

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Life and Death in Mohawk Country. By Bruce E. Johansen.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0rh4t8bz>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 18(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Pasquaretta, Paul

Publication Date

1994

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

governance leading up to the Constitutional Convention. Although non-Indian Iroquois researchers have consistently ignored the impact of Indian people upon the growth of the American concepts of freedom and liberty, these two chapters offer strong evidence to refute their stand. Vine Deloria's eloquent treatise (chapter 7) on the application of the Constitution to American Indians likewise should be required reading for those unfamiliar with legal issues and the Indians. Deloria contends that the underlying theme of the litigation he analyzes is that "the Indian nations are not subject to the Constitution because they existed prior to its adoption and have inherent powers, whereas the Constitution is a document of delegated and ceded powers" (p. 315).

In the final chapter on Congress, plenary power and the American Indian, Lawrence M. Hauptman takes on Congressional misused power and intrusions, from the Dawes Act to the New Deal, to "benefit" the Indians. What is needed, he argues, is an alteration of the doctrine of plenary power (another name for paternalism and intervention) to a policy permitting Indian self-government (p. 336).

Taken together, these fine essays (some of them worthy of expansion into separate books), are a clarion call for re-examination of all issues in the history and present-day relations between the United States government and the American Indians. We are greatly indebted to the publishers, editors, and authors for their printing of this superb book.

Wilbur R. Jacobs
UC Santa Barbara

Life and Death in Mohawk Country. By Bruce E. Johansen. Golden, Colorado: North American Press, 1993. 224 pages. \$23.95 cloth.

The recent conflicts involving Mohawk communities at Akwesasne, Kanasatake, and Kahnawake have become some of the most written—and talked about—events in recent American Indian history. Reported by journalists around the world and debated intensely in Canada and the United States, the troubles of the Mohawk community have also become the subject of two books: Rick Hornung's *One Nation Under the Gun* (New York: Pantheon,

1991) and, most recently, Bruce E. Johansen's *Life and Death in Mohawk Country*.

To date, Johansen's book is the most thorough treatment of the subject. It examines three major conflicts: the Akwesasne "civil war" over high-stakes reservation gambling, the golf course controversy at Kanesatake, and the Mercier Bridge blockade at Kahnawake. The bulk of the volume is devoted to the trouble at Akwesasne. Written from an antigambling, anti-Warrior Society perspective, Johansen's analysis of the conflict begins with a history of the reserve and recounts two centuries of ongoing political, cultural, and environmental changes that contributed to the killing of two Mohawk men in the spring of 1990. Johansen explores three major causes of those deaths: Akwesasne's ongoing jurisdictional nightmare (the result of governing structures imposed on the community by Canada and the United States), the degradation of the region's natural resources, and Reagan-era policies that allowed high-stakes reservation gambling to flourish.

Of these causes—all the result of non-Indian activity—environmental pollution has had the most drastic effect on the Mohawks and is figured as the most significant cause of the division and violence that have plagued the community. Johansen begins his account by detailing the systematic abuse of the land, particularly the poisoning of Akwesasne that began with the industrialization of the surrounding area in the 1950s. Much of the information Johansen relates can be found in other sources, including Peter Matthiessen's article on Akwesasne in *Indian Country* (1984) and Hornung's book. Of these, Johansen's account offers the most complete discussion of the problem and includes an account of Mohawk efforts to hold government agencies and private corporations responsible for the clean-up. According to Johansen, the poisoning of fish, people, and farmland at Akwesasne is both the major cause of the violence that divided the Mohawk community and the one issue on which most, if not all, Akwesasne Mohawks can agree.

With the toxification of Turtle Island his ground-zero, Johansen reports on the gambling war itself. His account includes the personal testimony of a number of antigambling leaders, including Barbara Barnes of the North American Indian Traveling College, Doug George, former editor of *Akwesasne Notes*, and Harold Tarbell, a former chief of the St. Regis Tribal Council. Johansen also includes George's own first-hand account of a momentous

Longhouse debate that culminated in the Mohawk Nation Council's decision to request the intervention of outside police agencies to shut down the reserve's many high-stakes gambling operations. This decision had been heavily criticized by a substantial portion of the Mohawk community. On the face of it, the council's decision violated the sovereignty of pro-gambling Mohawks. The council believes, however, that Mohawk sovereignty is a collective right and not the basis for an unregulated, laissez-faire gambling economy. This point is carefully explained in the book.

