

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Iroquois in the War of 1812. By Carl Benn.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7mt901pq>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 24(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Mullin, Michael J.

Publication Date

2000-03-01

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/>

determination of Inuit people who still depend on whales for day-to-day survival. *Inuit, Whaling, and Sustainability* gains authority over the existing scholarship because the voices of Inuit people resonate throughout the text. Inuit people themselves shift the discussion from non-Inuit issues to Inuit concerns: the whale is their primary food staple and without it the existence of Inuit people is threatened. The people represented in this work give the IWC and industrial Western people an opportunity to engage in culturally relevant and meaningful dialogue.

Delia Salvatierra

University of California, Los Angeles

The Iroquois in the War of 1812. By Carl Benn. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. 272 pages. \$19.95 paper.

Carl Benn's book reminds us that the War of 1812 remains a pivotal chapter in Canadian history. Like the battle of Vimy Ridge in World War I, Canadians use the War of 1812 to illustrate their martial ability. Attempting to close "an important gap" in our understanding "of both the Iroquois and War of 1812," Benn produces an interesting work on the Grand River warriors during the war (p. 3). He does this by combining Iroquois war leader John Norton's diary with specialized studies of the war. While the result of such scholarship provides a deeper understanding of the War of 1812, it does not necessarily afford a deep analysis of the Iroquois' part in that war. This book is primarily a military history text—not an ethnohistorical analysis of the Iroquois.

Benn begins his analysis by suggesting that indigenous political and social factors drove Iroquois war decisions. This is true, but one would not know it from reading this work. While Benn discusses the differences between Pine Tree, Village, and War chiefs, he spends little time developing the internal dynamics between them at the time of the war. These chiefs and their goals remain unknown. Throughout the conflict, pro-British, pro-American, or neutralist leaders emerge and disappear at Grand River while the warriors under John Norton's direction are off fighting. The reader has no idea how these factions operated.

More importantly, tantalizing questions remain unexplored. Why, for example, were the pro-British and pro-American factions primarily composed of Mohawks? Who were the neutralist leaders and why did they dominate the communities where Mohawk residents comprised a minority of the community? The Native religious revival led by the Shawnee Tenskwatawa makes its way into the text, but there is no discussion of what separated the Nativists from their Christian neighbors, or how this revival shaped decisions regarding war or peace. As a result, the reader has no sense of the internal political and social dynamics within the various Iroquois or Algonquian communities mentioned.

Take, for example, the John Norton-William Claus struggle. Benn portrays it solely in terms of a contest between the Indian Department and British military for control over the Iroquois. This conflict, however, involved gener-

ational and familial struggles as well. Both Norton and Claus traced their positions in the community through William Johnson's marriage to Molly Brant in the colonial period. Norton entered the picture through Molly's brother, Joseph, while Claus' father married one of Johnson's daughters. In the 1790s Claus argued against his kinsman Joseph Brant over the British Crown's right to oversee land on the Grand River. It was during this struggle that Brant adopted Norton as his nephew. The War of 1812 allowed old animosities to resurface. A full generation older than Norton, Claus' actions during the war can be understood not as those of a departmental official, but as a peace chief or a negotiator who helped dispel conflict between or amongst warriors. Norton, the warrior, represented the young men of the Grand River. By limiting his analysis to the confines of the military situation, Benn misses an opportunity to explore the impact of the Norton-Claus on the dynamics and persistence of Iroquois customs.

Benn implies that the War of 1812 was particularly difficult for the Iroquois because the Niagara Peninsula was its primary battleground. What is missing from the supposition is an analysis of why both sides fought the war there. Had the British settled the Iroquois in the area as a future buffer between themselves and the Americans? In the eighteenth century, British military strategy had assumed an Indian buffer between the colonies and the French. Did this strategy continue in the nineteenth century, only with a southern buffer for a new enemy?

