The Sioux

The Dakota and Lakota Nations

Guy Gibbon
The Sioux
The Peoples of America

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Contents

List of Figures viii
Preface and Acknowledgments xi

1 Reading the Sioux 1
Basic Sioux History 2
Problems with Modern History and Ethnography 9
The Sioux as Historical Relic, Exotica, Subject, and Text 12
Reorienting the Reader 14
An Overview of the Text 15

2 The Prehistory of the Sioux, 9500 BC–AD 1650 17
The Received View of Sioux Prehistory 17
The Anthropology and Archaeology of Identity 19
The Archaeological Record 23
Skeletal Biology 30
Historical Linguistics 33
A Model of Sioux Prehistory 38

3 The French and English Fur Trade, 1650–1803 47
The French and English Fur-Trade Period 48
Sioux Culture 56
De-scribing Historic Documents 58
Reading Maps 60
The Archaeology of Historic Sioux Culture 63
Contents

Entangled Objects 66
Imperfect Translations 69
Women’s Roles/Women’s Voices 72

4 The Early American Period, 1803–1850 76
The Early American Period 76
Explaining Sioux Warfare 92
Engendered Objects and Spaces 94
Kinship and Social Organization 99

5 Fighting for Survival, 1850–1889 105
The Fight for Survival 105
Looking Through Pictures 120
Custer’s Last Stand? 126
Men’s Clubs (Associations) 127
Traditional Religion 130

6 Assimilation and Allotment, 1889–1934 134
Reservation Dependency 134
Storytelling 148
Prophetic Movements 153
Colonizing Time 156
Language and Colonial Power 160

7 Restoration and Reorganization, 1934–1975 162
The Re-emergence of Sioux Culture 163
Health and Disease 175
Sioux Households 179
Formal Education 182
The Dakota Language: Dictionaries, Grammars, Texts, and the Ethnography of Speaking 187

8 The Sioux Today: Self-Determination, 1975–2000 190
A New Independence 190
Sioux Humor 201
The Stereotypes We Know Them By 203
# Figures

| Figure 1.1 | Sitting Bull | 4 |
| Figure 1.2 | *Maz-zo*, a Dakota woman | 7 |
| Figure 2.1 | Distribution of Minnesota’s biotic provinces before the spread of the Big Woods | 24 |
| Figure 2.2 | Sandy Lake pottery vessel from the Cooper site | 28 |
| Figure 2.3 | Modern map of settlement cluster around Lake Ogechie at the outlet of Mille Lacs Lake | 29 |
| Figure 2.4 | Linguistic dating of Central Siouan language | 34 |
| Figure 2.5 | Cooper Village and Mound site, showing partial outline of a palisade wall | 39 |
| Figure 2.6 | Distribution of Minnesota’s biotic provinces after the spread of the Big Woods | 42 |
| Figure 2.7 | Oneota-like Ogechie pottery vessel from the Mille Lacs Lake area | 44 |
| Figure 2.8 | Buffer zones in late prehistoric and early historic Minnesota | 45 |
| Figure 3.1 | A Dakota encampment with tipi | 50 |
| Figure 3.2 | A Dakota summer planting lodge | 55 |
| Figure 3.3 | A New Map of the English Empire in America . . . , by Rob Morden of London, 1695 | 62 |
| Figure 3.4 | Clay-lined ricing jig from a Mille Lacs Lake site | 64 |
| Figure 3.5 | University of Minnesota excavation of a large house structure at the Wilford site | 65 |
| Figure 3.6 | Plant remains from the Wilford Village site | 67 |
| Figure 3.7 | Dakota women and children guarding corn from blackbirds | 73 |
| Figure 4.1 | A Dakota hunting buffalo on the prairie near the mouth of the Minnesota River | 80 |
| Figure 4.2 | Dakota on the move along the Mississippi River, 140 miles above Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin | 82 |
List of Figures

