I AM SO TIRED OF JARGON AND NARROW TEACHING . . .

Brian Fagan

Brian Fagan says he has not only written far too much about public outreach over the years, he has said it all before. Accordingly, he promises this is the last time he will write about it.

I have spent the past three months saturating myself in a complex archaeological literature of CRM reports, journal articles, and monographs covering 13,000 years of the past. On the whole, I am little wiser than when I began. On the other hand, I am confused, frustrated, and puzzled, weary of obtusatory jargon and passive tenses, of mindless description and simplistic reasoning.

This huge bag of literature is all we have to tell the story of a huge area of North America. It leaves thirteen millennia inadequately described and virtually unintelligible even to those who have spent a lifetime working with the sites and artifacts involved. In short, the archaeology of the region concerned is effectively inaccessible to anyone but a handful of people who have mastered the literature—and I, hopefully a professional archaeologist, am not among them.

Even worse, no one seems to be worrying about the situation.

I have a sense that hundreds of us are locked into small, comfortable worlds of CRM projects and self-perpetuating research without any reference to reality whatsoever. And few people seem to be concerned about the credibility of these activities with the public (or clients) who pay for it. To my mind, this is what public outreach is all about—not teaching people what archaeologists do, but why archaeology is important in today's world and making it intelligible in the bargain.

Public outreach has become one of American Archaeology's cherished buzzwords. Like all buzzwords, it has generated a blizzard of spontaneous activity, and much of it can be best described as busywork—useful only to those who engage in it. But, for the most part, it seems as if public outreach activities are going one way, mainstream academic and CRM archaeology another. The one generates coherent prose, which reaches, for the most part, a limited audience, the other creates what can charitably be called "archy-bark." And like so many barks, this is generally pretty ineffective.

The problem is particularly acute in the CRM environment. Many in business and industry are challenging both the morass of legal requirements and regulations surrounding archaeological resources as well as the expense of complying with them at a time when there are cries for increasing self-sufficiency in oil production. Why is archaeology important, they inquire, especially in areas where the archaeological record is either sparse or unspectacular? Why are we spending huge sums of money on this seemingly irrelevant activity? In a political climate of increased deregulation, of more liberal policies for oil drilling and other activities, they openly question the steadily rising expense of CRM projects, especially when the end-product comes to them couched in dense, technical prose.

I find the genre depressingly standardized. Many local summaries of archaeological research claim to be aimed at a wider audience and at clients who know little about archaeology. But closer inspection reveals a few pages of general environmental information, then page after page of arcane projectile-point sequences, radiocarbon dates, and dreary culture history, which make few, if any, concessions to the general reader. Even an expert calls for a slug of scotch and a cold towel when confronted with more than a few pages of this gobbledy-gook. Some CRM clients have complained to me, with justification, that they want to be archaeologically and socially responsible—but what they get for their money does not motivate them to do anything other than fulfill minimal legal requirements.

Many CRM projects, especially the larger ones, require some form of public outreach, but these rarely extend to books or other forms of documents written for a wider audience—although there are notable, and rare, exceptions.

We are simply not doing enough to fill what is a legitimate demand for up-to-date, accurate, and stimulating summaries of our work aimed at the widest possible audience.

In these days of highly technical archaeology and the pernicious publish-or-perish academic culture, good syntheses are sometimes considered a demeaning activity, especially if they are aimed at a broader audience. This is, of course, nonsense, for anyone who has attempted such a work will tell you that
this is the toughest kind of archaeological communication of all. Few of us master the skill, which requires, among other things, an expertise in serious general writing, an ability to look at the larger picture, and a proficiency at navigating between the agendas of experts. Archaeological training does not include such skills, which is a pity from the point of view of the technical literature, but an even greater problem when you consider public outreach. Clearly we will have to address this aspect of public outreach in fresh and innovative ways—and teach fledgling archaeologists how to write.

Apart from better writing pedagogy, we need other creative approaches. Oxford University Press gives us one potential strategy. They are about to publish a series of children's books about major archaeological sites around the world such as Chaco Canyon, which team up a working archaeologist with an expert children's book writer. The result brings archaeology to a younger audience fluently, while the archaeologist focuses on the technical accuracy of the book and the illustrations. I believe that this approach would work well with more popular syntheses of CRM projects and regional surveys. There are many freelance writers with considerable experience and some scientific background out there, who would be thrilled to work with a professional archaeologist. So far, almost no one has experimented with this approach.

