

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Legends of the Delaware Indians and Picture Writing.By Richard C. Adams.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9cq894gb>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Beery, John Richard

Publication Date

1999

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/>

Legends of the Delaware Indians and Picture Writing. By Richard C. Adams. Edited by Deborah Nichols. Translated by Lucy Parks Blalock and Nora Thompson Dean. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997. 12 pages. \$25.95 cloth.

This work, published originally in 1905, is not for Native American scholars, but for lay people unfamiliar with Eastern Woodlands legends. The study, even with its faults, is a good place to begin exploring American Indian myths. It is divided into four sections: an introduction, the legends, a few illustrations of picture writing, and several appendices. As noted, many individuals contributed to the republication of this book, yet there is no continuity between the parts, no overall thesis, or even themes.

In the introduction, Deborah Nichols, a Delaware, examines the tribe's history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Though elementary, this section is done superbly. In the 1860s a remnant of the tribe residing in Kansas was forced to move to Indian Territory to live among the Cherokee and become Cherokee citizens. The Delawares did not have separate land rights, which became a problem when the Dawes Act of 1887 began dismantling reservations during the 1890s and the first decade of the twentieth century. The Delawares fought for federal recognition as a separate entity. The Cherokee had control over large tracts of former reservation lands, while the Delaware were left out in the cold. This is where Richard C. Adams entered the struggle. Adams, a mixed-blood Delaware, historian, and legal council, helped the tribe in its fight for individual federal recognition. He journeyed to Washington several times, and wrote five books on Delaware religion, culture, and history. Finally, the United States government acknowledged the tribe's separate status, even though the Delaware and Cherokee were still struggling over land issues.

Nichols also tells us why it was important to reprint this book and to add to it. According to Nichols, for a long time few whites cared about Native American traditions or legends, but this attitude has changed within the past two decades. Non-Natives are now interested, he says, and so it is necessary to preserve Adams' work.

It is unfortunate that Nichols did not include much information pertaining to the tribe's folklore and history before it migrated west of the Mississippi; this weakness needs rectifying because, for most of recorded time, the Delaware, or Lenape, resided in the East. Nichols also fails to incorporate the Walam Olum, the legend describing how these people became Delaware. Scholars are divided over whether or not this document, consisting of picture writing, is authentic. Also, neither Adams nor Nichols mentioned the Delaware Big House Ceremony, a ritual based on another creation myth. These stories should be included in any study of this nature regardless of their truth value. It is difficult to understand why Adams failed to mention them, since they were known long before he wrote this piece. To obtain a satisfactory assessment of these legends, interested readers should consult C. A. Weslager's *The Delaware Indians: A History* (1972); Frank G. Speck's *A Study of the Delaware Indian Big House Ceremony* (1931); and Elizabeth Tooker's *Native North American Spirituality of the Eastern Woodlands* (1979).

The second part of *Legends of the Delaware Indians* includes twenty-one legends. "The Story of Wa-e-aqon-ookase" describes the idea that it is important to be exact in communicating with others. In "Che-py-poo-thwah," the perils of being a reckless gambler are brought to life vividly. A young man, who was a foolish bettor, lost his eyes. A certain spirit asked him if he would give up the games if he had his eyes back; he said yes—he had learned his lesson.

However, a couple of important particulars in these legends that should have been examined were neglected. First, many of the stories contain elements of Christianity. For example, Christianity influenced "The Story of Mek-ke-hap-pa" greatly. The Great Spirit, ill-defined in aboriginal Delaware traditions and legends, is now more important. He created everything in the universe; then, for the most part, he left affairs to lesser deities, or manitous. The Great Spirit did not intervene as the Christian God did. As time progressed, however, and as the tribe became more intimate with Europeans, an all-knowing creator God, shaped in Christian theology, crept into traditional legends and religion.

