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Lost Women of the Matriarchy: Iroquois Women in the Historical Literature

MARTHA HARROUN FOSTER

The historical portrayal of Iroquois women is of importance to all women's history but especially to the history of Indian women. If historians have "lost" Iroquois women, widely recognized to hold positions of power in their society, how can we hope to find other Indian women, with less obviously powerful roles, in the histories of their people?

We find two important questions here. The first concerns the extent to which historians have actually ignored, misrepresented, or marginalized Iroquois women. The second question pertains to the methods and basis of such misrepresentation and neglect. In this paper I cannot possibly examine all of the literature or explore these questions in depth. It is, rather, my intention to present certain aspects of the problem of Indian women's invisibility that the study of Iroquois women illuminates. Ethnologists have long recognized the relatively powerful position held by women in Iroquois society. With the possible exception of the Pueblo people and the Mandan, no other Indian women are so widely recognized as enjoying a comparably influential role within their society. If Iroquois women are lost from the historical record, the methods and circumstances by which this loss was possible should be easier to discover in their case than in histories of people for whom women played a less prominent role or for

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which the documentation of women's roles and position is absent.

In this discussion of women in Iroquois history, two terms require explanation. I shall refer to all members of the Iroquois Confederation as *Iroquois*, even though these groups consist of separate nations with distinct yet related languages.¹ Although their cultures differed, the position of women in each during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century was essentially similar. I also employ the term *matriarchy* in its historical usage, recognizing that Iroquois society was matrifocal and matrilocal but not a matriarchy.² Men and women had separate but equally essential roles in Iroquois society. Part of the irony in the representation of Iroquois women by pivotal twentieth-century historians is that, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these women were popularly perceived as having great power and high status. The concept of an Iroquois matriarchy, in which women ruled absolutely, while incorrect, was widespread among the general public. Both the acceptance and later the rejection of the term clouded historians' understanding of Iroquois women's position within their society.

A summary of Iroquois women's historical roles will facilitate an understanding of their position. This study will focus on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before widespread acceptance of Christianity and Western education. The work of several important early observers and ethnologists, which was available to and influenced historians of the Iroquois, will aid in the discussion.

The first European observers left accounts that are still among the most valuable. Joseph François Lafitau, a Jesuit who lived among the Iroquois in the early eighteenth century, recognized the importance of Iroquois women's position. In his *Customs of the American Indians* (1724), Lafitau wrote of a "gyneocracy" in which women controlled the distribution of food and owned the fields, the produce, and the home.³ He concluded that women not only managed the material wealth of the group but also played culturally essential roles in events such as feasts, celebrations, and marriage arrangement.⁴ Lafitau observed that the clan mothers also played an important role in tribal politics, selecting the chiefs and their advisors.⁵ Another Jesuit of the same period, Pierre de Charlevoix, reported that these matron-appointed advisors were both men and women and that the chiefs could do nothing without their agreement.⁶

Lafitau understood that the political and ceremonial influence of Iroquois women extended beyond these easily observed roles. As Martha Randle explained in *Iroquois Women, Then and Now* (1951), the control of food supplies mentioned by Lafitau had important political and ceremonial consequences. With authority over food for public events, including war, the clan mothers controlled the events themselves.⁷ Nancy Bonvillain, in "Iroquoian Women," agrees, and her review of early primary documents suggests that the power of these women derived from their control of the economy and their position within the kinship network.⁸ She documents the substantial public and private influence that they held.⁹

There is surprisingly little argument about these basic facts of women's place in Iroquois society. The differences between writers' handling of the position of women become apparent more in emphasis and omission. For example, Lewis Henry Morgan, whose 1851 work *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois* influenced many twentieth-century historians, demonstrates a shift in emphasis from the earliest accounts. Nineteenth-century presuppositions color his observations. Historians have criticized Morgan for being preoccupied with Indian hunting and for blaming the hunting life for the Iroquois' perceived inability to accept civilization.¹⁰ This "strange infatuation for a hunter life," from which Morgan insisted all Indians suffered, also served to minimize the essential nature of women's roles.¹¹ In stressing the importance of the hunt, he ignored the centrality of horticulture to Iroquois society and women's total control of this aspect of life. In "Native American Women and Agriculture: A Seneca Case Study," Joan Jensen maintains that Morgan consciously declined to discuss women's production out of a belief that progress for the Iroquois lay in the abandonment of hunting and in the encouragement of male industry. She suggests that Morgan wished to protect Iroquois men from white criticism by emphasizing men's work and ignoring that of women.¹² It was politically imperative to stress male, profit-oriented, "progressive" farming techniques to prove that the Iroquois were truly using the land and were giving up their "primitive," nonproductive hunting life. The theory that Indians wasted valuable farm land by maintaining hunting grounds and persisting in woman-dominated, hoe horticulture, had been used since the seventeenth century to justify the acquisition of Indian land. Morgan feared (with considerable justification) that these theories would be used to appropriate what land the Iroquois still held.

