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The Iroquois in the Grand Tradition of American Letters: The Works of Walter D. Edmonds, Carl Carmer, and Edmund Wilson

WILLIAM N. FENTON

A title of this scope might lead the reader to expect some discussion of two great nineteenth century writers: Lewis H. Morgan and Francis Parkman. Indeed Morgan's *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee, or Iroquois* (Rochester, 1851) started scientific ethnography in America; and Francis Parkman's classic on *France and England in North America* ran to seven parts, and the remainder into twelve volumes, which represent a kind of literate narrative history that is no longer fashionable among historians. Parkman is not without his biases toward the savages, and he does not lack critics today.¹ However thorough his research, and however much he distorted sources to support his views, as Francis Jennings has charged, he was a great writer and a master of historical style. "Parkman's work is one grand historical novel," as Edmund Wilson once reminded me, and he should be read in that light. Early on Parkman intended to write an Iroquois history, but he abandoned the plan when he found that he could not connect the culture of their living descendants with their historical past. Instead he turned to the then still viable cultures of the Plains as represented in his personal experiences of the *Oregon Trail* (1872) and derived from the buffalo hunters of the northern Plains the inspiration for

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the Indians that populated his novel. I remain a Morgan and a Parkman enthusiast, their works merit separate treatment, which I have accorded them elsewhere,² and they are not my present concern.

A third writer on the Iroquois, Arthur C. Parker (1881–1955) brings us to the period of the three writers whom I shall discuss. Parker was part Seneca, and he identified ideologically with Native Americans. He wrote well enough to attract the attention of Edmund Wilson, the distinguished critic, who planned to include Parker's work in an American *Pleiade*, which one day may come to pass. Since I have already paid tribute to his ethnology in *Parker on the Iroquois* (Syracuse, 1968), he need only be mentioned here.

Rather I shall concentrate on three writers who are not anthropologists or historians per se, but who are essentially men of letters. I have known all of them more or less personally, and two of them—Carmer and Wilson—I introduced among the Senecas. Walter D. Edmonds, historical novelist of upstate New York, I met much later and know the least. Carl Carmer, self-styled "American folklorist and informal historian," sought me out at Tonawanda in the thirties. And Edmund Wilson, essayist and critic and sage of Talcottville, called upon me in 1957 at the New York State Museum. Each of these writers has made a special contribution to the literature on the Iroquois, and each has seen them with peculiar insight drawn from a wide-ranging acquaintance with literatures. From two of them I have learned how another writer can observe and interpret the same phenomena in a different light. The two, Carmer and Wilson, assisted me significantly at critical stages of my own career.

II

Walter D. Edmonds (1903–) and I did not meet until Edmund Wilson brought us together at dinner one summer evening in the "Old Stone House" at Talcottville, Wilson's summer home. The Edmonds winter in Cambridge, Massachusetts but return summers to Remsen, N.Y., where they have a house not far from Boonville, his birthplace. These annual returns enable Edmonds to renew an intimate familiarity with the waterways of upper New York State, the region

of his important writing. Edmonds must be one of the few persons from the north country to attend Choate and St. Pauls to prepare for Harvard where he graduated in 1926 with the A.B. and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Because of the library resources for a historical writer in greater Boston it is understandable why Edmonds settled in Cambridge. As a distinguished alumnus he has served on the Board of Overseers at Harvard, and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences honored him with membership. The latter is the learned body which John Adams founded and to which the Rev. Samuel Kirkland, missionary to the Oneidas, was elected in 1791 for his Census of the Six Nations. These are the bare facts of a distinguished career that can be gleaned from *Who's Who in America* and *Contemporary Writers*. Beyond these obvious sources, I cannot say that I really know him.

Drums Along the Mohawk appeared in 1936. My wife and I were recently married and living in Akron, New York, a small upstate village in western New York adjacent to the Tonawanda Seneca Indian Reservation where I was posted as Community Worker in the U.S. Indian Service. This residence represented my participation in the New Deal for the Iroquois, now a matter of record.³ One of the projects that we started was a library for the Tonawanda Senecas in cooperation with the Grosvenor Library of Buffalo. Having emerged from Yale and Westport, Connecticut, where I matured among artists, writers, and book reviewers, I set about tapping sources of current literature. We enlisted Carl Carmer, to scrounge review copies of books from his Greenwich Village neighbors and send them on to us. Our copy of Edmonds' *Drums*, however, came through a book club membership to which my wife, then an English teacher, subscribed. Whenever a shipment arrived certain persons were bound to turn up.