Figure 4.3  A buffalo hunt on the Plains  85
Figure 4.4  A Western Sioux camp, Dakota Territory, 1865  90
Figure 4.5  Bull’s Ghost (Tah-tun-ka-we-nah-hi), a Yanktonai warrior  95
Figure 4.6  Dakota graves at the mouth of the Minnesota River  97
Figure 4.7  Wah-ba-sha Village on the Mississippi River, 650 miles above St. Louis  104
Figure 5.1  Eastern Sioux treaty delegation to Washington, DC, 1858: Akepa, Anpetu-tokeca, Charles R. Crawford, Hakutanai, Ma-za-sha, Maza Kutemani, Mazzomanee, Ojupi, Upiyahidejaw, Wamdupidutah  107
Figure 5.2  Little Crow  110
Figure 5.3  Captured Eastern Sioux in a fenced enclosure on the Minnesota River flats below Fort Snelling  112
Figure 5.4  Cattle to be shot and the carcasses divided for beef rations, Dakota Territory, 1880  118
Figure 5.5  Western Sioux watermelon feast at a county fair, 1885  120
Figure 5.6  General Seth Eastman in army uniform, 1860  122
Figure 5.7  Red Cloud in fashionable Western dress  125
Figure 6.1  A Sioux woman fleshing a hide in North Dakota, 1913  137
Figure 6.2  A typical 12'-×-14' house built for the Prairie Island Dakota in the 1930s  138
Figure 6.3  Good Earth Woman (Makawastewwin), Prairie Island Community, 1930  140
Figure 6.4  Lace-makers at the Redwood Falls Mission, Lower Sioux Community, Morton, Minnesota  141
Figure 6.5  A Sioux woman jerking meat in Dakota Territory in the early 1900s  143
Figure 6.6  A Western Sioux village near the turn of the nineteenth century  145
Figure 6.7  Dr. Charles A. Eastman, 1920  146
Figure 6.8  A Western Sioux man in ceremonial dress near the turn of the nineteenth century at Cannon Ball, North Dakota  152
Figure 7.1  The Prairie Island Community Hall in 1960  164
Figure 7.2  The Noah White residence on Prairie Island, July 1960  172
Figure 7.3  House built for an Eastern Sioux family at the Redwood Falls Mission, Lower Sioux Community, Morton, Minnesota, 1938  182
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.4</td>
<td>Santee Normal Training School, The Dakota Home, Nebraska, 1890</td>
<td>184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7.5</td>
<td>The Four Winds School, Minneapolis</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8.1</td>
<td>Dancers at the 2001 Mankato Powwow</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8.2</td>
<td>A quilt giveaway, Dakota women, Poplar, Montana, 1934</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8.3</td>
<td>Location of Sioux reservations in the United States</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8.4</td>
<td>Standing Eagle demonstrating the craft of pipe-making to visitors at Pipestone National Monument in 1980</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8.5</td>
<td>A typical postcard portrait of a Western Sioux family in 1940</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since introductory-level histories of the Dakota, Yankton, and Lakota (Teton) Sioux are available (Bonvillain 1994, 1997; Hoover 1988), I have written *The Sioux* for advanced students and readers. By advanced, I mean students or readers who have some familiarity with the history of the Sioux, with other ethnohistories, with the rudiments of cultural anthropology, or with some combination of these different kinds of background knowledge.

Because the goal of *The Sioux* is to stimulate further study, the text is organized as a collage of ideas rather than as a history or ethnohistory, *sensu stricto*. While the chapters contain historical sketches of periods, for instance, they also contain topical issues for study. As a stimulus for further study, *The Sioux* also purposely raises many more questions than it answers and provides many more endnotes and references than is normal in a history or an ethnohistory. For the same reason, I build “models” at times about possible consequences of postulated events in the past, such as the settlement aggregation of the Sioux in the early fourteenth century. These imaginary reconstructions are not to be confused with verified histories of past events; the suggested consequences might or might not have occurred. Their purpose is to encourage readers to think creatively, to think about possibilities and consequences not considered in standard histories of the Sioux.

Stated even more plainly, *The Sioux* is not a “grand narrative” written by an “authority” to satisfy a curiosity; my intent is to prod readers into thinking deeply, critically, independently, and diligently about the history of the Sioux. Chapter 1 offers a philosophical and pragmatic rationale for this approach.

The historical sketches within the text are organized by periods, from the emergence of the Sioux as an identifiable group in late prehistory to the year 2000. There is nothing sacrosanct about these periods. The beginning and end dates of each period mark important external events that
affected the Sioux people. Examples are the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 that opened a large portion of the West to American settlement, the beginning (1850) and end (1889) of the Sioux Wars with the US military, and the Reorganization Act of 1934. Others would organize these divisions according to their own understandings and interests. Likewise, they would choose other topical issues for review, for only imagination limits their number.

Historical ethnographies are normally written by cultural anthropologists who work backward through time from “the ethnographic present.” As an archaeologist who has studied the material remains of Siouan-speaking groups for many years, I have worked “downstream” toward the present. I acknowledge with appreciation, then, the detailed remarks that I received from reviewers on a manuscript version of the text.

Special thanks to the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota, which provided a research leave of absence during fall 2001 to complete the manuscript. I was also awarded a Graduate Research Partnership Program grant in summer 2001 by the College of Liberal Arts to gather information on recent Sioux history. Karri Plowman, whose thesis topic is Indian identity in urban settings, was my capable research partner for this grant. Special thanks as well to Blackwell’s Ken Provencher and to Juanita Bullough, the manuscript’s copyeditor, for their help in preparing The Sioux for publication; to Debbie Schoenholz of the Science Museum of Minnesota for her help in selecting illustrations for the text; and to my wife Ann, who has endured life with an academic with graciousness and humor.