But it is not only in the area of production that Morgan omitted the importance of women's roles. When he discussed property ownership, he used a synchronic approach that distorted women's position. He freely mixed aspects of contact period Iroquois culture with post-1830 changes that he wished to emphasize. For example, he moved from a discussion of early contact activities to one of post-1830 male-dominated property ownership patterns without mention of the time difference involved. In reality, these post-1830 attitudes toward ownership had developed only gradually after "reformers" had begun pressuring Iroquois men to take up the plow and Western style agriculture. This process was slow and uneven and was never completely successful. Nevertheless, Morgan presented Western concepts of property as an integral and unchanged factor of Iroquois culture, with no indication of the passage of time, the incompleteness of this development, or the historical changes involved. Morgan wrote,

No individual could obtain the absolute title to land, as that was vested by the laws of the Iroquois in all the people; but *he* could reduce unoccupied lands to cultivation, to any extent *he* pleased; and so long as *he* continued to use them, *his* right to their enjoyment was protected and secured. *He* could also sell *his* improvements, or bequeath them to *his* wife or children. (emphasis mine)

Morgan's use of the masculine pronoun was more than just standard contemporary usage in which masculine pronouns represented both sexes. Here, Morgan referred to a "he" as a masculine person with a wife and children. He referred to men's ownership specifically, excluding that of women. This is an example of one method by which Morgan implied that Iroquois property rights were and had always been dominated by men and ignored the fact that, traditionally, women controlled the use of land, a pattern that continued long after decades of efforts by United States government and religious organizations to initiate change. In fact, the stubborn refusal of many Iroquois to give up traditional, women-centered horticultural practices was an issue in the mid-1800s when Morgan did his fieldwork. Morgan chose to focus on what he considered to be progressive male activities and intentionally ignored traditional women's roles, which were still very much in evidence.¹³

Morgan also ignored other aspects of Iroquois women's political and social power. In "Iroquois Women: An Ethnohistoric

Note," Judith Brown remarks that it was "surprising" that Morgan had "taken no particular note of the political power of Iroquois matrons."¹⁴ Surprises continue with his much-quoted comment about the "absence of equality in the sexes." Morgan concluded that "the Indian regarded woman as the inferior, the dependent, and the servant of man."¹⁵ Those same clan mothers who, Lafitau reported, controlled the fields, distributed the food, and appointed the chiefs, were described by Morgan, in 1851, as "inferior" and "dependent" "servant[s]" of Indian men.¹⁶

Whatever his motivation, Morgan had taken an enormous step toward the historical misrepresentation of Iroquois women. However, his opinion alone, influential as it was, could not have changed the historical view. Unfortunately for the history of Iroquois women, Morgan was representative of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Euro-American historical thought. He saw Indian progress as male progress and consciously programmed women out of the story of Iroquois acculturation.

Because Morgan's work was principally ethnographic, anthropologist Arthur C. Parker felt the need to write a historic account of the Seneca in 1926. His goal was to set "forth the underlying causes of tribal action," giving "the Seneca people a setting that would explain the phenomena of their folk-ways."¹⁷ He included a short version of the standard ethnographic information about Seneca women but then, as Morgan had, proceeded to undermine women's position. As a result, women in his *History of the Seneca Indians* have very little to do with either the causes of tribal action or Seneca folkways.

