

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies. Edited by Michael K. Foster, Jack Campisi and Marianne Mithun. A publication of the D' Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5vk2329w>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 8(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Jennings, Francis

Publication Date

1984-06-01

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/>

could understand, let alone speak, Cree. Dr. Krech notes that at Fort Simpson the absence of the interpreter caused the suspension of trade. If interpreters had to be used, who were they; British, French Canadian, American Indian or Métis?

W.J. Eccles
University of Toronto

Extending the Rafters: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Iroquoian Studies. Edited by Michael K. Foster, Jack Campisi and Marianne Mithun. A publication of the D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984. 396 pp. \$48.50 Cloth. \$16.95 Paper.

The Iroquois Indians have been for centuries among the most written-about of all the North American tribes. In 1727 Cadwallader Colden endowed them with a vast "savage" empire in his *History of the Five Indian Nations Depending on the Province of New-York in America*, and in the mid-nineteenth century Francis Parkman revived the empire, gave it a racist turn and embellished the "savagery." Simultaneously Lewis Henry Morgan described, more reliably than Parkman, the Iroquois political system, but he drew from it and other sources a universal theory of social evolution that made him into an international celebrity as well as a founding father of anthropology in the United States.

In recent years students have been less concerned with grandiose schemes of ideology and more interested in the American Indians. A Conference on Iroquois Research began to meet annually in 1945, involving ethnologists, archaeologists, linguists, historians and some odd fish [?] in its discussions. A number of scholarly publications have been produced by participants in these meetings, not least the Iroquoian sections in the *Northeast* volume of the Smithsonian Institution's *Handbook of North American Indians* (1978). Now we have *Extending the Rafters*, a collection of essays by some of the same and other authors. This book was conceived as a *festschrift* for William N. Fenton, the founder and dean of the Conference on Iroquois Research; but the book is far superior to your ordinary *festschrift* "grab-bag." It has been carefully organized and focused as a state-of-the-art assemblage of new work conducted by the most advanced

scholars in the field; it should be required reading for anyone interested in the Iroquoian-speaking Peoples; and its management of issues and evidence will be helpful to those people involved in intercultural studies. In consideration of the nearly forty years of existence of the Conference on Iroquois Research, this book may also serve as a model of what interdisciplinary exchange can achieve and what its difficulties are.

The book gives due attention to William Fenton's many and meritorious Iroquoian studies and his pioneering advocacy of ethnohistory (or, as I have heard it redefined by an anthropologist, historical ethnology); but its focus is on the subject rather than the person. Each of the twenty-two contributors treats a segment of Iroquois cultural history. As usual in such works the essays range from commonplace to exciting; in this case there is a very high average. I cannot hope to do justice to all the essays; the table of contents shows their variety and the writers' quality.

My favorite is Elisabeth Tooker's study, somewhat deceptively entitled "Women in Iroquois Society." It is definitely *not* just another rant about how we have neglected women and ought to pay more attention. Indeed it seems to be as attentive in the treatment of men as of women. This is an analysis of Iroquois society, the sex roles and functions in it, their institutionalization and the Iroquois concept of property as related to the functions and responsibilities of men and women. I do not remember anything as profound about property since A. Irving Hallowell's "Nature and Function of Property as a Social Institution." In *Culture and Experience* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955, 236-249). Tooker does some debunking of the romantic notion that Iroquois matrons were political bosses in their tribes. This has been argued on the grounds that matrons headed clans, chose chiefs (and "dehorned" them), and "owned" the crops of the fields they cultivated. In practice, says Tooker, the matrons usually named chiefs who were close relatives; the "names" or titles of chiefs were clan possessions rather than the women's; the chiefs made political decisions in councils unattended by women; and property consisted in the right of persons to "own" what they used, which implied function rather than treasure. "In summary," she writes, "the problems that Iroquois men and women had to confront were not those of contemporary western society." They appear to be so only when considered in isolation

from the whole culture, ". . . with the result that matters of little consequence to the Iroquois are presumed to be of great moment and matters of crucial significance to them overlooked" (p. 121).

Isolation of subject matter from its historical context is an issue that crops up in another way in Bruce G. Trigger's essay, which argues that a tribe's history must be made "comprehensible in its own terms and not merely as an appendage to White history" (p. 23). I would not argue with that except for deploring the racial term "White," but Trigger is not quite right in attributing to me the view that American Indian history should be "an extension or a part of colonial history" (p. 21). The wrong word, which I never used, is "extension." I confess that I did say "part of" in a 1968 essay, but that was semantic incompetence. What I meant was that Indians must be considered as part of the history of the colonial era, and I'll stand by that. So will Trigger. My concept is that of a large society embracing plural cultures mixing, mingling and changing in response to each other. This is fully consonant with Trigger's proper insistence that "Indian societies had their own internal dynamics . . ." and their histories should be considered as "independent foci of study" (p. 32). I will, however, quibble as to how much independence can be developed from historical documentation, and my example in point is Trigger's *Children of Aataentsic* with its classic exposition of the effects on tribal communities of European diseases and missions (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1976. 2 Volumes).