Cephas Hill, the reservation's resident intellectual, was our most frequent caller. Cephas owned the first edition of Morgan's *League*, which had been written out of research at Tonawanda in the previous century. Cephas had also discovered in an attic some correspondence between Morgan and Ely S. Parker concerning the Tonawanda Longhouse ceremonies, which I afterward published and persuaded Cephas to let the University of Rochester Library have the originals for the Morgan Collection.⁴ With Cephas we never ran short of conversation. When he borrowed *Drums*, which my wife and I had both read, I wondered how he would react to it.

Within a few days Cephas returned all excited. "Blue Back," Edmonds' wiley Oneida character, reminded him of Barber Black, a Tonawanda sachem chief and a whimsical local personality both among the Senecas and the White people of Genesee county. Apart from his official duties for the Bear Clan in the council, Ba Ba's specialty was weather prediction. Every October he walked the fifteen miles to Batavia to con his friend Larry Griswold, the then editor of the *Batavia Daily News*, out of a few dollars for the long range forecast on the coming winter. Ba Ba's data were such signs as the thickness of the hickory bark, the pile on the "Woolly Bears," and the height of some farmer's woodpile. What still fascinates me is that Edmonds could create an authentic and convincing character of an Iroquois personality, certainly the trickster of his piece, with whom our Seneca friend could identify.

Even more interesting is that Edmonds makes no pretense of knowing Indians. On re-reading *Drums* some forty years later, when I have come to know the setting much better, I still find "Blue Back" credible. Moreover, I admire Edmonds' certain knowledge of the Mohawk-Oneida country, his familiarity with tracking and related techniques of deer hunting, the cultural geography of the Palatine settlements, his mastery of rural New Yorker English, and his ability to build suspense. In a second reading I found some questions penciled in our copy: what was the source of the report of the Oneida and Onondaga delegation at Fort Stanwix in 1777 that the council fire of the League that had burned from time immemorial at Onondaga was extinguished (p. 143)? And what is the source of their carrying around the sacred fire in a stone pot when a village was removed to a new site (p. 145)? At times Edmonds has his Seneca warriors garbed and equipped straight out of the color plates of Morgan's *Reports to the Regents*,⁵ an authentic source in the absence of other information; but once or twice I questioned the wearing of the classic Seneca headdress with single twirling feather during a campaign. The settlers of German Flats certainly had every reason for hating Joseph Brant, and Edmonds conveys their sentiments toward the Loyalist Mohawk war leader unequivocally. But if one reads Brant's post-Revolutionary correspondence with Kirkland, whom he had known since boyhood, and General Israel Chapin, U.S. Agent at Canandaigua, Bryant reveals himself as highly intelligent, human, and politically astute. Brant deserves a critical historical biography to replace that of W. L. Stone (1838).⁶

Edmonds confessed uncertainty about such matters when writing to his classmate Oliver La Farge.⁷ He thought that La Farge had revealed more of himself than of Navajo life in *Laughing Boy*, and wrote that he liked *Sparks Fly Upward*, another La Farge novel of Navajo life, "twice as much as *Laughing Boy*." In return, Edmonds fully expected his classmate, "the Harvard Indian authority to lance me for my Indians." Indeed presently he wrote to La Farge again telling how he was "stunned to hear from one in the Indian Service," for I had written to Edmonds that Blue Back was convincing. Moreover, a Menominee woman wrote to him repeatedly from Wisconsin that his "Iroquois were real honest to god . . . Indians." Yet some time later in March of 1938, after G. P. Putnam's Sons, the publishers, had asked him to write a history of the Iroquois, Edmonds confessed to La Farge: "I don't know much about the Iroquois really." He had worked them up from the settler's point of view, and then attempted to view them from the inside by reading the standard ethnographic sources, which he lists. Such a history, he estimated, would require 150,000 words because "the Iroquois are a long story," and he did not feel up to it, not being a genuine Indian authority. He was rather more attracted to the great Indian personalities—Hiawatha, Handsome Lake, Brant, Cornplanter and Red Jacket. In this correspondence he professes a special view of Brant—that he was vain, vindictive, as well as great—and he noted that virtually all of the Mohawk massacres occurred when Brant was present. As for the history, every writer who has attempted it has learned that it takes too long and is too long.