Parker's handling of the position and roles of women is illustrated by his short sections on "Seneca Agriculture" and the "Rights of Seneca Women." In each he listed some of their rights and duties.¹⁸ He mentioned that the Seneca people's "whole life" depended on agriculture; however, the significance of this information is not clear until several pages later, where he revealed that women were "mistresses of the vegetable supplies."¹⁹ Nowhere did Parker suggest that the Seneca's "whole life" depended upon the productivity of women. In another passage on "Seneca Agriculture," women's horticultural importance was obscured by Parker's use of language. He maintained that the Iroquois grew crops in "extensive communal fields, in which the clanswomen were *required* to work under the supervision of a field matron." Parker did not mention that the fields belonged to these women who were "required" to work them. And we find that, even though

women are exclusively the gardeners and have complete control over the products of the garden, "any individual might have *his* own garden and reserve its fruits for *himself*, always providing that a *clansman* might take what *he* needed" (italics mine).²⁰

Not so subtle is the near absence of women from most of the book. Except for a small section describing the ethnographic background of the Seneca people, this history of the Seneca contains almost no women. Parker's handling of the life of Mohawk leaders Joseph and Mary Brant is representative. Although Parker dealt extensively with Joseph and his relationship to the powerful New York landowner Sir William Johnson, he ignored the influence of Mary Brant, a Mohawk matron, on whose powerful Indian contacts Johnson's power rested.²¹

Women are even scarcer in Parker's sections "The Seneca Since 1838" and "Modern Conditions." On page 156, we find a list of prominent men, but there are no prominent women. Lest they be forgotten, however, we learn, on page 152, that "women are neat housekeepers and excellent cooks, as a rule."

Thus Parker consolidated Morgan's neglect and distortion of the roles of Iroquois women and gave historical respectability to the results. By the 1960s, even a new interest in women's history would not yet revive the earlier reputation of Iroquois women. In fact, only a few short works written specifically about women made mention of the once-famous clan mothers of the Iroquois Confederation.²² Important post-1960s studies of Iroquois-white relations illustrate the trend and indicate the extent of the influence these early works had on Iroquois history.

By 1960, when Allen Trelease wrote *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century*, women had almost disappeared from general Iroquois historical writing. Trelease's work was no exception. In tracing European expansion in colonial New York, focusing on Indian-Dutch and then Indian-English affairs in the seventeenth century, the author's main preoccupation is to show the value of the northern tribes to the colonists, first as participants in the fur trade and later as "buffers and allies" against the French and other Indians.²³ The book is, by design, one of war and diplomatic history. Trelease summarizes Iroquois economic and social organization in the first chapter, as a setting for his description of the conflict caused by European expansion. He stresses the influence of culture on all Iroquois action and explains motives and behavior in war, treaty-making, and trade in terms of cultural patterns.

Trelease's interest in the Indian point of view is commendable and, at the time of the writing of *Indian Affairs* (1960), unusual. The emphasis, though, is on colonial interests and problems, and his discussion of Indian culture is brief and shallow, not in the least because, while attempting to explain the Indian point of view, he omits half of the population. He finds no reason to include the importance of women's roles in his brief discussion of Iroquois culture, even less in his discussions of the fur trade, war, and diplomacy. For example, women hardly intrude into the description of the council and clans, nor is there any mention of woman's dominant place in the clan or of the role of clan mothers.²⁴ Trelease ignores the fact that decisions of war and peace were clan decisions in which women participated fully. It was often the women's call for revenge and captives that precipitated war, and women had final say in the fate of captives (a frequent goal of Iroquois war).²⁵ Nor could war parties leave home without the provisions that only women could provide.²⁶ Likewise, trade decisions were communal, and products of the hunt were controlled by women.²⁷ The large trade in woolen cloth, which outweighed firearms and liquor in value of sales, is just one illustration of the fact that Iroquois women shared in the acquisition of trade goods (neither should one assume that liquor sales were all to men.)²⁸

Similarly, Trelease minimizes women's roles in tribal subsistence. Although he mentions women as the gardeners in a half-paragraph on horticulture, unfortunately their "primitive methods . . . resulted in soil exhaustion" and caused the entire village to have to be moved every few years to start over the difficult process of clearing the land.²⁹ While he notes that the "relative importance of agriculture over hunting and fishing varied from one locality to another," he ignores the enormous amount of data supporting the essential nature of Iroquois horticulture and the power that the control of the land and its products gave women. Effectively dismissing women as inefficient and unessential gardeners, Trelease discusses the issues of politics, trade, war, and diplomacy without them. The book might better be titled *A Male Colonial Government Official's View of Male Indian Affairs in Colonial New York*.

As noted above, Trelease's interest is in trade, war, and diplomacy. Although he attempts to speak from an Indian point of view, he assumes that these were male occupations, not recognizing cultural differences between the colonists and the Iroquois. Paying too little attention to cultural factors, Trelease does not

understand that the Iroquois made all decisions by consensus and that women had a powerful voice. Because, for Trelease, Indians and their culture take a second place, Iroquois women have no place at all.

