiating itself from history and natural history as a scientific study of man in the 1840s and 1850s, when advocates advanced anthropology's claim to social utility based on a distinctive subject matter and methodology. The establishment of the American Ethnological Society in 1842, the Smithsonian Institution in 1846, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1848 contributed to the organization of the American scientific community and the infant science of American anthropology.⁸

Specialization, integration, and consolidation were transforming American culture from the mid- to the late nineteenth century as a by-product of the emerging urban and industrial order. Those changes had a profound impact on the organization of knowledge in all areas of scholarly endeavor.⁹ The American scientific community began to organize during those formative years, and the emerging disciplines of archaeology and ethnology were no exception. Squier's activities and writings reflect the distinctive character and direction of American anthropology from the 1840s through the early 1870s, and they were an essential part of the process of disciplinary self-definition. The assumptions about human nature that shaped his anthropological thought, the problems and issues he thought important, and the kinds of evidence he used to support his arguments tell us much about Squier and the history of American anthropology from the mid- to the late nineteenth century.

It may be objected that use of the term *anthropology* in connection with Squier's career and those of his contemporaries is anachronistic – a term of convenience inappropriately imported into the past. If the American anthropological community did not begin to coalesce as a professional community until the 1870s and 1880s, that does not mean that earlier investigators were not practicing anthropology. The elements of the four-field approach to the study of man (the anthropological subdisciplines of physical anthropology, archaeology, ethnology, and linguistics) that later came to define the discipline of anthropology existed in embryo at an earlier day, however imprecise and rudimentary the boundaries and definitions. That is particularly true of the work of Squier and the other members of the American School. Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon self-consciously referred to Samuel George Morton as the founder of their “cis-Atlantic School of Anthropology” as early as 1854,¹⁰ while in 1869 Squier spearheaded the movement that transformed the American Ethnological Society into the short-lived Anthropological Institute of New-York.

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The American School's contributions to the development of anthropology were, moreover, recognized in England and France from the 1840s to the 1860s. The *Anthropological Review* of London, for example, observed of Squier's friend and correspondent Josiah Clark Nott in 1868 that to give an extended notice of Nott's work and its importance to the development of anthropological science in the United States "would be practically to write a history of transatlantic anthropology, from the death of Dr. Samuel George Morton [in 1851] to a very recent period."¹¹ The passing of time has decidedly changed our opinion about many of the assumptions, attitudes, and conclusions of the American School, but their contemporaries held their works in high regard. Squier and his cronies attempted to make the older and more fragmented ethnology in the United States conform to recent developments within the emerging anthropological community of Europe.

Squier articulated the need for American ethnologists to take a more comprehensive and integrated approach to the study of man, one that examined the American Indian physiologically, psychologically, linguistically, archaeologically, and historically. Squier's own works embody that approach and draw upon a wide array of supporting evidence. Anthropology as a concept and approach to the study of man can be properly historicized within the context of Squier's life. His study of archaeological and ethnological problems exemplifies an anthropologically oriented approach to American prehistory that is consonant with later developments, especially in his use of ethnographic analogies to interpret archaeological artifacts and sites.¹² If anthropology is essentially "a generalizing and comparative discipline,"¹³ then Squier is indeed a worthy intellectual ancestor. He is a transitional figure in the history of American anthropology in many ways.

The ethnocentrism and scientific racism that informed many of the writings of the American School represent the least useful aspects of its legacy and go against the grain of latter-day sensibilities. A virulent racism permeated all aspects of American society and culture in the early and mid-nineteenth century and was reflected in both American and European anthropology. The racial determinism of the American School is a forceful reminder of the social construction of knowledge and of how much has changed in our basic assumptions and attitudes about race from an anthropological point of view. But the approach to the study of man and the methods employed by the members of the American School, however flawed or erroneous, were essentially anthropological. The research interests and methodologies of the American School are still of interest from a historical point of view.

I treat Squier's diplomatic and entrepreneurial activities in Central America here only to the extent that they affected the objectivity of his scholar-

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ship, and to the degree necessary to establish the political context of his archaeological and ethnological fieldwork in the region. The observations recorded in *Nicaragua, Notes on Central America, The States of Central America*, and related contributions to periodicals amply illustrate how his political and social views, diplomatic activities, and entrepreneurial interests affected his anthropology. Squier's earlier archaeological investigations in Ohio and later fieldwork in Peru have tended to overshadow the significance of his contributions to the ethnology, ethnography, and ethnohistory of Central America. Scholars have noted the polemical and propagandistic aspects of his treatment of the Miskito Indians, for example, but have tended to either ignore or minimize the original contributions he made to Central American archaeology and ethnology between 1849 and 1869.

