Exhibit Review


This recent exhibit at an elegant small Philadelphia library explored “the role of the written word in the colonization of North America.” In four interpretive sections not uncomfortably crowded into two modest rooms, curator Kirim M. Tiro, a graduate student in history at the University of Pennsylvania, used the Rosenbach’s rare book collection to explore how European authors, explorers, and missionaries employed their literacy to subordinate Native Americans—and how Native Americans attempted to turn literacy back on the colonizers as a tool of resistance. Although the exhibit is now closed, its illustrated catalogue, with an introductory essay by Tiro, may still be available through the World Wide Web Site, <http://www.libertynet.org/rosenbl/deeds/words-deeds-cat-order.html>.

The exhibit’s first set of display cases, on “Explorers, Entrepreneurs, and Propagandists,” concentrated on the verbal images that European authors constructed to assert the “savage” inferiority of Native Americans and the right of their nations to claim and repopulate the continent. Copies of works such as Richard Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations* (1859), Robert Johnson’s *Nova Britannia* (1609), Samuel Purchas’s *Haklutyus Posthumus* (1625), and John Smith’s *General Historie of Virginia* (1626) were opened to marked passages that drove the message home. Two other books that seemed to convey more positive images of Indians, Marc Lescarbot’s *Nova Francia* (1609) and Thomas Morton’s *New English Canaan* (1637) nonetheless described welcoming Natives in a country ripe for the taking. Eighteenth-century works such as William Penn’s *Information and Direction to Such Persons as are Inclined to America* and Josua Kochertal’s *Aufführung, and umständlicher Bericht von der berühmten Laneschaft Carolina* (1709) went a step further by leading prospective immigrants to imagine a land practically empty of Indians, friendly or otherwise.

A second, more extensive, set of books, prints, visual materials, and artifacts lined a room devoted to “Writing from East to West: Literacy and Euro-American Expansion.” Displays on “The Seventeenth Century and Its Aftermath: New England,” “The Eighteenth Century: The Middle Colonies,” and “The Nineteenth Century: The American South” focused directly on the “Words and Deeds” of the exhibit’s general title. Real estate deeds, land conveyances, printed records of Indian treaty conferences, and maps of North America told a grim tale of how the written and printed word transferred ownership of the continent to Europeans and their descendants. But as the displays proceeded chronologically, Native Americans increasingly could be
seen actively shaping the process, using the European legal system to their own advantage as signatories and petitioners, and literally placing their mark on the record through the clan symbols they used to sign treaties. A strikingly drawn turtle, with a red back decorated by a black cross, leapt out at viewers to remind them that these marks were neither hastily scrawled nor made lightly.

The eighteenth-century display included wampum belts from the University of Pennsylvania's collections accompanied by a recording of Cayuga chief Jacob Thomas "reading" another belt dealing with the role of literacy in treaty making. (On the day I visited, the tape recorder resisted all of my efforts to start it, only coming to life after the attendant mysteriously switched the room lights on and off several times in a way nearly as baffling as the first talking book must have seemed to early seventeenth-century Indians or wampum belt reading must have seemed to Europeans.) An adjacent display included a copper plate used to print certificates of alliance illustrated with visual representations of Indian metaphors of peacemaking and a silver trade armband featuring the American eagle. All of these artifacts were intended to show how the treaty process became truly bicultural and trans-literary. A well chosen 1830 article from the bilingual Cherokee Phoenix—headlined "First Blood Shed by the Georgians!!"—graphically displayed Native people attempting to defend their own lands with the printing press.

At the entrance to this room, a label noted that, during the European colonial period, Indian use of "literacy was in fact largely limited to land transactions and the practice of Christianity. In all other areas of life, oral modes continued to predominate." Appropriately, as visitors returned to the main exhibit space, Christian practice was the theme of the next major section. Displays of familiar missionary texts worth seeing in the original—a 1645 edition of the Jesuit Relations, John Eliot's Indian Bible (1663), Roger Williams's Key into the Language of America (1643)—were hammered perhaps a bit too vigorously into a framework of the missionary as agent of cultural imperialism. More convincingly, other books such as the Mohegan Samson Occom's Sermon at the Execution of Moses Paul (1789) and the Pequot William Apess's autobiography, A Son of the Forest (1831) illustrated how Native Christians used their religion, and especially the literacy they learned in mission schools, to tell their own, often quite subversive, stories. Interestingly, however, the Tuscarora David Cusick's Sketches of the Ancient History of the Six Nations (1828) was opened not to his text (written in prose heavily influenced by the "Indian English" dialect spoken on the reservations of early nineteenth-century New York State) but to illustrations of scenes from Iroquois folklore drawn by Cusick or his brother. This portion of the exhibition closed with evocations of the enduring legacy of Native American Christianity in nineteenth-century Indian language hymnals and in a snapshot and tape recording of Wisconsin's Oneida Singers performing "Lo! What an Entertaining Sight" in 1988.
The final section, "Captivity Narratives and Cultural Frontiers" displayed editions of Mary Rowlandson's, John Williams's, John Tanner's, Mary Jemison's and others' famous stories to tell again a tale of literacy as cultural domination. The labels emphasized the ways in which, "by ignoring the reasons for Indian violence and focusing on 'innocents' (i.e., women and children), these narratives also legitimized white retributory violence." Except in Jemison's defense of her decision to remain among the Senecas rather than be repatriated, Native perspectives come through less clearly in this portion of the exhibit than others. Nonetheless, perhaps the most delicious insight into Indian attitudes towards literacy appeared in the passage to which Jonathan Dickinson's 1699 account of his capture in Florida was opened. "Being all Stripped as Naked as We were Born; and endeavoring to hide our Nakedness," the passage read, Dickinson's captors "took the Books, and tearing out the Leaves would give each of us a Leafe to cover us; which We took from them: At which time they would deride and Smithe us; and instantly another would snatch away what the other gave us."

Tiro told an ambitious story and attempted to convey to his popular audience a sophisticated message well rooted in current scholarship. To some extent, the message may have struck visitors as going beyond the materials on display and perhaps, for the more politically conservative among them, driven by an ideological agenda. To the extent that unfortunate impression may have gotten across, the problem was not with the message but with the kind of materials available to illustrate it. Arguments about the power of the written word to construct reality and subordinate others—and to be used by the subordinated in turn to challenge dominant constructions—necessarily rest on sophisticated readings of entire texts in a framework of cultural and historical analysis. Old books in display cases simply cannot convey the power they once had to construct reality when read as a whole in the matrix of early modern print culture. Perhaps for this very reason, the elements of the exhibition that "worked" best were those dealing with the Native American side of the equation that were either non-literary artifacts or brief eruptions of printed defiance such as the Cherokee Phoenix article or the game of book page fig leaf keep-away. Nonetheless, the effort was worth it and, if a conversation I overheard among two middle-aged women who left the museum just before me is indicative, some important messages got through. "I had no idea," said one to the other, "that people captured by Indians didn't want to go home again."

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- Gemini
- Cancer
- Leo
- Virgo
- Libra
- Scorpio
- Sagittarius
- Capricorn
- Aquarius
- Pisces

The Blackmoor may as easily change his Skin, as Men forsake the ways they're brought up in; Therefore I've set the Old Anatomy, hoping to please my Country men thereby, But where's the Man that's born & lives among, Can please a Fickle throng?

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