Like war, trade, and diplomacy, religion has been portrayed by historians of Native Americans as a male activity. The problems inherent in the discussion of religion and Iroquois women may be best illustrated by Anthony F. C. Wallace's *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca*. This is the history of the Old Way of Handsome Lake, the religion of the longhouse Iroquois. (Although this religious practice was considered innovative at the time, it is referred to today as the traditional religion of the Iroquois.) Wallace writes,

This book tells the story of the origin of their religion: how the Iroquois lived before catastrophe befell them: what the disaster was like; and how Handsome Lake and his disciples designed for themselves and their people a new way to live and brought about a renaissance of Iroquois society.³⁰

In the early nineteenth century, Handsome Lake "saved" the Iroquois from cultural disintegration with a Christian-influenced, patriarchal religion, dominated not by the clan mothers but by himself.³¹ He emphasized the male-dominated husband-wife relationship rather than the mother-daughter bond. Perhaps his intention was to find a new role for men who, after European colonization of New England, had lost the traditional activities of hunting and warfare, or perhaps he sought a tool to gain personal power.

To explain the cultural changes taking place after the American Revolution, Wallace uses a psychosocial approach that works best in his descriptions of male activities and frames of reference. His section on "The Ideal of Autonomous Responsibility" helps the reader understand the enormous dislocation and role confusion that occurred when Iroquois men were denied their most important and socially significant roles. When it comes to the roles of women, however, his approach fails him. The reader gets no feeling for what it was like to be an Iroquois woman, for Wallace minimizes her essential position. The image we get of Iroquois women is the already familiar one of a hard-working gardener. For Wallace, women are "bounded" by their fields rather than empowered by them.³²

Wallace describes the "matriarchy" (his quotation marks) itself as an inevitable consequence of men's unavoidable but unfortunate absence. Because of men's absence, women "had to be eco-

nomically self-sufficient" and this "quasi-matriarchy . . . had a *certain* validity in a situation where the division of labor between the sexes required that men be geographically peripheral to the households that they helped to support and did defend" (italics mine).³³ There is a certain defensiveness here that makes one wonder if Wallace is not somewhat afraid that Iroquois men are more than just geographically peripheral. In any case, Wallace sees all sorts of undesirable consequences resulting from men's prolonged absences. He portrays the "matriarchy" as an aberration with accompanying destabilizing effects on Iroquois marriages, which "were apt to fray." Long absences caused the men to seek other relationships, and, when they did return home, "drunken quarreling, spiteful gossip, parental irresponsibility, and flagrant infidelity might lead rapidly to the end of the relationship."³⁴ One wonders how such a society lasted as long as it did.

Wallace's use of language is revealing. He finds that, after the American Revolution, "the traditional diplomatic and military role of Iroquois men was sharply limited by the circumstances of reservation life." At the same time, he argues that "the 'matriarchal' character of certain of their economic, kinship, and political institutions was drastically diminished."³⁵ Although men's roles in warfare were utterly destroyed by the imposed peace, Wallace describes them as "sharply limited." Meanwhile, he insists that women's roles, which, in fact, continue in many ways to this day, had been "*drastically diminished*" (emphasis mine).³⁶

With the matriarchy so diminished, Wallace credits the Handsome Lake religion with saving the Iroquois people and giving them hope for a new life, as Christ, by his death and rebirth, gave Christians new life. To accomplish this rebirth, Handsome Lake condemned "four evil practices": "whiskey, witchcraft, love magic, and abortion-and-sterility medicine."³⁷ Wallace portrays the abandonment of these practices as more or less straightforward goals for the betterment of Iroquois life. Interestingly, though, three of these reforms involve the control of women. This control was necessary for Handsome Lake. He could not become a religious leader without the support or, lacking that, control of the clan mothers. By his attack on women's sexual power (love magic), reproductive processes (abortion and birth control), and witchcraft, Handsome Lake intended to reduce the overall power of women and to threaten leading women who opposed him with accusations of evil practices and witchcraft. He had several women

killed for witchcraft; consequent council charges that he killed only those who disagreed with him did not stop his followers from murdering other clan mothers who resisted his "reforms."³⁸

