

I have spoken of the errors to which Indian testimony upon Indian place-nomenclature is subject. In the first place, the living Indians have in many cases lost the aboriginal forms of their own place names, especially in long settled districts, through adoption of the corrupted and familiarized forms used by the whites: and when questioned as to the meaning of these words, they explain them from the Indian roots that happen most to resemble the modern form of the name, with a result which is utterly wrong. This very same thing is often done by white philologists, including some of the missionaries; and the literature of the subject is full of absurd derivations based upon the effort to interpret corrupted place-names from genuine Indian roots. It is because the Indian names have been so much corrupted by the whites that the search for the very earliest recorded forms becomes so important. In the second place, the ordinary unsupported statements of living Indians made to the usual white inquirer are apt to be mendacious. The Indian does not lie purposely to the white man on these matters,—but he does lie incidentally, for the same reason that we tell “white” lies among ourselves, viz., not in order to deceive but in order to be polite. It is especially fatal to the acquisition of the real truth if the inquirer gives any hint of the answer he expects, for the Indian knows full well the art of polite flattery through agreement with one’s opinion. Moreover an Indian, like a white man, when consulted as a specialist, does not like to confess ignorance in his specialty, and if he does not know the correct answer, is apt to manufacture something, especially as the matter seems to him not at all important. All Indian information, therefore, should be taken with reservation, and not accepted as truth until confirmed from other sources. On the other hand, it is entirely possible to enlist the sympathetic understanding and intelligent aid of some of the older Indians, who, when once they have grasped the inquirer’s motives, and know that their replies can be tested, become of the greatest aid to the investigator.

In any genuine investigation, it is just as important to expose old error as to expound new truth. It is by no means sufficient to prove the truth and ignore the error, trusting that the right will triumph, for, on the one hand, errors, especially if started under the auspices of some great name and pleasanter than the truth to believe, have a wonderful vitality, and on the other, if ignored, they are sure sooner or later to be dug out and triumphantly displayed by some superficial student as the real truth overlooked by the investigator! The only logical way for the investigator is to recognize error as a worthy enemy, and then proceed to demolish it by the same scientific methods which he uses for the demonstration of the truth.