

Legends, Traditions, and Laws of the Iroquois, or Six Nations, and History of the Tuscarora Indians

Elias Johnson

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by Elias Johnson

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"foreign" language, expect grammar and spelling which might seem more strange or mistaken than mere time or preference can explain.

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LEGENDS, TRADITIONS, AND LAWS OF THE
IROQUOIS, OR SIX NATIONS
AND
HISTORY OF THE TUSCARORA INDIANS
BY
ELIAS JOHNSON,
A NATIVE TUSCARORA CHIEF.

INTRODUCTION.

"A book about Indians!"--who cares anything about them?

This will probably be the exclamation of many who glance on my little page. To those who know nothing concerning them, a whole book about Indians will seem a very prosy affair, to whom I can answer nothing, for they will not proceed as far as my Preface to see what reasons I can render for the seeming folly.

But to those who are willing to listen, I can say that the Indians are a very interesting people, whether I have made an interesting book about them or not.

The Antiquarian, the Historian, and the Scholar, have been a long time studying Indian character, and have given plenty of information concerning the Indian, but it is all in ponderous volumes for State and College libraries, and quite inaccessible to the multitude--those who only take up such book as may be held in the hand, sitting by the fire,--still remain very ignorant of the Children of Nature who inhabited the forests before the Saxon set his foot upon our shores.

There is also a great deal of prejudice, the consequence of this ignorance, and the consequence of the representations of your forefathers who were brought into contact with the Indians, under circumstances that made it impossible to judge impartially and correctly.

The Histories which are in the schools, and from which the first impressions are obtained, are still very deficient in what they relate of Indian History, and most of them are still filling the minds of children

and youth, with imperfect ideas. I have read many of the Histories, and have longed to see refuted the slanders, and blot out the dark pictures which the historians have wont to spread abroad concerning us. May I live to see the day when it may be done, for most deeply have I learned to blush for my people.

I thought, at first, of only giving a series of Indian Biographies, but without some knowledge of the government and religion of the Iroquois, the character of the Indians could not be understood or appreciated.

I enter upon the task with much distrust. It is a difficult task at all times to speak and to write in foreign language, and I fear I shall not succeed to the satisfaction of myself, or to my readers.

My title will not be so attractive to the American ears, as if it related to any other unknown people. A tour in Arabia, or Spain, or in India, or some other foreign country, with far less important and interesting material, would secure a greater number of readers, as we are always more curious about things afar off.

I might have covered many pages with "Indian Atrocities," but these have been detailed in other histories, till they are familiar to every ear, and I had neither room nor inclination for even a glance at war and its dark records.

THE AUTHOR.

PREFACE.

To animate a kinder feeling between the white people and the Indians, established by a truer knowledge of our civil and domestic life, and of our capabilities for future elevation, is the motive for which this work is founded.

The present Tuscarora Indians, the once powerful and gifted nation, after their expulsion from the South, came North, and were initiated in the confederacy of the Iroquois, and who formerly held under their jurisdiction the largest portion of the Eastern States, now dwell within your bounds, as dependent nations, subject to the guardianship and supervision of a people who displaced their forefathers. Our numbers, the circumstances of our past history and present condition, and more especially the relation in which we stand to the people of the State, suggest many important questions concerning our future destiny.

Being born to an inauspicious fate, which makes us the _inheritors of many wrongs_, we have been unable, of ourselves, to escape from the complicated difficulties which accelerate our decline. To make worse these adverse influences, the public estimation of the Indian, resting, as it does, upon the imperfect knowledge of their character, and infused, as it ever has been, with the prejudice, is universally unjust.

The time has come in which it is no more than right to cast away all ancient antipathies, all inherited opinions, and to take a nearer view of our social life, condition and wants, and to learn anew your duty concerning the Indians. Nevertheless, the embarrassments that have obstructed our progress, in the obscurity which we have lived, and the

prevailing indifference to our welfare, we have gradually overcome many of the evils inherent in our social system, and raised ourselves to a degree of prosperity. Our present condition, if considered in connection with the ordeal through which we have passed, shows that there is the presence of an element in our character which must eventually lead to important results.