To encourage comment on the text by individual Sioux and by other American Indians, a version of the text was serialized in Native American Press/Ojibwe News, a bi-monthly newspaper. Many thanks to Bill Lawrence, the publisher of the newspaper, and to Clara Niiska, a reporter, for this opportunity. I also discussed the appropriateness of parts of the text with Faith Bad Bear of the Science Museum of Minnesota. Comments from all of these sources and from two reviewers have been incorporated into the text where possible.

G. G.
The most common image of American Indians throughout the world is that of the bison-hunting Sioux. Warrior horsemen on the northern Plains of North America, they became the best known of all Indian nations through paintings and photographs, confrontations with the US military, Wild West shows, and hundreds of movies. Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Red Cloud, and other Sioux leaders are among the most famous of all Indians, and the battle at Little Bighorn ("Custer’s Last Stand") in 1876 and the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 are among the most widely known events in US history. For most people in the world, the very symbol of Indianness is the Sioux eagle-feather headdress. Even other Indian people throughout North America wear some version of this headdress at powwows as a symbol of Indian unity. In 1973, the Sioux brought the plight of Indian people to the attention of the world again in a second confrontation at Wounded Knee. For all of these reasons, the Sioux are the prototype of Indian people in the Americas.

However, these famous horsemen of the Plains were only one division of a larger Sioux nation, and the lifeway of their popular image lasted only a little over 100 years. Earlier, before the horse appeared on the Plains, their ancestors lived for hundreds of years in the forests of central Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin, where they hunted deer and harvested wild rice. Later, their descendants lived for decades in poverty and misery on small reservations in the northern Plains and Minnesota. Today, the Sioux are an increasingly vibrant people who are forging a new lifeway in which their cultural heritage has a central role. To understand the Sioux as a people, then, it is necessary to view the entire panorama of their history, not just a few romanticized "highlights."

As you will discover, this is a problematic and difficult undertaking. It is an illusion to believe that we can “understand” the Sioux – or any other people, for that matter – by reading a few ethnographies and histories of one period of their history in the nineteenth century. Since the goal of this
Basic Sioux History

Today the Sioux are a loose alliance of tribes in the northern plains and prairies of North America. They speak Siouan, a linguistic family that at contact was among the most commonly spoken language stocks north of Mexico. They became known as the Sioux or a word like it in the seventeenth century, when the Ojibwa told the French that that was what they were called. The word derives from the Ojibwa na-towe-siwa, which means “people of an alien tribe.” The French spelled the word Naudoweisious, and the English and Americans shortened it to Sioux. Both spellings have been used since that time, with Sioux the more commonly used of the two versions of “people of an alien tribe.”

The Sioux alliance of tribes has three main divisions, the Dakota to the east, the Yankton–Yanktonai in the middle, and the Lakota to the west, with the latter now more numerous than the others combined. Individuals within these divisions commonly refer to themselves as Dakota (Dakota and Yankton-Yanktonai) or Lakota, words that roughly mean “Indian” or The People in their dialects. There are four Dakota subdivisions, the Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, Sisseton, and Wahpeton, and two Yankton-Yanktonai subdivisions, the Yankton and Yanktonai (“Little Yankton”). Each of these subdivisions and the Lakota are divided still further into smaller political units.

The seven principal subdivisions – the Mdewakanton, Wahpekute, Sisseton, Wahpeton, Yankton, Yanktonai, and Lakota – are recognized by the Sioux as ancestral political units, the Seven Council Fires (Oceti Sakowin), whose origins extend back to their homeland in the present
state of Minnesota. In recent years, some Sioux, like many other Indian people, have made a concerted effort to replace their imposed, non-Indian name, here “the Sioux,” which is derived from an Ojibwa word, by the names they call themselves. For example, the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux tribe recently became the Sisseton-Wahpeton Dakota tribe, and other tribes are proposing changes in their name, too. The label Sioux is used here because there is no agreed-upon alternative, it is the most appropriate label for their language, and the word (as opposed to Lakota–Dakota) is recognized throughout the world. However, readers should constantly be aware that there are more appropriate and acceptable names for these Indian people than the word “Sioux.”

Europeans first encountered the Dakota, the eastern division of the Sioux, in the seventeenth century in the mixed hardwood forests or northwoods of central Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin. Since that time this region has been regarded as the late prehistoric ancestral homeland of the Sioux people. Because the prehistory of the Sioux before this encounter is poorly documented, contending interpretations of their past based on oral narratives, reconstructed written histories, and archaeological evidence exist. An interpretation of the archaeological evidence suggests that they emerged relatively suddenly as an alliance of tribal groups in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century ad. At that time, scattered family groups aggregated into a small number of clustered, probably palisaded, villages situated beside the larger lakes and rivers in the region. There they harvested wild rice, their principal grain, in the fall, made maple sugar in the early spring, and hunted deer. Once or twice a year they entered the prairies to the west to hunt bison.

