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978-0-521-18344-4 - The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815

Richard White

Excerpt

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Refugees: a world made of fragments

Human populations construct their cultures in interaction with one another, and not in isolation.

Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History*

I

The Frenchmen who traveled into the *pays d'en haut*, as they called the lands beyond Huronia, thought they were discovering new worlds. They were, however, doing something more interesting. They were becoming cocreators of a world in the making. The world that had existed before they arrived was no more. It had been shattered. Only fragments remained. Like a knife scoring a pane of glass, warfare apparently far more brutal than any known previously among these peoples had etched the first fine dangerous lines across the region in the 1640s. Broad cracks had appeared, as epidemics of diseases unknown before in these lands carried off tens of thousands of people. And then, between 1649 and the mid-1660s, Iroquois attacks had fallen like hammer blows across the length and breadth of the lands bordering the Great Lakes and descended down into the Ohio Valley.

The Iroquois desired beaver and the hunting lands that yielded them, and they wanted captives to replace their dead or to atone at the torture stake for their loss. The coupling of the demands of the fur trade with Iroquois cultural imperatives for prisoners and victims created an engine of destruction that broke up the region's peoples. Never again in North America would Indians fight each other on this scale or with this ferocity. Amid the slaughter people fled west. The largely Algonquian-speaking world west of Iroquoia broke up, and the Iroquois pushed the fragments west.¹

Shattered peoples usually vanish from history, and many of the Iroquoian peoples – the Eries, the Neutrals – who fell before the epidemics and the

¹ For recent accounts of the Iroquois wars, see Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 84–113; Daniel Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (1983): 528–59; and Bruce Trigger, *The Children of Aataentsic: A History of the Huron People to 1660*, 2 vols. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1972), 2:767–97, 820–21.

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warfare, disappeared as organized groups. But most Algonquians did not disappear. Instead, together with Frenchmen, they pieced together a new world from shattered pieces. They used what amounted to an imported imperial glue to reconstruct a village world. This village world sustained, and was in turn sustained by, the French empire.

The story of the creation of this world forms the beginning of this book, and it must begin with the often horrific fragments left by the shattering of the old. To write a coherent story of the Iroquois hammer striking Algonquian glass, historians have traced the blows of the hammer. When they have featured the victims of the Iroquois, they have written about other Iroquoians – the Hurons, Petuns, Neutrals, and Eries – because these groups either had Jesuit missionaries among them or lived beside neighbors that did. They have not concentrated on the shattering Algonquian world, because it is hard to tell a story of fragmentation. And in any case, the very events grew vague as the Iroquois blows fell farther and farther west among peoples the French barely knew. When the French did come to know these peoples, the blows were still falling and the story seemed only chaos.

The result is a historical landscape that consists largely of dim shadows. There are tribal traditions collected a century and a half or more after the fact. There are the memories of French traders – their recollections in old age of a youth among strangers. There are contemporary accounts, vivid renderings of events in which details are unfamiliar and without apparent meaning. Thus a fractured society has been preserved in fractured memory. To pretend this world exists otherwise is to deceive. And in any case, this fragmentary, distorted world is, for the historian, good enough. For the history in question during the horrible years of the mid and late seventeenth century is a history of perceptions, of attempts to make sense, of attempts to create coherence from shattered parts. For the French and the refugees alike, older patterns and older routines were in collapse. For all concerned this was a world where dreams and nightmares happened. It was a desperate world where accidental congruences and temporary interests became the stuff from which to forge meaning and structure. The fragments are the history. It is, therefore, a world best initially perceived in fragments, as both Algonquians and Frenchmen perceived it and tried to make sense of its danger, strangeness, and horror.

