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Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America. By Hilary E. Wyss. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000. \$29.95.

Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America by Hilary E. Wyss is one of a growing number of texts written about the bicultural narratives generated by encounters between American Indians and Europeans in early America. This work deals primarily with American Indian Christian converts and the missionaries who proselytized them. Both Europeans and American Indians left written records of their encounters. How these literary cultural artifacts can be interpreted is a major focus of this volume.

In early American society it quickly became clear that American Indians who converted to Christianity were viewed with distrust by their traditional Native brethren and by the colonists who kept them isolated in segregated villages referred to as praying towns. Because Christian Indians were taught to read and write in English as a requisite for practicing the faith, they, perhaps more than non-Christian Natives, left records of their day-to-day life experiences and feelings. Wyss confronts a task that many researchers and critics find overwhelming when she looks at letters, journal entries, conversion narratives, and biblical marginalia written by Christian Indians prior to 1829, the publication date of William Apess's *Son of the Forest*, one of the first books written by an American Indian in the United States. Examining this often-overlooked material allows Wyss to understand how Christian Indians occupied a space between two cultures and how they reacted to their cultural isolation and loss of political ascendancy. Wyss's work also examines the way the praying Indians defined themselves and how they brokered political power.

Some ethnohistorians and literary critics have ignored this material because it is supposedly tainted by Christian influence and therefore not strictly traditional or representative of many American Indians at the time. Wyss sidesteps these observations and makes good use of narratives that give significant insights into the intellectual and political observations of Christian Indians in the early days of the nation. She finds that these early Christians were not savages turned malleable, but were people who quickly utilized the theological language of the colonizers for reasons of "personal agency, action, and control" (p. 16). Not only did the praying Indians appear to upend the English language to advance their own ends, but by accessing print culture they also sometimes found themselves mediators between the red and white worlds.

Wyss bases most of her findings on current research in cultural anthropology and ethnohistory. As a result, many of her conclusions derive from the reasoning gone before her. Such a paradigm will probably satisfy non-Indian academicians knowledgeable in the field, but unfortunately this method does little to break the tradition of Europeans analyzing American Indians' responses to the problems of contact in the context of their own epistemologies and worldviews. For instance, Wyss argues that

[t]he most significant single shift in cultural practice for the Wampanoag was the adoption of a written language. . . [and this] acquisition of literacy must have seemed daunting, since it was so intimately linked with the abandonment of traditional spirituality. (p. 58)

Since Wampanoags were literary if not literate, it is doubtful that the acquisition of the Greco-Roman writing system affected them much. This simple kind of writing could well have been a convenience the Christian Wampanoags welcomed since it was more precise and less burdensome than other methods of storing and transmitting knowledge then in use, methods such as memorization, message sticks, wampum strings, and memory holes. Since, as Wyss notes, American Indians quickly modified English rhetoric to suit their own interests, it is doubtful that they agonized over loss of traditional spirituality as a result of literacy. More likely, they used their newfound writing abilities to record their spiritual meditations and mediations. Several Native sources Wyss quotes indicate that the Christian Indians contextualized their new spirituality in terms of the old, so there was perhaps more accretion than deletion in spiritual understanding; furthermore, being able to read the Bible and record responses would probably have been regarded as an expansion of spiritual devotion, not as an occasion for angst.

Again, perhaps drawing from John Demos, Wyss explicates patriarchal relationships common in New England among Euro-Christians as “mutually beneficial exchanges based on clearly established systems of obligation,” (p. 133) and concludes that Christian Indians such as Samson Occom, Joseph Johnson, and David Fowler used a Puritan-style language of patriarchy, presumably learned from missionaries, when writing to each other. In analyzing a letter written by Johnson to Occom referring to him as a “kind father,” to Occom’s spouse as an “hon[orable] wife,” and to his children as Johnson’s “beloved Brothers and Sisters,” (p. 132) she finds that “[p]ersonal relationships among family members thus involve a series of obligations based on a descending scale of familial status” (p. 132).

Such a reading could very well fit into the present Euro-exegetical paradigm, but it does not necessarily represent everything that is likely happening here. The possibility exists that Johnson is simply translating standard Indian terms of address into English and is subtly reinforcing American Indian notions of kinship and connection to all things. It is unlikely that he is underscoring notions of hierarchy in this passage. Since American Indians of earlier times rarely used names directly, generic terms such as grandmother, husband, sister, or cousin were common vocatives. These terms could refer to anyone, and when intended to be specific, they merely state the obvious relational ties with no sense of dominance intended. In matriarchal systems, the context under discussion here, the term *brother* might actually carry more weight than *father* since brothers are clan relatives deriving from the mother, and the father is not.

Wyss is at her best when she articulates what appears to be her own interpretations of the writings. From reading the Mayhews she astutely notes that it is possible that some Native Christian women on Martha’s Vineyard

assumed the healing function of the shamans (p. 73). This observation brings former debates into a new light. Her assertion could allow us to see that American Indian medicinal practice may have changed course in order to survive, or it could call into question some of the truisms accepted by scholars about American Indian shamanism. Since colonial writers rarely if ever mentioned the presence of female medicine people, we assume that there were not any, but we do not know that there were not. There are female practitioners today, but whether they are the result of acculturation or continuations of an original practice, scholars cannot be sure.

As Wyss works her way from Experience Mayhew's *Indian Converts* to the Stockbridge Indians to Brotherton, she brings into focus on a group of Christian Indians who change before our eyes. We see them move from docile converts to angry, displaced persons who are quite vocal about their lowly position in church and society. We see Mayhew's dignified, powerful women reduced to Pauline models of subservience in Brotherton. We also see articulate, intelligent American Indian men not blinded by cant or duplicity, ready to enter theological dialogues. As Wyss remarks, the Christian Indians of early America "work[ed] against an Anglo-American absolutist ideology that threatened to erase them" and they left elusive records of their identities and their struggles (p. 167).

It is interesting to note that a significant number of the issues confronting these early converts and the solutions they devised to address them are the same issues and solutions facing many Christian Indians today who are often set apart (or set themselves apart) from traditional tribal practices and mainstream ecclesiastical bodies. The norm is still Indian churches serving Indian communities in ways that sometimes deviate from denominational norms. Wyss's book would be a good starting point for any scholar interested in researching modern American Indian Christianity.

Writing Indians: Literacy, Christianity, and Native Community in Early America is an important contribution to early American studies because it insists that American Indian voices be recognized as part of the political dynamics forming the nation. It dispels the myth that American Indians did not write. It further dispels the myth that American Indians were silent people who rarely verbalized political or theological opinions. In addition to its treatment of early American Indian writings, this volume also delineates the evolution of racism in the United States with regard to whites and American Indians. It makes clear that the *separate but equal* mentality characterizing black-white relations in this country years later actually began with Massachusetts Bay and the Indians. *Writing Indians* further shows how issues of color became part of power dialogues for Indians as well as whites.

Writing Indians performs a much needed scholarly function. By bringing the writings of Christian Indians into the academic marketplace, Wyss is insisting that these narratives, and the people who wrote them, be given literary currency. Her volume also subtly reiterates the little-considered theory that American Indians indeed had some influence on American writings. Just as Algonquians literally scribbled on the margins of the Eliot Bible and reworked English rhetoric to publish their own worldviews and commentaries

on public figures and existing political systems, they indeed stamped their own distinct marks on American letters as they shed light on the underbelly of much ecclesiastical and governmental action.

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