

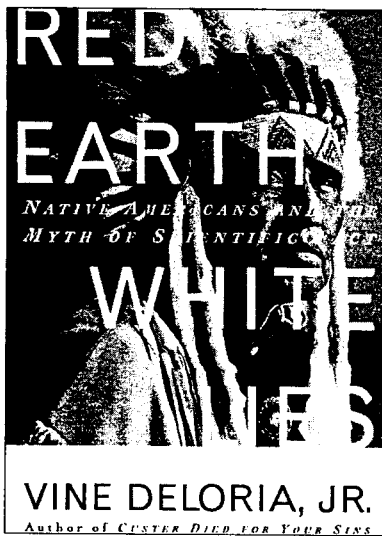
Red Power Finds Creationism

JOHN C. WHITTAKER

Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact. By Vine Deloria Jr.
 Scribner, New York, 1995. ISBN 0-684-80700-9. 286 pp. Hardcover, \$23.

When I was a student, I admired Vine Deloria Jr.'s polemical history *Custer Died for Your Sins*, and I feel a personal sense of grievance now because his most recent book, *Red Earth, White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact*, is so bad that I no longer feel I can trust anything he has written.

Sometimes when creationists shout to have their religious beliefs about the origins of the world taught in public schools as science, I want to ask them why they think the Bible version is a better choice than the Buddhist, or Hopi, or Zulu, or Sioux creation stories. Of course, it isn't, because all origin myths and other pieces of religious writings and oral traditions have, as their most important meaning, moral lessons about the relationships between humans, god or gods, and the universe. While they may, like parts of the Bible, reflect some real past events, they are rarely accurate guides to geology or history. Attempts to fit what we know about the past into any of dozens of different religious traditions resembles Cinderella's sisters' trying to wear her shoes: the result is dishonest mutilation of science, degradation and misinterpretation of great literature and moral wisdom, and hurtful bigotry toward other people. Vine Deloria Jr. has provided new proof of this in a wretched piece of Native American creationist claptrap that has all the flaws of the Biblical creationists he disdains.



Deloria is known as a skillful polemicist, and his fluent and occasionally witty writing is the only thing to recommend *Red Earth, White Lies*. His basic theme is that science is flawed, and native traditions offer a better way to understand the world. Specifically, the current scientific views of New World prehistory are all wrong and racist.

Deloria begins by explaining that when science dismissed Biblical literalism, other religious traditions were condemned as even less accurate. In chapter 3, he argues that the basis of modern science is evolution. His account of the racist uses of evolutionary theory is not too inaccurate, but his assumption that they still dominate science is. In any case, according to Deloria evolution is a flawed concept because there are no transitional

fossils, and there are numerous "anomalies" that disprove the accepted sequence of human evolution.

In chapter 4, the idea of Pleistocene "Ice Ages" is made to seem implausible with some silly stories about the migrations of bison ("Mr. Bison"), selective citing of outdated evidence, and mixing of geological periods separated by millions of years. Archaeologists agree that the first humans in the New World, who crossed the Bering Strait "land bridge" from Asia to North America about 12,000 years ago, were the ancestors of modern Native Americans. This well-supported theory is not good enough for Deloria, who claims it is a fiction created to suggest that the Indians were latecomers to the New World and thus could be legitimately cheated out of their land. Deloria seems to feel that a religious fiction of "we were always here" provides more authority to Native American land claims.

In chapter 6, Deloria attacks the theory that the first migrants to the Americas (the ancestral Native Americans) caused the extinction of the mammoths and other Pleistocene megafauna. To him this is another denigration of native respect for the environment and justification for ongoing destruction. Some of his attacks on the theory and evidence for "Pleistocene overkill" are legitimate, and despite his claim that it is uncritically accepted, others have raised similar concerns, if less scathingly. Unfortunately, he

prefers to believe that the megafauna perished in catastrophes so recent that vague Native American traditions can be claimed as *memories* of mammoths and saber-toothed cats. Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to supporting this thesis with nineteenth-century accounts and a blissful ignorance of geology.

Not only were there large animals in the past, but people were larger too. Deloria takes traditions of "giants" or "tall ones" to refer (p. 167) to Pleistocene Americans, possibly Sasquatch, but more likely "the white-skinned race which forced the Salish, Sioux, and Algonkians out of the north country and then . . . migrated east and invaded western Europe, routed the Neanderthals, and are known as the Cro-Magnon peoples." Pleistocene animals and humans were extra-large, according to Deloria, because of higher percentages of CO₂ in the atmosphere, and both Native American and Biblical traditions remember these "giants" who had life spans of up to one thousand years until a "dump of cometary water" changed the atmosphere and initiated Deloria's quick-step ice age.