The horror that the Iroquois would bring to the *pays d'en haut* was first prefigured by another confederation of Iroquoian-speaking peoples. The Neutrals, soon themselves to become Iroquois victims, obtained iron weapons from Europeans when their enemies to the west still relied on stone. In the mid-1640s a large Neutral war party “to the number of 2,000” attacked a stockaded Algonquian village in Michigan. These Algonquians were a

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people the Neutrals called the Nation of Fire. Most likely, they were Fox or Mascoutens. After a siege of ten days, the Neutrals captured the fort. They killed many on the spot, but they retained eight hundred captives – men, women, and children. Of these, they burned seventy warriors. The old men had a crueler fate. The Neutrals put out their eyes and girdled their mouths, leaving them to starve in a land they could no longer see.²

As Iroquois attacks depopulated the lands around Lake Ontario, refugees fled west and the Iroquois followed. Refugee Ottawas and remnants of the Hurons and Petuns fled in stages as pressure from the Iroquois increased. In 1653 eight hundred Iroquois cornered their prey at Green Bay, one of the stops on this staggered flight west. Many of the besiegers were, it turned out, “the offspring of the people whom they had come to attack.” Far from their original home, Hurons adopted by the Iroquois attacked refugee Hurons. For a long time, the Iroquois besieged the fort and villages. But in this siege it was the attackers rather than the besieged who grew hungry, and so eventually the two sides negotiated a truce. In exchange for food and a safe withdrawal, the Iroquois agreed to surrender the Hurons who were among them.

Some of these Hurons, however, had developed ties to their captors. On the eve of the departure of the Iroquois, the Ottawas at Green Bay gave each Iroquois warrior a loaf of poisoned corn bread. A Huron woman, who had married an Iroquois man but had fled west with the refugees, knew the secret. She told her son, who, apparently, had come with the Iroquois, not to eat the bread. The son informed the Iroquois of the plot, and they escaped.

The salvation of the Iroquois proved temporary. They divided into two parties. The smaller party went north, where warriors from the bands of the people who were to become the Chippewas and the Mississaugas attacked and defeated them. Few escaped. The main force pushed south into the prairie country. They reached a small Illinois village. The men fled, and the Iroquois killed the women and children. But other Illinois were nearby, and the warriors surprised and overwhelmed the Iroquois. In this warfare their deaths only became the seeds for new attacks.³

The Iroquois onslaught did not halt other wars in the *pays d'en haut*, and sometime during the Iroquois wars, four or five hundred Miami warriors marched against their southern enemies. In their absence, a band of Senecas destroyed their village. Only one old woman, left for dead, survived. She told

² *JR* 27:25–27.

³ Nicolas Perrot, *Memoir on the Manners, Customs, and Religion of the Savages of North America*, in Emma Helen Blair (ed.), *The Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi Valley and Region of the Great Lakes*, 2 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1911), 1:151–56.

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Although such portraits emphasized the exoticism of Indians, the trade blanket, the trade beads, and the breech cloth all testify to the mixing of European and Indian worlds. (Mackinac State Historic Parks)

the returning Miamis that the Senecas had marched the women and children east.

Every night as the Senecas traveled home, they killed and ate a Miami child. And every morning, they took a small child, thrust a stick through its head and sat it up on the path with its face toward the Miami town they had

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left. Behind the Senecas came the pursuing Miamis, and at every Seneca campsite, brokenhearted parents recognized their child.

When the Senecas were within a day's march of their own village, they sent their people a message telling them to prepare a great kettle and spoon to enjoy the good broth they were bringing them. It was at this last campsite that the pursuing Miami warriors at last caught the Senecas. But the Senecas had guns and the Miamis did not, and so the Miamis decided to set an ambush rather than attack the camp directly.

Two Miami spies watched the Seneca camp. And that night, as usual, for the evening meal one of the Senecas decapitated a child and prepared its body for the kettle. Hearing a noise outside the camp, the cook tossed the head into the bushes and told the wolf he imagined lurking there that he was giving it the head of a Miami for its supper. The Miami spies carried the head back to their companions who sorrowfully recognized it.

When the heavily laden Senecas reached the Miami ambush, they were overwhelmed. The Miamis killed all but six. Two escaped. Four were taken prisoners. The Miamis killed two of their captives and beheaded them. They ran a string through the ears of the heads and hung the heads around the necks of the remaining two prisoners whose hands, noses, and lips they cut off. They then sent them home to tell of the vengeance of the Miamis. At the Seneca village all was horror and confusion. The Miamis returned home with those of their relatives whom the Senecas had spared.⁴

Pierre Esprit Radisson and his brother-in-law Médard Chouart, better known as Des Groseilliers, were the bravest and most experienced of the French who followed the refugees west. In the late 1650s and early 1660s when Iroquois war parties haunted the rivers and portages, they made several voyages, going as far as the Mississippi in search of furs. Sometimes they traveled with Jesuits in search of souls; always they traveled with Huron-Petuns, Ottawas, and other refugees who had come to Montreal for guns and other goods. Their travels took them into a world of horrors. They recorded events that they could not fully decipher.