As I do not profess that this work is based upon authorities, a question might arise in the breast of some reader, where these materials were derived, or what reliance is to be placed upon its contents. The credibility of a witness is known to depend chiefly upon his means of knowledge. For this reason, I deem it important to state, that I was born and brought up by Tuscarora Indian parents on their Reservation in the Town of Lewiston, N.Y. From my childhood up was naturally inquisitive and delighted in thrilling stories, which led me to frequent the old people of my childhood's days, and solicited them to relate the old Legends and their Traditions, which they always delighted to do. I have sat by their fireside and heard them, and thus they were instilled upon my young mind. I also owe much of my information to our Chief, JOHN MT. PLEASANT. I have also read much of Indian history, and compared them with our LEGENDS and TRADITIONS.

THE AUTHOR.

THE IROQUOIS.

NATIONAL TRAITS OF CHARACTER.

In all the early histories of the American Colonies, in the stories of Indian life and the delineations of Indian character, these children of nature are represented as savages and barbarians, and in the mind of a large portion of the community the sentiment still prevails that they were blood-thirsty, revengeful, and merciless, justly a terror to both friends and foes. Children are impressed with the idea that an Indian is scarcely human, and as much to be feared as the most ferocious animal of the forest.

Novelists have now and then clothed a few with a garb which excites your imagination, but seldom has one been invested with qualities which you would love, unless it were also said that through some captive taken in distant war, he inherited a whiter skin and a paler blood.

But I am inclined to think that Indians are not alone in being savage--not alone barbarous, heartless, and merciless.

It is said they were exterminating each other by aggressive and devastating wars, before the white people came among them. But wars, aggressive and exterminating wars, certainly, are not proofs of barbarity. The bravest warrior was the most honored, and this has been ever true of Christian nations, and those who call themselves christians have not yet ceased to look upon him who could plan most successfully the wholesale slaughter of human beings, as the most deserving his king's or his country's laurels. How long since the pean died away in praise of the Duke of Wellington? What have been the wars in which all Europe, or of America, has been engaged, That there has been no records of her history?

For what are civilized and christian nations drenching their fields with blood?

It is said the Indian was cruel to the captives, and inflicted unspeakable torture upon his enemy taken in battle. But from what we know of them, it is not to be inferred that Indian Chiefs were ever guilty of filling dungeons with innocent victims, or slaughtering hundreds and thousands of their own people, whose only sin was a quiet dissent from some religious dogma. Towards their enemies they were often relentless, and they had good reason to look upon the white man as their enemy. They slew them in battle, plotted against them secretly, and in a few instances comparatively, subjected individuals to torture, burned them at the stake, and, perhaps, flayed them alive. But who knows anything of the precepts and practices of the Roman Catholic Christendom, and quote these things as proofs of unmitigated barbarity.

At the very time that the Indians were using the tomahawk and scalping-knife to avenge their wrongs, peaceful citizens in every country of Europe, where the Pope was the man of authority, were incarcerated for no crime whatever, and such refinement of torture invented and practiced, as never entered in the heart of the fiercest Indian warrior that roamed the wilderness to inflict upon man or beast.

We know very little of the secrets of the inquisition, and this little chills our blood with horror. Yet these things were done in the name of Christ, the Savior of the World, the Prince of Peace, and not savage, but civilized. Christian men looked on, not coldly, but rejoicingly, while women and children writhed in flames and weltered in blood. Were the atrocities committed in the vale of Wyoming and Cherry Valley unprecedented among the Waldensian fastnesses and the mountains of Aurvergne? Who has read Fox's book of Martyrs, and found anything to parallel it in all the records of Indian warfare? The slaughter of St.

Bartholomew's days, the destruction of the Jews in Spain, and the Scotch Covenanters, were in obedience to the mandates of Christian princes,--aye, and some of them devised by Christian women who professed to be serving God, and to make the Bible the man of their counsel.

It is said also that the Indians were treacherous, and more, no compliance with the conditions of any treaty, was ever to be trusted. But the Puritan fathers cannot be wholly exonerated from the charge of faithlessness; and who does not blush to talk of Indian traitors when he remembers the Spanish invasion and the fall of the princely and magnanimous Montezuma?

Indians believed in witches, and burned them, too. And did not the sainted Baxter, with the Bible in his hand, pronounce it right, and was not the Indian permitted to be present, when the quiet unoffending woman was cast into the fire, by the decree of a Puritan council?

To come down to the more decidedly Christian times, it is not so very long since, in Protestant England, hanging was the punishment of a petty thief, long and hopeless imprisonment of a slight misdemeanor, when men were set up to be stoned and spit upon by those who claimed the exclusive right to be called humane and merciful.