Edmonds made two other literary attempts involving Indian themes. *In the Hands of the Senecas* (1947) addressed the Indian captivity literature, so popular in the nineteenth century, through the medium of fiction. He learned that twentieth century readers are not as vitally concerned with these tragic adventures as were the nineteenth century descendants of the victims. And in writing *The Musket and the Cross* (1968), Edmonds viewed the "Indian World" through historical documents bearing on the ancient theme of Parkman—the struggle between France and England for control of North America. To enrich the reader's understanding of Indian participation in the events described Edmonds makes good use of the rich ethnological literature on such topics as the Feast of the Dead, the Condolence ritual, and the persistent belief in the power of the Little Water Medicine to sustain life. But with all this, "the

work peters out," as I noted at the close of reading the work ten years ago; as Edmonds feared, it was too big a canvas and too detailed to reach any destination. He had undertaken a task which thirty years earlier he considered impossible. But he then thought that Carl Carmer might carry it off.

On receiving Jesse Cornplanter's *Legends of the Longhouse* (1938), for which Carl Carmer wrote the Foreword, Edmonds again wrote to LaFarge, expressing the notion, "perhaps a ridiculous one, that Carl Carmer could . . . write (the Longhouse book), if he wanted to be thorough."⁸ Edmonds had liked Carmer's New York book, which had appeared two years earlier, although he frequently found it inaccurate. He concluded his letter: "The trouble is he is a kind of atmospheric reporter, tremendously effective in some ways, not so hot in others." And this about sums up my own experience with this charming and talented person.

III

Carl Lamson Carmer (1893–1976) was born in Cortland in the very heart of upstate New York, the son of a school superintendent. He attended Hamilton College and graduated with the Ph.B. in 1914, receiving the Ph.M. three years later, after taking an M.A. in English at Harvard in 1915. World War I interrupted his graduate career, but he once told me that he could not abide the thought of writing a doctoral dissertation on some arcane subject. Hamilton made up for any oversight by awarding him an honorary L.H.D. in 1941.

When I first met him in 1935 he had already abandoned teaching college English and was a full-time writer having done a best-seller on the Deep South. After two summers and a winter of field work among the Allegany Senecas, and having exhausted the available fellowships at Yale, I had heeded Commissioner John Collier's summons to anthropologists to join the U.S. Indian Service and was sent up to New York Agency in February as "Community Worker" to the Tonawanda Band of Senecas. I was to spend the next two and one-half years on this assignment. With the uncertainties attending the Indian New Deal, and not wishing to abandon a career in anthropology, I was resolved to keep my sanity by continuing ethnological field work as time afforded. As the new anthropologist

in the region I was presently invited to address the Lewis H. Morgan Chapter of the New York State Archaeological Association in Rochester. In my previous research on the Allegany Reservation I had discovered and worked out the underlying ritual pattern that governs the celebration of the calendric cycle of Longhouse ceremonies at Coldspring Longhouse and my first publication was in press.⁹ The pattern concept being my forte, I asked Jesse Cornplanter to come along and illustrate the songs which make up the cycle. Jesse's performance on that occasion made the presentation a signal success. Carl Carmer was in attendance and that was our first meeting.

I would soon learn that creative writing marches to a different drummer than historical ethnology. As a literary artist Carl Carmer was not above altering chronology, shifting scenes, and substituting characters and roles to fit the needs of creative writing. Although Arthur Parker had introduced Carmer to Cornplanter and to me after our Rochester performance, Carmer in writing chose to place our meeting after a camp meeting at Akron, which he came out to attend in early summer and where I was present with Cephas Hill, not Jesse, as Carmer has it in *Listen for a Lonesome Drum* (1936:26). His version makes a better story. What is more he wrote to me before he left home in New York City to expect him there and he sent best regards to "Jess, Cephas . . . and also that most attractive squaw—Olive," an English teacher in nearby Oakfield to whom I was engaged. By this time for a fact he had already visited Akron and had stayed with me. We three and Jesse had gone down to Cattaraugus together to collect the origin myth of the Dark Dance, a ritual of four cantos that is sung in the dark for the Little People who once conferred hunting magic on a Seneca hunter.

