

August 15, 2012

To the Editor:

I write in response to Glenn Coin's article "400 Years Later, A Legendary Iroquois Treaty Comes Under Attack," published in the Post-Standard on 9 August, 2012.

The scholars denying the validity of the document purporting to represent a 1613 treaty between Dutch and Mohawk negotiators, referred to today as the Two Row Treaty, have, in my opinion, overreached themselves by claiming that the entire agreement is an invention. Professor William Starna is quoted in the article as follows: "If the paper treaty is fake, so is the idea of any formal agreement made in 1613." This argument rests on a fallacious premise, i.e., that the absence of evidence equals evidence of absence. In a similar manner, Starna and his colleagues argued in their 1987 study that since no early copy of a "Two Row" belt has been located, the agreement must not have happened. This is also an unconvincing claim, since the historical and archaeological literature indicates that Iroquois wampum belts were routinely disassembled and reused. Very few wampum belts from the 17th and 18th centuries, in fact, have survived intact.

For the sake of argument, however, let us concede these points and assume that the document in question is in fact fraudulent and that no wampum belt associated with an agreement in 1613 exists. Does this really mean that the Two Row Treaty is a "fake," as Starna claims?

The question, in my view, boils down to whether or not the consistent strand of Iroquois oral tradition regarding the Two Row treaty and its terms can be aligned with the surviving evidence in the European-authored documentary record. I believe that such alignment exists, and that the existence of an early Dutch-Mohawk agreement can be validated using standards of evidence commonly applied in Western academic scholarship. I took the first steps toward an exhaustive analysis of the documentary record for evidence of renewals of an early seventeenth century Mohawk-Dutch agreement in my book The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701 (2010). The book documents no less than ten distinct recitations by Iroquois speakers of the Two Row Treaty tradition in published French and English documentary sources dating from 1656 to 1701. All of these documents appear in published collections familiar to scholars of the period. While this evidence establishes with precision neither the date of 1613 (although that date is certainly within the realm of possibility) nor the exact language employed in the original agreement, it points very strongly to the existence of a long-remembered agreement between the earliest Dutch explorers and colonists and their nearby Mohawk neighbors that established fundamental principles of equitable coexistence (including mutual recognition, peaceable trade, and security provisions) that were later extended to other Iroquois nations. I would add further that historian Mark Meuwese of the University of Winnipeg has also provided further validation of the treaty's existence using different evidence in his recent book Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595-1674 (2012).

One of the oldest tricks in the colonizer's playbook has been to deny the authenticity and/or the antiquity of indigenous traditions; European-centered scholarship, in adopting these principles, works to conflate contemporaneous cultural and political differences between indigenous and settler nations into a progressive temporal sequence – denied a "true" past, the indigenous nation is placed in an inferior position, "behind" in terms of its cultural development and thus susceptible to the demands of the colonizing mission. It is worth noting that the very concept of the Two Row Treaty facilitates a fuller recognition of how to coexist simultaneously with others possessing their own historical trajectories, their own nationhood, and their own stories to tell. Engaging the complex history of the Two Row Treaty, rather than simply dismissing it in the interest of protecting academic "turf," raises our awareness of a deep Iroquois understanding of cross-cultural relationships that work towards unity by demonstrating how differences between individuals, communities, and nations must be acknowledged and accommodated, rather than annihilated or absorbed. In that sense, the Two Row Treaty is very much worth remembering now, in 2013, and beyond.

Sincerely,

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