

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Prophets of the Great Spirit: Native American Revitalization Movements in Eastern North America. By Alfred A. Cave.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4s54x9hq>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Trafzer, Clifford E.

Publication Date

2007-06-01

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/>

Prophets of the Great Spirit: Native American Revitalization Movements in Eastern North America. By Alfred A. Cave. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006. 328 pages. \$27.95 cloth.

American Indian prophets, spiritual leaders, and medicine people have always played a significant role in the history of Native America. From the time of Native creation, holy men and women interpreted the origins of the people, their place on earth, and their lives within human drama. American Indian communities held their prophets in high regard as seers who predicted the future and helped people navigate their lives as individuals and communities. American Indian prophets had great power and influence to do both good and ill for the people, and sometimes communities feared the power and influence of prophetic individuals who could turn the power against their enemies and cause harm. However, most accounts tell of prophets predicting future events and actions that would benefit the people, offering courses of action intended to preserve and protect others. They spoke of signs that would serve as clues to future events, and they offered solutions brought to them from superior powers originating from the spirit world, the source of power.

Alfred Cave has written an important book that allows us to enter the world of many Native Americans from eastern North America. He has assembled a tightly written narrative to introduce us to several prophets and explore their meanings historically within their own communities and within non-Native communities. Many contemporary American Indian communities throughout eastern North America continue to believe in the power of prophecy, which for them began at the time of their creation. Stories abound today in the oral tradition and the written word about the ancient origins of power and the ability of special individuals to interpret and use power intuitively to inform their communities about coming events and ways to negotiate change over time. For Native Americans, these stories are not “fish tales that grow with the telling” but a body of knowledge that informs us of the cultural history of Indian people. The prophets drew on their tribal knowledge about the mythic forces that put the world into motion in specific ways and placed power within the landscape of Native America. Often plant and animal, rock and water characters placed power in various sites within the homelands of specific people, and the prophets knew how to access the power to learn more about the future so that they could inform others. The prophets generally used this knowledge to enhance their power in order to negotiate changes that would develop over time. The prophets provided some certainty in an uncertain world, and many Indians believed in their messages.

American Indian prophets tapped into the power of the earth and spiritual world, sharing it with their people and teaching others divinely guided songs, prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies, and laws. Sometimes these teachings had their origins within the cultural belief systems of the people. At other times, the prophets offered new cultural teachings that diverged from past beliefs. However, the messages’ contexts came in forms familiar to Indian communities because prophets emerged out of Native communities. However, prophets could also be influenced by Native and non-Native beliefs,

dogma, ceremony, and ritual. Cave argues that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some notable American Indian prophets reformed traditional beliefs about many creative deities or characters to offer a supreme being, which they called the Great Spirit or Master of Life. Since the time of creation, the beliefs of some Indian people included major deities, both male and female. But Cave argues that no single deity existed that put the world into motion and being. Cave maintains that the concept of an active “God” came into being among the Eastern tribes only after Indians had contact with Christians. Perhaps Cave does not give sufficient credibility to the Manitou of Algonquin speakers or Aataentsic among Iroquoian peoples. But the place of these deities as central figures in comparison to the omnipresent Jewish “God” is debatable. American Indians include many actors in their creation process, generally not a single, all-powerful god who directed all things and gave humans dominion over plants and animals.

Cave concentrates his work on those prophets that he states drew on new traditions, including a central Great Spirit, to frame their revitalization movements. He focuses on Neolin, the Delaware Prophet; Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee Prophet; Handsome Lake, the Seneca Prophet; Kenekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet; and various Creek prophets, including Hillis Hadjo. Cave’s careful and often-detailed analysis of each of these prophets is the strength of this volume. Unlike David Edmunds’s *The Shawnee Prophet*, Anthony F. C. Wallace’s *Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*, or Joseph Herring’s *Kenekuk, the Kickapoo Prophet*, Cave offers a broader spectrum of prophets, subjects, and ideas that are well argued and nicely written. His work allows us into several American Indian communities through the lives of each prophet, and he uses the cultural components of various tribes as a backdrop to understand each personality and his movement.

The author also has a firm understanding of American history and places the prophets within the national and regional historical scenes of the time. For example, Cave has a firm grasp of the historical dealings of General Andrew Jackson and his relationship with the Creeks, and he uses his research about the era to deconstruct the actions and motives of historical characters, both Indian and white. He points out, for example, that in 1813, Creek warriors attacked white settlers in the Ohio River Valley, and Jackson reported that the Creeks had “butchered, mangled, murdered, and torn to pieces” the “beloved wives and little prattling infants” of the white settlers. By doing so, the Indians had provided a justification “for vengeance” (162). Cave recognizes that such inflammatory statements, common among non-Indians and Indians, contributed to hostilities. Threats, rumors, and fighting on the frontier offered prophets an opportunity to organize Indian people to resist the US Army, militia forces, and settlers threatening the Creeks and other Indians of the East. Cave shows us that the responses offered by Native prophets were not uniform, as some were more accommodating than others, but all prophets faced a common enemy bent on taking their lands, killing their people, and forcing Indians off the lands they had long called their homes.

Cave’s work is a definite contribution to the field of American Indian history for many reasons. Most importantly, he has provided a single volume

that deals with several different prophets who are significant in American history, and he places them in their own historical milieu. He provides the reader with an understanding of time and place and with the circumstances surrounding the historical drama that unfolds within Indian communities. Cave weaves his content with his interpretations and analysis in a seamless fashion so that readers understand his work without confusion. He has assembled a book that introduces American Indian history students to several Native revitalization leaders in a neutral manner, allowing readers to assess the material and draw their own conclusions. The book will be helpful to specialists and buffs alike, and I have no doubt that professors will adopt this book for classroom use.

Clifford E. Trafzer

University of California, Riverside

The Sound the Stars Make Rushing through the Sky: The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft. Edited by Robert Dale Parker. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. 288 pages. \$34.95 cloth.

Jane Johnston Schoolcraft/Bamewawagezhikaquay was an Anishinaabe-Irish Métis woman born at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan Territory, in 1800. Literary scholars have known her primarily as a contributor to the ethnographic efforts of her husband Henry Rowe Schoolcraft (1793–1864), especially his landmark *Algic Researches* (1839), and, consequently, as a source for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Song of Hiawatha* (1855). Thanks to this expertly researched and carefully crafted edition of her collected writings, we now know the fuller extent of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft's remarkable literary accomplishments. *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing through the Sky* is an important contribution to American Indian literary studies.

In his introduction to the volume, Robert Dale Parker gives us a richly detailed account of Johnston's family history, upbringing, marriage, motherhood, intellectual and personal traits, and her later years of illness and isolation. The daughter of an Irish trader and a politically prominent Ojibwe mother, Johnston Schoolcraft belonged to an influential and elite Métis family. She was raised in a trilingual Ojibwe-French-English household amidst the shifting indigenous-French-British-American political topographies of early-nineteenth-century Michigan territory. Aside from one year of formal schooling in Ireland, she was largely educated by her Ojibwe-speaking mother and self-educated during long Michigan winters in her father's thousand-volume library, which included Shakespeare, Milton, Byron, Greek and Latin classics, and other literary, historical, and religious texts in English and French. In 1823, Jane married Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, an appointed agent of the Department of War sent to manage the US federal government's dealings with Native peoples. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft supported Indian Removal, negotiated treaties to take lands from local tribes, and conducted extensive ethnographic researches into the lifeways and oral traditions of Ojibwe