

NATIVE AMERICAN ADVOCATES

From early in U.S. History many people have shown a deep admiration for Native American culture. One of the first was Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was a writer who lived in Massachusetts in the early 1800s. Thoreau believed people should live in harmony with nature, and wrote books and essays encouraging people to do so. He thought the Native Americans were a great example of how to pay respect to, and draw inspiration from, the natural world. In the early 1900s, scientists and ethnographers (people who study cultures) started doing serious work to better understand Native American art, literature, language and history. Students and researchers traveled throughout North America buying Native American art, writing down stories from storytellers, and learning the languages of hundreds of different tribes. By this time, most of the Native American tribes had been deeply hurt and severely damaged by European contact. Still, many elders held onto their histories and stories, and were willing to share them with curious visitors.

In 1900, a man named John Swanton went to the Queen Charlotte Islands off the coast of northwest Canada. He was an ethnographer interested in learning the stories and myths of the Haida tribe, word for word, in their own language. At that time, it was still common for Native American stories to be summarized in English, rather than written down in the original language. It wasn't for another hundred years that his work would be published and sold.

Many other scientists and artists since John Swanton have focused their attention looking into what Native American culture has to say, on its own terms. Though they are still oppressed by centuries of neglect, the Native Americans and their way of life can be a source of wisdom and inspiration, as it was for Thoreau and Swanton.



Henry David Thoreau



Daaxiigang – or Charles Edenshaw (his English name) – was a Haida carver and artist, and one of the people John Swanton heard stories from when he went to the Queen Charlotte Islands.

QUESTIONS

1. Why did Henry David Thoreau admire Native Americans?

2. What is an ethnographer?

3. Imagine you're an ethnographer studying the history of Native Americans in your local area. What would you most want to know?