Chapters 7 and 8 are devoted to "correcting" geology by uncritical reference to native traditions, intentional blindness to basic geology, and loony "commonsense" arguments. For instance, geology does not, as he claims, proceed by first identifying index fossils, arranging them in an evolutionary order of simple to complex, claiming that geological strata are then in order, and finally using this to show that evolution took place. The geological sequence and the ordering of the fossil evidence depends on literally thousands of instances where a sequence of many layers, with consistent species of plants and animals, are deposited one on top of another *in a single location*.

Contrary to Deloria's claims, most anthropologists would agree that some oral traditions may reflect historical events, even recent geological events like the volcanic eruptions he discusses at length. Whether they actually do so must be judged on whether they plausibly fit the evidence, not by discarding the evi-

dence when it contradicts the stories. A Hopi tradition of the eruption of Sunset Crater near Flagstaff, Arizona, (well dated from 1064 and perhaps continuing into the 1200s) is quite plausible and widely accepted by archaeologists, but to fit other possible eruption traditions to the most interesting mountains in their regions, Deloria is willing to discard atomic dating and vast bodies of geological evidence of the prehuman antiquity of the mountains.

In the final chapter, Deloria identifies areas where good research "will force open any breaches I have identified in the wall of scientific orthodoxy." Actually, while he has pretended to scholarly analysis in the preceding chapters, here he whips up the runaway horses of his imagination. Although "the majority of stories of origin suggest a creation in which people are given an awareness that they have been created"—which, by Deloria's logic, implies that the creation story must be true—he remains vague about creation. Perhaps he does not want to specify whether the first people fell from a land above the sky or migrated up from several levels of worlds beneath this current one, to mention only two of the many traditions.

Once living beings were created, he contends, there was a golden age that people remember in their traditions as having very different geological conditions from the present, with no rivers or normal meteorological phenomena, and a mist covering the earth. This world was destroyed by fire, that is, volcanism, but "higher spiritual entities warned enough people" to repopulate the earth. The volcanism was triggered by a blanket of extraterrestrial matter that produced what geologists think are sedimentary layers. He says "living fossil" species prove that the earth really has a very short history and tribal traditions even remember dinosaurs. The different climate with high CO₂ means that carbon 14 cannot be used for dating, and just like Biblical creationists, he cites some obviously incorrect radiocarbon dates, ignoring literally tens of thousands that fit expected

sequences or can be tested against historical evidence. This is like saying that internal combustion engines are impossible just because your car does not start on a cold morning. But no matter what Deloria has to do to the evidence, he will do it, because "regardless of how many religious trappings have been attached to introduce lessons of morality, these [creation myths] are basically geological reports." He finishes with a final swish at archaeology, dismissing the idea that artifact styles changed slowly over thousands of years in favor of a vague, short prehistory where everyone lived together. Archaeologists have no accurate means of dating, he says, and can't tell the difference between prehistoric peoples anyway. This seems a poor position to take for his political goals, since if archaeology cannot provide the evidence of long native occupation of America, what is to prevent other crackpots from claiming that Columbus brought all the Indians with him in 1492, or that they are really Jews who fled the tower of Babel?

Deloria's style is drearily familiar to anyone who has read the Biblical creationist literature. At the core is a wishful attempt to discredit all science because some facts clash with belief systems. A few points will suffice to show how similar Deloria is to outspoken creationist author Duane Gish or any of his ilk.

1. Creationists of all stripes start with a religious story and either interpret the story to fit the geological facts or dismiss or ignore the facts because they do not fit the story. Deloria cites a Salish account (p. 98) that claims they were driven by other people from the north where there were ice mountains and strange animals. According to him, this may be a memory of glacial conditions, although it may seem rather vague to the unbiased reader.

2. The contradictions in religious traditions are ignored. Deloria has a worse problem than even Biblical literalists: there are dozens of completely different

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Native American creation myths. But Deloria is not worried because "each tribe had its own special relationship to the superior spiritual forces which governed the universe . . . Tribal knowledge was therefore not fragmented and was valid within the historical and geographical scope of the people's experience" (p. 51). Deloria throughout weighs oral traditions with his thumb on the scale. He argues that if lots of different American Indian tribes have similar long-standing beliefs, they must reflect geological reality, but I am pretty sure he would be (rightly) skeptical about the reality of a hot place for unbelievers that is a widespread and ancient tradition among Christian sects.