Naive as I was about some things, I had learned how to conduct and record an ethnological interview and I was glad to share field work with a successful writer whose company I enjoyed. Here was a chance to exchange observations on techniques of interviewing. Carmer never made any notes at the time, while I was an inveterate scribbler, filling the right hand pages of notebooks with texts and comments of informants and reserving the left hand pages for corrections and additions. This was a technique that Leslie Spier had taught us in an informal course on field methods at Yale. The next step was to transcribe from these notebooks fairly promptly accounts of ceremonies, folktales, texts, etc.

At the time I was concerned that Carmer would not remember the details and was certain that, without my transcribed notes, he would not get things right. Perhaps out of some compulsion to be helpful, I shared with him typescripts of events and interviews where we both had been present. He evidently made good use of my notes. Some months later when our copy of the book arrived suitably inscribed, I was both pleased and somewhat shocked to see my words in print but without direct acknowledgement. He mentions my presence at the Dark Dance which we both attended at Jesse Cornplanter's (p. 91), but he does not say that I elicited the origin legend which he prints (p. 96). Likewise, he describes the Maple Thanksgiving ceremony from my notes and his own memory; but not knowing what to expect and not recording observations at the time, he confuses the number of singers carrying rattles and drums to the singers' bench in the longhouse, and singers do not sit on their instruments (p. 107). Only one drum is involved, and the drummer is supported by a chorus of several singers with horn rattles. Moreover, no instruments are used in the Trotting Dance, which is a typical stomp dance of the Eastern Woodlands, in which the leader and supporting singers in the file behind him sing in antiphonal (p. 108).

Calling attention to these lapses in ethnographic observation, which could have been corrected in proofs by submitting them to someone familiar with the ceremonies, as Edmund Wilson did later, in no way deprecates Carmer's ability to recall whole conversations, his genius at capturing a mood, and his considerable skill as a writer. Tonawanda Seneca readers liked what he wrote and recognized the accounts of his Tonawanda visits as authentic. They were then less demanding than academicians.

During two years at Tonawanda I had published three articles, filed a dissertation and defended it, was awarded the Ph.D., and was seeking an academic connection. When our small family arrived at St. Lawrence University in the autumn of 1937 to begin my first teaching, virtually no one had seen or read my publications. Nevertheless I was something of a celebrity for having appeared as a character in *Listen for a Lonesome Drum* the preceding year. It was soon made clear to us that living with the Indians and mention in a best-seller counted for more with academics and students than election to learned societies or my own publications. So I should not fault Carmer for clearing the path for us.

Years later, and after several other successes, Carmer returned to Indian themes in *Dark Trees to the Wind* (1949). This time he acknowledged printed sources and cited persons consulted. There are two spare quotes from Red Jacket's speeches early in the nineteenth century: on the Crucifixion (p. 104), and his Farewell, before he died in 1832 (p. 181). There is a splendid account of a twentieth century Cayuga patriot (pp. 105-117), Levi General, whom his people knew as *Deskaheh*, the leading title on the roster of Cayuga chiefs in the council of the Iroquois Confederacy. When in 1924 the government of Canada disbanded the Council of Life Chiefs at Six Nations Reserve, which had functioned as local government since 1784, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police confiscated the wampum belts, Deskaheh carried the cause of Iroquois nationalism to the Council of the League of Nations in Geneva. Denied a hearing before that prestigious body, Deskaheh and his lawyer hired a great hall, they packed the house, and after Deskaheh plead his cause, he received a standing ovation. Europeans reared on the novels of Cooper and the German writer, Karl May, who never visited America, retain to this day a romantic attachment to *les sauvages américains*. Finding himself unwelcome on returning to Canada, Deskaheh crossed the Niagara frontier and died in exile among the Iroquois of western New York. Carmer treats this tale of Native American illusion, romantic imagery, and personal tragedy with great sympathy.

Of all the captives who preferred Indian society to returning to Yankeedom, Mary Jemison, "the White Woman of the Genesee," has special appeal to Yorkers. Her story seizes Carmer's imagination. The name that the Senecas gave to Mary Jemison is spelled *De-ge-wa-nus* in the many editions of her life. But appealing as it may be this name cannot be interpreted as "Pretty Girl," for the Senecas still know the name as *degiwän-ne?s*, "two women's voices falling." No less an authority than J. N. B. Hewitt so interpreted the name for the 1932 edition (p. 333),¹⁰ and I have recorded it from living Seneca speakers at Allegany.

