V. Publications by subscribers

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bha.15107

VI. Book reviews

Donald W. Linebaugh 2005 *The Man Who Found Thoreau: Roland W. Robbins and the Rise of Historical Archaeology in America*. Durham: University of New Hampshire Press. xii + 294 pp. ISBN 1-58465-425-2 (hard). $30 US.

Reviewed by *Andrew L. Christenson*

The history of historical archaeology has received little critical attention and by critical I mean in-depth and judicious exploration of the behavior, interaction, and results produced by practitioners in the field. Although, I find reminiscences such as those published by South (1994) fascinating and important sources for historical research, they often will not have the distance needed to understand the field in context.

If you were asked to name a pioneering American historical archaeologist you might come up with Harrington or Cotter or Deetz or South, but Roland Robbins would not likely cross your mind. From the late 40s until the 70s, however, he was a leader in historical archaeology in the Northeast and was virtually the only specialist in Colonial ironworks. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Robbins did not slide into historical archaeology from prehistorical archaeology through some fluke of life. As he approached 40 years of age, he chose historical archaeology as a career path and stuck to it exclusively. Leaving high school at the end of his first year, he worked in business until the stock market crash forced him to start a new career as a window washer! After the war he became intrigued with the location of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond, and through a combination of historical research and fairly primitive excavation, found the location, wrote a popular book on the results, and began a self-directed career as an archaeologist. (Although not discussed in the volume under review, Linebaugh has been involved in reconstructing the work at Walden Pond using Robbins's detailed notebooks and analyzing the artifacts that were collected but never analyzed.)

Robbins and his few contemporary historical archaeologists operated under the demands of

organizations and governmental groups who wanted to reconstruct historic sites. The focus of excavation was upon foundations and other architectural remains with associated artifacts receiving less attention. As historical archaeology began the slow transition from an interest in structural remains to a broader one encompassing artifacts and the people behind them, Robbins remained mostly interested in narrower issues of identification and reconstruction.

The book discusses several of the major projects that Robbins worked on over the years (the appendix lists 55 sites at which that he did survey or excavation work) with a focus upon the varying and often conflicting demands of the groups that paid Robbins to dig, the ways in which Robbins pursued his career, and, most important to me, the interaction, both positive and negative, that Robbins had with his peers. In the late 1940s, when he started his career as the first historical archaeological consultant, Robbins was alone with his interest in Colonial industrial sites and one of a handful interested in Colonial habitation sites. As the 60s arrived there were an increasing number of archaeologists in the field and there was a push to standardize methods, establish communication, and so on – in other words, to professionalize. Calls to professionalize often come with the setting up of a we vs. they situation with the "theys" being called amateurs or worse. Robbins's archaeological friends such as J. C. Harrington and J. O. Brew recommended him for projects and were supportive of his work, but there developed a group of academically-trained archaeologists including John Cotter and James Deetz who would have nothing to do with him. His supposed sins make an interesting list. His lack of formal training or a degree is never explicitly noted by his critics, but was no doubt a relevant issue for some and may have played a role in the Park Service's rejection of his qualifications as an archaeologist. Early on, Robbins had some bad experiences with academics and had a working-class disdain for college educated people, which certainly did not help his relationship with fellow archaeologists who were more sensitive about their academic training than he was to his lack of it.

His popularization of archaeology in his writings, his innumerable lectures to public groups, and his "dig-it-yourself" programs (visitors to his digs were put to work screening backdirt piles, with the resulting finds being added to the collection and the finder's name publicly acknowledged) were viewed dubiously by some of his contemporaries but actually places him at the forefront of public archaeology, an approach later followed (perhaps mimicked) by Ivor Noël Hume and James Deetz. Robbins's book *Hidden America* (Robbins and Jones 1959), the first popular work on historical archaeology, received mixed reviews from archaeologists and historians specifically because it supposedly took the approach that anybody could do archaeology. A review by John Cotter emphasized the years of classroom and field training need to become an "academic professional." A reading of the book, however, shows that Robbins certainly did not minimize the complexities of the archaeological process. Robbins says that he began digging at Walden with "no more equipment than a shovel and a questioning mind" (Robbins and Jones 1959:11), but then proceeds through the book to show that good archaeological research requires much more. His chapter titled "Dig It Yourself" indicates the preparation needed before putting a shovel in the ground and the "long and intense experience" needed to interpret what is found. He mentions academic training but points out that there were no courses available on digging historic sites. Here again, Robbins was a leader in promoting public involvement in archaeology, but he wasn't turning unthinking diggers loose on sites as his critics claimed. As an aside, for over a decade, the American Society for Amateur Archaeology (ASAA) has operated with the premise that "the past may be studied by anyone – no matter what their education background, age, sex, or ethnic origin," which sounds like it comes directly from Robbins's mouth. (It should be pointed out, however, that the ASAA is run by a professional and has professionals involved in its field programs and publications.)

Another issue that academics found unacceptable was Robbins's unabashedly promotion of himself as a consultant, which was a necessity given his position as an archaeologist and a businessman. In 1970, James Deetz volunteered to dig a site for free that Robbins was negotiating to work on for pay, an early example of a scenario repeated in the early years of cultural resource management when university archaeologists could not accept the concept of independent consultants.

Another of his "faults," was his consistent and well thought out use of mechanical equipment to help excavate sites. Although standard today, use of such excavation methods was viewed with great alarm by many of his colleagues. Although his field notes and discussion in *Hidden America* indicate understanding of stratigraphy, his focus upon architectural remains and features, and lack of interest in later occupations at his sites, meant that vertical artifact proveniences were often not recorded, although horizontal provenience was always recorded with a superimposed grid system.

Robbins' reaction to criticism was to disparage academic archaeology and to call himself a treasure hunter (earlier, on the dust jacket of *Hidden America* he identified himself as a "professional archaeologist," a thoroughly appropriate term). A Yankee individualist to the end, he chose not to make basic changes in his approach to sites as the field that he had pioneered changed and put him in a marginal position. Such marginalization might be considered the very heart of the process of professionalization, which involves the creation of standards that some practitioners cannot or will not meet (see examples in Kehoe and Emmerichs 1999). This process may place extremely knowledgeable people in situations where their knowledge is inaccessible or ignored and their past work marginalized. Astute historians of archaeology are aware of such processes and there has been a steady rehabilitation of some of these marginalized scholars into the history of prehistorical archaeology over the last couple of decades. Linebaugh's book is the first to begin this process in historical archaeology and it provides an important case study for those interested in pondering the multifaceted process of professionalization.

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Reviewed by *Margarita Díaz-Andreu*

Histories of archaeology remind us of the debates that have guided archaeological interpretation to the present. They also allow us to understand the social context in which theories and interpretations were developed. This is particularly true in the case of external historiographical analysis, a recent trend in historiographical studies in the field of archaeology which is unveiling a wealth of information on past practices in the discipline. In