Intellectual biography concerns itself with the origin and development of ideas and with their embodiment in the works of particular writers and in the collective discourse of their era. I have endeavored to more clearly delineate Squier's efforts at comprehending the contours of American prehistory and the presumed origins, migrations, and affinities of aboriginal peoples on the American continent. Both his original contributions to knowledge and the unresolved issues and problems with which he grappled are examined, while particular attention is given to topics and little-known writings that fill gaps in previous treatments of his work. Squier's anthropological interests and activities are positioned within the larger contours of his life, the broader background of American society and culture, and in relation to those of his predecessors, his contemporaries, and his successors in the field of American anthropology. Both the private and public spheres of his life are examined together with the psychological dimensions of his personality and character. Although I have stopped short of a psychoanalytic approach, I am sensible of the need for biographers to seek insights into the psychological motivations of their subjects.¹⁴

The multitalented Squier possessed one of the best minds of his generation. He was largely self-educated and relentlessly driven by an overweening ambition. He is a complex and engaging figure, one that represents both the best and the worst attributes of his day. His historical significance rests on the fact that his writings and activities reflect so many of the normative attitudes in the nascent field of American anthropology. The interplay of personality and experience, the wellsprings of ambition, the sources of conflict and rivalries, and the influence of intellectual affiliations all find a place in the chapters that follow. As David Byron Davis has noted, "By showing how cultural tensions and contradictions may be internalized, struggled with, and resolved within actual individuals, biography offers the most promising key

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to synthesis.”¹⁵ There were many such cultural tensions and contradictions in Squier’s anthropological career, while the depth and breadth of his scholarly interests and activities provide synthesis in understanding the anthropological concerns of his generation.

Those who attempt to construct what Jacob Gruber has called “intellectual biography” in the history of anthropology must be cognizant of the intellectual and cultural barriers they will encounter.¹⁶ Coming to grips with time-bound meanings and usages is particularly important, since the intellectual traditions and assumptions that informed the early periods of anthropological inquiry faded from view long ago. As historians and anthropologists have distanced themselves from the work of their avocational predecessors (often called “antiquaries”), their ability to perceive the texture, symbolism, and language of that lost world has likewise been diminished. Biographers must be intellectual and cultural historians as well as chroniclers. They must discern their subjects’ intellectual habits and cast of mind, must know the individuals with whom they interacted, the institutions that influenced their activities, and the aims of their research. In a word, they must anchor themselves within the intellectual tradition in which their subjects read, spoke, and wrote.

Making those connections when dealing with preprofessional figures in anthropology’s past is particularly crucial. One of the benefits of studying earlier periods of archaeological and ethnological investigations is, indeed, that it may provide anthropologists with a salutary “distance from their own theoretical and methodological preoccupations.”¹⁷ Stepping outside present-day concerns, interests, and agendas may have a salutary effect by adding useful historical perspectives to contemporary anthropology – a true linkage of past and present that makes neither one serve the other and allows each to more fully speak on its own terms. The anthropology of one era should not define that of another but should rather be presented synchronically and diachronically within a developmental sequence. The intellectual lineages and schools of thought in anthropology’s past were nurtured within personal and institutional networks that individually and collectively comprise a historical sociology of anthropological knowledge.¹⁸ Contemporary practice has its own intellectual lineages and schools of thought that have likewise followed a historical trajectory to the present, thus making the history of anthropology an important field of professional concern and area of specialization.¹⁹

The intellectual and cultural distance that separates professional anthropology from its avocational origins dictates caution lest we lapse into presentist perspectives. The baneful effects of presentism intrude themselves

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into all historical studies, as Herbert Butterfield so aptly noted in *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931).²⁰ History is too often written as affirmation of the present, giving rise to certain fallacies within the underlying assumptions of historians, the historical process, and the rendering of moral judgments. The judgments that historians make about the past are essentially presentist, since they use values, attitudes, understandings, and standards of their own time as benchmarks to interpret the past. The historiographical dimensions of the problem are formidable. The difficulties involved in divorcing oneself from presentist perspectives take the full measure of all students of the past. It is, indeed, far easier to draw attention to the problem of presentism than to free oneself of it.