Seventeenth century French writers found *Le Festin à tout manger*, or the "Eat-all Feast" of English chroniclers, particularly arresting. There was one celebrated occasion in 1655, when the French mission at Onondaga was severely threatened, that the French turned the Indian custom of exaggerated hospitality around and gorged the principal Onondagas. Having fed them to satiety the French slipped away in the night while

their invited guests slept off their torpor. Carmer makes quite a yarn of this incident (pp. 195–215).

Perhaps my view of Carmer's writing on Indians is best expressed in a review that I wrote: "*Dark Trees to the Wind* shows a maturity of style and makes masterly use of both oral and written tradition. Neither a proper folklorist nor a true historian, Carmer belongs rather to the *belles lettres*."¹¹

IV

By all odds the greatest man of letters to confront the Iroquois literature and observe and interview them in the field was Edmund Wilson (1895–1972). Wilson's career as America's foremost critic and essayist in this century has been fully covered by other writers, so I shall confine my remarks to his Iroquois adventures which I shared in part. During the fifteen years that I knew him until his passing, he lifted up my mind, as the Iroquois would say, from the sloth of administration, convinced me that I should and could write prose free of anthropological jargon, and persuaded me to give up my job or find a research professorship where I could discharge my obligations to scholarship. Our meeting had a profound effect upon my life that I could in no way have anticipated.

Wilson sought me out in late October in 1957. I was then Assistant Commissioner for the New York State Museum and Science Service; it must have been a busy day for there are no entries in my diary for October 28, when in the afternoon my secretary ushered in an unexpected caller, a not infrequent occurrence in the life of a public official. The visitor was not tall but close-coupled and on the pudgy side. He was florid-faced, dressed in a brown Brooks Brothers' suit of comfortable cut, and carried a brown wide-brimmed felt hat. As he sat down in the chair across the desk, he wheezed a bit and then stammered as he commenced to speak. (My first reaction was a mental note: another person who must see the Director and needs to talk but who should be seeing an analyst.) "All the paths lead here," he said. "Everywhere I have been among the Iroquois, I have been told that I must see Fenton." I asked him where he had been, and he told of his visits to St. Regis and Caughnawaga among the Mohawks where he had been introduced by Harry White, a Mohawk schoolman in the village of

Port Leyden near his summer home in Talcottville. As I listened, I came to realize that this man is no nut and he may indeed be Edmund Wilson, as he says. The flow of his well-structured sentences and the pertinence of his questions moved me to dig out a bibliography and to suggest that we both watch the ascent of the Pleiades and mark the first full moon after the winter solstice so as to be ready to visit the Senecas at the Indian New Year twenty days later. Wilson left for a plane to Boston, and wrote me next day from Wellfleet that he would be ready.¹²

I thought little about this interview for several months, but as the time approached when one could count twenty days to the fifth night of the next new moon, I sent Wilson a wire. If he were still interested, he should show up in Albany on or about January 22. Again I was preoccupied with other things. On that day the then State Archeologist, Dr. William A. Ritchie, was scheduled to report on the first season's work under a National Science Foundation grant. In the midst of the seminar, Wilson wheezed in hobbling with a cane, and announced: "I am here, but I have the gout. I am ready to start when you are." The taxi driver who followed him put down heavy bags and Wilson sat down to hear the rest of Ritchie's presentation. At the end he asked Ritchie several pointed questions. Meanwhile, my secretary had ordered up a State car for what I had resolved should be an official visit to the Senecas. It was the first of several such trips in the next year or two that Wilson and I made together, which facilitated much good talk as we drove and enabled me to share field work with him.

After a late start, toward evening as it began to snow, we stopped off at Geneva to have dinner and spend the night at the Hotel Seneca. Edmund wrote to Elena his wife that I talked a blue streak all the way, but much to the point. I wanted Edmund to see Canandaigua, the site of the Pickering Treaty of 1794, in daylight, and possibly view the document in the Ontario County Historical Society, because at the time that treaty was thought to be crucial to the Kinzua Dam controversy which was at its height just then. The Allegany Reservation, where we were going to see the Midwinter Festival, was the affected area and the Coldspring Longhouse settlement was at the center of the lake. I had the feeling that the ceremonies which I had commenced studying in 1933 would never be the same again. Moreover, there were certain positions that I per-

sonally favored but as a public official could not take which I hoped that Edmund would be moved to discuss in print.