Second, the Great Plains environment and its peoples influenced these myths. One example appears in "A Delaware Indian Courtship," depicting how a man acquired a wife and how a horse was included in the bride price. When the Delaware lived in the East, horses were never very important to them, but, as most people know, the horse transformed Indian life on the Plains. The Delaware also adapted some aspects of their culture to survive in new surroundings. The Plains likewise had an impact on "The Legend of Alliance of the Delawares and Cherokees." According to Adams, the partnership between the Delawares and Cherokees was established centuries ago; however, I have never run across mention of this union. In addition, while residing in the East, the Delaware were allies of the Six Nations Iroquois of New York, who were enemies of the Cherokee. Adams further remarked that the Delaware helped the Cherokee on the Plains against the Osage. This entire story seems to have been employed to remind the Cherokee to treat the Delaware favorably concerning land when the Cherokee Reservation was abolished, to treat their allies properly. But none of the individuals involved in this project analyzes these points, and, again, this reviewer cannot understand why such details were overlooked.

In the third section John Hill, a Nez Perce-Delaware, contributed ten representations of picture writing. These few illustrations indicate that the title of this work does not live up to its expectations. Adams could have found more specimens if he had looked far enough. All of these pictures, which are both informative and beautiful, deal with the Great Plains only.

James Rementer, Nora Thompson Dean, and Lucy Parks Blalock, all Delaware, organized the final section of this study, which translates four legends. One can gain some understanding of how much of the substance of a work changes when taken from the original Lenape language and transferred into English. Students interested in linguistics will find this piece delightful—it is superbly done.

Scholars and the general public intrigued with Delaware myths should consult three other sources in addition to those mentioned above. First, is

John Bierhorst's *Mythology of the Lenape: Guide and Texts* (1995), which Nichols names in her introduction. Another work of equal importance is Daniel Garrison Brinton's *The Lenape and their Legends* (1885; reprinted, 1969). Finally, there is M. R. Harrington's *Religion and Ceremonies of the Lenape* (1921). These books cover Delaware legends while the tribe lived in the East and can answer some of the questions raised in this review.

A suggestion for further research is to focus on the differences between Adams' legends and older traditions that were firmly established before the Delaware moved west. Nichols relates that there are many Delaware communities in the United States, and it would be a fruitful to examine the disparity that exists between the traditions of each of these groups.

Finally, even though *Legends of the Delaware Indians* does not live up to its title, I am pleased that someone decided to republish it. As noted, the general public can benefit from reading it; this is what Nichols and her colleagues wanted. It is an excellent introduction. But I encourage lay persons to check out other works discussed herein.

John Richard Beery
University of Toledo

Linking Arms Together: American Indian Treaty Visions of Law and Peace, 1600–1800. By Robert A. Williams, Jr. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 192 pages. \$32.00 cloth.

In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, lawyers representing Indian interests had unprecedented victories in United States courts. Most of these successes resulted from lawyers using U.S. laws to the advantage of Indians. In the 1990s, however, the legal tide has turned against Indians, especially in the United States Supreme Court. Of the fifteen cases to appear during this decade, only one ruling has come down in favor of Indians. It is in this climate that Robert A. Williams, Jr. offers *Linking Arms Together: American Indian Treaty Visions of Law and Peace, 1600–1800*. Believing that "legal scholarship should be actively directed toward the resolution of contemporary policy issues," Williams hopes his book will lay the framework for new legal strategies (p. 4). For too long lawyers have viewed the principles of U.S. Indian law as the "exclusive by-products of the Western legal tradition brought to America from the Old World" (p. 6). As Williams demonstrates, Indians brought their own concepts of diplomacy to the table in negotiations with European colonists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Resurrecting these visions, Williams hopes, will help ensure Indian sovereignty rights and cultural survival in the twentieth century and beyond. And while *Linking Arms Together's* effectiveness in this aim cannot be immediately gauged, the book is certainly a welcome addition to the historical literature.

Perhaps the strongest contribution of the work lies in its scope. This short book ambitiously generalizes for all Eastern Woodland Indians over a two-century period, and in this it succeeds about as well as one could hope. Williams