Much of what passes as more popular writing in archaeology is still aimed at a relatively narrow constituency of fellow colleagues and readers seriously interested in archaeology—not a large number of people. Success in the future will depend on communicating with very different audiences, especially those with no background in archaeology whatsoever. The solution lies not only in much-improved training in communication and writing skills in graduate schools, but also in enlisting the help of people with the appropriate literary or media expertise—something we have not done with any conspicuous success. Successful public outreach depends on our ability to communicate with normal, intelligent, and literate human beings, not just with ourselves and the converted. So far, we have hardly scratched the surface and still belong to a scientific culture that often regards public outreach demeaning and a second-rate activity. After a lifetime involved in public outreach, I am convinced it is the hardest archaeological skill of all.

**Archaeology and Higher Education**

Times have changed. School curricula in many states now introduce even grade school students to major developments in prehistory and to archaeology. But many students' first exposure to archaeology of any kind, and to North American archaeology in particular, comes as late as the freshman and sophomore years of college. Introductory archaeology courses have always, and will always, remain one of the primary ways in which we reach out to a broader audience. In this we have been successful over many years, thanks to generations of conscientious and expert teachers. Public consciousness of archaeology owes much to solid introductory teaching over the past half century. Such rising awareness coincides in considerable part with the great expansion of higher education since the 1950s. In recent years, we have heard loud calls to the effect that the undergraduate curriculum in archaeology is out of date and irrelevant to today's world of CRM, with its need for professionals trained in many other topics as well as archaeological methods and North American archaeology. As so often happens, these concerns, and the rhetoric associated with them, overstate the case. An introductory course is just that, and it has several vital and unchanging objectives:

- To make students aware of the importance of archaeology, its role in the contemporary world, and its great fascination.
- To give a sound grounding in the basic methods and theoretical approaches of archaeology. In other words, how do archaeologists reconstruct and interpret the past?
- To provide a general background in the major developments of human prehistory on a very wide canvas. This means at least some exposure to world prehistory, not just course content that focuses on such narrow topics as eastern North American archaeology or the Southwest. Such a focus comes later on.
- To raise awareness of the basic ethics of archaeology, including the notion of stewardship, both for archaeologists and people everywhere.
- To supply at least a summary of career opportunities in archaeology, including CRM, and to discuss how one acquires the relevant training.

The best introductory courses are just that—an engaging survey of a compelling, ever changing field of study, which deals with important human problems and issues of cultural diversity. Effective public outreach to young people depends on providing such a course at the beginning level, a course designed on the assumption that only a few people will go on and become anthropology majors and even fewer professional archaeologists. No one in the introductory business is engaged in doing anything more than raising public awareness about archaeology. They are not there to provide professional training in CRM, or any other form of archaeology for that matter. To do such things with beginning students is to invite a perpetuation of many of problems confronting today's archaeology—overspecialization at an early stage, too much scientific mumbo jumbo, and, above all, the perpetuation of a pervasive and still surprisingly widespread value system that hints that if you take an introductory course, you join an exclusive "in-group" who know all about archaeology.
Public outreach in undergraduate education means raising awareness of the importance of archaeology and its ethics in today's world. But, above all, its mission is also to provide students with a grasp of the basic, and fascinating, issues of early human history. To treat introductory courses as anything else is to invite both intellectual disaster—and the creation of a myopic army of archaeological technicians. Such offerings are the most important teaching we do; yet many institutions starve such classes of resources and consider them less important than graduate seminars.

With skillful use of interactive media and other innovative teaching methods, introductory archaeology has great potential as a means of public outreach in the future.

Upper-division and graduate education are another matter. Juniors and seniors, who may be considering graduate school and obtaining some practical field experience, can benefit from some careful, and highly specific, exposure to technical issues surrounding CRM. And many graduate curricula need massive restructuring to reflect the contemporary realities of North American archaeology as a profession as much as a purely academic discipline. So far, the move toward revamping graduate curricula, especially in research universities, has been glacially slow, despite the open-ended opportunities on the horizon.

Public outreach is one of the most fundamental issues facing archaeology today. In recognizing this, we should be aware that innovative approaches both in the classroom and in the wider public arena are long overdue, expanded use of interactive teaching methods and the Web being among them. And, above all, we have to realize that the best archaeology is written in fluent, jargon-free prose that makes people want to learn about the past, not avoid it because it is incomprehensible.