Our journey that morning took us beyond Batavia, the legendary place of the giant mosquito, and the earthwork enclosure near Oakfield and into Tonawanda Reservation at Basom. Crossing the creek and heading "down below" to the Longhouse district, we met two Seneca matrons about to go shopping for the Longhouse who affirmed that tomorrow was indeed the New Year, the same as at Cattaraugus and Allegany, a coincidence worth noting given the variations in the lunar calendar and how the old people set the date. The Faithkeepers having confirmed my own prediction of the date, there was time to call on Nick Bailey (originally Billy) and his wife Edna and get him to tell Edmund about the people who had built the fort at Oakfield and originally inhabited Tonawanda village. I gloss these details from my diary because the interview afforded me my first opportunity to watch Edmund at work. The old labor journalist listened well and asked a few precise and apt questions on which Nick expanded. Wilson took no notes, although I wrote down the Seneca terms for the three earlier peoples on the Niagara frontier. Next day in Salamanca, Wilson discharged his memory of the interview in a letter to his wife.¹³

I was interested in how he worked, and having observed him in this first interview, asked him. He had established rapport almost immediately. Indeed I had never seen anyone get into the confidence of informants so rapidly, and this was to be repeated in the days that followed. He told me that he habitually kept a journal in which he wrote, as time afforded, first-draft accounts of events and his own impressions as soon as possible after the event or interview, that he had schooled himself to retain whole conversations and to recall situations sometimes several days afterward. He also wrote letters to his wife, to his publisher and to friends of varying length, the first being the more substantive and Elena kept these until his return. These materials he mined later in his writing, as the interview with Nick Bailey in *Apologies* (pp. 186–88). Wilson's method may be suited to the kind of critical journalism of which he was master, and I have employed it in situations where notebook and pencil or tape recorder offends other participants in the situation, but I know of no substitute for taking texts then or afterwards, nor does it have the precision of getting informants

who know the culture to recall afterward the significant parts of an event or ceremony that is patterned in their unconscious. One's observations include much accidental behavior that may not be significant, and until the observer learns the pattern that governs such events he may miss much that is important.

Wilson had prepared himself for the field by reading widely in the literature to which I had called his attention. He commented on my ability to operate in the native language, which I control but imperfectly, and kept asking for study materials. Wallace Chafe's *Seneca Morphology and Dictionary* (1967) was then in the formative stages, and his *Handbook of the Seneca Language* (1963) was several years away; but Wilson's demands inspired me to finance the fieldwork for both undertakings. He kept saying that the want of such materials handicapped him greatly, and Elena, whom I presently met on a visit to Boston, remarked that "*Apologies*" was hurried. This was also the period when Edmund was being harried by the Internal Revenue Service.

From Tonawanda we crossed the flatlands to Gowanda, some 30 miles southwest of Buffalo, where Cattaraugus Creek dissects the Allegheny Plateau. We kept a dinner date with the attorney for the Seneca Nation, picked up pills for Edmund's gout, and stayed over hoping to catch the round of the Bigheads at Newtown next morning. In a late start we first called on Cornelius Seneca, sometime President of the Seneca Nation, that Edmund might hear his views on the Kinzua affair. At noon the Bigheads were making their second round of the houses when we reached the Longhouse at Newtown. The officials greeted us cordially just as the heralds entered by the opposite door, bumping their cornpounders and chanting indistinctly, apparently unsure of their lines. One wore a bear skin, the other an old blanket; both trailed cornhusk anklets but wore no other cornhusk decoration, a somewhat inadequate wardrobe for the role. At least Edmund got to see and hear the Feast of Dreams announced, albeit it was a poor performance.

To the Senecas, going over the hills to Allegany is "to the other side," or to Ohi:yo?. That evening we visited Franklin and Mary John at Quaker Bridge, which is now inundated. Mary, matron of the Beaver clan, insisted we stay for supper, which enabled Edmund to share in Seneca hospitality and listen to Franklin foretell the gloomy future of his Nation.

Often its President, Franklin, then Allegany's lone working farmer, nevertheless commanded a vigorous style of address, both in Seneca and in English, that recalled the great Cornplanter. I never heard him in better form than in response to Edmund's questions.