Wallace argues that Handsome Lake wished to stabilize the nuclear family as a means of strengthening Iroquois society. Handsome Lake did this by stressing the evils of a hierarchical mother-daughter relationship. He viewed domestic vices (adultery, separation, abortion, etc.) as a result of mothers' control over daughters. Wallace writes that Handsome Lake believed "mothers were all too prone to urge their daughters toward sin by administering abortifacients and sterilizing medicines."³⁹ The nuclear family with patriarchal marriage was Handsome Lake's ideal: "[M]en were supposed to assume the role of heads of families, being economically responsible for their wives and children and not frittering away their energies on strong drink, gambling . . . nor on mother-in-law trouble."⁴⁰

Wallace does not explore the causes of Handsome Lake's need to control the clan mothers or his apparent fear of their power. Wallace's psychosocial approach might have brought a fresh perspective to these issues, but he fails to address them. His concern with portraying Handsome Lake's success distorts the nature of the opposition. We must look elsewhere to understand the complexity of the historical context for Handsome Lake's efforts.

In contrast to Wallace's work, Joan Jensen's "Native American Women and Agriculture" enhances our understanding of Handsome Lake's fears. Jensen explains that a split between factions of older Iroquois women was brought about because the more conservative among them feared the new changes and saw them as a threat to their power. It was these more traditional women who urged their daughters to take drastic steps, including contraception, abortion, and refusal to bear children, in order to control their husbands and to prevent their following the new ways. Handsome Lake consequently attacked these women, accusing them of witchcraft.⁴¹ Unlike Anthony Wallace, Joan Jensen delves further into the historical situation to examine Handsome Lake's motives in a political struggle between the conservatives and the change-oriented Christian group. Jensen finds that many of the women killed as witches by Handsome Lake's followers were conservative matrons resisting the implementation of Christian concepts and practices, mechanized farming, and other male-dominated "improvements."

Jensen does not stop there, however. She concludes her exploration of Handsome Lake's religion by showing that it was just one of many factors changing and disrupting Iroquois society. For example, the Quaker missionaries' influence, which provoked powerful resistance, is a thread that runs through the history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries more strongly than the influence of Handsome Lake. Diane Rothenberg, in her examination of Iroquois-Quaker relations, supports Jensen's contention that the Iroquois-Quaker women's relationship was long term, complex, and the cause of powerful reaction.⁴² Thus, rather than the "rebirth" seen by Wallace, the new religion of Handsome Lake was actually only a new aspect of an old political struggle—a struggle that continues to this day.

As Jensen and Rothenberg both demonstrate, the central nature of women's position in Iroquois society means that this political struggle cannot be understood without examining their roles. Wallace's presentation, which neglects women's agency and places Handsome Lake at the center of this controversy, is thus simplistic and misleading. Wallace's minimization of the clan mothers' roles and his portrayal of them as impediments to progress and "rebirth" distort the history of nineteenth-century Iroquois cultural change and women's place in that change.

What Wallace saw as reform or renaissance, many Iroquois understood as the destruction of their culture. Although, at the time of its creation, Handsome Lake's religion was considered radical and excessively accommodating to white ways, the longhouse religion today supports not a renaissance or new way but traditional Iroquois society. As Cyndy Baskin points out in "Women in Iroquois Society," today it is the members of the longhouse religion who are the traditionalists, preserving matrilineal descent and women's historical place in society. The longhouse religion itself demonstrates this with the relative gender equality of its organization.⁴³

Wallace's misunderstanding of women's position reduces the value of his interpretation of the Handsome Lake religion and its development, but, more importantly, it adds to the already abundant fund of misinformation concerning Iroquois women. Like Morgan so long ago, Wallace evaluates Iroquois "progress" or "rebirth" in terms of acceptance of male-dominated religious and political systems. Unable to see beyond their own Eurocentric perceptions of gender relations in society, Morgan and Wallace imposed these notions on the Iroquois. Worse, because much of

the historical work on the Iroquois has centered on two loci of European patriarchy, religion and politics, this tendency has been exaggerated.

That it is possible to write a history of Iroquois-white relations and include Iroquois women was demonstrated by Barbara Graymont in 1972. In *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, Graymont insists that one cannot understand the logic of Iroquois actions without investigating relevant historical and cultural forces.⁴⁴ Even though her topic is military and political and her sources are almost exclusively white and male, Graymont's ethnohistorical perspective and sensitivity to Iroquois women's position make it possible for her to illustrate the roles played by these women. Her handling of Mary Brant's importance to the loyalists and of the influence that the matrons had on both warriors and chiefs illustrates this.⁴⁵ Conflicts such as those between the warriors and the sachems and between those supporting the British and those supporting the colonists did not occur without the involvement of women. Graymont, despite a shortage of appropriate sources, makes this clear.

