

REVIEW ESSAY

NATIVE AMERICAN ROLES IN THE WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE

Thomas J. Lappas
Nazareth College

*David J. Norton. *Rebellious Younger Brother: Oneida Leadership and Diplomacy, 1750–1800*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009. Pp. x, 239, maps, tables, indexes, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$38.00.)*

*Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin. *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006. Pp. 434, maps, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$30.00.)*

Since the publication of Barbara Graymont's 1972 work *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, American historians have been familiar with the basic contours of the role that members of the Iroquois Confederacy, or Haudenosaunee, played in the War for Independence. Though the Iroquois tried to remain neutral at first, most of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Mohawk eventually sided with the British. Most of the Oneida and Tuscarora allied themselves with the Americans. In the ensuing years,

historians have been adding nuance to the narrative, focusing on different leaders or examining the causes behind the split in the confederacy. Two contributions to this literature, both focusing on the Oneida, are David J. Norton's *Rebellious Younger Brother: Oneida Leadership and Diplomacy, 1750–1800* and Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin's *Forgotten Allies: The Oneida Indians and the American Revolution*. The former is a brief, but useful examination of the causes behind the rift between the Oneida and other Iroquois nations. The latter discusses causes of the split, but also provides a very thorough military history of Oneida participation in the conflict.

Rebellious Younger Brother and *Forgotten Allies* trace some of the same Oneida leaders, such as Good Peter (Agwongdongwas), Han Yerry, and John Skenandoah, who played important roles throughout much of the Revolutionary era. They also use many of the same primary sources, including the Papers of the Continental Congress, British and American military records, and the writings of missionaries. Yet, these two works are quite different. Norton's book is not terribly concerned with the military contributions of the Oneida—indeed, many of the major battles of the Revolution are covered in a page or less. Instead, Norton focuses on the very complicated set of causes behind the choices the Oneida made in trying to remain neutral and then, ultimately, in breaking from the rest of the confederacy in siding with the Americans. To answer the question of why the Oneida sided with the Americans Norton focuses on the period 1750–1776, which he sees as more important than the earlier colonial era in explaining the changes to internal Iroquois dynamics.

Like Glatthaar and Martin, Norton discusses the origins of the Iroquois Confederacy. In his introduction, he describes the “Oneida as a Nation Apart” and their importance to the confederacy “as receivers and conveyers of information” (6). They were also entrusted with the responsibility of accepting new nations into their territory. In the Iroquoian moiety and fictive kinship systems, the Seneca, Onondaga, and Mohawk sat as the older brothers at the council fire kept by the Onondaga. The Cayuga and Oneida were the younger brothers. While they lacked the special responsibility to protect the eastern and western frontiers like the Mohawk and Seneca did, the Oneida and Cayuga had the authority to communicate dissenting voices to the other nations. These responsibilities, coupled with their geographic proximity to the colonists, contributed to their gradual alienation from the others. Norton tackles the process in stages: Chapter One discusses the Oneida participation during the French and Indian War. The next three chapters describe their role at peace, as diplomats, and as neutrals in the years preceding the Revolution.

During this time, the Oneidas frequently ran into conflicts with the British Indian Agent William Johnson, an Anglican convert who became a mentor to the loyalist Mohawk warrior Joseph Brant. Brant became the most virulent supporter of the Loyalist cause and tried, unsuccessfully, to bring all of the Oneida to the side of the Crown. The Oneida's own Presbyterian minister, Samuel Kirkland, helped link them to the patriots, but Norton makes a point of de-emphasizing Kirkland as a chief cause for their active support of the colonists.

Instead, Norton argues that the Oneida's place in the confederacy and their traditional functions led them to stand apart from the rest of the confederacy. According to the Great Law of the Iroquois, they were charged with adopting new nations into the confederacy, as they did with the Tuscarora and the Nanticoke. As "adoptive parents" to new nations and in their "supervisory capacity in their southern lands" they had special political and even ceremonial roles (4). Yet, during the decades before the American Revolution, the elder brothers of the confederacy began to disrespect the Oneida's position and ignore their leaders, cleaving them from the rest of the Iroquois. The military history is brief, but Norton explains how Oneida participation in martial events led to further disruptions and their struggles to navigate the complicated diplomatic arena of the late 1770s and 1780s. Norton's conclusion emphasizes that neither the new Christian Oneida leadership nor the traditionalists were able to stop the land speculators and New York State's aggressive policies. Following the war, the Oneida were further fragmented, some remaining in New York State, some fleeing to Canada, and some making a deal for land in Wisconsin. Norton provides useful appendices, including a listing of Oneida leaders, listed by their Oneida name, but with alternate spellings and English versions and their status within the tribes, as sachems, warriors, or chiefs. This device might be useful for anyone examining the sources for the first time and in need of an introduction to Oneida leaders, many of whom have multiple names in the records.

The prolific American military historians Joseph T. Glatthaar and James Kirby Martin precede their fine narrative history of the Oneida and the American Revolution with the Marquis de Lafayette, the French officer who commanded many of the patriot-allied Oneida during the conflict. While on his return trip to what was once Oneida territory in Rome and Utica, NY, in 1824, he was taken aback when he saw none of his old allies in the vicinity. The authors, who seem to share in Lafayette's disappointment at their absence, convey the Oneida's importance to the Americans' struggle.

