Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences 51 (2015) 23–31

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc

Arctic observers: Richard King, monogenism and the historicisation of Inuit through travel narratives

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 25 February 2015

Keywords:
British ethnology
Richard King
Inuit
Monogenism
Travel narratives

ABSTRACT

In 1848 the ethnologist, surgeon and Arctic explorer Richard King (1810–1876) published a three-part series on Inuit in the *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London*. This series provided a detailed history of Inuit from the eleventh century to the early nineteenth century. It incorporated a mixture of King's personal observations from his experience travelling to the Arctic as a member of George Back's expedition (1833–1835), and the testimonies of other contemporary and historical actors who had written on the subject. The aim was to historicise Inuit through the use of travel reports and show persistent features among the race. King was a monogenist and his sensitive recasting of Inuit was influenced by his participation in a research community actively engaged in humanitarian and abolitionist causes. The physician and ethnologist Thomas Hodgkin (1798–1866) argued that King's research on Inuit was one of the best ethnological approaches to emulate and that it set the standard for the nascent discipline. If we are to take seriously Hodgkin's claim, we should look at how King constructed his depiction of Inuit. There is much to be gained by investigating the practices of nineteenth-century ethnologists because it strengthens our knowledge of the discipline's past and shows how modern understandings of races were formed.

> 'Ethnology is the history of human races, or of the various tribes of men who constitute the population of the world. It comprehends all that can be learned as to their origin and relations to each other.'[1]
>
> - James Cowles Prichard (1848).

1. Introduction

Ethnology in the 1840s was an historical pursuit. According to the physician James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848)—a leading ethnologist in the first half of the nineteenth century—practitioners interested in human diversity were to historicise the races of the world and trace the changes they had undergone over vast periods of time. Working within a framework that would later be known as a form of monogenesis,[2] Prichard arranged humans into groupings based on their shared physical and cultural features, and geographic location in the world. Next through an extensive comparison of these global populations over space and time, Prichard showed how the different tribes and nations came together into a spectrum. By organising humans in this way, Prichard could conceptualise typical examples of each race and unite them to a common origin.[3] But Prichard was not distinctive in his methodological approach to ethnological studies, and in the first volume of the *Journal of the Ethnological Society of London* (*JESL*) from 1848, the physician, abolitionist and co-founder of the Ethnological Society of

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[1] Prichard (1848), p. 302.

[2] The terms 'monogenesis', 'monogenism', and 'monogenetic' were not part of early nineteenth-century British ethnologists' disciplinary lexicon. They are terms appropriated in the secondary literature by historians to denote nineteenth-century studies that sought to link all humans to a common origin.

[3] Prichard (1848), pp. 310–311. There were of course competing versions of ethnology that were based on polygenetic theories but such an examination is far too encompassing for a detailed discussion here.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsc.2015.01.016
1369-8486/

London (ESL) Thomas Hodgkin (1798–1866) also described the discipline as a kind of historical investigation grounded in monogenetic theories and comparative methods. There were many different types of historical data for ethnologists to draw upon in their studies, but for Hodgkin, voyager accounts were one of the best sources of evidence for information on the races of the world.[4]

Since the expansion of the British Empire from the late eighteenth century onward, travel narratives were a crucial source of natural history data for many scientific fields. As Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs argued, 'travel writing… provided the vehicle for the conveyance of the new information which laid the foundations for the scientific and philosophical revolutions…'[5] Within the context of mid nineteenth-century British ethnology, Hodgkin argued that travel narratives were a valuable evidentiary resource for two reasons. First they contained data that was collected *in situ* by Europeans who had engaged first-hand with indigenous populations in their local habitats. Second, if multiple European travellers had visited a race over several centuries it was possible to examine the changes that the people had undertaken since the earliest recorded encounters, and verify, expand and correct different observations. While there were many practitioners producing significant ethnological works by the late 1840s, Hodgkin believed that the research of the surgeon and Arctic explorer Richard King (1810–1876) was one of the best ethnological approaches to emulate. His three-part series on Inuit (or Esquimaux to use the nineteenth-century category) from the first volume of the *JESL* exemplified how to unite all humans to a common ancestry using monogenetic theories, and historicise different races through the use of travel narratives.[6] Hodgkin wrote,

> … the Society has already excellent examples in the communications of Dr Richard King regarding the Esquimaux, in which personal knowledge of the people was seconded by a careful reference to original authorities and observations, from the earliest records of the race to the present time, with such constant regard to the past and present geographical distribution, as not only to enable him to confirm or rectify previous statements, but to furnish data respecting the limits and peculiarities of this group, which must be of the greatest value to those who may take up similar investigations…[7]