Again, it is said, the Indian mode of warfare is, without exception, the most inhuman and revolting. But I do not know that those who die by the barbed and poisoned arrow linger in any more unendurable torment than

those who are mangled with powder and lead balls, and the custom of scalping among Christian murderers would save thousands from groaning days, and perhaps weeks, among heaps that cover victorious fields and fill hospitals with the wounded and dying. But scalping is not an invention exclusively Indian. "It claims," says Prescott, "high authority, or, at least, antiquity." And, further history, Herodotus, gives an account of it among the Scythians, showing that they performed the operation, and wore the scalp of their enemies taken in battle, as trophies, in the same manner as the North American Indian. Traces of the custom are also found in the laws of the Visigoths, among the Franks, and even the Anglo Saxons. The Northern Indians did not scalp, but they had a system of slavery, of which there are no traces to be found among the customs, laws, or legends of the Iroquois.

Again, it is said, "They carried away women and children captive, and in their long journey through the wilderness, they were subjected to heartrending trials."

The wars of Christian men throw hundreds and thousands of women and children helpless upon the cold world, to toil, to beg, and to starve.

This is not so bright a picture as is usually given of people who have written laws and have stores of learning, but people cannot see in any place that the coloring is too dark! There is no danger of painting Indians so they will become attractive to the civilized people.

There is a bright and pleasing side to the Indian character, and thinking that there has been enough written of their wars and cruelties, of the hunter's and fisherman's life, I have sat down at their fireside, listened to their legends, and am acquainted with their domestic habits, understand their finer feelings and the truly noble traits of their character.

It is so long now since they were the lords of this country, and formidable as your enemies, and they are so utterly wasted away and melted like snow under the meridian sun, and helpless, that you can sit down and afford to listen to the truth, and to believe that even your enemies had their virtues. Man was created in the image of God, and it cannot be that anything human is utterly vile and contemptible.

Those who have thought of Indians as roaming about in the forests hunting and fishing, or at war, will laugh, perhaps, at the idea of Indian homes, and domestic happiness. Yet there are no people of which we have any knowledge, among whom, in their primitive state, family ties and relationship were more distinctly defined, or more religiously respected than the Iroquois.

The treatment which they received from the white people, whom they always considered as intruders, aroused, and kept in exercise all their ferocious passions, so that none except those who associated with them as missionaries, or as captives, saw them in their true character, as they were to each other.

Almost any portrait that we see of an Indian, he is represented with tomahawk and scalping knife in hand, as if they possessed no other but a barbarous nature. Christian nations might with equal justice be always represented with cannon and balls, swords and pistols, as the emblems of their employment and their prevailing tastes.

The details of war are from far to great a portion of every History of civilized and barbarous nations, to conquer and to slay has been to long the glory of the christian people; he who has been most successful in subjugating and oppressing, in mowing down human beings, has too long wore the laural crown, been too long an object for the admiration of men and the love of women.

It seems you might be weary of the pomp and circumstance of war, of princely banquets, and gay cavalcades. The time and space you bestow upon King and courts, and the homage you pay to empty titles, are unworthy your professed republican spirit and preferences, let us turn aside from the war path, and sit down by the hearth-stone of peace.

In the picture which I have given, I have confined myself principally to the Iroquois, or Six Nations, a people who no more deserve the term savage, than the whites do that of heathen, because they have still lingering among them heathen superstitions, and many opinions and practices which deserves no better name.

The cannibals of some of the west Indies Islands, and the Islands of the Pacific, may with justice be termed savage, but a people like the Iroquois who had a government, established offices, a system of religion eminently pure and Spiritual, a code of honor and laws of hospitality, excelling those of all other nations, should be considered something better than savage, or utterly barbarous.

The terrible torture they inflicted upon their enemies, have made their name a terror, and yet there were not so many burnt, hung, and starved by them, as perished among Christian nations by these means. The miseries they inflicted were light, in comparison, with those they suffered. If individuals should have come among you to expose the barbarities of savage white men, the deeds they relate would quite equal anything known of Indian cruelty. The picture an Indian gives of civilized barbarism leaves the revolting custom of the wilderness quite in the back-ground. You experienced their revenge when you had put their souls and bodies at a stake, with your fire-water that maddened their brains. There was a pure and beautiful spirituality in their faith, and their conduct was much more influenced by it, as are any people, Christian or Pagan.

