

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Seneca Myths and Folk Tales. By Arthur C. Parker.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/45t2w198>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 14(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Hauptman, Laurence M.

Publication Date

1990

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/>

development is most interesting, particularly where he analyzes the interaction of native and white sentiments: "What could be more effective than a false vision of the noble, idealized Red Brother to cloak over the troubles they continued to endure in their effort to bridge several different identities?" (page 48). Mesquakie adjustment to mainstream society may well be most clearly reflected by the strong commercial and white-oriented aspect of their powwows since the events began in 1913.

Both essays are good reading, and the illustrations are of excellent quality. With the production of this catalogue, the University of Washington Press has added another beautiful book to its record.

Ted J. Brassler
Canadian Museum of Civilization,
Ottawa

Seneca Myths and Folk Tales. By Arthur C. Parker. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Book, 1989. 465 pages. \$11.95 Paper.

Arthur C. Parker's *Seneca Myths and Folk Tales*, originally published in 1923 by the Buffalo Historical Society, is a classic of Native American folklore. The University of Nebraska Press has performed a great service in reprinting this book in a paperback edition, thus making it readily available for scholars, Native American communities, and the general reader. This new edition not only contains the complete text of the original, but also reproduces the extraordinary illustrations of Jesse J. Cornplanter, the famous Seneca artist, which were an essential part of the first edition. To make this new paperback even more valuable, noted anthropologist William N. Fenton has provided a brief but informative introduction. Fenton, who knew and worked with Parker, previously edited *Parker on the Iroquois* (1968), which contained three of Parker's major works on the Iroquois Indians.

Arthur C. Parker was a nationally recognized archeologist, children's book writer, ethnologist, folklorist, historian, Indian rights advocate, and museum administrator. He was one of the founders of the Society of American Indians and a leader of that organization until its demise in the 1920s. From the mid-1920s

to the mid-1940s, while building the Rochester Museum and Science Center into a major educational institution, Parker helped develop museology as a profession. In fact, as Fenton notes in his introduction, Parker even coined the word *museology*.

While moving in all these different directions, Parker never lost track of his Seneca ancestry. Parker was a descendant of the lineages bearing sachemships and was genealogically connected, however distantly, to the great Seneca prophet, Handsome Lake. His great-uncle, Seneca chief and American general Ely S. Parker, had worked closely with Lewis Henry Morgan, the "father of anthropology." His grandfather Nicholson, Ely's brother, served as a United States government interpreter among the Seneca. Arthur C. Parker himself spent the first eleven years of his life on the Cattaraugus Indian Reservation before his family moved to White Plains, New York. Later, Parker was adopted into the Bear Clan and given a Seneca name, *Gawasowaneh*, "Big Snowsnake."

Despite this background, Parker was not an enrolled Seneca Indian, because his mother was white. He was a man in two canoes, using the Iroquois metaphor, attempting to balance himself as he made his way down the river's currents. Because of his special abilities and his unique background, Parker served as a "cultural mediator." His lifetime role was to explain the Iroquois, most notably the Seneca, to a non-Indian world. Through pageants, radio programs, museum exhibits, boy scout, and hobbyist activities, and in his writings, Parker performed this truly important and difficult function.

In his introduction, Fenton carefully shows this duality. He points out that Parker spent much of his boyhood near the Cattaraugus Reservation's mission church, but that the "pull of traditional culture created an ambivalence in him, as it did for his grandfather, who was nominally a Protestant" (page xii). As a young man in New York City, Parker found himself searching out his Indian roots in the back rooms of the American Museum of Natural History. Befriended by Professor F. W. Putnam of Harvard, young Parker turned his attention to archeology and museum work.

Yet, when he was sent on an archeological survey of southwestern New York and the Cattaraugus Valley, Parker's interest in the oral literature of the Seneca people was rekindled. Seneca annalists such as George Jimerson, Bill Snyder, and Frank Pierce

came to visit his dig. Later, he was aided by other Seneca intellectuals such as Edward Cornplanter (Jesse's eminent father), Moses Shongo, and other authorities, Christian and Longhouse, on Seneca traditions.