King's three part series provided a comprehensive historical picture of Inuit that combined first-hand knowledge with the observations of other European voyagers who had visited the region since the eleventh century. By combining his personal insights with the authoritative texts of other eyewitnesses, King could corroborate the accuracy of older reports, alter and improve ethnographic records that contained inconsistencies or ambiguities, and correct misinformation.[8]

This paper argues that King was an important founding member of the British ethnological community, and it discusses how he constructed his monogenetic framework through an examination of his ethnological writings on Inuit from the first volume of the *JESL*. It builds on recent scholarship by historians such as Robert Kenny and David Livingstone who have explored the history of human origin theories—including monogenism—in nineteenth-century Britain. It also connects to the large body of secondary literature by scholars such as Hulme, Youngs, Janet Browne, Lisbet Koerner, and Daniel Carey, who have examined the importance of travel literature in the making of natural sciences.[9] However, this paper moves beyond previous work by bringing together these two areas of historical analysis, and showing how human origin theories and travel narratives were combined to shape early ethnology. If we are to take seriously Hodgkin's claim that King's writings on Inuit represented some of the most sophisticated monogenetic ethnological research in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century, we should look at how King constructed his racial depictions. There is much to be gained by investigating the practices of nineteenth-century ethnologists because it strengthens our knowledge of the discipline's past and shows how modern understandings of racial identities were formed. As we will see in due course, working alongside a group of researchers with strong humanitarian and abolitionist beliefs influenced King's monogenism, and it possibly shaped his desire to recast Inuit in a positive light.

This paper is divided into two main sections. In the first section it provides a general sketch of King's early career. For the most part King's contributions to the disciplinary formation of British ethnology have been overlooked, and his most detailed biography, written by Hugh Wallace, has predominantly focused on his exploits as an Arctic explorer. However, during the first half of the nineteenth century, King played a central role in helping to establish an ethnological community in Britain, and he should be positioned as one of the progenitors of the modern discipline.[10] In the second section, the paper looks at how King historicised Inuit in his three-part series from the *JESL* by drawing upon his personal experiences in Northern Canada, as well as the writings of other Arctic travellers. Key to this analysis is tracing the important role of travel narratives and monogenism in making ethnological knowledge. Travel accounts—like all written documents—are both socially constructed within specific contexts and draw selectively on various historical precedents. In order to maximise their research value it is important to understand the politics of writing embedded in these texts. Identifying the historical transformations that occurred within the genre, as well as the purpose of an expedition, the personal and professional motivations of individual travellers, and the experiences that actors had in the field, enriches our understanding of how racial description were constructed within any given setting and how they were appropriated in scientific works.

2. Richard King and the formation of the Ethnological Society of London

Richard King grew up in London and came from a middling-sort background. His father Richard King Senior worked for the Ordnance Office in London. At the age of fourteen King began training as a surgeon and apothecary, and in 1824 he commenced a seven-year apprenticeship with the Society of Apothecaries. He qualified as a licentiate in 1832 while he was working as a student probationer at Guy's Hospital in London. Soon after completing his medical training, King joined the Royal Navy and travelled to the northern part of Canada in 1833 with George Back (1796–1878) in search of the missing explorer John Ross (1777–1856).[11] Upon returning to England in 1835 King's interests shifted to ethnological

[4] Hodgkin (1848), p. 42.
[5] Hulme & Youngs (2002), p. 4.
[6] For more on the use of travel narratives in early British ethnological works see: Stocking (1987), pp. 78–109); and Sera-Shriar (2013), pp. 43–51.
[7] Hodgkin (1848), p. 43.
[8] King (1848c), pp. 45–59; King (1848b), pp. 127–153; and King (1848a), pp. 277–300.
[9] Kenny (2007), pp. 363–388; Livingstone (2008), pp. 109–136; Hulme & Youngs (2002); Browne (1992), pp. 453–475; Koerner (1996), pp. 117–152; and Carey (1997), pp. 269–292.
[10] Wallace (1980) and Wallace (1987). The most extensive attention that King's ethnology has received in the secondary literature is in Sera-Shriar (2013), pp. 53–63. King is briefly mentioned in Stocking (1987), pp. 244, 255 and Browne (1992), p. 465 and Baigent (2004).
[11] Wallace (1980), pp. 20–21.