Also missing is an explanation of why the British were content with their victories over the Americans at Mackinac, Dearborn, and Detroit. Did the British foresee fundamental difficulties in executing a victorious war west of the Great Lakes? Why did both sides ignore their primary eighteenth-century invasion routes, the Lake Champlain corridor or White Mountains? These routes would have threatened the Iroquois communities of Kahnawake and Akwesasne. It is most likely because a military operation along the Lake Champlain waterway threatened the lucrative cross-border trading operations of both Montreal and New York merchants. As for the White Mountain region, New England's disinterest in the war mitigated against it.

The book's title is a reminder of Barbara Graymont's 1972 work concerning the Iroquois and the American Revolution. Unfortunately, Benn's book is far less satisfying than Graymont's. Whereas Graymont's book uses the American Revolution to explain the dynamics of Iroquois culture and worldview, Benn uses the Iroquois to examine the military maneuvers of the War of 1812. The result is a succession of battles and skirmishes that do little to explain the way the dynamics of the war affected the various Iroquois reservations and reserves. When done, the reader has little sense of the political, social, and cultural dynamics the war unleashed within the Iroquois Confederacy. The reader understands that the war hurt these communities, but is not sure whether to blame the marauding armies, the civil chiefs whose traditional function is peacemaking, or the warriors who fought alongside the British and Americans.

Benn argues that the War of 1812 marked the end of Iroquois military independence. Following this war, military strategy required the integration of

Iroquois warriors into “white” units. In part, one suspects this resulted from the increasing size of the armies fighting in North America. These larger armies produced casualty rates much higher than earlier conflicts in which the Iroquois participated. Benn finds that 500 warriors joined the British on the Niagara frontier in the fall of 1812. Opposing them were 6,300 Americans and Iroquois allies. Even at the height of the Seven Years War, Brigadier François-Gaston de Lévis defended Montreal with fewer than 3,200 regular troops and Canadian militiamen. At the battle of Fort George in 1813, the British suffered 350 casualties, a phenomenal sum compared to such eighteenth-century battles as Lake George in 1755, where fifty New Englanders and forty Mohawks died. Even the Battle of Beaver Dams, the Grand River warriors high-water mark during the war, saw the loss of five chiefs. Fifty years earlier such a disaster would have led the warriors to rethink their participation in the conflict. In 1813, however, the battle represented a skirmish rather than a major engagement for the opposing armies.

Where this book could be strengthened is in its attention to the Iroquois’ historic relationships with the other Native peoples allied with the British or Americans. This is important because it might help explain some of the Iroquois’ actions during the early part of the war. John Norton, as Joseph Brant’s political protégé, probably picked up Brant’s concern about British policymakers and ignored the Iroquois Council Fire by moving the entry point of Indian affairs west of Grand River toward Amherstville or beyond. Britain’s support of Tenkstawa and Tecumseh suggest such a possibility. Norton’s actions, then, might fit an historic pattern of Iroquois warriors using their military alliance to maintain a preeminent position in Anglo-Indian affairs.

One place Benn uses historic precedents, thereby strengthening his analysis, is in his understanding of British interests at the Treaty of Ghent in 1814. Benn begins his analysis of the War of 1812 by making the reader aware of the problems Britain had to overcome among the Iroquois dating back to 1783 and 1794. Britain tried to atone for these historic blunders at the Treaty of Ghent when British negotiators tried to secure “a native buffer state in the Old Northwest” (p. 175). Unfortunately American negotiators rejected the British proposal. Benn suggests that Americans rejected the proposal because more Americans now live in the area than Indians. While this is likely, Benn should also have noted that the Americans, even as colonists, rejected British attempts to create an Indian territory. American reactions to both the Proclamation of 1763 and the Treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1768 show that such a proposal was unlikely to succeed.

A better title for this book would have been *The War of 1812 and the Iroquois*. It is an informative and well-documented military history, and the Iroquois figure centrally into its subject. The book is less successful in explaining how the War of 1812 impacted the Iroquois politically, socially, or culturally. That book remains to be written.

Michael J. Mullin
Augustana College