Is there anything more barbaric in the annals of Indian warfare, than the narrative of the Pequod Indians? In one place we read of the surprise of an Indian fort by night, when the inmates were slumbering, unconscious of any danger. When they awoke they were wrapped in flames, and when they Attempted to flee, were shot down like beasts. From village to village, from wigwam to wigwam, the murderers proceeded, "being resolved," as your historian piously remarks, "by God's assistance, to make a final destruction of them," until finally a small but gallant band took refuge in a swamp. Burning with indignation, and made sullen by despair, with hearts bursting with grief at the destruction of their nation, and spirits galled and sore at the fancied ignominy of their defeat, they refused to ask life at the hands of an insulting foe, and preferred death to submission. As the night drew on, they were surrounded in their dismal retreat, volleys of musketry poured into their midst, until nearly all were killed or buried in the mire. In the darkness of a thick fog which preceded the dawn of day, a few broke through the ranks of the beseigers and escaped to the woods.

Again, the same historian tells us that the few that remained, "stood like sullen dogs to be killed rather than to implore mercy, and the

soldiers on entering the swamp, found many sitting together in groups, when they approached, and resting their guns on the boughs of trees, within a few yards of them, literally filled their bodies with bullets." But they were Indians, and it was pronounced a pious work. But when the Gauls invaded Italy, and the Roman Senators, in their purple robes and chairs of State, sat unmoved in the presence of barbarian conquerors, disdaining to flee, and equally disdaining to supplicate for mercy, it is applauded as noble, as dying like statesmen and philosophers. But the Indians with far more to lose and infinitely greater provocation, sits upon his mother earth upon the green mound, beneath the canopy of Heaven, and refuses to ask mercy of civilized fiends, he is stigmatized as dogs, spiritless, and sullen. What a different name has greatness, clothed in the garb of christian princes and sitting beneath spacious domes, gorgeous with men's device, and the greatness, in the simple garb of nature, destitute and alone in the wilderness.

There is nothing in the character of Alexander of Macedon who "conquered the world, and wept that he had no more to conquer," to compare with the noble qualities of king Philip of Mt. Hope, and among his warriors are a long list of brave men unrivalled in deeds of heroism, by any of ancient or modern story. But in what country, and by whom were they hunted, tortured, and slain, and who was it that met together to rejoice and give thanks at every species of cruelty inflicted upon those who were fighting for their wives, their children, their homes, their altars and their God. When it is recorded that "men, women and children, indiscriminately, were hewn down and lay in heaps upon the snow," it is spoken of as doing God's service, because they were nominally heathen. "Before the fight was finished, the wigwams were set on fire, and into those, hundreds of innocent women and children had crowded themselves, and perished in the general conflagration." And for those thanksgivings were sent up to heaven, the head of Philip is strung upon a pole, and exposed to the public. But this was not done by savage warriors, and the crowd that huzzaed at the revolting spectacle, assembled on the Sabbath day, in a Puritan church, to listen to the Gospel that proclaims peace and love to all men. His body was literally cut in slices to be distributed among the conquerors, and a christian city rings with acclamation.

In speaking of this bloody contest, one who is most eminent among the fathers, says: "Nor could they cease praying unto the Lord against Philip, until they had prayed the bullet through his heart." "Two and twenty Indian captives were slain, and brought down to hell in one day." "A bullet took him in the head, and sent his cursed soul in a moment amongst the devils and blasphemers in hell forever."

Masasoit, the father of Philip, was the true friend to the English, and when he was about to die, took his two sons, Alexander and Philip, and fondly commended them to the kindness of the new settlers, praying them the same peace and good will might be between them, that had existed between him and his white friends. Upon mere suspicion only a short time afterwards, the elder, who succeeded his father as ruler, among his people, was hunted in his forest home, and dragged before the court, the nature and object of which he could not understand. But the indignity which was offered him, and the treachery of those who insulted him, so chafed his proud spirit that a fever was the consequence, of which he died. And that is not all. The son and wife of Philip were sold into slavery, (as were also about eight hundred persons of the Tuscaroras, and also many others of the Indians that were taken captive during the Colonial wars.) "Yes," says a distinguished orator, (Everett,) "they were sold into slavery, West Indian slavery. An Indian princess and her child,

sold from the cold breezes of Mount Hope, from a wild freedom of New England forest, to drop under the lash, beneath the blazing sun of the tropics."

Bitter as death, aye, bitter as hell! Is there anything--I do not think in the range of humanity--is there any animal that would not struggle against this? Nor is this indeed all. A kinswoman of theirs, a Princess in her own right, Wetamore Pocasset, was pursued and harrassed till she fell exhausted in the wilderness, and died of cold and starvation. There she was found by men professing to be shocked at Indian barbarity, her head severed from her body, and carried bleeding upon a pole to be exposed in the public highways of the country, ruled by men who have been honored as saints and martyrs.

