

Desperately Seeking Walter Taylor

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*Prophet, Pariah, and Pioneer: Walter W. Taylor and
Dissension in American Archaeology.* Edited by Allan Maca,
Jonathan Reyman, and William Folan. Boulder: University
Press of Colorado, 2010.

This is a fascinating book about a complex person. Walter Taylor, refracted through multiple authors who knew or read him in different ways, ends up as richly diverse—a gun-toting, duck-hunting orchid grower who liked music and fine wines, European philosophy, and abstract theory as much as excavating in the dirt of the Southwest. He is described as a privileged (Schoenwetter, p. 146) gentleman scholar (William Folan, p. 149) without sufficient funds to prevent having to sell his library (Kennedy, p. 93), as well as an abrasive and antagonistic advisor and commentator on the work of others, while yet a private person most at home fishing, hunting, gardening, or cooking.

There seems always to have been some uncertainty and ambiguity about how Taylor fits into the history of archaeology in the United States. What exactly was he saying and what was his program? This edited volume does not aim to close down the debate. Rather, it identifies the many currents and subtleties in his writings, and in particular in “A Study of Archaeology” (Taylor 1948). It is notable that Taylor is claimed by the contributors to this new book as ancestor to both processual and postprocessual archaeologies.

As Allan Maca notes in chapter 1, Taylor clearly had a notion of hypothesis testing in that he wanted archaeological statements to be open to scrutiny and evaluation. “A Study of Archaeology” (Taylor 1948) grew out of frustration felt by several in the postwar era at mere chronology and taxonomy. Instead, Taylor wanted to focus on a broader, more explanatory culture process model. An important influence was Kluckhohn, but in his 1948 work, Taylor also cites Gordon Childe and Grahame Clark (Taylor 1948). Other contributions to Taylor’s thinking came from Croce, Quine, Peirce, and Sapir, all authors who would have taken him down a non-positivist line. There was a clear idealist, relativist, and historical particularist strain in his thinking that caused him to argue forcibly for a constructivist position and to emphasize historiography rather than reconstruction. These aspects of Taylor’s work are well and strongly argued for by Maca. The conjunctive approach involves establishing correlations be-

tween different types of data within specific historical and cultural contexts. Of course, Taylor’s aim was to move from historical particulars to anthropological generalities, but his methodology involved balancing hypothesis testing with the analysis of internal patterning. His main focus was on detailed contextual studies that would allow general ideas to be adapted to specific data. He recognized that, along with hypothesis testing, archaeology was situated in the present so that critical reflection was needed (Maca, p. 284).

Given the strong argument made by several authors in this volume that Taylor’s approach differed substantively from several of the major claims of the New Archaeology, it is perhaps surprising and confusing that Taylor (1948) claimed that “A Study of Archaeology” foreshadowed New Archaeology (Kennedy, p. 96). As Maca notes (p. 40), Taylor challenged Binford, saying that hypothesis testing and systems perspectives were already present in his conjunctive approach. And his focus on the archaeologist as technician seems to conjure up a separation of theory and data in ways championed by positivism and processual archaeology.

On the other hand, Riley (p. 126) reports that Taylor expressed dissatisfaction with some aspects of processual archaeology. There are undoubted differences such as Taylor’s focus on culture as ideational and his conviction of the importance of history and historiography. The most significant difference, however, was his repeated claim that archaeologists construct the past. While in some respects the archaeology advocated by Taylor had similarities with what later became postprocessual archaeology, especially the emphases on construction, context, and history, and while many of the influences on Taylor also contributed to early postprocessual archaeology, there are also differences. In particular, culture came to be seen in postprocessual archaeology as tied to material practice, in contrast to Taylor’s insistence that there can be no such thing as material culture (because artifacts are just objectifications of ideational culture).

Taylor’s writings are often difficult and complex, so categorizing his position is not easy. He took a nuanced stance that recognized the strengths and weaknesses of what archaeologists often see as incompatible positions. And it is difficult to work out what his archaeology would have been like by example because he never managed to produce a major substantive demonstration of his conjunctive approach, and he never published his report on his Coahuila excavations. It thus remains possible to read him in different ways, as is well brought out by the diverse contributions to this volume, which is the first to provide a thorough and informed account that contextualizes Taylor’s work and habilitates him within later and contemporary currents in archaeology.

Why has it taken so long for Taylor’s perspective to be fully evaluated and recognized in the discipline in the United States? In a thoughtful contribution, Leone asks what the anger was that confronted Taylor after the publication of “A Study of Archaeology” (Taylor 1948). Leone (pp. 316–319)

argues that the anger derived from the frustration felt by all of us when we would like to say more than the archaeological data will allow and from the use of archaeology to protect class differences and established social structures. Leone suggests that the same anger was directed at postprocessual archaeology. Maybe, but I also wonder whether a related anger was directed at NAGPRA. Perhaps a colonial archaeology of pre-Columbian North America has preferred to explore universals and positivist science rather than admit the local historical voice, as Trigger argued. Or did the anger stem from the tensions between the elite Harvard-Peabody-Yale context of Taylor and the wider context of archaeology in state universities (Maca, p. 266)? Perhaps the anger was just the appropriate response to the overly confrontational and abrasive style of a privileged, elite young scholar.

Whatever its source, the anger did not seem to make the threat posed by Taylor go away. The book remained there on shelves, often unread and partially understood but nagging away at the conscience of American archaeology. Maca (chap. 16) argues that Taylor's conjunctive approach has had an impact in Maya archaeology, though often unacknowledged and often not using Taylor in any depth. The conjunctive approach in this context gets reduced to the use of multiple lines of evidence. Castañeda (p. 350) argues that "A Study of Archaeology" (Taylor 1948) was "too conceptually sophisticated for archaeologists of the day." Perhaps in the aftermath of the processual-postprocessual debates it has become possible to reappraise a complex thinker who did not fit into any obvious mold. Perhaps now his work can be looked at without dogma but on its own terms. This book is a worthy first effort.

The commentary by Castañeda at the end of the volume and the various voices in the epilogue all add to a complex and diverse picture of a man and an archaeological perspective. Throughout *Prophet, Pariah, and Pioneer* and especially at the end, the twists and turns, the refractions never stop. No unified whole is created—no stable program or closed and coherent Walter Taylor. No final answer is provided. The editors are to be congratulated for not trying to tidy him up, not trying to make him one-dimensional, not trying to fit Taylor's peg into any of the holes that have developed since his time. The editors leave us reading letters and responses, still not quite sure what it all means but perhaps better equipped to try to understand Taylor on his own terms, that is, to understand him conjunctively, as perhaps he would have wanted.

References Cited

Taylor, Walter. 1948. "A Study of Archaeology."

QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

- q1.** Please provide first names for these authors.
- q2.** Please provide a full bibliographic reference for this Taylor 1948 work.
- q3.** Please provide Kluckhohn's first name.
- q4.** Please provide first names for Croce, Quine, Peirce, and Sapir.
- q5.** Please provide Binford's first name.
- q6.** Please provide Riley's first name.
- q7.** Please provide Leone's first name.
- q8.** Please spell out NAGPRA.
- q9.** Please provide Trigger's first name.
- q10.** Please provide the first name for Castaneda.