In 1658 Radisson and Des Groseilliers departed on the voyage which eventually took them to the Mississippi. Their own party contained twenty-nine Frenchmen, who desired "but to do well" for themselves, and six Indians, all or mostly Hurons. As was customary, they formed a convoy, with others going west. Of the French, only Radisson and Des Groseilliers had experience in the western woods. The novice voyageurs advanced carelessly

⁴ C. C. Trowbridge, *Meeameear Traditions: Occasional Contributions from the Museum of Anthropology of the University of Michigan*, no. 7, ed. Vernon Kintz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1938): 75-76.

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upriver, laughing at the caution of Radisson and Des Groseilliers and calling them women. After three days' travel, a single Iroquois appeared on shore with a hatchet in his hand, signaling the French to land. Even after the Iroquois threw his hatchet away and sat on the ground, the novices feared to approach him. The Iroquois finally rose, advanced into the water, and said (in the fractured English of the Radisson manuscript): "I might have escaped your sight, but that I would have saved you. I fear not death." When the canoes finally closed on him, and their occupants, binding him, took him on board, he began to sing his death song.

When he had finished singing, he made a speech. "Brethren," he began, "the day the sun is favorable to me [it] appointed me to tell you that you are witless, before I die." The enemy, he told them, was all around. The enemy watched the French; it listened to them. It regarded them as easy prey. "Therefore I was willing to die to give you notice. . . . I would put myself in death's hands to save your lives." He instructed them on how to proceed if they were to save themselves. The "poor wretch," wrote Radisson, "spoke the truth and gave good instructions." The next day, the party met Iroquois warriors on the river. After initial panic, the French and Hurons forced up. They then brought in the prisoner "who soon was dispatched, burned and roasted, and eaten. The Iroquois had so served them." Why the Iroquois warrior had surrendered to save the French, the French never knew. In the end, all the French but Radisson and Des Groseilliers decided to return to the French settlements. The two brothers-in-law, endangered and saved by events they did not understand, continued in company with the Indians. They could explain cruelty; they could not make sense of kindness, if that is what the Iroquois by the river had intended.⁵

The refugee villages in the West welcomed Radisson and Des Groseilliers and those who followed. Those who had no traders eagerly sought them. In the 1660s, the Miami and Mascouten refugees who had settled inland from Green Bay invited Nicolas Perrot and a companion to visit them. When the French landed at the Mascouten village, an old man carrying a red stone calumet – a long-stemmed pipe decorated with feathers – and a woman with a bag containing a pot of cornmeal met them. Behind the old man and the woman came two hundred young men with "headresses of various sort, and their bodies . . . covered with tattooing in black, representing many kinds of figures." The young men carried weapons. The old man first presented the calumet to the French on the side next to the sun. He then presented the calumet to the sun, the earth, and all the directions. He rubbed Perrot's head, back, legs, and feet.

⁵ Arthur Adams (ed.), *The Explorations of Pierre Esprit Radisson* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1967), 80–84; also see Introduction.

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The old man spread a painted buffalo skin and sat Perrot and his companion upon it, but when he tried to kindle a fire with flint, he failed. Perrot drew forth his fire steel and immediately made fire. "The old man uttered long exclamations about the iron, which seemed to him a spirit." He lighted the calumet and they smoked. They ate porridge and dried meat and sucked the juice of green corn. They refilled the calumet, and the Mascouten blew smoke into Perrot's face. Perrot felt himself being smoked like drying meat, but he uttered no complaint. When the Mascoutens tried to carry the Frenchmen into the village, however, Perrot stopped them. Men who could shape iron, Perrot said, had the strength to walk.

At the village the ceremonies were renewed. The Miami chiefs, entirely naked except for embroidered moccasins, met them at its edge. They came singing and holding their calumets. A war chief raised Perrot to his shoulders and carried him into the village where he was housed and feasted.