In the mid-seventeenth century, the Sioux began drifting westward and southward. Both “push” and “pull” processes seem to have been involved. Turmoil in New England and the eastern Great Lakes pushed tribes west around Lakes Michigan and Superior. By the time the fur trade became established in the western Great Lakes and Upper Mississippi Valley in the early eighteenth century, many of these tribes were competing with one another and the Sioux for furs and the benefits of the French trade. Pressure from the Ojibwa, who gradually moved into Minnesota from the Lake Superior area, pushed some Sioux southward and perhaps westward.

The Dakota, for example, were apparently pushed and pulled into the southern one-third of the state, where they settled along the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers. By contrast, the western Sioux, the Lakota and Yankton-Yanktonai, had already crossed the Red River into the eastern Dakotas between 1700 and 1725. Greater game resources and the promise of the horse, which was present on the southern prairie-plains by 1650 and was being used by other Siouan speakers south of the Dakotas by
1700, might have drawn them. While some western Sioux bands had a few horses by 1707 if not earlier, the Lakota (the Sioux of the West) did not become Plains horsemen until 1750–75, by which time Lakota foraging parties had crossed the Missouri River. By the late 1700s, because of “pulls” and “pushes,” all of the Sioux had left their ancestral homes in the mixed hardwood forests of central Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin.

As each of the three divisions adapted to different prairie-plains environments, their lifeways changed and diverged from one another, and while they spoke the same language, each developed its own dialect. The Middle Sioux, the Yankton-Yanktonai, became middlemen in a far-flung

Figure 1.1  Sitting Bull (F. F. Barry photograph, 1885. Minnesota Historical Society Photograph Collection)
trade system between the Lakota, who had pushed westward as far as Wyoming and eastern Montana, and the Dakota (the Sioux of the East), who were closely involved in the French fur trade. While the Lakota became bison-hunting, nomadic horsemen and the principal grain of the Dakota shifted from wild rice to maize (corn), some Yankton-Yanktonai adopted many of the traits of their Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara neighbors, including earthlodge dwellings and their style of dress. With the horse for transportation, the Lakota prospered and their numbers grew until, by the nineteenth century, they outnumbered all other Sioux bands combined. Because of limitless bison herds, their horsemanship, and their nomadic, warrior existence, they became the last, great barrier to Euro-American domination of the Plains.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, American pressure on the resources of the Sioux became increasingly intense and demanding. Fort Snelling was established at the junction of the Mississippi and Minnesota rivers in 1819 to keep peace between the Sioux and Ojibwa, and to keep non-Indian settlers off Indian lands and British fur traders out of American territory. Soon after, Indian agents initiated a long-term process of preparing the neighboring Dakota for participation in the Euro-American way of life. Reading and writing English and farming were encouraged by the US government, and, in the 1820s, missionary teachers were allowed to come and assist in this process.

In 1837, the Dakota succumbed to mounting pressure and sold their land east of the Mississippi River to the US government. Among the pressures were debts that the government was using to force land sales and a desire by missionaries to anchor the mobile Dakota to small reservations where education in reading, writing, and farming would be easier and under closer control. Treaties signed at Traverse des Sioux and Mendota in 1851 took away their remaining land in Minnesota except for a small reservation along the Minnesota River. American settlers, who had reached Minnesota in the 1840s, poured into Minnesota Territory in the 1850s. Meanwhile, much of the money paid to the Dakota for their land was given directly to fur traders to settle debts, and promised food rations were not always supplied on time or in sufficient quantity. These and other inequities led to the Dakota Conflict of 1862. At the end of the conflict, the remaining land of the Dakota was seized and opened to homesteading. The surviving Dakota fled the state, were removed to Crow Creek on the Missouri River in South Dakota, were sent to prison, or were otherwise dispersed.

A similar pattern of initial land acquisition, subsequent movement to ever-smaller reservations, stress on learning non-Indian ways, and deprivation was experienced by the Yankton-Yanktonai and Lakota to the west. During the first half of the nineteenth century, at the very time the horse-
riding nomadic way of life of the Lakota was flourishing, Euro-American traders and US troops, and many thousands of eastern Indians after 1830, moved into the grasslands of the Great Plains. One of the largest of these Indian displacements resulted from the Chicago Treaty of 1833, which removed the Potawatomi, Kickapoo, Sauk, Miami, Illini, and other eastern tribes from Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin to Kansas and Oklahoma. By mid-century, the Euro-American colonization front reached Kansas, and, following a clamor for new land, both Kansas and Nebraska were opened to colonization in 1854. To end the “Indian problem,” the US government initiated an aggressive military policy in the Plains in the Civil War years of the 1860s. This policy included building additional military posts and hunting “renegade” groups that refused to settle on reservations. Both of these activities further inflamed relationships and stressed the limited food resources of the region. After completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, herds of bison were slaughtered for their hides, which were shipped back east in boxcars. By the mid-1870s, bison were nearly extinct in the central Plains, and by the mid-1880s, they had disappeared in the northern Plains.

