

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Restoring the Chain of Friendship: British Policy and the Indians of the Great Lakes, 1783-1815. By Timothy D. Willig.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/65x8g1k7>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Shaw, John M.

**Publication Date**

2009-09-01

**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/>

the clear social disruption that European colonialism had on the Ojibwe family, the core faculties of the family and culture remained sound. The palpable lessons of love and spiritual renewal evoked from her stories reflect a vast sense of community and kinship among the people of Rainy River. Many stories illustrate the efforts taken to protect the sick, elderly, and young. She further elaborates on the practice of adoption as it is also seen in most of the stories and sheds light on an extended familial structure that demonstrates the extent to which the traditions of Ojibwe culture are maintained.

In this collection of thirty stories nearly every one opens with some version of “This is the story of an Indian woman.” The body of each story takes the reader inside the everyday life of an Ojibwe living near the Rainy River at the turn of the twentieth century. Whether describing the collection of wild rice in the fall, battles with the Sioux, the marriage of two lovers, the power of dreams, or the wisdom of the animals, Wilson’s everyday interactions and experiences created stories. Her knowledge and creativity educates the audience on almost every aspect of Ojibwe culture while empowering Ojibwe women. Her stories, although providing a detailed snapshot of time, in the end accomplish much more. They are means by which to transmit the autonomy and power of Ojibwe women through story. Simply put, stories survive for centuries not because they are written but because they are told. Wilson’s stories remain a resource for Ojibwe women because they are now told.

In the words of Cole, “Storytelling became the foundation of women’s efforts to pass on cultural values and knowledge to their children and to maintain continuity in the face of social rupture” (xxxi). With her words, Wilson conjures up what a moccasin game or snake stick game looks like. She describes *jisukan*, or the shaking tent, and describes its power as a medium of transcendence. Spiritual knowledge that Wilson calls *manitokaso* is layered throughout the text. Quite simply, she is an educator. The stories found within *Rainy River Lives* may or may not reflect Western conceptions of fact, reality, or time. However, there is no doubt that the stories reflect an ancient tradition not infatuated with fact, reality, or time but that instead is infatuated with people. Their lives, experiences, and stories are a way to maintain the social fabric of Ojibwe culture. There is a fluidity to Wilson’s stories that unites the past to the present and no doubt connects those that still live on the banks of the Rainy River.

*Michael B. Cavanaugh*

University of California, Los Angeles

**Restoring the Chain of Friendship: British Policy and the Indians of the Great Lakes, 1783–1815.** By Timothy D. Willig. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. 374 pages. \$50.00 cloth.

Following in the scholarly footsteps of British Indian policy studies like Colin Calloway’s *Crown and Calumet: British-Indian Relations, 1783–1815* (1987), Timothy Willig’s *Restoring the Chain of Friendship: British Policy and the Indians of the Great Lakes, 1783–1815* contributes significantly to our understanding of

how “the eighteenth century ended with the future of British-Indian relations uncertain” (88). With the advent of the United States of America and the British relegated to Upper Canada, an era of European imperial rivalries had passed in North America, and the former Indian allies of the British found themselves reduced “to a dispossessed set of refugees who had become wards of the state” (89). But from the Native perspective, such disparity in power did not turn them into subjects.

Willig reconstructs how a diverse array of Native American tribes, bands, and villages stretching from southern Ontario across Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois to the western Great Lakes shaped, negotiated, and contested British Indian policy formulation and implementation from the end of the American Revolution through the War of 1812. At the end of the first decade after the American War of Independence, the political status of Indian tribes in the eyes of British policy makers declined. Although both sides wanted to maintain mutually beneficial relations, postwar circumstances ushered in a “policy of retrenchment” that threatened to reduce Indian power and influence (80). Postwar expansion of the fur trade became the only means by which the British could burnish the Chain of Friendship and placate Indian dissatisfaction with their diminished status (29). But the growing fur trade hastened Native destabilization and dependency on European manufactured goods, along with the spread of disease, depletion of game, abuse of alcohol, and greater reliance on the British as traders and military allies.

From 1783 to 1812 the key question surrounding Britain’s ever-evolving frontier policy in the Great Lakes region was how to restructure Indian relations in a postwar era of peace in which conditions on the ground remained fluid. The primary concerns of Native peoples centered on retention of homelands and sovereignty amidst a strained relationship with the British in Upper Canada and an aggressively expansionist United States. Willig demonstrates that the motivations, factors, and reasons behind British policies can be better understood by analyzing them within the framework of this transformative era in US and Canadian history. The overarching narrative focuses on how the firm “Chain of Friendship” that bonded the British with many Indian allies during the War of Independence broke down into more localized and tenuous tribal relations from the conclusion of the American Revolution to the finish of the War of 1812. The locus of the story is the Great Lakes and Ohio Valley regions, or as it was known during the early republic era of US history, the Old Northwest (that is, what became the states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin) plus Upper Canada (that is, Southern Ontario). Within the post-Revolution British-held territory, three military/diplomatic posts (Fort Amherstburg across from Detroit, Fort St. Joseph opposite Buffalo, New York, and Fort St. Joseph at the juncture of Lakes Huron and Superior) became regional centers that had to deal with diverse local Native communities and interests. Through several iterations the British realized that no single Indian policy could meet the needs of such a dissimilar array of localized Native interests.

