

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Concerning the League: The Iroquois League Tradition as Dictated in Onondaga by John Arthur Gibson. Newly elicited, edited, and translated by Hanni Woodbury.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/33n5m1fv>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Grindle, Donald A., Jr.

Publication Date

1994

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Concerning the League: The Iroquois League Tradition as Dictated in Onondaga by John Arthur Gibson. Newly elicited, edited, and translated by Hanni Woodbury, in collaboration with Reg Henry and Harry Webster on the basis of A.A. Goldenweiser's manuscript. Syracuse, New York: Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics and Syracuse University Press, 1993. 850 pages. \$80.00 paper.

Will literate people and scholars of the Iroquois pay eighty dollars for a paperback version of John A. Gibson's account of the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) Great Law, for information and pleasure? Yes, anthropologists, linguists, political scientists, historians, ethno-historians, and others will consult this volume for both research and wisdom. Although the annotation is by no means exhaustive for those steeped in the ways of the Iroquois, most interested scholars will find this work a welcome addition to their personal and/or university libraries. Hanni Woodbury is to be commended for her care in painstakingly producing an invaluable text that has international appeal in the world of scholarship.

For the scholar of Iroquois political organization and culture, the publication of the newly elicited text of John A. Gibson's *Concerning the League* fills a long-standing gap in our documentary knowledge of the Iroquois League. Dictated to Alexander A. Goldenweiser in the early twentieth century by Gibson, the manuscript (in the Onondaga language) has been the basis of many analytical studies by William N. Fenton, Floyd Lounsbury, Simeon Gibson, and others. However, this manuscript and its new English translations have not been readily available to a wider scholarly audience until now. Without a doubt, this text remains one of the foremost products of human thought and experience. It ranks with the Mayan *Popol Vuh* and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* in its ability to weld mythic, political, social, economic, and spiritual concepts and wisdom into a unified whole. Along with its constitutional aspects, this work also contains a variety of literary constructs that include preaching and narrative, chants and songs. All of these additional forms supplement and broaden our understanding of the multifaceted aspects of the League of the Iroquois.

Over the years, the League of the Iroquois has inspired the constitutional thought of founders such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams. With the publication of this text, a broad range of scholars can comprehend more fully the

statements that John Adams made about the League of the Iroquois in his *Defense of the Constitutions . . . of the United States* on the eve of the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Adams's *Defense* stated that, in developing a constitution, it was "well worth the pains . . . to collect . . . the legislation of the Indians" and asserted that the Iroquois had "fifty families governed by all authority in one centre" long before Lewis Henry Morgan reached that conclusion (Charles F. Adams, ed., *Works of John Adams*, 1851). Like most other significant texts in human history, *Concerning the League* should be more widely available in an authoritative form not only for Iroquois specialists but also for scholars of political theory, constitutional thought and comparative literature. Indeed, the potential uses of this text are virtually unlimited. The widespread availability of such a work as this should revolutionize, reconfigure, and revitalize our knowledge of the Iroquois. One may not always agree with the textual interpretations that will be forthcoming, but the intellectual ferment will be stimulating and invigorating.

Although some Iroquois traditionalists and non-native scholars may quibble with some of the text's phraseology in Onondaga and perhaps even its English translations, this work will remain an important source book for the specialist and the enthusiast in Iroquois studies for a long time. The literal, interlinear English translation of the text is supplemented by a free translation into English. The English translation is coupled with extensive explanatory and documentary footnotes that promote a better understanding of the text.

Readyng this text entailed countless hours of listening, the re-examination of faded manuscripts, and the patient re-eliciting of many portions of the text that seemed ambiguous, unintelligible, ponderous, or contradictory. The native linguists and traditional Iroquois scholars (Harry Webster, Reg Henry, Jacob Thomas, and Gladys Thomas Williams) are to be commended for their expertise and forbearance in bringing this project to fruition. Translation is always a difficult and murky process, but it is good to see that such contemporary anthropological projects are often joint ventures now. As with any transformation of a work from an oral to a written form and from Onondaga to English, there are problems with emphasis, interpretation, and glossed passages. However, there can be no doubt that this newly published and edited text will continue to be a crucial work for some years to come. At long last, scholars can experience something that approximates a native voice concerning the League of the Iroquois.

Those who study and respect the power of the oral tradition and the ways of the Iroquois will find this volume an indispensable reference. My only wish is that the authors had indexed the work copiously, since that would have enhanced its value as a research and reference tool. For the more general reader, the text will continue to challenge our minds and our hearts, since it is also great philosophy and literature in its own right.

Donald A. Grinde, Jr.

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Exiled in the Land of the Free: Democracy, Indian Nations, and the U.S. Constitution. Edited by Oren Lyons and John Mohawk. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publishers, 1992. 336 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

For the historical world of Indians and Indian-white relations, here is a splendid new book. The volume had its genesis in conferences between newspaper publisher Thomas E. Worrell, Jr., and Oren Lyons, professor of American studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo, on the topic of the U.S. Constitution and the American Indian. With the sponsorship of Thomas Worrell, financial assistance from the Five Rings Corporation, and the collaboration of John C. Mohawk and Oren Lyons, both of SUNY Buffalo, the book had its birth. The authors, a phalanx of able Native American scholars and non-Indian ethnohistorians, have come together to analyze the place of the American Indian in issues of sovereignty and democracy relating to the U.S. Constitution. The authors have gathered a mountain of evidence to question themes in the Eurocentric scholarship that for so long has dominated European imperial history and general American history. Oren Lyons (Onondaga Nation), John Mohawk (Seneca Nation), Vine Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux tribe), Donald A. Grinde, Lawrence M. Hauptman, Robert Venebles, Howard Berman, and Curtis G. Berkeley, give us a fascinating overview of historic and current issues on democracy, Indian sovereignty, the Constitution and Congressional power, and the roots of political theory. As Peter Matthiessen writes in an introduction, one of the most important arguments emerging in this fine book is the need to recognize the principle of Indian sovereignty, "since the American government has never permitted it to become an 'issue'" (p. xii).