"Let me die among my kindred," "Bury me with my fathers," is the prayer of every Indian's heart; and the most delicate and reverential kindness in the treatment of the bodies of the dead, was considered a religious duty. There was nothing in all their customs that indicated a barbarism so gross and revolting as these acts, which are recorded by New England historians without a censure, while the Indian's protests in his grief at seeing his kindred dishonored and his religion reviled, are stigmatized as savage and fiendish.

If all, or even a few who ministered among them in holy things, had been like Eliot, who is called "the Apostle to the Indians," and deserved to be ranked with the Apostle of old, or Kirkland, who is endeared to the memory of every Iroquois who heard his name, it could not have become a proverb or a truth that civilization and christianity wasted them away.

They were, not by one, but many, unscrupulously called "dogs, wolves, bloodhounds, demons, devils incarnate, hellhounds, fiends, monsters, beasts," always considering them inferior beings, and scarcely allowing them to be human, yet one, who was at that time a captive among them, represents them as "kind and loving and generous;" and concerning this same monster--Philip--records nothing that should have condemned him in the eyes of those who believed in wars aggressive and defensive, and awarded honors to heroes and martyrs and conquerors.

By the Governor of Jamestown a hand was severed from the arm of a peaceful, unoffending Indian, that he might be sent back a terror to his people; and through the magnanimity of a daughter and king of that same people, that colony was saved from destruction. It was through their love and trust alone that Powhatan and Pocahontas lost their forest dominions.

Hospitality was one of the Indians' distinguishing virtues, and there was no such thing among them as individual starvation or want. As long as there was a cup of soup, it was divided. If a friend or a stranger made a call he was welcome to all their wigwams would furnish, and to offer him food was not merely a custom, for it was a breach of politeness for him to refuse to eat however full he might be.

Because their system not being like the white people's, it does not follow that it was not a system. You might have looked into the wigwam or lodge and thought everything in confusion, while to the occupants, there was a place for everything, and everything in its place: each had a couch which answered for bed by night and seat by day. The ceremonies at their festivals were as regular as in the churches, their rules of war as well defined as those of christian nations, and in their games and athletic sports there was a code of honor which it was disgraceful to violate:

their marriage vows were as well understood, and courtesy as formally practiced at their dances.

The nature of the Indian is in all respects like the nature of any other nation; placed in the same circumstances, he exhibits the same passions and vices. But in his forest home there was not the same temptation to great crimes, or what is termed the lesser ones, that of slander, scandal, and gossip, as exists among civilized nations.

They knew nothing of the desire of gain, and therefore were not made selfish by the love of hoarding; and there was no temptation to steal, where they had everything in common, and their reverence for truth and fidelity to promises, may well put all the nations of christendom to shame.

I have written in somewhat of the spirit which will characterize a History, by an Indian, yet it does not deserve to be called Indian partiality, but only justice and the spirit of humanity; or, if I may be allowed to say it, the spirit with which any christian should be able to consider the character and deeds of his foe. I would not detract from the virtues of your forefathers. They were at that time unrivalled, but bigotry and superstition of the dark ages still lingered among them, and their own perils blinded them to the wickedness and cruelty of the means they took for defence.

Four, and perhaps two centuries hence, I doubt not, some of your dogmas will seem unchristian, as the Indians seem to you, and I truly hope, ere then, all wars will seem as barbarous, and the fantastic dress of the soldiers as ridiculous, as you have been in the habit of representing the wars and the wild drapery of the Indians of the forest.

How long were the Saxon and Celt in becoming a civilized and Christian people? How long since the helmet, the coat of mail, and the battle axe, were laid aside?

To make himself more terrific, the Briton of the days of Henry II drew the skin of a wild beast over his armor with the head and ears standing upright, and mounted his war-horse to go forth crying, "To arms! Death to the invader!" The paint and the Eagle plume of the Indian warrior were scarcely a more barbarous invention, nor his war-cry more terrible.

It is not just to compare the Indian of the fifteenth, with the christian of the fifteenth century. But compare them with the barbarian of Britain, of Russia, of Lapland, and Tartary, and represent them as truly as these nations have been represented, and they will not suffer by the comparison.

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CAPTIVE'S LIFE AMONG INDIANS.

ILLUSTRATED BY THE LIFE OF THE "WHITE WOMAN."

* * * * *

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