David Hackett Fischer defines the fallacy of presentism as “a complex anachronism, in which the antecedent in a narrative series is falsified by being defined or interpreted in terms of the consequent. . . . [I]t is the mistaken idea that the proper way to do history is to prune away the dead branches of the past, and to preserve the green buds and twigs which have grown into the dark forest our contemporary world.”²¹ Presentism distorts and falsifies the actual configurations of the past by dressing it in ill-fitting clothes of later date. The history of ideas often comes wrapped in many such anachronisms. Understandings, attitudes, and values imported into the past from the present must be stripped away in order to encounter the past unencumbered by the backward projections of our own time- and culture-bound assumptions. But presentism also robs us of historicized perspectives on our own time, for it precludes an understanding of the present and possible trajectories of the future in other than self-referential terms.

Presentism does not bring the past forward to us as it would stand and speak were it possible for it to do so. Thomas S. Kuhn perceived the misrepresentations that can arise from presentist perspectives in the history of science, when the “normative science” of one era is interpreted from the normative values of another.²² The scientific paradigms of the present (backward projections) obscure those of the past, creating cognitive dissonance. Kuhn’s deft conceptualization of how scientific revolutions originate as anomalies and finally emerge as normative science through consensus building is most instructive as an interpretive strategy in the history of American anthropology. It helps us better understand the processes by which the scientific truths of one generation come to be the myths and fictions of another.

Numerous scholars working in the history of anthropology have directed attention to the dichotomy between historicism and presentism and to the pitfalls awaiting investigators who do not attempt to abandon their presentist assumptions and perspectives.²³ The dangers of looking for contempo-

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rary ideas and understandings in old places are many, especially when working with the time-bound meanings of words such as *race*, *culture*, *evolution*, and *civilization*, which have far more restricted and precise meanings today than in the nineteenth century. The indiscriminate and often incorrect use of the word *race* is particularly problematic in the early literature, since it was commonly used to make biological, ethnic, and cultural distinctions. The terms *savage*, *barbarous*, and *semi-civilized* are likewise problematic. They are not only jarring today but were often invoked within a particular set of assumptions regarding the place of peoples within the “scale of civilization” (to use a period phrase) – a pre-Darwinian developmentalist scheme that found wide expression in the early and mid-nineteenth century. A failure to properly historicize those usages not infrequently causes confusion as to the actual opinions and conclusions being expressed by nineteenth-century writers. I give due consideration to this problem in the pages that follow.

The present distorts the past in other ways as well. The orthodox views of one generation often determine who is remembered and who forgotten in history, and the past is made to serve the present by reaffirming existing paradigms. All too frequently, nineteenth-century works are quoted with little or no regard for the actual context in which they were developed or for the larger cultural discourse of which they were an integral part. The aphorism that history is the story of winners as written by the winners is given further affirmation by the intellectual history of anthropology. The losers – those whose ideas were part of previous paradigms – are frequently ignored or dismissed out of hand, while those to whom we wish to lay claim as intellectual ancestors are inducted into anthropology’s pantheon of right thinkers. Looking too diligently for either correctness or error in the past is poor historical method and tends to obscure more than it clarifies. As one historian of archaeology has commented, “A knowing superiority from hindsight is the easiest and most pernicious attitude to fall into.”²⁴ Judgmental histories that attack discarded notions with little or no effort to understand them on their own terms are poor servants indeed. Paradigms come and go, yet certain anthropological problems remain unresolved or only partially understood.

Such is precisely the case in a good deal of the historical literature dealing with anthropology’s preprofessional past, which has frequently been written from the perspectives of post-Boasian anthropology. Under that view, the significant benchmarks of anthropology’s past are those which lead inexorably to consensus about what anthropology is or is not. Ideas and events in anthropology’s past that do not fit into normative practice are avoided or relegated to the dustbin of exploded hypotheses and discarded theory. The figures in anthropology’s past whose ideas and values are out of the

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mainstream of current practice tend to be either dismissed or else unduly minimized in terms of their contributions to the development of anthropology. There were many dead ends in nineteenth-century anthropology, but only a narrow parochialism reduces the complexity and ambiguities of past arguments about the nature of man to a linear march of progress from the darkness of the preprofessional past to the enlightened present. As has been noted regarding the history of American anthropology, "There are lessons in the failures as well as the successes."²⁵ Squier and other anthropologists of his era had their fair share of both.

