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DEATH AT SNAKE HILL: A REVIEW OF THE POPULAR REPORT

Edward L. Bell

The popular account of an archaeological investigation of a War of 1812 cemetery in Ontario offers a fine example of the need to relay research results to our interested constituents. Popular reports should emphasize not only the scientific and historical value of archaeological resources, but also encourage public support for adequate preservation planning. Like politics, popular archaeological accounts are highly effective when they appeal to local constituents' interests.

Le présentation à l'intention du public des investigations archéologiques menées dans un cimetière de la Guerre de 1812 du sud de l'Ontario constitue un bel exemple du besoin de diffuser les résultats de nos recherches à nos concitoyens. Les rapports qui s'adressent au public en général devraient non seulement mettre en lumière l'intérêt scientifique et historique de la recherche archéologique, mais aussi chercher à susciter l'appui du public envers une approche planifiée de la préservation des ressources. Comme en politique, la présentation des résultats de la recherche est la plus efficace lorsqu'elle rejoint directement les préoccupations des communautés locales.

Death at Snake Hill: Secrets from a War of 1812 Cemetery. Paul Litt, Ronald F. Williamson, and Joseph W. A. Whitehorne, 1993. Ontario Heritage Foundation Local History Series No. 3. Dundurn Press, Toronto & Oxford. 158 pp., paperback, illustrations, tables, notes, index, C\$12.99. ISBN 1-55002-186-9.

Received wisdom has it that public archaeology (cultural resource management or heritage conservation) is all too often undertaken without much regard to disseminating research results to the constituent public whose history is uncovered and whose funds support these projects. In contrast to the situation in Canada and Great Britain where popular accounts of archaeological investigations are regularly produced, and public support for historic preservation is strong, in the United States published popular accounts are few. It is not surprising, then, that public sentiment here is often balanced toward development, emphasizing short-term economic benefits and private property rights, while preservation of the cultural patrimony is unfavorably viewed as a special interest, having little general support among the public.

Recent review of the literature on the historical archaeology of cemeteries (Bell 1994) indicates that *Death at Snake Hill* is only the

second book-length popular account of the archaeology of cemeteries, following Beattie and Geiger (1987). A shorter booklet has just appeared on the recovery of a South Carolina Civil War cemetery used by the 55th Massachusetts and 1st North Carolina Colored Infantry (Smith 1993). Two popular books about forensic anthropology, in part dealing with historical populations, have also been published in the last few years (Joyce and Stover 1991; Ubelaker and Scammell 1992). Popular interest need not be sought only through books; television programs and newspaper stories reach more people, and archaeological cemetery investigations regularly have been showcased in these media. The printed word, however, is a more satisfying, longer-lasting outlet, offering a format where complex subjects can be treated at length.

Death at Snake Hill is a welcome addition to a slow-growing list of popular books on the archaeology of historical cemeteries. The authors and the Ontario Heritage Foundation are to be applauded for bringing out the results of the investigation in an affordable, attractive format with text that is accessible to the interested educated public. *Death at Snake Hill* describes the discovery, excavation, analysis, interpretation, and reinterment of the remains of

soldiers buried in a War of 1812 cemetery. In relating the story of the conduct of the investigation and the site's historical and scientific importance, the book succeeds through engaging and vividly descriptive writing. The investigation was recently reported in technical format by Pfeiffer and Williamson (1991). In the present volume, the authors indicate that one of the benefits of producing a popular account was the freedom that the format allowed: "The academic study was . . . restricted by scientific probity from offering the kind of speculative and imaginative interpretation of archaeological data that public interest in the Snake Hill project demanded" (Litt, Williamson, and Whitehorne 1993: 13). Perhaps Deetz's (1993: 170–173) warm and welcome suggestion to his colleagues to emphasize both the intellectual and emotional appeal of historical archaeology will thaw out the more clinical, unnecessarily distant writings that technical archaeological reports often contain.

