

BOOK REVIEWS

Andrew Newman. *On Records: Delaware Indians, Colonists, and the Media of History and Memory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013). Pp. 328. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. Cloth, \$45.00.

Andrew Newman aims to unravel the fundamental complexities of Native American sources written by non-natives and how those records often times do not catch the entire context of cultural meaning. In this case, Newman analyzes four contentious episodes between the Delaware Indians and the early settlers of New York and Pennsylvania. Uncovering the myths behind the *Walam Olum*, the Dido Motif, the Great Treaty of Peace, and the Walking Purchase of 1737, Newman successfully illustrates how the media of history and memory was contested between colonists and Indians in the past and how they continue to be disputed by scholars and the courtroom in the present. He skillfully threads his narrative around the central question: "To what

extent might we consider written representations of Native American oral forms as records not only of spoken language but also of the sometimes distant historical events that were spoken of?" (6). Newman finds his answer in the unwritten context of the records and representations that were used to negotiate understanding between whites and Indians. These events, recorded by Euro-Americans and used as factual information for decades, failed to have native peoples "speak to us fully, without mediation, to circumvent the processes of negotiation involved in reading for the 'real' Native Americans in writings by non-Indians" (53).

Concerned with the idea of the "chain of memory," Newman demonstrates how various Native American material culture—wampum, landmarks, and relics—possess important messages that are often overlooked because their meanings are not easily interpreted. They also require confidence in sources that are not always present in the written record. Despite the reliance on memorization, Newman believes that the "chain of memory" is closely linked to the stability of group identity and strongly attached to the landscape where it originated. These memories are maintained through apprenticeship and carried forward by subsequent generations, even during times of encroachment and removal. And although not completely transportable, "the parts of the chain that have become visible, so to speak, are sufficient to allow the inference that it extended deeply into the precolonial past" (194). Memory, however, is not without its weaknesses. Indeed, Newman candidly points out that memory, over time, will exaggerate, lose detail, and distort, but oral traditions often retain specific details that can be collaborated by later generations. Thus, when memory and documentation overlap, it provides stronger evidence that native traditions possess historical time more so than the above weaknesses do to invalidate them.

One of Newman's greatest contributions is his ability to provide a balanced interpretation of how a common experience between natives and colonists ultimately diverged into two completely separate understandings. Whether it be over a misinterpretation over words and phrases that the Indians believed were mutually understood in the Walking Purchase of 1737, a dubious historical narrative that the Delaware defiantly claim to be false in the *Walam Olum*, the trickery of the first land transaction between the Dutch and Delaware known as the Dido Motif, or the centuries-old story of William Penn meeting Delaware leaders under the elm tree outside Philadelphia

negotiating the Great Treaty of Peace, Newman cites all as significant challenges to native memory and oral traditions. One of the conflicting reasons for misunderstanding is largely based on the written language. Writing has often been used as the defining determinate for civilization, and "human memory," according to James Logan, a Proprietary agent for Pennsylvania, "was short and weak" (146). Therefore, Newman explains, too much significance has been placed on the western value of writing and "to check oral traditions against the documentary record for inconsistencies is to hold them to an unrealistic standard" (62).

The danger of denying the association of native oral traditions with historical events, according to Newman, is to not recognize native self-determination. In fact, Newman goes to great lengths to demonstrate that known native traditions and memories can oftentimes be verified within the documentary sources if carefully consulted. Here the author reveals how native oral traditions can be evaluated without being recorded by the colonists themselves. The Dido Motif, for example, is not extant in North American colonial papers, but the story has tradition among the Delaware, not because it pertains to a specific event but, rather, it is used by the Delaware to explain their entire experience of removal by Euro-Americans. At the same time, the *Walam Olum* migration story is largely recognized only among non-natives because the written record of it was preserved, but it is not received by the Delaware as being authentic. Newman believes that a balance between the two ends of the spectrum is possible, but native oral traditions that were not attested to by colonists must first be accepted to avoid the "whole problem of the spoliation of the Indian's rights by the white invader" (68).

In an exciting and continually evolving field of inquiry, Native American history finally has a compelling guide on how to approach the difficulty in interpreting indigenous sources and how they may be applied alongside traditional, written documents. *On Records* provides clear and concise explanations on the nuances of language, culture, and understanding, and how they all contributed to the miscommunication between natives and colonists in early American treaties, land transactions, and the Delawares' ancient claims of creation.

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