Given Graymont's efforts to include women in Iroquois history, Francis Jennings's later *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire* (1984) is disappointing. Jennings presents the Covenant Chain Confederation as an all-male creation. Like Trelease's discussion of European expansion, Jennings's discussion of how Euro-Americans and Indians "shared the creation of the society that became the United States of America" attempts to portray the Iroquois point of view.⁴⁶ But, like Trelease, that view is all male.

Ironically, Jennings's problem with making women visible may be in the breadth of his knowledge of Iroquois society. Because he believes that "to tell the history of the Chain . . . is to tell the external political history of the Iroquois," he sees neither the reason nor a way to include women in the narrative.⁴⁷ In other words, Jennings thinks that whatever women's importance in domestic life, they necessarily become invisible in external political maneuvering. Further complicating Jennings's effort to speak from the Indian point of view is the nature of his sources and their information. The colonists' discomfort in dealing with women leaders and the private nature of women's council meetings helped mask the real extent of their political influence.⁴⁸ Thus, unlike the early Jesuits, who were aware of the power of women's opinions (and dependent upon them), most colonists never understood. Moreover, even when they were presented with evi-

dence of this power, they followed the practices of their own gender-divided society and ignored or belittled it. Not surprisingly, documents from the colonial period contain few references to Iroquois women's political power. (Iroquois women were not alone: Indian women rarely appeared in colonial political and diplomatic documents or commentary.) Jennings's dependence on such primary sources thus prevents him from seeing women's real positions within their culture. While both Trelease and Jennings make an effort to determine "the Indian point of view," Indian women's views remain deeply hidden.

Historians of the Iroquois who would avoid this failing must begin by extrapolating from ethnographic information to understand that Iroquois men did not make decisions on war and diplomacy without women's input and that the chiefs whom the colonists admired spoke for the entire group—both men and women. Since the Iroquois made decisions communally, it is impossible to present an Indian point of view without including the whole community. In his preface, Jennings writes that he does not doubt "that my own turn to be corrected will come."⁴⁹ And so it has.

Unlike Jennings's work, James Axtell's *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America: A Documentary History of the Sexes* (1981) begins to include Indian women in Indian history. Although neither his editorial remarks nor the documents he has collected deal primarily with the Iroquois, he does address some of the important questions concerning the misrepresentation and misunderstanding of Iroquois women. In his introduction, Axtell first examines certain problems of Indian history in general, acknowledging that, if Indians appear at all, it is "chiefly as colorful obstacles to the inevitable and inexorable 'civilization' of the 'untamed continent.'" He notes that "never are they given leading roles as *determinants* of American history, as people who helped shape, both positively and negatively, the historical contours of the multi-ethnic society we have inherited."⁵⁰ Axtell could have added that this is doubly true for Indian women.

In his discussion of the "obstacles" to our understanding of Indian men and women, Axtell mentions that the Christian bias of the early European observers involved not only a male perspective but a system of values that made it difficult for these men not to make judgments about what they saw.⁵¹ Although Axtell makes clear that there were differences in the systems of values held by Jesuits, traders, and colonists, these values affected the

attitudes of all of these men towards Indian women. From their patriarchal view of society, Europeans had difficulty comprehending and accepting the importance of Iroquois women. Iroquois women's status seemed to defy both the natural order and the Christian sense of hierarchy. Thus, with the exception of a few isolated and dependent Jesuits and early traders, most whites dealt with Indians on white terms, which meant that white men met with "chiefs," while both white and Indian women stayed home. Ironically, the fact that Iroquois women saw their domestic roles as primary supported this white patriarchal bias in some ways. Even so, Axtell insists, the value of these early observations is too great to dismiss. The historian can extract much reliable information from accounts such as those of the early Jesuits, whom we might expect to be the most male oriented and constrained by religion in their views.