Yet, it appears to be commonly assumed that when we communicate our findings to lay people, what is required are simple, definitive answers—reporters are famous for relating the single "expert opinion." More often, popular accounts do an excellent job of showing how fundamental questions of site identification, chronology, etc., are answered—but the minutiae uncovered in the field and laboratory, and a large part of the detective work, often fall out of the story. The reader doesn't generally have the full benefit of understanding how an interpretation was arrived at, and why it is considered to be the likeliest. Of course, as exemplified by Noël Hume's (1991) fascinating account of the Martin's Hundred investigations, the lay person's attention can be held as he or she is led along the cognitive trails we follow toward explaining the empirical evidence we uncover. Alternative interpretations and the limitations of archaeological knowledge are a part of the game, but popular accounts often dissemble on these points. In *Death at Snake Hill*, for example, one wonders whether all the copper straight pins were evidence of bandaged wounds as the account has it, or whether the use of burial shrouds might sometimes be indicated (a point considered briefly in the technical report). The possible use of shrouds could be of more import at the Snake Hill Site than simply how a body was clothed at the time of burial. Traditionally, women prepared bodies

for burial, and historical accounts indicate that women were present at Snake Hill as camp followers and nurses. Fuller consideration of this minor point, then, might fill out a larger piece of the story of the Snake Hill Site.

Billed on the book jacket as "a revealing parable of the conflicts between land development and heritage conservation," there is a solemn lesson here of the importance of enacting robust but flexible heritage preservation laws. The Snake Hill Site was discovered during construction of a project that did not otherwise fall under review by provincial preservation planners. Despite effectively communicating the scientific and historical significance of the Snake Hill remains, the unfortunate and no doubt unintended moral of the parable (as it unfolds in the prologue, "Backhoes, Bones, and Bureaucracy"), seems to be that if bones are found during construction, it's better not to report them. It was simply distressing to encounter an anecdote about the practice of tossing aside (or keeping as souvenirs) Native remains found during construction in Ontario, without any editorializing on the moral or legal implications. In emphasizing project delay, expense, bureaucratic entanglements, and red herrings that occurred at Snake Hill, the worse aspects of unexpected discoveries stick in the reader's mind. The absence of local planning mechanisms to evaluate new development projects for their archaeological sensitivity and the obtuse and ineffective cemetery laws then in place are pointed to as to why the Snake Hill boondoggle occurred. But, preservation of cultural resources for their commemorative and scientific values is not served by stressing conflict and mitigation. The reader-as-developer or property owner needs to know what to do when graves are accidentally found and who to contact. In our public information efforts in Massachusetts, we also emphasize rapid response and flexibility, and that projects will proceed after taking into account the feasibility of preserving graves given a project's requirements. The educational value of the book would be greatly enhanced by providing key points of the current Ontario Cemeteries Act, by emphasizing the obligation to report unmarked burial discoveries, and by indicating what to do and who to contact when human remains are discovered. Perhaps in the next edition, a tabular summary of this pertinent legal information can be printed in the inside of the book jacket.

If it were not for the U.S. Army's interest in the site for its public relations potential, it appears that the cemetery might never have received the public attention and scholarly interest that was generated. Recall that the Pentagon was—and continues to be—under public scrutiny to account for POWs and MIAs from the Vietnam and Korean Wars. As it were, the Snake Hill discovery and subsequent repatriation of the American soldiers offered the U.S. Army a spectacular media event to counter the otherwise adverse publicity that not enough efforts were being made to account for military personnel lost in foreign conflicts. Contributions to the project, both direct and in kind, were also received from municipalities, government agencies, foundations, institutions, museums, and universities in Canada and the United States. The context of the research program is therefore well addressed in a marvelously whimsical and entertaining manner, including a great account of a diplomatic *faux pas* when armed U.S. military officers crossed the Canadian border oblivious to protocol entailed by foreign sovereignty. Throughout the book, sidebars focus on particular points of the investigation—there's a biographical section on Williamson and public archaeology, and sections that highlight how analyses of the human remains and artifacts found in individual graves complemented the Snake Hill story.

Death at Snake Hill is a well-produced popular book, one that will hold the interest of the educated reader because it is a good tale. *Death at Snake Hill* is also an exemplary case study that shows how historical archaeology contributes to a fuller understanding of local history—and perhaps that is the book's most redeeming quality: engaging our constituents' interest in the value and results of our work. By generating their support, our efforts to foster effective protective legislation for cultural resources and our ability to intervene in planning decisions are more likely to succeed.

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