Parker, Fenton reveals, was a literary man. As a former newspaper reporter, he had learned to write quickly and concisely, but, nevertheless, he brought to his writings "some of the native eloquence of his people" (page xiii). He attempted to assume the role of mythteller "in Seneca society, to learn the tales as he heard them, and to reproduce them in part like native storytellers while interpreting them for a wider audience" (page xvi). Despite earlier versions by Jeremiah Curtin and J. N. B. Hewitt, Parker laboriously pushed on with his own new text. Fenton points out that Parker decided not to use previous texts for comparative purposes "to preserve the literary integrity of his own materials" (page xiv). Because of this painstaking work, his appointment as archeologist at the New York State Museum, the bureaucratic battles he faced in Albany, and the tragic fire of 1911 which destroyed much of the Indian materials at the state museum, Parker's plans for publication of the text was delayed for twenty years.

Parker divided his work into eleven parts. The first three sections focus on the fundamental factors in Seneca folklore, the themes, and the atmosphere in which the legends were told. The next seven sections recount the oral tradition: "When the World Was Young"; "Boys Who Defied Magic and Overcame It"; "Tales of Love and Magic"; "Horror Tales of Cannibals and Sorcerers"; "Tales of Talking Animals"; "Tales of Giants, Pygmies and Monster Bears"; and finally, an all-inclusive chapter labeled "traditions." At the end of his work, Parker included a valuable appendix containing the original notes of Laura Wright, the famous nineteenth-century missionary among the Seneca, who recorded from Esquire Johnson the Seneca creation myth and, in a separate interview, Johnson's knowledge about Seneca history and beliefs. The appendix also contains an extract of the Wyandot creation myth as collected by Marius Barbeau and Parker's analyses of emblematic trees in Iroquoian mythology and the "Little Water Company."

Parker's work has received criticism over the years. J. N. B. Hewitt of the Bureau of American Ethnology, himself a Tusca-

rora, questioned the work because Parker was not a linguist. Others have insisted that Parker was not analytical enough, an argument that led to the overhaul of component parts of the cosmological myth Parker recorded. Yet, Fenton asserts that Parker partly presented the cosmology and religion of the Seneca. Contemporary Seneca owe a special thanks to Parker for preserving these myths and folktales, since television and other factors have supplanted much of the storytelling tradition.

Although great modern folklorists such as William S. Simmons have gone far beyond Parker in analysis and methodology, Parker's work remains solid. His advice about the recording of folklore rings true today, namely that we can never understand a people "until we understand what it is thinking about, and we can never know this until we know its literature, written or unwritten. The folk-tale therefore has a special significance, if honestly recorded" (page xxv). Thus, *Seneca Myths and Folk Tales* is an extraordinary book produced by an extraordinary man, one who helped shape the direction of both the Indian and the non-Indian worlds of the twentieth century.

Laurence M. Hauptman
SUNY, College at New Paltz

Maria. By Richard L. Spivey. Revised and Expanded Edition. Flagstaff: Northland Publishing, 1989. 176 pages. \$45.00 Cloth. \$21.95 Paper.

In his revised and expanded edition of *Maria*, Richard L. Spivey includes the same original six chapters and adds a seventh new one, plus a "Preface to the Revised Edition." This is as it should be, for those first six chapters give an excellent portrayal of this remarkable lady, Maria Montoya Martinez and her seventy active years as a potter. Divided between the original words of Maria and the narrative of Spivey, these chapters portray a unique personality in an adequate manner. The new chapter adds recently acquired information to the original work, plus a few corrections also based on newly acquired facts, such as an earlier date, 1962 rather than 1965, for the first piece of pottery by Popovi Da.

Maria's son, Popovi Da, opens this book with words relative