There was a blizzard in the night so we stayed in Salamanca next morning until noon. Over a leisurely breakfast Edmund urged upon me the writing of an Iroquois classic, he volunteered to speak to his publishers, and we discussed alternate plans for a work which I have never managed to fulfill. My tutor pronounced: "I have read your papers and you do not use the anthropological jargon. What the book needs is a clear style from one steeped in it—an authority." We estimated that such a writing project would take two years, that a sabbatical might break the back of it. "Could you get a year off from your job," he asked? With two youngsters in college just then, this prospect seemed impracticable. (I had first to convince the Commissioner of Education to inaugurate a plan of leaves of absence, chair the planning committee, and then manage six months of leave with pay as a reward.) The chapters written since 1960 for the great work have appeared in various journals and their publication recalls the folkloristic motif of magic flight—hindrances thrown off to the pursuing monsters—without ever delivering the manuscript.

It would be unproductive to compare my diary entries on the Midwinter Festival with the account Edmund printed in *Apolo-gies*. At the time I read the pertinent chapters in typescript and made corrections then when the events were fresh in mind. What impressed me then as now was Edmund's receptiveness to criticism and his willingness to re-write even in galley-proof to get it right. He told me that with him six or seven drafts were not unusual, although I would have settled for his second or third. This is a lesson for academics: that even the consummate master of American prose in our century did not bring it off in a single draft.

Edmund's gout proved something of an asset with the old men of Coldspring Longhouse. Jake Logan, who had known my father and who had previously treated me as a neophyte, immediately came to Edmund's assistance with prescriptions of herbal remedies. Albert Jones, a great singer and speaker, and Ed Coury, though mostly white, who had understudied with Chauncey Johnny John, my old informant, joined the con-

sultation. Jake, then 83, recalled the building of the then present longhouse when he was a boy of perhaps 10, which would date its erection about 1886. "The old longhouse," he said, "stood out near the road; it was built of logs and plank-sided up and down."

Having settled in among the old men at the north stove, we listened as the speeches flowed and the ceremony progressed. Indians have a great capacity for boredom. In the long intervals, however, boys grow restless, although their antics seem not to bother the speakers. They were soon quieted with watching Edmund perform feats of magic: manipulating coins to appear and disappear, a handkerchief mouse that kept appearing from his coat sleeve—all done in low key, which even the older Seneca men and women enjoyed.

Whether it was the gout pills, Jake Logan's advice, or fulfillment of the Seneca aphorism—"perhaps all he needs is a little dance"—within a day or two Edmund improved sufficiently to walk around the singers' bench in Feather Dance, an act which endeared him to the Longhouse leaders, for whom participation is the essence of respect and the key to acceptance.

People who live in the oral tradition are rather sensitive about writing. The Senecas since Red Jacket's day have reason to believe they have been done in by "all that pen and paper business." While they wish to maintain their tradition and have their children learn the lore and ceremonies in the native language, they are reluctant to see it made explicit; they often used to ask me "are we really like that?"; and they suspect that writers of books make money off their religion. In a sense that is true. But, in my experience, they avidly snap up and cherish the monographs of ethnologists going back to L. H. Morgan, and one sees some woefully dogeared copies circulating on the reserves. This ambivalence raises some ethical questions.

What does the ethnologist, who has enjoyed the confidence of traditional people, who has participated in their "doings," and who has striven to learn and get things right, do with his field notes? He has an obligation to himself for having invested his time in a profession, he owes a debt to the academicians who trained him, and his colleagues expect that he will write up his notes and share them. This means publishing. How then should he treat materials that are sensitive? In my experience subjects that were formerly not classified have been added to the list of tabu topics by younger Indians who have

recently discovered their cultural roots and resent persons who have applied themselves to learning their culture but are never part of it. Many topics once discussed openly were recorded by folklorists and became part of the literature a century ago. I have particular reference to the origin legend and the ceremonies of the Little Water Medicine Society. Parker published on it in 1909, although the origin legend was known much earlier.