Overall, Johansen's sensitivity to the position of the Mohawk Nation Council (Akwesasne's traditional Longhouse government), his ability to render their struggle to maintain their culture and traditions in the face of drastic change, and his extensive knowledge of Iroquois history and culture provide the focus and pathos of *Life and Death in Mohawk Country*. His traditionalist, antigambling approach to the conflict also refutes Hornung's earlier treatment. *One Nation Under the Gun* was written from a pro-gambling, pro-Warrior Society position. In a plainly derisive fashion, Hornung refers to antigambling leaders as political opportunists who simply "cast themselves as men of the spirit" (p. 18). Conversely, he portrays the Warriors as the community's legitimate leaders, fierce defenders of Mohawk sovereignty. Yet, as Johansen explains, the Mohawk language does not contain a word that can be translated as *warrior*. This point contributes to the book's argument that the Warriors are, in fact, among the most assimilated members of the Mohawk community. In Johansen's treatment, the Warriors are the opportunists, who, motivated by a desire for power and wealth, evoke Mohawk tradition and employ strong-arm tactics to advance their own entrepreneurial and political gains. With a forward by Doug George, who credits Johansen with having written the first careful analysis of the gambling war, *Life and Death in Mohawk Country* may be said to be written on behalf of antigambling Mohawks, just as *One Nation Under the Gun* was clearly written on behalf of the Warriors and their pro-gambling allies.

Therein lies the limitation, as well as the strength, of both books. These are not disinterested accounts; Johansen and Hornung unequivocally take sides on the issue and continue in print the debate that raged within the Mohawk community. Consequently, both writers often prefer to delegitimize, rather than explain, the position of the adversary. This objective is often combined with personal attacks. For instance, in Johansen's book, Louis

Karoniaktejeh Hall, credited with being the ideological founder of the Warrior Society, is represented as a “manifestly homophobic” neo-Nazi fascist and Indian supremacist (p. 115). We are also told that Hall is reported to have a fondness for big bands and the music of Judy Garland. The first part of this portrait represents Hall as dangerous; the second part makes him appear ridiculous. Yet, even without a straw man such as this, the conditions that made Warrior militancy possible would still exist, and, as Johansen explains, these conditions are not the fault of the Warriors themselves. My sense is that the truth lies somewhere between Johansen’s and Hornung’s accounts. Each book reports a great deal of information not included in the other; a broader perspective on the conflict can be gained by reading both.

Informed by a myriad of Mohawk voices, *Life and Death in Mohawk Country* is an important contribution to the current debate on gambling in the Native American community. It may also inform debates taking shape in North America’s non-Indian community. Increasingly, gambling has been viewed as a solution to revive sluggish regional economies throughout the U.S. At the same time, its proliferation has become increasingly controversial. In this context, Johansen’s book may serve a growing audience.

Paul Pasquaretta

State University of New York at Stony Brook

Portraits from the Age of Exploration: Selections from André Thevet’s *Les Vrais Pourtraits et Vies des Hommes Illustres*. Edited by Roger Schlesinger; translated by Edward Benson. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992. 160 pages. \$24.95 cloth.

This collection of twelve illustrated biographies of European explorers and Amerindian chiefs is drawn from a two-volume work published in 1584 by André Thevet (c.1517–92), the controversial cosmographer to four kings of France. The original edition, entitled *Les vrais pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres*, contained 232 biographies, most of them illustrated, of individuals from around the world and through time, from antiquity until Thevet’s own day. Their compilation was an extraordinary achievement, not only because of its scope, for exceeding comparable contemporary efforts, but also because it included Amerindians, a first in Euro-