The history of archaeology in particular has greatly benefited from the perspectives of several scholars who have called for more contextually and methodologically rigorous treatments of archaeology's past. Andrew L. Christenson has articulated the need for archaeologists who write the history of their discipline to be more aware of historical method and to more critically question "the theoretical biases that archaeologists may bring to the interpretation of archaeology's past."²⁶ Christenson's observation is similar to that of Bruce G. Trigger, who has commented on "the natural tendencies for archaeologists to view the history of their discipline from presentist and provincial viewpoints that the professional historian is trained to avoid."²⁷ It has even been suggested that there is an ingrained prejudice against the history of pre-Boasian figures within the subculture of professional anthropology.²⁸

Historians who presume to write the history of any episode or era of American archaeology or ethnology, however, must master more than the methodological rigors of their own craft. They must also know something of the anthropological theory and method of the period under investigation. Once again, Trigger has succinctly identified the problem as it relates to the history of archaeology:

The history of any scientific discipline requires intimate familiarity with at least two separate fields. Substantive knowledge is needed of the science being investigated, together with knowledge of historical methodology and a detailed understanding of the history of Western thought and culture that has given rise to the science. Only rarely do individual scholars achieve equal proficiency in both fields. This is one reason why much mutual benefit might be gained from more regular interaction between professional historians who are committed to studying the development of archaeology and archaeologists who are studying the history of their own discipline.²⁹

Anthropological inquiry in the early and mid-nineteenth century is often depicted in negative terms, as a period to be glossed over or avoided when

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possible, memorable only for its racial stereotypes, pseudo-science, episodes of archaeological fraud, grave robbing, or the role that archaeology and ethnology played as agents of colonialism in the dispossession of American Indian peoples. The exploitative aspects of anthropology's past are not to be minimized. The racial theories of the American School were used in the 1840s and 1850s to justify Manifest Destiny, an exploitative Indian policy, and the institution of slavery. But an imposing attitude that assumes the period to be beneath serious consideration represents a distinct historiographical problem.

Historians of American archaeology in particular have, as Thomas Gilbert Tax has observed, "underplayed the achievements of earlier years" and over-emphasized archaeology's romantic and unscientific origins."³⁰ This is certainly true of the period prior to the establishment of the Smithsonian's Bureau of American Ethnology in 1879 and the work of Frederic Ward Putnam at Harvard University's Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology from the 1870s to the turn of the century. But we should not have historical amnesia about the concerns of earlier periods. As Gordon R. Willey and Jeremy A. Sabloff have noted, the "follies and foibles" of archaeology's preprofessional past are also part of the story. Those who endeavor to avoid them as being unscientific or non-anthropological (which they often are) should think more historically, since "no individual, no institution, no intellectual tradition can ever fully escape from its genetic forbears, and archaeology is no exception."³¹ Contemporary concerns and preoccupations should not induce us to minimize or ignore the achievements of the more empirical investigators of the early and mid-nineteenth century.

The arguments advanced in the following pages developed in stages as I worked my way across the distinct chronological periods of Squier's career. One cannot live with a subject of research over the span of several years without forming an attachment – misplaced or otherwise. I readily confess an admiration for Squier's many talents and accomplishments, of which I have been repeatedly reminded while plodding through the extensive range of his correspondence, manuscripts, and publications. I have attempted, nonetheless, to render an account of his contributions to American anthropology that is neither encomium nor detraction, that draws attention to both his accomplishments and his shortcomings as a scholar, and that distinguishes between the countervailing tendencies of empiricism and polemics which characterized many of his writings.

One can well be critical of Squier's penchant for self-laudation, his shabby treatment of Edwin Hamilton Davis, his animus toward Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, his strident embrace of Manifest Destiny in Central America, and the

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corollary doctrine of scientific racism. His racist assumptions and attitudes were shared by many of his contemporaries and were an integral part of a larger discourse about race and the maintenance of social hierarchy. However, we do not have to endorse all of Squier's assumptions, attitudes, and conclusions in order to recognize his achievements and significance in the history of American anthropology. I expect that Squier, who leveled many harsh criticisms against his contemporaries, would be somewhat comfortable with that judgment.