Even though many of these developments occurred first south of Dakota Territory, the Western and Middle Sioux were soon subjected to similar processes. In 1868, the Lakota were restricted to the Great Sioux Reservation, which was that part of Dakota Territory west of the Missouri River. By the 1870s, intolerable pressure led to a series of “Indian Wars,” the most famous of which was the annihilation of Custer’s Seventh Calvary at the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 by Sitting Bull’s Lakota and by Cheyenne forces and other allies. With the disappearance of the bison herds in the northern Plains by 1885, the foundation of the Lakota’s nomadic lifeway was destroyed and decades of dependence on reservation annuities began for all Sioux. Their holdings were further diminished and scattered by the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, which forced families and individuals onto 160-acre or smaller allotments and opened the remaining land to non-Indian settlement. The massacre of Big Foot’s band at Wounded Knee Creek in 1890 and the killing of Sitting Bull by Indian policemen the same year symbolize the end of the freedom and preferred nomadic lifeway of the Lakota and some other western Sioux bands.

The 1890s were revolutionary years for the Sioux. Besides being confined to reservations where indifferent and self-serving Indian agents appointed for political favors often controlled them, they were expected to farm arid land. Worse, some of their children were shipped to boarding schools, such as Carlisle in Pennsylvania, where they were taught manual skills, urged to abandon their Indian ways, and made to speak English. While the Sun Dance, which had reached its peak of popularity during the
war years of the mid-nineteenth century, was now forbidden, other reli-
gions, such as the Ghost Dance and Peyotism, spread in the 1890s as
integrating mechanisms for crowded and deprived Indian societies. Be-
sides reaffirming the value of the Indian experience, they taught accom-
modation to Euro-American patterns of life.

The first two decades of the twentieth century were periods of adjust-
ment to reservation life in now scattered allotments in the prairie-plains
region for the Sioux. Some reservations even began to prosper somewhat
in the 1920s. However, the terrible drought of the Dust Bowl years of the
early 1930s and the Great Depression (1929–33) devastated most reser-

Figure 1.2 Maz-zo, a Dakota woman (Martin’s Gallery photograph, 1863.
Minnesota Historical Society Photograph Collection)
vations on the Plains. Still, the catastrophe provided an opportunity to introduce radical reforms. These well-intentioned if controversial reforms were introduced by John Collier of the new Roosevelt administration and were enacted as the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934. The Act was designed to improve subsistence and employment opportunities on the reservations and to ensure that tribal councils and chairmen were democratically elected. Opportunity for employment off the reservation was greatly expanded by World War II, when many young Sioux men and women volunteered for service or worked on farms or in industry in larger cities.

The second half of the twentieth century has been a time of far-reaching change and renewal for many Sioux. Reduction in mortality and high birth rates almost doubled their population, which strained employment on reservations. In response, an increased effort was made to prepare young people for urban employment. The Eisenhower administration enforced this trend with its 1952 Voluntary Relocation Program, which was designed to relocate Indians to centers of employment as private citizens. Poorly educated and discriminated against, many of these young people soon returned to the reservation. A more drastic measure was House Concurrent Resolution 108, which called for the US to unilaterally end the special status of Indian tribal reservations. In the late 1960s, as part of the “counter-culture” movement, the national American Indian Movement (AIM) was formed to combat deprivations and injustices. These demands for civil rights were supported in part by the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

By the 1970s, the once radical position that Indians should be able to follow their own cultural traditions – rather than be forced to assimilate to Euro-American ones – became more widely accepted. The publication of Dee Brown’s immensely popular Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee in 1971 and a new confrontation at Wounded Knee in 1973 led by Russell Means, an Oglala Sioux, heightened public consciousness of the plight of the Sioux. In addition, since the 1950s powwows have become linked into circuits that bring scattered Indian people together, if only for a few days, to reaffirm their Indianness and to seek solutions to powerlessness and poverty. Also in the early 1970s, legislation and policy statements by Presidents Nixon and Ford reversed the Eisenhower initiative and recognized the right of the Sioux and other Indian people in the US to self-determination without the withdrawal of government support. The 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which transferred many governmental and administrative powers to Indian tribes, is an example of this new direction in US Indian policy.

An increasingly articulated goal in the last three decades of the twentieth century has been sovereignty and immediate access to specific rights granted by past treaties. A series of laws has reaffirmed these rights. This
effort has been immensely accelerated by the infusion of millions of dollars from gambling casinos on Indian lands. Beginning in the mid-1970s, and expanding rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s, gambling has become a source of individual and tribal funds not encumbered by US government restrictions. This new economic base has made life easier for some Sioux and allowed individual tribes to pursue their legal rights with ever-increasing vigor. Today, although transformed through decades of forced assimilation and intermixing with people from many other cultures, the Sioux nation and culture is in a vigorous, if difficult, renaissance.