Axtell explores such issues as the interpretation of Iroquois women's roles by early Jesuits and colonists. He examines the treatment of Iroquois women in the writing of Joseph François Lafitau, Pierre de Charlevoix, and Sir William Johnson. It is clear, for example, that Lafitau understood the importance of clan matrons and their power in influencing the public conduct of the chiefs and the decisions of the council. At the same time, William Johnson either did not understand or, more likely, could not acknowledge this power. As Axtell's excerpts from the Johnson papers makes clear, Johnson was uncomfortable with the participation of women in negotiations and discouraged it: "When I Called you to this Meeting I really could not Discover any Necessity there was for the presence of Women & Children, and therefore I Called none but those who were Qualified for, and Authorized to proceed on business. . . ." ⁵² Given such attitudes, it is not surprising to find Indian women becoming invisible, not only in the primary documents of the colonial period but in the primary events as well.

With such an auspicious beginning, one cannot help but wonder what happened to these women four years later in Axtell's *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America*. Axtell presents his work as "an ethnohistory of the colonial French, English, and Indian efforts to convert each other." ⁵³ He is concerned with the ways that ethnohistory can "begin to give equal treatment to its cultural subjects." ⁵⁴ Yet, in his discussion of efforts towards conversion or of the resistance to it, Axtell considers neither women's important ceremonial roles nor their influen-

tial position within the clan. And this despite the fact that, among the Iroquois, important religious decisions were made exclusively within the clan. The sole exceptions were cases where individuals, because of war or disease, found themselves alone and without kin. (Interestingly, many of the successful Indian conversions to Christianity involved such lone individuals, those whose lives had been drastically disturbed by forces outside their control.) But these isolated men and women were the exception that proved the rule: For most Iroquois, conversion was a family or clan affair. In his discussion of religion and culture, Axtell's earlier commitment to portraying Indians as "determinants of American history" apparently does not extend to Indian women.⁵⁵ The reader wonders where the women were while the men were out there contesting cultures.

A more recent history of the Iroquois people considers this problem. In his *The Ordeal of the Longhouse* (1992), Daniel Richter attempts a revision of Iroquois history.⁵⁶ He emphasizes the outside economic, political, and demographic forces that altered the Iroquois way of life but resists portraying Indians as victims or perpetuating the invisible Iroquois woman. Richter stresses the retention of important traditions in the long struggle to maintain Iroquois culture. His title, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, summarizes the erosion of the early advantageous position of the Iroquois in the colonial period. By 1730, the importance of Iroquois trade declined, European settlement pressed upon Iroquois villages and lands, and, with the French defeat, the Iroquois lost much of their autonomy. Traditional values, however, remained. Richter tells a story of "creative persistence amid wrenching change."⁵⁷

To portray this change, Richter uses an anthropological approach and attempts to understand the point of view of the Iroquois of the colonial period. His is a history of a political and diplomatic struggle for survival, but he does not lose track of its social aspects. It is true that his history emphasizes the roles of public men and de-emphasizes the less visible roles of women. But unlike earlier historians of the Northeast Indians, Richter at least attempts to deal with this problem by describing the roles of women in this long process. Like others before him, he is hindered in this attempt by male sources whose gender bias colors their reports. Still, Richter is able to locate women in important aspects of Iroquois history by dealing at length with ethnographic data portraying their position in society. By noting that "male European observers took little notice of the workings of female clan

and village councils, which they were probably not permitted to attend," Richter begins to explain how colonial society's officials were unable, as well as unwilling, to see the pervasive role of Iroquois women in decision-making.⁵⁸ Similarly, using a careful reading of existing documents, Richter's discussion of religion and religious conversion presents a woman's point of view (while not suggesting that there is only one woman's point of view). For example, he explains the advantages that dislocated women who were isolated from kinship networks might have found in the adoption of Christianity, and he notes the power some women captives and adoptees were able to generate using European religious institutions. Richter argues further that conversion and the establishment of Christian villages would not have been possible without the "leading role" of women.⁵⁹ Unlike Wallace, he portrays women's active role in religious decisions.

Again, unlike Morgan, Parker, and Trelease, Richter describes women's complex role in both war and peace. He acknowledges that, while it was the matrons' call for revenge or their need for captives to replace loved ones that often caused warriors to initiate raids, it was also often the women who called for peace negotiations and even supplied the goods to make them possible.⁶⁰

Richter has taken a long step, but the journey towards the inclusion of women in Iroquois history is not complete. The fact that Iroquois women are present but remain marginal in this work reflects the extent to which histories of the Northeast Indians have ignored and misrepresented these women. Given their genuinely powerful roles, both in building the consensus necessary in all tribal decisions and in controlling most of the group's resources, how was this marginalization possible? Was the neglect intentional? Did Morgan, Parker, and Trelease, for example, have some particular dislike for Iroquois women? Did they unintentionally lose sight of women only because of their overemphasis on the agency of Iroquois men?