Readers unfamiliar with the Iroquois Confederacy or Haudenosaunee receive a solid primer in the first chapter. The authors ably summarize the Iroquois creation story and the traditions about the consolidation of the Five Nations—the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Oneida, and Mohawk—into a grand confederacy. The Tuscarora became the sixth nation in the early eighteenth century and largely sided with the Oneidas during the Revolution. The authors hint at the Oneida's role as the adopters of outsiders as they wrap up their cultural introduction. When the Tuscarora and others came to live with the Oneidas, this was in accordance with “tribal customs, beliefs, and practices” (25). Despite their attentiveness to Iroquois cultural traditions and the internal relations of members of the confederacy, they do not emphasize internal Iroquois strife as the disruption of a sacred union given to the people by the Peacemaker. In contrast, Norton uses the Oneida's place within the confederacy and their sacred adoptive tradition as the organizing principle behind his book.

Chapters Three and Four explain the historical developments in Oneida territory during the colonial era up until the eve of the Revolution. Special attention is paid to Samuel Kirkland, the missionary who resided at the Oneida village of Kanonwalohale, and who has long been seen as a major catalyst in getting the Oneidas to side with the Americans. Chapters Five and Six cover the fighting between the British and Americans and explain the Oneida struggle to remain neutral. However, as many of the Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Mohawk were convinced to fight actively for the British, by either British officers from Fort Niagara or by Brant, the Oneida looked to the Americans as allies, in large part because of their proximity to the patriots and because of the influence of American officers and diplomats, and especially Kirkland.

The last half of the book traces Oneida martial activities through the Treaty of Paris in 1783. This portion is where the authors are at their best as scholars and as storytellers. The authors illuminate the Oneida's contributions, in addition to the limitations of their impact on the course of the war. For instance, prior to what came to be known as the Battle of Oriskany Creek in 1777, General Nicholas Herkimer failed to appoint his Oneida warriors to the tasks to which they were best suited: scouting, skirmishing, and setting ambushes. Without scouts, Herkimer's party walked directly into a British and Iroquois ambush and paid with the lives of many of his men and ultimately with his own life. The authors emphasize that Han Yerry, and other Oneidas, proved themselves excellent fighters despite the tactical errors of their commander. Gradually, Americans came to rely on the Oneida for key tasks.

Lieutenant Peter Gansevoort placed more trust in his Oneida scouts, even ordering them to play ruses on the British who were besieging Fort Schuyler (Fort Stanwix). While a lack of supplies to the British troops under St. Leger was the primary cause of abandoning the siege, Oneida actions also contributed to the abandonment of the siege. At Saratoga and Barren Hill, too, the Oneidas played important supportive roles.

The situation for the Iroquois got much worse following the events of 1778. In retaliation for British and Iroquois attacks in the Wyoming Valley, German Flatts, and Cherry Valley, George Washington ordered what became the Sullivan-Clinton Campaign of 1779, where the Americans, accompanied by some Oneida, destroyed Cayuga and Seneca villages in Western New York. The Oneida's reluctant participation in a campaign that destroyed villages and food supplies of their alienated brethren led to retaliation against the Oneida villages. Fear of further revenge forced them to leave one of their last stronghold villages, Kanonwalohale, and encamp near American forts.

As they say in their acknowledgements, Glatthaar and Martin came upon the topic of Oneida participation in the Revolution by accident, after they were asked to pursue the project by a legal scholar working with the Oneida Nation. Though they were less familiar with the cultural history of the Iroquois, they mined the relevant secondary materials from anthropologists and historians like William Fenton, Anthony Wonderly, and Laurence Hauptman, and they sought guidance from the scholars within the Oneida Nation itself like Gloria and Ray Halbritter. The result is an excellent study of key battles in the American Revolution where the Oneida played a role. The authors embed the Oneida's decision to side with the Americans and an analysis of the consequences of their decision for the nation and the confederacy within an engaging story based on thorough research.

Norton's work is a revised dissertation and contains many of the benefits and distractions that come from such a work. On the one hand, it engages specific debates about the details of Oneida-European interaction before, during, and, to a lesser extent, after the Revolution. Yet, in the pursuit of novel insights, Norton often overstates differences with previous histories relating to these details. Kirkland is rarely given all the credit for turning the Oneida toward the Americans, and most historians were already in line with Norton's thinking on the matter. There are some minor errors that got past the editors. For instance in a note on Daniel Richter's *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, Merrell and

Richter are both erroneously listed as editors (194 n. 4). A few other minor punctuation errors should have been caught.

Readers looking for a gripping tale and a clear understanding of Oneida participation in the Revolution would likely benefit more from *Forgotten Allies*. However, Norton offers some creative insights into why the Oneida broke from the rest of the Iroquois Confederacy. Both works drive home the point that not only were the Oneida important to the Revolutionaries' struggle, but that they paid a dear price for it—one that has not often been recognized by non-Native Americans in the United States today.