3. Creationists reason that if scientists disagree, they must all be wrong. With little evidence on their side, creationists like to cite errors and arguments in science to show not just that some theories are to be doubted, but that scientists are really dumb. To carry this out, it helps if you use outdated information and ignore recent consensus in favor of antique controversy. Deloria constantly uses outmoded ideas of human evolution (e.g., "Neanderthals evolved into Cro-Magnons") as if they were current. He frequently cites information such as early dates that have been dismissed by later work, claiming for instance that the Calaveras skull dates from the Pliocene epoch and thus "calls into question the geological time scale itself." Of course, it was found in the 1860s by miners, and it was obvious long ago that any association it may have had with ancient deposits was a result of disturbance rather than great age. A recent radiocarbon date on the skull itself shows that it is only about 740 years old. His misinterpretations of the Bering Strait land bridge and Pleistocene geology are based on sources from the 1940s to the 1960s; thus he ignores more than thirty years of productive research. Of course, if he were to find that we still do not know everything or agree on all points today, he would feel equally vindicated. Meanwhile, he prefers to rely on pseudoscientific ideas like

"dumps of cometary water," borrowed from Velikovsky's attempts to explain all of history and geology as the result of the earth's encounters with comets.

4. Creationists suffer from a lack of knowledge, often willful, of basic science. Dinosaur and mammoth bones on top of the ground do not mean they died yesterday, but that they were exposed by recent erosion. You cannot dismiss an earth history of millions of years, or a Native American prehistory of about twelve thousand years, unless you dismiss literally thousands of dates based on tree rings and atomic decay. If you dismiss those, you have to deny much of biology and physics; and anyone who eats apples, drives gasoline-powered cars, or uses electricity from nuclear reactors ought to concede that the principles of biology, geology, and physics are well founded and at least partly understood. Deloria does not like the idea of long, slow, ancient ice ages, so he suggests instead "cometary water dumps" or that the solar system might have "suddenly traveled through an area of intense cold in space," as if interstellar space was like the water in a swimming pool. The glacial processes of ice movement that Deloria sneers at are well documented in modern glaciers.

5. Most crackpots believe there is a scientific conspiracy to conceal the truth and suppress brilliant dissenters like themselves. Deloria has a couple of unsupported stories about the persecutions of people who have countered orthodox science. This makes me feel a bit better about writing a harsh review: whatever I say, Deloria and his supporters will not be hurt because I am just another academic trying to defend the status quo, namely politically and racially motivated theories that disadvantage Native Americans. According to Deloria (p. 41), we scientists even consider it permissible to maintain our status by lies because "the most fatal counterattack against entrenched authority will not be directed against their facts, but against their status." In making this claim about scientists, Deloria has described his own plan in a nutshell. He is willing to write a

piece of dishonest scholarship because by attacking scientific authority, he thinks he can further his political goals. He doesn't consider this kind of thing very honorable when scientists do it, but it seems to be OK for him.

As an archaeologist, I found Deloria's unjustified hatred painful. If I have a political motivation in teaching American prehistory, it is to make the point that native cultures were and are as human, important, interesting, and worthy of understanding as the ancient Greeks, the Biblical Jews, and the historic colonists. Whatever its flaws, good archaeology has consistently fought racism and spoken out for diversity, preservation, and common humanity. It was archaeology that showed that Native Americans had an ancient history here and that their achievements were their own, not borrowed from "higher" civilizations of the Middle East or Europe. Sad to say, many of the creationist and crackpot theories of prehistory are subtly or openly racist, which is one reason archaeologists ought to confront them. As Deloria points out, the Biblical version of creation was interpreted to favor Western Christian cultures and even at times to relegate others to nonhuman status. Christianity and its followers received legal protection denied to native religions because Christianity was "real" religion and others were not.

