
The three monographs by Arthur C. Parker, "Iroquois Uses of Maize and Other Food Plants," "The Code of Handsome Lake," and "The Constitution of the Five Nations," edited by William N. Fenton, are welcome additions to the literature on the Iroquois. Parker, one-fourth Seneca chief and three-fourths New Englander, lived among the Senecas, excavated the sites of their ancient villages, interviewed their old people, made recordings of their ceremonies, and otherwise used modern methods to determine what manner of men the early Iroquois were.

Parker's first monograph, on maize or Indian corn, is his best. It is as plain and homely as the corn meal mush listed as one of twenty-one ways of preparing maize. One hundred fifty-two edible plants were to be gleaned from the northern forests. Corn, beans, and squash were the mainstays. Corn was also the main staple of the colonists; they learned their farming from the Indians. The Indians cleared land for corn by girdling the trees and planting among the leafless trunks; but at festival time they prayed that the children be not hurt by falling limbs.

The Code of Handsome Lake is as idealistic as the maize book is realistic. The religious revival led by Handsome Lake, a Seneca Chief, took place at the end of the American Revolution after the Iroquois had preferred the council fire of the British to the "thirteen fires" of the Americans and had lost. As a result many fled to Canada, the old Confederacy went to pieces, and the people — confused, disheartened and leaderless — listened eagerly to the young Seneca's tale of his visions and his message of hope through orderly and quiet living and peace. President Jefferson publicly commended Handsome Lake for his good work in temperance reform.

Parker selected, amid considerable controversy, what he thought was the truest form of the Constitution of the Five Nations as gleaned from the oldest sources and illuminated by modern practices. The women of certain noble families nominated the civil chiefs, subject to popular council, and could recall them. War chiefs were selected from the sons of the noble families. Braves could win the title of Pine Tree Chief by bravery in battle. The decision at each council fire had to be unanimous, and decisions in the council of the Confederacy had to be approved by all Five Nations.
These five small nations never, after the white man came, amounted to more than 15,000 souls. Yet they destroyed or adopted five surrounding nations of the Iroquoian family and then subdued or cowed the Algonquin tribes — older and more numerous than the Five Nations — until the decrees from the council fire at Onondaga had virtually the authority of law throughout the northeast.

In none of the three monographs is there mention of the known cruelty of the Iroquois to their captives. All is a search for the Great Peace. The truth is that the Iroquois considered themselves a master race. Hence it was provided in their law that if another nation, after a third council, refused the offer of peace, the War Chief of the Iroquois should at once club him to death, war should be declared and the “Five Nations seek to establish the Great Peace by a conquest of the rebellious nations.”

_New Castle, Pennsylvania_  

_W. WALTER BRAHAM_