Problems with Modern History and Ethnography

With rare exceptions, histories of the Sioux are written from a “modern” perspective, that is, from a view of human history rooted in Enlightenment philosophy. This is true as well of the vast majority of Sioux ethnographies, which are descriptions and interpretations of the customary behavior, beliefs, and attitudes of the Sioux at a moment in time called the “ethnographic present.” Although professional historians and anthropologists have written some of these histories and ethnographies, most have been written by missionaries, Indian agents, professional writers, and people with a personal interest in the Sioux.

Most readers assume that these histories and ethnographies are accurate, authoritative accounts, and read them for their content. A more demanding and insightful approach is to focus on the myriad of issues involved in writing and reading histories and ethnographies. Some of these issues are internal to modern history and ethnography, and concern standards of scholarship developed within this perspective since the eighteenth century. Others are postmodern and question the very foundation of Enlightenment philosophy. While many of these basic issues are raised in this introduction to the Sioux, none are resolved. For reasons that will become apparent, each reader cannot help but formulate her or his own understanding of the Sioux.

The Enlightenment is a western European ideology or way of perceiving and interpreting the world that developed in the eighteenth century through the works of Voltaire, John Locke, and other philosophers. Like other views of the world, it is based on assumptions about the nature of reality, of human beings and other life forms, and of ways of knowing. Among the basic assumptions of Enlightenment philosophy are the ideas that all human groups share the same basic physical and psychological make up, so there is no biological barrier to human development; that progress is the dominant characteristic of all aspects of human life, including moral, technological, and social aspects; and that progress results
from the exercise of reason or rational thought. Later chapters will argue that the first two assumptions guided many Euro-American patterns of interaction with the Sioux. The third assumption has a heritage in modern history and anthropology in an emphasis on reason, truth, objectivity, rationality, consistency, accurate description, and correctness, among other features of Western social science. Because of these values, modern social scientists assume that it is possible to provide a true and adequate account of the history of the Sioux. They assume, too, that this process can and should be conducted in an objective manner with the methodology of their discipline.

Postmodern critics question these assumptions and everything else that is taken for granted by modern social scientists. They argue that the concepts of history and anthropology have to be re-conceptualized. Among their concerns are modern views of representation, truth, reality, and science. They conclude that conventional views of history and anthropology are at best inadequate and at worst illusory and exploitative. These issues have obvious implications for understanding the Sioux.

A primary target of postmodernists is the modern assumption that it is possible to reproduce or re-present a true image of a past or present cultural reality. Besides being entangled in cultural and personal perspectives, representation, according to its critics, excludes ambiguity and imposes a standpoint of interpretation by controlling the proliferation of meaning, when many diverse meanings are possible and should be explored. In addition, representation assumes that everyone understands the meaning of words, images, and symbols the same way. Postmodernists argue that because words, images, and symbols are language-dependent, representation is always indeterminate (Wittgenstein’s irreducible pluralism of language).3 If these arguments have merit, then representation necessarily distorts and possibly even creates the social world that it is supposed to re-present. This critique has implications for the concepts of reality, truth, science, history, and ethnography that must be considered in our effort to understand the Sioux.

Modern history and ethnography assume that an independent, external reality exists. That it can be discovered, and objectively described and interpreted. Western social science has generally supported a positivist, materialist notion of reality in which material things, and only material things, exist independently in a real world.4 By assuming an independent reality of real things, modern social science is able to “discover” and “depict” its object of study “as it really is.” Representations can be judged accurate or not, and can be used to confirm or falsify interpretations. However, if representation is problematic, then the ability to reproduce and duplicate external reality is called into question. Objectivity becomes an illusion and the concept of truth (in the sense of “true” knowledge
claims) a potentially dangerous tool of modernity. By maintaining that there is a “truth to the matter,” that there is a single best or correct answer to every question, modern social science excludes the possibility of multiple realities and of conflicting versions of the truth of a situation. Most postmodernists argue that truth claims silence the argument of “the other” – the Sioux, for example – and are products of power games “manipulated into position by those whose interests they serve.” The notions of “reality construction” and of different theories of reality have been proposed as less naive alternatives to the positivists’ materialist notion of reality. A contextualist theory of reality, for example, maintains that knowledge claims are the result of agreement within their context, whether the context is a linguistic community, a society, or a social science profession. More extreme is the view that reality is only a linguistic convention, that language produces reality. This latter position is predicated on the view that there are indeterminate real-world referents for words, images, and symbols.

These views of reality, objectivity, and truth have implications as well for the very notion of social science. Modern social science is based upon a materialist assumption of reality; a self-correcting method, grounded in reason and rationality, that is assumed to be universal across disciplines; the idea that social realities can be understood as systems of causal relations; and the belief that conflict among interpretations can be adjudicated by reference to external reality as the ultimate arbitrator. Of course, if modern notions of truth and objectivity are questioned, then it is impossible to distinguish good and bad interpretations with any certitude. By extension, the role of reason itself in modern social science can be challenged. This is possible from a variety of perspectives. For instance, even though people can engage in “reasoned arguments,” their thoughts are culturally contextual and reflect preference rather than privileged insight. In addition, from another perspective, “good reasons” have been given for a multitude of actions the consequences of which have been disastrous for the Sioux.

