

EDITORIAL: ACCESS TO THE PAST

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The May, 1997 issue of *Toronto Life* contains a lengthy article by Elaine Dewar on "why archeology in Ontario is an international disgrace." In the spirit of investigative journalism the author follows up on Bill Finlayson's allegations by interviewing a cross-section of the archaeological community in Ontario, doing research, and examining facilities. She pulls no punches and names both informants and principal characters. Published reaction has been mixed, with some archaeologists praising the author for bringing matters to public attention and others complaining about the manner in which she characterizes certain individuals or misrepresents complex issues.

Dewar makes several important points: the Ontario archaeological record is spectacular, the material remains removed from the ground are haphazardly catalogued and improperly stored, and site reports are either non-existent or non-accessible. Few will argue with the first point, even had Dewar failed to sprinkle in allusions to Vikings and Mayan lords — the hackneyed imagery used to enhance a people's past. The second point involves an infrastructural problem that has plagued the archaeological community for over a decade. It can only be remedied by a massive infusion of capital or a complete reorganization of priorities.

Dewar's third point is what caught my attention. It is alleged that "peer-reviewed research has dwindled to almost nothing" (Dewar 1997: 85). This is not borne out by Ontario *Archaeology* which has nearly doubled in size since I assumed the editorship. True, much archaeological work is now being done by private consulting companies on behalf of developers; with some exceptions this research is indeed not regularly published. The result has been an overall decline in the proportion of peer-reviewed publication relative to the quantity of archaeological activity. It should be recalled, however, that scholarly journals represent only one stage in legitimating knowledge and are

not the only way in which research results can be communicated. Since the 1970s unpublished licence reports have often become the *only* surviving record of archaeological exploration.

According to Dewar (1997:85, 88, 92) archaeological reports filed with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Recreation are not in the public domain; hence, other researchers must obtain approval from the authors to obtain copies or to even see them. Such permission is not always forthcoming since some CRM archaeologists competing for the same clients in multi-phase assessments are apparently reluctant to share information with one another even when pressed. In one case an appeals officer who was ruling on an unsuccessful Freedom of Information application "agreed the ministry was right when it said other archaeologists, fearing their future reports might be disclosed, would provide much less detailed information, and that this would damage the public interest" (Dewar 1997:92). In other words, to ensure that we have the most detailed record, archaeologists must be reassured that their reports will be kept confidential!

Such convoluted logic, if correctly reiterated by Dewar, must be challenged by all those concerned about the integrity of archaeology in this province. In my opinion, scientific investigation, historical research and the public interest are all best served by immediate and complete disclosure, provided of course that there are adequate controls to protect archaeological sites from looting. I have heard no convincing legal or moral arguments in support of proprietary claims to information or to justify keeping such material secret to protect the business interests of private parties. In fact, it seems to me that such behaviour should be considered a form of ethical misconduct to be discouraged by professional sanction and/or revocation of licences rather than promises of confidentiality. Competent archaeologists who

are genuinely interested in advancing a collective understanding of Ontario's past will have nothing to hide and will freely share all research findings both within and beyond the guild.

I have personally never had problems obtaining an unpublished report from any of my colleagues. I have also had excellent cooperation from the Archaeology and Heritage Planning section of the Cultural Programs Branch. If, as was recently confirmed by Ministry officials, archaeologists must now go through Freedom of Information to obtain licence reports filed with the province, an alarming bureaucratic obstacle has been placed before us and archaeological information may in some instances fail the test of easy access.

It is the policy of this journal to accept citations of unpublished documents only if they are freely circulating or are "on file" in a place where they can be scrutinized by any interested researcher. If a manuscript is not readily accessible to all members of a research community the data it contains does not constitute evidence in a scientific sense and cannot be cited in support of any verifiable or falsifiable argument. It is as if the data did not exist (a circumstance that may be of interest to those who are paying to have such nonexistent material removed from the ground). In this regard, archaeology is no different from any other historical discipline. When the problem of "in the possession of the author" emerged in oral historiography, scholars immediately responded with a call to recognize only those oral narratives which had been properly archived (Henige 1980).

As I suggested in my inaugural editorial (von Gernet 1994), archaeology is not merely digging for artifacts but is the creation of texts about the past which are disseminated as public knowledge and which have social value because they render our past intelligible to consumers outside the profession. Indeed, it is about time archaeology was viewed not as the removal of a non-renewable heritage resource to be stored away and written up in confidential reports, but as the production of accessible knowledge about the past. It is widely acknowledged that CRM archaeology, while essential, does not proceed at an ideal or preferred pace of excavation, analysis and publication. It is only in rare instances, such as the landmark Snake Hill project (Litt et al. 1993), where the

same archaeologist or consulting firm can take a salvage excavation through all the steps and produce a popular account that significantly enriches our understanding of Ontario's past. This is why it so important that licence reports be made available to those who have the interest, time and fiscal resources to complete the task.

There is clearly a continuing need to popularize this province's rich heritage. An article by Roberta Avery in the June 21, 1997 issue of the *Toronto Star* reports that people with "slack-jawed amazement" are "packing area halls" to hear Robert Burcher talk about a "Celtic burial mound" west of Collingwood, Ontario. Burcher, who is described as a bartender, ski instructor, photographer and amateur archaeologist, apparently has so much faith in his theory that it was built by Bronze-Age Europeans who sailed the Great Lakes in search of copper that he has "decided to buy the mound so he can excavate it." It seems unlikely that he would have seriously considered spending \$48,000 on a pile of dirt or even have dreamed of Celts had it not been for a genre of hyper-diffusionist literature recently revived by Barry Fell.

Fortunately, this literature has at least some competition from popular works written by professional archaeologists. The first contribution published in this number is the 1996 Ridley Lecture in which J.V. Wright outlines what prompted him to write *A History of the Native People of Canada*. He recalls that J. Norman Emerson taught him the importance of sharing archaeological knowledge with a broad spectrum of society. Wright's previous experience with Ontario *Prehistory* (which went through three editions, became a best-seller and was even consulted in negotiations between Aboriginal bands and the Department of Indian Affairs) convinced him of the need for archaeological knowledge to be more widely distributed.

Licence reports contain the raw materials used to produce technical articles and monographs which, as Wright notes, are the foundation upon which any synthesis rests. Not surprisingly, the three other contributions published in this number contain references to unpublished manuscripts on file in public institutions.

Lawrence Jackson's report on the Palaeo-Indian Murphy Site provides new evidence of

activity area separation and functional differences in Gainey phase settlement systems and supports mobility patterns proposed for other sites in southern Ontario. Philip Woodley's summary of the Laphroaig Site suggests that Early Archaic bands occupied regional territories and did not travel far. Finally, Andrew Hinshelwood's article on Woodland materials from Wunnumin Lake is a unique contribution to our understanding of archaeological site formation and serves as a reminder that excellent research is being conducted in the vast lands of northern Ontario. While often acknowledged as important post-depositional formation processes, forest fires have rarely been considered in such detail by an archaeologist.

These three articles which cover the Palaeo-Indian, Archaic and Woodland Periods offer a temporal cross-section of Ontario prehistory. The authors relied on the *esprit de corps* of a research community and free access to other data to help them make sense of their own excavations. Their efforts have in turn made the archaeological record of this province a little more accessible and will undoubtedly contribute to the quality of future syntheses.

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