The relevance of this argument to Edmund Wilson and to myself is that when he first applied for admission to attend the all night sing to renew the strength of the Medicine, which I had been attending for years, word came back that he would be admitted if I came too and if he promised not to write anything about it.¹⁴ The following June we went up to Tonawanda together to honor an invitation that was renewed. We arrived in the late afternoon at the home of Chief Corbett Sundown, whose wife Priscilla insisted that we take supper with them because it would be a long night. I remember distinctly Edmund's explaining to Chief Sundown that he was a writer and he planned to write an account of our visit. Perhaps Sundown did not get the point, or was too polite to make an issue of it. Chapter nine of *Apologies* says it all, and it represents our combined observations on that occasion. Although I sat with the singers, I wrote nothing at the time, but I did read and correct Edmund's manuscript. I still regard this chapter as one of the finest pieces in the Iroquois literature and the people are lucky to have it from one who had written hundreds of notices of Broadway performances.

Our parting at daybreak with Chief Sundown was most cordial, just as Wilson ends his book. On reaching home I wrote Chief Sundown thanking him for his hospitality and the privilege of sitting with the singers.

The New Yorker ran much of Wilson's material before the book appeared toward the close of 1959. For me the collaboration was a great learning experience. But it did not end as I had expected. No Seneca objected until a certain self-appointed protector of Tonawanda tradition went up to Tonawanda and confronted Chief Sundown with a copy of the *New Yorker* in hand. The person also called on Nick Bailey and questioned the propriety of his having received us and demonstrated the flute music, an instrument on which he was a virtuoso performer. This is an example of the way that White people some-

times patronize Indians, a process that I had observed at Tonawanda during the New Deal, and it also illustrates how adept Indians are at manipulating White people. In this particular case Carl Carmer had devoted more attention to me than perhaps I deserved, and Wilson had ignored such patrons of the Tonawanda people altogether. The pity of it all is now that the one book which lifted the cause of Iroquois cultural autonomy into the realm of *belle lettres*, a work which generated support for the Seneca case against the U.S. Corps of Army Engineers over Kinzua, a book that was read by President Kennedy and discussed in the White House, should end up on the proscribed list at the Seneca Iroquois National Museum.

V

Of the three literary men whom I have discussed and of their images of the Iroquois, Edmonds created convincing characters of Indians without pretending to know them. Carmer, who was fun to be with and had a real feel for a story, seemed less interested in digging for the truth, and might with a little more effort have created more than a mood. And Wilson perceived the Iroquois world view intuitively and overcame any obstacle to get at the truth. Indeed he frequently proclaimed that he made his own version, one that I came to respect. Men of his ilk walk the earth but seldom and I am glad to have shared the path with him for a few brief years.

NOTES

1. Francis Jennings has remained Parkman's most persistent critic. His indictment of Parkman's use of sources is devastating. See Jennings, "A Vanishing Indian: Francis Parkman Versus His Sources," (1963).

2. See Review, *Letters of Francis Parkman*, ed. Wilbur R. Jacobs, *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961): 849-50; Introduction, 1962 edition of Morgan's *League of the Iroquois* (New York: Corinth Books), pp. v-xviii; Review, *Lewis Henry Morgan: the Indian Journals, 1859-62*, ed. Leslie A. White, *Science* 131 (1960): 402; "The Iroquois Confederacy in the Twentieth Century: A Case Study of the Theory of Lewis H. Morgan in 'Ancient Society,'" *Ethnology* 4(3), (1965): 251-65.

3. Laurence Hauptman, *The Iroquois and the New Deal* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981).

4. "Tonawanda Longhouse Ceremonies: Ninety Years after Lewis Henry

Morgan," (1941).

5. See Morgan 1850, 1851.

6. William L. Stone, *Life of Joseph Brant-Thayendanegea . . .* (1838).

7. I am indebted to Professor Laurence Hauptman of New Paltz for finding and excerpting for me the Edmonds-La Farge correspondence in the La Farge Papers at the University of Texas Library, Austin. Quoted by permission.

8. La Farge Papers.

9. William N. Fenton, "An Outline of Seneca Ceremonies at Coldspring Longhouse," (1936).

10. Seaver, *A Narrative of the Life of Mary Jemison: the White Woman of the Genesee* (1932).

11. Fenton, "Review Note: C. Carmer, *Dark Trees to the Wind*" (1950).

12. Wilson to Fenton, October 29, 1957, in Elena Wilson, ed., *Edmund Wilson* (1977):553.

13. Wilson to Elena Wilson, January 24, 1958, in *ibid.*, pp. 553-54.

14. William N. Fenton diary, entry for January 7, 1959.

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