All of these objections call into question conventional views of history and ethnography. If there is no real, knowable past, if truth and reason are context-dependent, if no grounds exist for defensible external validation, then what are history and ethnography about? What is their purpose? Answers vary. According to the End-of-History and New History movements, they are creations of modern Western nations that innocently or sinisterly fabricate “façades” that, while claiming to be objective and scientific, serve instead to deceive, to legitimate modernity, and to reinforce Western myths and ideologies at the expense of those of “the other.” As meta-narratives (“Grand Narratives”), they stress, for instance, continuity, progress, closure, direct causal understanding, the search for ori-
gins, and correct interpretations, and preclude multiple interpretations, intertextuality (the existence of “infinitely complex interwoven interrelationships”), the absence of truth, and plural realities. In addition, by focusing on dramatic events, important individuals (“Great Men”), and wars and treaties, on deep, enduring, and autonomous social structures, and on the “pure” culture unadulterated by trappers and Indian agents, history and ethnography ignore the impact of external, public events on everyday experience. They ignore women, children, and old people, who are uneliminable members of Sioux society.

These are basic issues that readers of histories and ethnographies must make decisions about or at least become aware of in “reading” the Sioux. Is a history or ethnography only a story? Is it possible to describe (represent) other cultures and formulate theories about them? Is all insight of equal value? How do we distinguish “what really happened” from fictional accounts of the past? What roles do history and ethnography play in our society? Can we ignore these issues and still avoid an “innocent reading”?

The Sioux as Historical Relic, Exotica, Subject, and Text

Other fundamental issues involved in reading about people with another culture revolve around how they are perceived by authors in some global sense. Most books and articles written about the Sioux view them, for instance, as a historical relic or as exotica, or as both. For many people, the Sioux of the East are frozen forever in the 1830s and the Sioux of the West in the war years of the 1860s and 1870s. In this view, present-day Sioux are faded reminders, historical relics, of what they once were – at least in the mind of the Western observer. A related perception pictures the Sioux as an esoteric people who once lived in the distant, wild frontier, where they pierced their flesh during the Sun Dance, hunted massive bison from horseback, and had other strange but interesting customs. As exotica, they present an exciting alternative to our own humdrum lives. Basic questions should be asked about these perceptions: Whose interests do they serve? Are they paternalistic and perhaps demeaning to the Sioux? In their quest for the exotic, do authors “over-interpret” the Sioux, that is, make them appear more different and esoteric than they actually were and are?

More subtle problems concern the Sioux as subject and as text. At its simplest, the Sioux as subject refers to the Western conception of the significance of human beings. In this conception, a person is a self-aware, rational, self-conscious, autonomous, unified, and self-determining agent, who is the “preconstituted center of the experience of culture and his-
Furthermore, as isolatable agents they are presumed to be independent of social relations and to have the capacity to maintain or change them. As the building blocks of social processes, the actions and points of view of the subject are the focus of modern analysis.

Postmodernists regard this conception as an illusion, a fiction, and an invention of humanist philosophy. From their perspective and that of Freud and others, human beings are better characterized by self-deception, diversity, powerlessness, and contradiction. What we say, do, and think cannot be taken at face value. At an extreme, a person is only a mask or a role in a drama whose scenes are not the products of anyone’s plan or intention. For these and other reasons, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss once suggested that the ultimate goal of his research was not “to constitute man but to dissolve him.”

Postmodernists contend that the notion of the modern subject, as an ideological construct, has had a largely negative effect in Western society. As the focus of analysis in most histories and ethnographies, the notion has detracted from other avenues of understanding. An example is the investigation of the linguistic construction and symbolic meaning of large-scale social structures, and of change as manifest in their transformation. According to this latter research strategy, no human action is meaningful without being situated within the context of a structure. Others contend that the notion “fraudulently underscores the individual as a potentially effective, rational agent,” when s/he is not; has been almost exclusively male-centered (the “Great Men” of history); implies an object, and thereby designates the observer (author) as subject and relegates those being studied (the Sioux) to passive object status; and leads to an objectification that encourages the reader to view individuals as mere members of a group, among other charges. Although these critiques are most often aimed at the notion of the individual as subject, many apply as well to social wholes. For example, the Lakota and other Sioux social groups are often treated as if they have the characteristics of a person, as if they are self-determinant and unified.

These contentions imply that the notion of the subject should be eliminated, be de-emphasized as a focus of analysis, or be rethought and “repositioned.” At the very least, they raise fundamental issues for the reader intent on learning about the Sioux. For instance, what justification is there for assuming that the subject should be the center of analysis? Does this focus detract from learning about the processes that shaped and now shape the Sioux? How has this focus been expressed in books and articles about the Sioux? Would the history/anthropology of the Sioux be more interesting without the modern subject?