The “divergent paths” of Indian interests included the viability of the fur trade; proximity to the United States; levels of acculturation or Native revitalization movements; caliber and influence of British commanders and

agents; non-Indian encroachment and land pressures; and current state of British opinion regarding tribal sovereignty (105). As a result, the British had to set aside some of their superior notions about dictating policy and adapt to Indian-influenced conditions and status unique to each locale. By focusing on Native peoples' sense of themselves, Willig's analysis of these complex interactions provides the reader with a new outlook on tribal-British relations from an Indian perspective. Although still holding onto the Chain of Friendship, various tribal leaders challenged the expedient decisions and actions of British authorities in an attempt to secure trade relations and a land base that would ensure their cultural autonomy and political sovereignty.

The Iroquois Mohawk leader Joseph Brant (Thayendanega) became the most significant Native American leader who shaped the early history of Upper Canada, along with the Shawnee warrior Tecumseh. Although the British almost entirely abandoned their Indian allies at the Paris Peace Treaty that ended the American Revolution in 1783, one exception to this betrayal was the creation of the Grand River Reserve for loyalist Indians (mostly Mohawk Iroquois) in Upper Canada. As a Mohawk war chief, Brant had championed the British cause. At least the Grand River Reserve would provide refugee Iroquois and other Indians with a sanctuary beyond the boundaries of the new United States. But as Willig reminds us, although the Chain of Friendship could be burnished, when the mutual needs of wartime allies prevailed, peacetime led to British policies of "retrenchment" that looked upon Indian allies as subjects (199).

Brant's overarching yet unrealized goal at Grand River was to secure a land patent of essentially fee simple ownership that precluded British claims of preemption or trusteeship and to enable the Iroquois to sell or lease land to private individuals when deemed necessary to their own economic self-interest. Brant wanted the same land rights as non-Indian loyalists. Acknowledgment of this natural right would have entailed recognition of complete tribal sovereignty. But to Brant and his people's enormous frustration, the British would never accede to this desire. The expediency of British policies, usually couched in the benevolent rhetoric of paternalism, always precluded any formal acknowledgment or full exercise of Native sovereignty. Brant would die in 1807 without realizing his goal of having the Iroquois Six Nations recognized by the British as an "autonomous and self-sustaining" independent ally (164).

The inherent contradictions in expedient British policy toward Indian sovereignty impeded productive and amicable Indian relations. Willig's detailed explanation of both sides' goals, strategies, tactics, successes, and failures illuminates the complex web of Native American relations within the North American branch of the British Empire. British Indian policies proved to be counterproductive because they exacerbated conflict.

Clearly insatiable American land hunger precluded any sustained peaceful relations between the United States and the Native peoples of the Old Northwest. Although Willig's story omits how Euro-Canadian interests in Upper Canada influenced Indian policy, it shows that there was a wide range of accommodation and resistance on both sides. The complex multicultural interactions involved with the Chain of Friendship demonstrates clearly that

British-Native American relations between 1783 and 1815 cannot be reduced to any simple Indian-versus-white dichotomy.

From the Native American perspective, the ante bellum status quo outcome of the War of 1812 was a disaster. While the dreams of US expansionists to invade and annex Canada failed, the war ended British influence over American Indians. The British betrayed their pledges to protect Indian interests. Stunned lower-level British officials in the Great Lakes region bewailed “the hapless Destiny of these devoted Nations who listened to our solicitations and . . . adhered to us during the war, but found the peace which *promised* security . . . only led to their utter ruin and annihilation” (261). The British tried to negotiate for an Indian buffer state to protect Canada from American encroachment, but more than one hundred thousand Americans settlers had already precluded that proposal. Although remnants of the old Chain of Friendship remained until the 1840s, a Dakota chief named Red Wing accurately foresaw the future. The American “eagle” and the British “lion” became allies, enabling US Indian policy makers to diminish the sovereignty of Native peoples, cultures, and homelands further.

In their narratives, historians always endeavor to avoid the “history is just one damn thing after another” trap. Specialists in the field of British/US-Indian relations will relish the details. Although the book is strong on complex cross-cultural interactions and tenuous outcomes, a general audience might be dismayed by the lack of cogent summaries and conclusions. The much-smaller Euro-Canadian demographic surge resulted in less pressure on Aboriginal lands and less violent conflict with Native peoples. However, in terms of Indian policy, the British and US goals and tactics shared the same four assumptions. Both European-derived nations assumed superior sovereignty and plenary (exclusive and unlimited) authority over Native peoples and territory. This resulted in diminished tribal sovereignty that left Indians with only land-use rights of occupancy (Indian title), further downgraded to the status of dependent wards or subjects until some national security crisis turned them into temporary allies or permanent enemies.

A noteworthy yet minor weakness, which may have more to do with the University of Nebraska Press than the author, is the lack of adequate maps. One map is half a page, the other three-quarters. Surely they could be enlarged without distortion and include more sites referred to within the text. Although *Restoring the Chain of Friendship* is perhaps too detailed for the general reading public or lower-level college courses, it would make a strong addition to upper-level and graduate classes on US, Canadian, and Native American history from 1783 to 1815. For those who specialize in First Nations law and policy on either side of the forty-ninth parallel, Willig’s book can proudly take its place alongside those of Gregory Dowd, Reginald Horsman, R. David Edmunds, and Colin Calloway. On a personal note, I am gratified to see a community college peer’s research augment the scholarship of such distinguished company.

*John M. Shaw*  
Portland Community College