The next day the French gave a gun and a kettle as presents, and Perrot told the Miamis and Mascoutens that acquaintance with the French would transform their lives. "I am the dawn of that light, which is beginning to appear in your lands, as it were, that which precedes the sun, who will soon shine brightly and will cause you to be born again, as if in another land, where you will find more easily and in greater abundance, all that can be necessary to man." The gun, he said, was for the young men, the kettle was for the old; and he tossed a dozen awls and knives to the women, adding some cloth for their children. The French expected gifts of beaver in return, but it turned out that the Miamis singed their beaver in the fire, burning off their fur, before eating them. They had no beaver skins.

A week later a leading chief of the Miamis gave a feast to thank the sun for having brought Perrot to them. He made the feast in honor of a medicine bundle which contained "all that inspires their dreams." Perrot did not approve of the altar. He told the chief that he adored a God who would not let him eat food sacrificed to evil spirits or the skins of animals. The Miamis were greatly surprised. They asked Perrot if he would eat if they closed the bundles. He agreed. The chief then asked to be consecrated to Perrot's spirit "whom he would . . . prefer to his own who had not taught them to make hatchets, kettles, and all else that men needed." Perrot departed leaving the Miamis and Mascoutens to make sense of him while he tried to make sense of them. Neither Perrot nor the Indians were sure of the intentions of the other. Both sides, however, knew what they wanted from each other.⁶

Refugees were never quite sure what to make of Catholic priests. On August 8, 1665, Father Claude-Jean Allouez embarked from Three Rivers with six

⁶ Claude Charles Le Roy, Sieur de Bacqueville de La Potherie, *History of the Savage Peoples Who Are the Allies of New France*, in Blair (ed.), *Indian Tribes*, 1:322–32. Hereafter cited as La Potherie, *History*.

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other Frenchmen and four hundred Indians who had come to Three Rivers to trade. The Indians objected to taking Allouez. They thought he was a witch. They thought the baptism that he administered caused children to die. A headman threatened to abandon the Jesuit on an island if he persisted in following them. When Allouez's canoe broke, the Hurons reluctantly agreed to carry him. They changed their minds the next day, however, and Allouez and his companions had to repair the broken canoe and follow as best they could.

Eventually the Indians relented again and agreed to take all the French except for Allouez. He, they said, did not have the skill to paddle nor the strength to carry loads on a portage. Only after Allouez prayed for divine assistance did the Indians consent to take him, but he became the butt of their jokes, and they stole every item of his wardrobe that they could lay hands on.

Allouez endured the usual hardships of the dangerous passage to the lakes, and he created other hardships for himself. The Indians ate lichen soup; they once ate a rancid deer that had been dead for five days. When the Indians were careless with the powder they were transporting, it blew up and badly burned four warriors. Allouez interfered with the shaman's attempt to cure a burned man. Furious, the shaman smashed the canoe that carried Allouez.

In September Allouez reached the mission of Saint Esprit at Chequamegon. He discovered that the Indians there had abandoned their belief that baptism brought death. They now thought the rite essential for a long life. Not all Indians proved to be so taken with Christian ceremonies. Allouez preached to more than ten visiting nations only to be often greeted with contempt, mockery, scorn, and importunity.⁷

Allouez only tasted the hardships the northern Great Lakes offered; Radisson and Des Groseilliers drank more deeply of them. In 1661–62 they wintered with a band of Huron-Petuns, a farming people driven to the inhospitable shores of Lake Superior. The Huron-Petun men were not as skilled hunters as the surrounding Crees, Ojibwas, or even the Ottawas. They had few food reserves. Snow usually aided hunters, but this winter the snow fell in such quantities and was of such a lightness that the hunters could not go forth. Even though they made snowshoes six feet long and a foot and a half wide, the snow would not support them. Those who did struggle out made such noise floundering in the snow that the animals heard them at a distance and fled. Famine overtook the Huron-Petuns.

Apparently (the broken English of Radisson's manuscript is unclear), the

⁷ *JR*, 1666–67, 50:249–99.