While Deloria rightly condemns racist stereotypes of Native American culture, he is quite willing to say things like: "Religion . . . ceased to exist in America long ago. Indeed, any higher deity exists for Americans only insofar as he or she can guarantee great sex, lots of money, social prestige, a winning football team, and someone to hate." Science, according to Deloria, is also morally bankrupt, and all scientists are fools, tools, and conformists. In contrast, Indians are spiritually honest and in touch with the universe in ways other Americans cannot understand; their spiritual leaders can control weather, predict the future, and heal the sick. Some political activists and the New Age

Indian wanna-bes will eat this up and wallow happily in the drainage ditch of antiscience, but unfortunately, Deloria's reputation will also attract less biased readers who deserve an honest account of American prehistory. Contrary to Deloria's complaint that he cannot find any coherent or believable explanations of current theories of the peopling of the new world, Brian Fagan's *Ancient North America* (Thames and Hudson 1995) and *The Great Journey* (Thames and Hudson 1987) are two of several read-

able and well-documented books.

Both the great achievements of Native Americans and the sorry record of United States dealings with them should be widely and honestly taught. I would like to think that eventually enough justice will be done that modern Native Americans will no longer feel themselves a victimized minority, and an articulate leader like Deloria will not feel the need to put his best foot forward into a cow pie of politically motivated, false prehistory. □

UFOlogical community that the world's governments and military powers are all too aware of the reality of extraterrestrial visitors, and that they are engaged in a vast coverup to keep this knowledge from the public. UFOlogist Timothy Good is the main proponent of such a conspiracy theory in the United Kingdom, and he has written the foreword for Pope's book. A natural choice, it would appear.

There is only one snag. Pope, the man billed as "the real Fox Mulder," is convinced that the British government is not engaged in any kind of coverup. Far from it being the case that the government has vast amounts of detailed information on UFO technology, Pope is worried that the Ministry of Defence is so ignorant about "a phenomenon which is as real as toast." Good's foreword, therefore, argues that although Pope may be being honest about his lack of knowledge of a coverup, there is one anyway. If Good is right, then Pope is merely a pawn being controlled by unseen forces within the Ministry of Defence. If that is the case, why should we be expected to treat his revelations as any kind of a reliable guide to the UFO phenomenon?

Personally, I suspect that Pope is giving us an accurate account of just how seriously the British government takes the UFO threat. Contrary to the views of the conspiracy theorists, vast resources are not put into a sophisticated coverup operation. The job of dealing with UFO claims is allocated to a single person—and even that person has other unrelated duties! One part-time civil servant who has subsequently published a book on his activities and yet is still working for the Ministry of Defence is not really the stuff of elaborate conspiracy theories.

Interestingly, Pope seems to imply that the American government is engaged in a coverup. Many of the cases that he finds

An Encounter with the Man from the Ministry

CHRISTOPHER C. FRENCH

Open Skies, Closed Minds: For the First Time a Government UFO Expert Speaks Out. By Nick Pope. Simon & Schuster, London, 1996. 270 pp. Cloth £14.99

Recently, in the United Kingdom, another book was published on UFOs. However, according to the media hype, this was not just another book about UFOs. According to an official press release, this book "blows the lid off the British Government's UFO secrets by exposing for the first time what they really know." And who should be in a better position to write such a book than Nick Pope, the man who from 1991 to 1994 was responsible for investigating and analyzing claims of UFO sightings for the British Ministry of Defence?

During this period, Pope worked for Secretariat (Air Staff) Department 2A—"The UFO Desk." Apparently, although he started out as a skeptic, he was forced by the sheer weight of evidence to acknowledge that extraterrestrial spacecraft really are routinely breaching the United Kingdom's air defences and that they represent a major potential threat to national security. In his new book, *Open Skies, Closed Minds*, he presents the apparently "irrefutable evidence" that has led him to this conclusion. It was therefore with great anticipation that I opened Pope's book a few days ago and began to

read. My hands trembled as I turned the pages. The truth was about to be revealed. At last, a glimpse into the real *X-Files* . . .

Okay, so I am exaggerating slightly. I had already been told by a friend who had read the serialization in a British daily newspaper that it was "just the same old stuff" as all the other books on UFOs. However, I had been approached by the producer of a TV talk show to provide a skeptical perspective on UFO claims for a program they were doing focusing on Pope's book, so I felt duty-bound to read it. As it turned out, my friend's description was totally accurate. I searched in vain for the "irrefutable evidence" that had been promised. What I found instead was a presentation of some of the classic UFO cases, plus some of Pope's own rather less impressive cases.

The book does actually give some real insight into the British government's approach to UFOs but not quite in the way that the book's publicity might lead one to expect. In the TV series *The X-Files*, the fictional Fox Mulder is often prevented from getting too close to the truth regarding UFOs by sinister government agents. It is widely believed by the

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