

# UCLA

## American Indian Culture and Research Journal

### Title

Wild Rice and the Ojibway People. By Thomas Vennum, Jr.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7nx1t50s>

### Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 14(4)

### ISSN

0161-6463

### Authors

Boatman, John F.  
Olsen, M. Lee

### Publication Date

1990-09-01

### 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/>

and other possessions. Krech points out that Lonsdale's emphasis on "sport" resulted in a northern collection differing from several others made at the same period. It contained relatively little Métis or Indian beadwork and few articles of personal adornment. Some items were quite large; Lonsdale had the monetary credit and logistic support necessary to get them back to England.

The earl kept for his personal display a fair number of items mentioned in his journal. Most have disappeared or were scattered by an estate sale in 1947. For example, one intriguing photograph, probably taken about 1890, shows Lonsdale and a party of sixteen male and female guests all dressed in Eskimo and Indian garments and posed in front of Lowther Castle with a polar bear skin (which the host bought, though he said he shot it).

Krech provides a meticulously annotated description of the artifacts given to the British Museum. All are illustrated in splendid color or black-and-white. Although they were poorly documented when received, Krech has diligently searched Lonsdale's papers for their provenance and other data. He also has combed other collections and published and unpublished sources for useful parallels to the material, thus giving added cultural context to most of the specimens. Such information about a precisely dated collection, in conjunction with details about the social context of the collector, greatly enhances the book's intrinsic ethnographic worth. This volume is a model of how we can better understand and learn from early museum collections.

*Catharine McClellan*  
University of Wisconsin

**Wild Rice and the Ojibway People.** By Thomas Vennum, Jr. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988. 357 pages. \$14.95 Paper.

This book is about much, much more than wild rice. It is an excellent source of general information about American Indian tribal peoples of the northern portion of the western Great Lakes. Although Vennum's primary focus is the Ojibway, much of the information he provides is also applicable to other tribal groups in the area. The book contains information about many cultural practices, including food-related activities separate from wild rice.

It also contains useful information about some of the related religio-metaphysical belief systems of the tribal peoples.

Vennum demonstrates that he understands the cultural significance of wild rice, in addition to its great importance, for a very long time, as a food staple. In explaining this point, he often uses the words of the native people themselves. For example, in the last paragraph of the final chapter, Vennum concludes, "For cultural reasons alone, the Ojibway people will probably never give up ricing willingly." Then, quoting Norma Smith of the Mole Lake reservation area, he asks, "What will take its place when this last tradition is gone?" Throughout the book, Vennum uses the words of traditional Ojibway informants such as Mary and George McGeshick and William "Bineshi" Baker, Sr.

The book, which is very well footnoted, contains an excellent bibliography and a fine selection of informative photographs. Every serious student of the northern western Great Lakes tribal peoples should be familiar with it.

In chapter seven, Vennum presents some particularly useful data relating to legal issues involved in the contemporary American Indian treaty controversy. This controversy is, at the present time, occupying a great deal of both Indian and non-Indian attention in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota.

Vennum is to be commended for pointing out a fact that is overlooked far too often by other writers: In writing about American Indians, scholars have often reported others' faulty interpretations of cultural practices. The scholars' work, in turn, often is accepted as accurate. To make matters even worse, quite often the original writer never personally witnessed the practice about which he or she wrote. Vennum is referring to reports about ricing, but the same is true of reports about other activities.

This book, in spite of its many strengths and its great value as a resource, does have some weaknesses. Perhaps the most apparent of these is that the writing is rather tedious in some places. Intermingled with extremely useful data is too much other information. This is a problem for the reader who is seeking specific knowledge, or for someone who lacks sufficient preparatory background information on the subject.

Another weakness is Vennum's failure to discuss current problems in the cultivation of wild rice. In the past the Ojibway, realizing that diversity is important to guard the gene pool, used many varieties of the grain. The European-American society, on

the other hand, has, for a long time, depended primarily on only one form of one variety of one species—a foolish and dangerous practice. Today, two zizania species, the interior and aquatica, already have a threatened status in Michigan.

Vennum also makes some inaccurate statements for which he cites no source. For example, in his preface he comments on the use of the words *savages* and *squaw*. He states, "Although offensive to Indian people today, these words did not always have their present connotations." He continues, "Where clearly derogatory, they comment on the social attitudes of the period; to delete them would be a disservice to historical accuracy." We have no problem with his second statement. However, for his first comment he should have cited a source. According to Ojibway elder Saxon Gouge, as reported in *The Journal: News From Indian Country* and reprinted in the Minneapolis American Indian community newspaper *The Circle* (March 1989), "The word Squaw is a most derogatory word (being) actually a European corruption of an Iroquoian word meaning female sexual parts." Other tribal elders emphatically support Gouge.

In his preface, Vennum thanks various other scholars for providing him with information and insights from their fields. This is commendable, but the expertise of some of those individuals is questionable in regards to traditional American Indian religious-philosophical beliefs, practices, and interpretations. Several times Vennum utilizes Christopher Vecsey, author of *Traditional Ojibwa Religion*, who, it appears, puts great stock in the works of Ake Hultkrantz, the Swedish scholar. We wonder whether either man really understands western Great Lakes American Indian religion and philosophy from the perspective of the native peoples themselves.

Although Vennum appears to have made a sincere effort to demonstrate the crucially important, metaphysically based differences between the Euro-Americans and the Ojibway regarding wild rice and other resources of the land, he really has failed to clarify the point. On the one hand, the Ojibways' metaphysics developed along with their long relationship with the North American land. The tribal peoples, including the Ojibway, lived *with* the land and its resources. On the other hand, the Euro-American society in North America, from the beginning, rewarded enterprise that *exploited* the resources of the land. This is a crucial and fundamental difference, having far-reaching implications.

Vennum states, rather obtusely, that the Ojibway migrated into the western Great Lakes wild rice area. Elsewhere, however, he gives the impression that the Ojibway were indigenous and *the* "People of the Wild Rice." They were neither. The Menominee of Wisconsin were both.

Vennum's glossary is problematic also. Although Ojibway is primarily a verb-based language, the glossary contains questionable accurate nonverb forms of words.

We have pointed out a number of weaknesses in this book, but we wish to make it clear that we believe the strengths of this book far outweigh its weaknesses. It is an extremely important and valuable resource, and we strongly recommend it.

*John F. Boatman*

*M. Lee Olsen*

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

**A History of Indian Education.** By Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder. Billings: Eastern Montana College, 1989. 158 pages. \$6.00 Paper.

The history of American Indian education has captured the attention of scholars from several disciplines, whose recent works enhance the expanding literature on the subject. Indeed, the topic is worthy of study. At any given historical moment, Indian education policy and practice reflect the prevailing social, political, economic, and cultural contexts of Indian-white relations. Consequently, scholars have approached the study of Indian education from a number of disciplinary perspectives, offering fresh insights into the general history of Indian-white contact.

John Reyhner and Jeanne Eder are among the more recent scholars to explore the subject. In *A History of Indian Education*, they tackle a monumental, nearly impossible task: to examine almost four centuries of Indian education history—in 158 pages, no less. Spanning the period from 1492 to 1989 in nine chapters, the book explores Indian education in the context of changing Euro-American policies and attitudes toward Native Americans. The authors also attempt to give presence and voice to the Indian participants, describing with too little substance and detail "the resistance and cooperation that the Indians exhibited in reaction to these [educational] efforts" (p. 1). The authors reach the