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already hungry Huron-Petuns were joined by 150 Ottawa families who had even less food than the Hurons. They, too, had to have their share, although Radisson regarded them as the “cursedest, unblest, the unfamous, and cowardliest people I have ever seen amongst four score nations.” The Indians ate their dogs. They retraced their steps to earlier kills to eat the bones and entrails that they had discarded. The men ate their bowstrings, lacking strength to draw the bow. Starving, the women became barren. The famished died with a noise that made the survivors’ hair stand on end. The living scraped bark from trees, dried it over fires, and made it into a meal. They ate skins; they boiled and ate skin clothing. They ate the beaver skins their children had used as diapers, although the children had “beshit them above a hundred times.” Five hundred died before the weather changed. Then the snow crusted, and the deer, breaking through the crust, became trapped. Hunters could walk up to them and cut their throats with knives.⁸

Four years after his difficult passage into the *pays d’en haut*, the Fox greeted Father Allouez as a manitou, or an other-than-human person. The previous winter, Senecas had attacked a Fox village while the warriors were away hunting. The Senecas had slaughtered seventy women and children and the few men in the village. They had led thirty more women into captivity. Allouez gave the Fox presents to dry the tears caused by the Iroquois attack. He then explained to them “the principal Articles of our Faith, and made known the Law and the Commandments of God.”

Later, in private, a Fox told Allouez that his ancestor had come from heaven, and that “he had preached the unity and Sovereignty of a God who had made all the other Gods; that he had assured them that he would go to Heaven after his death, where he should die no more; and that his body would not be found in the place where it had been buried.” And this, indeed, the Fox said, had happened. The man informed Allouez that he was dismissing all his wives but one and was resolved to pray and obey God.

As for the other Fox, Allouez wrote his superior, “Oh, my God! What ideas and ways contrary to the Gospel these poor people have, and how much need there is of very powerful grace to conquer their hearts.” They accepted the unity and sovereignty of God, but “for the rest, they have not a word to say.” Allouez credited their resistance to an earlier visit by “two traders in Beaver-skins.” If these French “had behaved as they ought, I would have had less trouble giving these poor people other ideas of the whole French nation.” The Fox asked Allouez to stay near them, to teach them to pray to “the great Manitou.” Allouez could protect them from their enemies and intercede with the Iroquois to restore their relatives. Allouez

⁸ Adams (ed.), *Radisson*, 131–33.

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postponed his answer, telling them in the meantime to obey the true God, “who alone could procure them what they asked for and more.” That evening four Miami warriors brought more immediate consolation. They gave three Iroquois scalps and a half-smoked arm to the relatives of the dead.⁹

A few days later, entering the village of the Mascoutens, Allouez received the same treatment earlier accorded Perrot. They summarized in their requests to him the horrors of the period:

This is well, black Gown, that thou comest to visit us. Take pity on us; thou art a Manitou; we give thee tobacco to smoke. The Nadouessious and the Iroquois are eating us; take pity on us. We are often ill, our children are dying, we are hungry. Hear me, Manitou; I give thee tobacco to smoke. Let the earth give us corn, and the rivers yield us fish; let not disease kill us any more, or famine treat us any longer so harshly!

Toward evening, Allouez gathered the Mascoutens together. He was not, he told them, the manitou who was master of their lives. He was the manitou’s creature. The Mascoutens, he reported, only “half understood” him, but they “showed themselves well satisfied to have a knowledge of the true God.”¹⁰

On his way to the Illinois country in the late winter of 1677, Father Allouez passed near the Potawatomi villages around Green Bay. He learned that a young man whom he had baptized had been killed by a bear in a particularly gruesome manner. The bear had “torn off his scalp, disembowled him, and dismembered his entire body.” The bear had, in short, treated the young man as a warrior treated the body of an enemy. Allouez, being acquainted with the hunter’s parents, detoured to console them. He prayed with the parents, comforting the distressed mother as best he could.

Afterward, “by way of avenging . . . this death,” the relatives and friends of the dead man declared war on the bears. They killed more than five hundred of them, giving the Jesuits a share of the meat and skins because, they said, “God delivered the bears into their hands as satisfaction for the death of the Young man who had been so cruelly treated by one of their nation.”¹¹

II

In these fragments of contact and change are glimpses of both a world in disorder and the attempts of people to reorder it through an amalgam of

⁹ *JR* 54:219–27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 229–31.

¹¹ *JR* 60:151–53.