If history is conceived as description of a subject by following its development through time, most of the "historical" essays in *Extending the Rafters* have been written by persons based in other disciplines. In my biased view this historical orientation holds the book together and makes its contents accessible to non-specialists. Perhaps it is not actually required for interdisciplinary communication, but it surely facilitates that purpose.

The essays contributed by historians trained as such include two on missions by James Axtell and Charles M. Johnston and a biographical sketch of Fenton's work in the U.S. Indian Service by Laurence M. Hauptman. All are solidly grounded in original research in prime sources; all are written in straightforward English prose, avoiding jargon and assumptions of previous background on the part of readers; and all have a point.

Other historical contributions include Anthony F.C. Wallace's

overview of Fenton's career and influence, echoed many times throughout the book; Gordon M. Day's typically meticulous exhumation of an almost forgotten New England Indian war; two examples by Thomas S. Abler and Annemarie Shimony of internal dispute between Iroquois groups; and Jack Campisi's consideration of the complex legal problems arising from sovereignty contests between tribe, state and nation. They cover a lot of territory and do it well.

Besides these there is much attention focused toward a temporal development which, because it precedes written documents, is called prehistory. (This seems to me to be a quibble; it is history by other means.) The archaeologists, as always, have a dispute going. Dean Snow and James Wright use their sticks and stones and pots and bones to arrive at rather different conclusions about where the Iroquois came from, and when, before they surfaced in written sources. Snow holds that recent argument about known Iroquois culture evolving *in situ*—i.e., right there, in upstate New York—does not settle anything; the question of where those Iroquois Indians's ancestors came from ". . . has merely been pushed back to an earlier level" (p. 243). He puts their arrival on site at some time between 1700 and 1200 B.C., and he hints at agreement with the traditional belief that they came up from the South.

James Wright looks in the opposite direction, to the St. Lawrence Valley, for the Iroquois' origins, and he places them there "at least" 5500 years ago (p. 284). I do not propose to choose sides between these respected scholars. I hope, however, that Wright finds a better way to state his case than to rest it on ". . . an assumption based upon principles independent of the phenomena under consideration . . ." (p. 284). That is a definition of bias, which is not likely to be what he meant.

As an aside: Putting a foreign language tag on a notion seems to be a sure-fire way of impressing anglophile scholars. Latterly, historians' "chicken coops" have been fluttered by *mentalités* which bear a suspect resemblance to what used to be called national character. Thinking by archaeologists has almost been paralyzed by *in situ*. Many seem to be echoing the tribal fundamentalist dogmas that ". . . our ancestors sprang out of this very ground." I see no profit in rejecting the Judeo-Christian ethnocentrism of Genesis only to pick up its counterpart from some tribal shaman. Snow and Wright show a better way. I wish,

however, that they would have had more mercy on readers who are not intimately acquainted with the names and significance of the digs they summon up as evidence in their discussions. Maps would be a boon.

Linguists often give me a pain when they concentrate exclusively on the "snap, crackle and pop" of speech without any evident interest in what those phonemes suggest about cultural *foci* or historical movement. *Extending the Rafters*, however, has essays that transcend the noise level to convey something valuable to persons in other fields. Michael K. Foster relates ritualistic language to treaty protocol. Hanni Woodbury wrestles with the semantic problems of translation. Marianne Mithun and Wallace L. Chafe trace vocabularies to suggest the sequence in which Iroquois tribes split off from their common ancestral group, the Proto-Iroquoians. William C. Sturtevant, though oriented more strictly to ethnography, worries about finding the right word in English for Iroquoian customary procedures. A warning to non-linguists: In these essays much use is made of the phonetic alphabet.

Space limitations preclude further discussion, and some contributors, regrettably, have been missed. On the whole, nevertheless, *Extending the Rafters* fulfills its interdisciplinary promise with great merit in spite of the difficulties presented by the different vocabularies and alphabets of the separate disciplines. Some day, perhaps, we shall all be able to talk to one another in Standard English. That will be a great day.

Francis Jennings, Emeritus
Newberry Library

Indians of California: The Changing Image. By James J. Rawls. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984. 312 pp. \$19.95 Cloth.

In his preface James Rawls explains the reason for examining White cultural perceptions of California's Native Peoples. "White observers," he declares, "consistently described the California Indians as primitive people, but their attitudes toward the 'primitives' changed dramatically over the generations of contact." Powering this evolution of attitudes and images, he continues, "the engine . . . was the changing needs of the white