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Book Review: The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701, by Jon Parmenter

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THE EDGE OF THE WOODS: IROQUOIA, 1534–1701, by Jon Parmenter, 2010, Michigan State University Press, 520 pages, black and white illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index, \$49.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Jack Rossen

This volume begins with a sound and interesting goal, to reconsider the nature of Iroquois culture and identity through the lens of interactions with European colonial powers from 1534–1701. The central theme is mobility as a source of Native power and cohesion and as a strategy for evading colonial domination. According to the author, this perspective departs from concepts of immobility and fixity that have been imposed on the Iroquois by academics, suggesting that Contact period mobility indicated inevitable decline and cultural decay. This work seeks to challenge the linkage between fixed locality and culture by suggesting that Iroquois expansionism outside what is now New York State strengthened rather than eroded their identity. Throughout, the key metaphor is the “edge of the woods,” a Native ceremonial practice of meeting and escorting visitors outside the settlement that expressed peaceful relations, institutionalized hospitality, and exerted power and control over space. The relationship between the title, representing peaceful relations, and the contents of the volume discussed below is murky. The primary evidence is Euro-American historical documents, although lip service is also given to oral traditions and historical archaeology. The book is organized with an introduction that explicates the mobility and strengthened identity thesis, six descriptive chapters organized in chronological order, and an epilogue.

The bulk of the volume is a detailed history of warfare between the Iroquois and the various Euro-American powers, along with the history of Iroquois warfare on other Native nations. There are also in-depth descriptions of relations with the Jesuits because of the extensive documentary record created by the Jesuits. Presented is an unrelentingly violent portrayal of the Iroquois (whose true name of Haudenosaunee, or People of the Longhouse, is never mentioned). The language of the

narrative, both as written by the author and as borrowed uncritically from documents, supports an ultra-violent stereotype of the Iroquois. “Standard accounts...depict the League as undertaking a rampage against virtually every people in the Northeast” (p. 80). Documentary quotes in the text describe the Iroquois as “the plague of the country, the scourge of the human race and of the Christian faith” (p. 82). Throughout the historical chapters there is not much to alleviate the one-sided descriptions of atrocities committed by the Iroquois. Because of the emphasis on Iroquois mobility, there are no descriptions of European atrocities. There are only dispersed and brief attempts to tie this extensive historical narrative and summation back to the principles of identity and culture discussed in the introduction.

A major issue is the author’s assumption that the late 16th century and especially the first half of the 17th century represent the formation period of the League or Confederacy of the Iroquois. The confederacy is thus presented as a reaction or adaptation to the arrival of Euro-Americans. There is considerable debate over the timing of the formation of the confederacy that is not acknowledged here. Most archaeologists and historians recognize the confederacy as a pre-European-contact phenomenon, at least dating to the early decades of the 15th century (Fenton 1998:68–72; Snow 1994). A few scholars discuss archaeological evidence that suggest much earlier origins dating from the 12th to 10th centuries, dates that accord with oral traditions (Johansen 1995; Mann and Fields 1997). This debate is fluid (Engelbrecht 2003:129–131; Kuhn and Sempowski 2001), but why assume a post-contact confederacy here? It is stated that the “completion of the process of League formation reflected an increasing concern with...unprecedented, revolutionary and spiritually powerful phenonema,” specifically the intrusion of Europeans. Furthermore, the Peacemaker epic story of confederacy formation represents “protocols pertaining to the transformation of a cultural context of intergroup hostility and suspicion to one in which freedom of movement and peaceful communication prevail...” (pp. xlv–xlvi). (By the way, the name of the Peacemaker is specifically used, though its annunciation is prohibited by

many Haudenosaunee people.) A significant discrepancy is raised but never addressed. If the confederacy with its Great Peace was formed on the principles of ending centuries of warfare, why does a post-contact formation set off an unprecedented period of aggression against both Natives and Europeans? The confederacy undoubtedly passed through various stages of development and reorganization, so why not view this period as one more stage or incarnation of an established confederacy? Was there never truly a Great Peace? Why were the Peacemaker and his companions Hiawatha and Jigonsaseh, supposedly late-16th- or early-17th-century people in this account, not known as historical figures? A confederacy with some time depth might better explain the power and organization of the Iroquois as they confidently navigated the tumultuous and fragmenting times of the contact era.

To be sure, long-distance travel, trade, and the establishment of new settlements that expanded territory were hallmarks of Iroquois culture and political strategy of the contact era. The thesis presented in the volume is that within the complexity of relations, warfare, and economic and spiritual interactions, "Iroquois society did not disintegrate during the...seventeenth century" (p. 147). This idea has been previously presented by historical archaeologists such as Kurt Jordan (2008); however, key sub-headings include "humiliation" (p. 175), "revenge" (p. 182), "escalation and innovation" (p. 195), "unraveling relations" (p. 207) and "final hostilities" (p. 237). As the volume winds down, there is an attempt to describe the numerous military and diplomatic actions as a "geography of solidarity" and an "evolving network of social, political and ethical relations among individuals, communities and nations" (p. 273). Long distance movement of the Iroquois is described as a way of "recalibrating" internal and external relations and "minimizing potential social conflicts" (p. 273). Given the length and detail of the narrative, this may have been partially true, but the thesis is undermined by the graphic imagery of a century and a half of chaos and violent death.

A brief epilogue returns to the idea that "previous treatments of pre-colonial Iroquois have held them immobile" (p. 276) and makes

a strained link between New York State's attempts to tax Native-sold cigarettes and gasoline, as well as the federal rejection of a Mohawk casino in the Catskills, and a continuing misunderstanding of Iroquois concepts of mobility. Repeated is the theme that Iroquois mobility and related strength of identity had to be rendered "inauthentic," with academics complicit, to control the Iroquois and build the nation-states of the U.S. and Canada. In final analysis, *The Edge of the Woods* works best as an ethnohistoric chronicle of regional warfare and (mostly failed) diplomacy as viewed through the eyes of Euro-Americans.

Anyone interested in the events of this tangled period of history, conflict, and the Iroquois' tenacious struggle for survival will be both interested and maybe disappointed. The promise of illuminating how Iroquois identity strengthened in the early to middle Contact era is only partially fulfilled. The volume reads more as a compilation of Eurocentric blow-by-blow accounts, and the thesis centered on mobility strategies and identity seems pasted over the descriptive historical narrative. One can only imagine how this volume would have been enhanced by conversations with Haudenosaunee leaders and historians about their stories, character, and motivations during Contact times, as well as their interpretations of the historical documents. This is especially relevant with the development of indigenous archaeology (Watkins 2000), a paradigm that emphasizes collaboration and the development of community projects with Native peoples and the use of Native knowledge and oral histories in the interpretation of sites and documents (for northeast examples, see Hansen and Rossen 2007; Kerber 2006; Silliman 2008).

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