It is worthwhile as well to consider what is implied by the notion that the Sioux can be read as a “text” or are a “text.” For postmodernists, a
society, an archaeological assemblage, a life experience, a reservation, and just about anything else is considered a text. All phenomena, all events are texts. Unlike modern written texts that are assumed to have a knowable content determined by the author, postmodern “texts” – like the Lakota – have multiple interpretations no one of which is necessarily more correct or meaningful than another. In this view, the Sioux have no single meaning, since political, social, religious, and economic events encourage an infinite number of interpretations. By implication, a variety of readings is available. Rather than an objective, separable, and internally integrated social reality, they are undefined, fragmented, and enmeshed in an infinite play of intertextual relationships with other “texts.” Consequently, it is fruitless to search for the correct meaning or description of the Sioux as text. Although interpretation is not completely arbitrary (some things happen and others do not), readers still (re)-create the text. Said another way, there is a difference between simply “seeing” (the impact of electromagnetic impulses on the retina of the eye and so forth) and “seeing as” (learning to see those impulses as, for example, a “Sioux woman”). There is a difference between the existence of “brute facts” and their interpretation.

**Reorienting the Reader**

Considerable uncertainty exists today concerning the relationship of the author, reader, and written text. In modern history and anthropology, the author is assumed to write a text to communicate a specific message or to convey knowledge. Her or his role is to “re-present” a social reality in order to educate, to instill moral values, or to otherwise enlighten the reader (about, for example, what really happened at Wounded Knee). As a “readerly” text, a book or article is to be read for its specific message or content. The reader’s role is to “passively” absorb or grasp this information. In classrooms across the country, examinations assures that students “correctly” understand what they read and are told.

Postmodernists diminish the importance of the author for a variety of reasons: the modern author assumes privileged access to truth, a view that postmodernists consider naive at best; authors are not always conscious of the implications of what they are saying; by imposing a “truthful” account, the modern author discourages multiple interpretations and often becomes an unwitting instrument of the status quo; and by imposing order on events by binding them together in a rational, explanatory framework (a history or ethnography), the author-writer can mask the paradoxical, the chaotic, the ambiguous. This movement symbolizes as well a general protest against author(ity). Critics point out, too, that the
modern concept of an author is not a natural idea but an idea with a social history. According to Foucault and others, the idea emerged during the Middle Ages as a means of authenticating scientific statements.\textsuperscript{14}

The outcome of these debates is a repositioning of the reader. For the modern reader, who reads in pursuit of truth and knowledge, a more active reading is required to identify authorial bias and the distortion of meaning, to discover new sources of information, and to explore alternative explanatory frameworks. The task remains the accumulation of true knowledge through diverse and deeper readings, and the goal remains the determination with certitude of what “really happened.” By contrast, postmodernists empower the reader more dramatically. Any number of readings are possible because a text does not have a “best” reading. Indeed, we should expect different readers to offer divergent interpretations of a text because there are multiple realities in a postmodern world. Likewise, some readers will share similar readings of a text because they learned to read in the same “interpretive community” (a culture, subculture, academic discipline, and so on). However, none of these readings is privileged or at best is privileged only within a certain context. In the extreme, the postmodern reader (re)-creates the text in the act of reading; the postmodern text is a “writerly” text “rewritten” (interpreted, created) by the reader with every reading. Here reading becomes textual construction, not knowledge building.

These divergent views raise other interesting questions for readers setting out to learn about the Sioux. Is any written text about the Sioux open to multiple readings? Are all readings of equal value, or is it possible to choose among incompatible interpretations? How do we evaluate divergent written texts or readings? To what extent does a written text have an objective status? Should the reading of the Sioux-as-text by Sioux “readers” be privileged? In the last instance, do readers “write the text”? Again, one’s answers to these and related questions affect the nature of their encounter with the Sioux. To refuse to engage questions like these is to already embrace a point of view.\textsuperscript{15}

**An Overview of the Text**

Except for chapter 2, the remaining chapters follow the pattern established in this introduction to the text. After a brief review of the content of the chapter, a “basic history” section is followed by a series of four to six topical issues that I consider important in thinking about the Sioux. Some of these issues fall within the ambit of modern social science: What additional sources of information should be explored? How do we evaluate that information in order to get at “the truth of the matter”? How has
the bias or special interests of an author affected his or her interpretation of the Sioux? Others are postmodern in tenor. Who has benefited from (fraudulent) claims of truth? How have Western concepts of space and time influenced our understanding of Sioux culture? Where in the literature are the voices of women, children, and old people?

The topical issues chosen reflect my own interests. Inquisitive, “writerly” readers should prepare their own list as a guide for learning about the Sioux. The chapters progress through time in an ordered, linear sequence whose temporal divisions are largely arbitrary. Other authors – and individual Sioux – would choose different formats and highlight different events.