There does not appear to be ill will towards Iroquois women. Even when historians portrayed the women as insignificant gardeners, they still presented them as industrious insignificant gardeners. It is informative that some historians who find Iroquois women to be practically invisible are scholars who, out of admiration for the Iroquois people, wish to present them in the "best light." This is more obvious with the pre-1970 historians who tended to see Iroquois society on a continuum towards some

ideal of civilization. They measured Iroquois progress by how closely it resembled patriarchal nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Euro-American ideals. The active presence of female leaders would, in their eyes, have marked the "primitivism" of the Iroquois nation, not its progress.

Even after the awakening of feminist scholarship in the 1960s, interest in the diversity of culture and in women's place in society remained restricted to anthropology and the new women's history.⁶¹ The increased interest in Indian women barely touched the broader histories of Northeast Indians or the general histories of Indian-white relations. I suggested above that at least part of the answer to this question lay in the nature of Northeast Indian history. Much of the important work since the 1960s has dealt with religion, diplomatic, and political issues of acculturation and adaptation (or resistance thereto). These are natural areas of research, because it is precisely in these fields that most of the primary data exist. They are, however, data of a particular nature, written (as Axtell and Richter both noted) by a certain type of person. Not only are these records written by males but, for the most part, by males whose primary purpose in writing was economic, political, or religious control of Indian groups. Since European and Euro-American men perceived these aspects of society as male controlled, they saw the inclusion of women as irrelevant. Their letters, journals, and documents dealt with the actions and opinions of important men.

Even when historians of women began recognizing this problem in the 1980s, Iroquois women continued to remain almost completely invisible in general Northeast Indian history.⁶² Historians since the 1960s have been concerned with an Indian perspective, but few have noted the extent to which it is a male Indian perspective. For the Iroquois, whose public speakers were all male, the inevitable result was a male Indian voice. How much more true this must be for Indian women who had no organized positions of authority and no politically recognized women leaders.

Although various historians and ethnologists have used language to disempower women, making Indian women visible will not be as simple as deconstructing male language. Historians and students of Indian history must look at historical sources in new ways and use them with caution, not limiting themselves to traditional white, male, middle-class-engendered documents. The Iroquois, like many Indian groups, governed by consensus, and

when there were irreconcilable differences the division usually occurred along clan or family, not gender, lines. Envisioning a history in which men and women share equal influence could have a liberating effect. The simple-sounding but complex process of constantly keeping in mind that women shared equally in all decisions challenges historians to look at Iroquois history in new ways and to be more careful in their use of sources. But, if we do not write Iroquois history without disempowering these women, for whom we have a relative abundance of information, it will be even more difficult to put other Indian women back into their histories. All Indian history has an interest in finding the lost women of the matriarchy.

NOTES

1. It is also important to note that the name *Iroquois* is only the historical designation of this confederation.

2. In a matriarchy, authority is held by females, and they dominate their society. Among the Iroquois, power was shared historically, and neither men nor women dominated; it was not a true matriarchy.

3. Joseph François Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians*, trans. William Fenton and Elizabeth Moore (1724; reprint, Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1974), 1:69.

4. *Ibid.*, I:69, 325, 341.

5. *Ibid.*, I:70, 292.

6. Pierre de Charlevoix, *Journal of a Voyage to North America* (1721; reprint, London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), 2:26.

7. Martha Randle, *Iroquois Women, Then and Now*, Bulletin of the Bureau of American Ethnology 149 (Washington, DC: 1951), 172.

8. Nancy Bonvillain, "Iroquoian Women," in *Studies of Iroquoian Culture*, Occasional Publications in Northeastern Anthropology 6 (Rindge, NH: Franklin Pierce College, Department of Anthropology, 1980), 55.

9. *Ibid.*, 47.

10. Francis Jennings, *The Invasion of America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 110.

11. *Ibid.*, 135.

12. Joan Jensen, "Native American Women and Agriculture: A Seneca Case Study," in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (1977; reprint, New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 60, 63.

13. Lewis H. Morgan, *League of the Ho-de-no-sau-nee or Iroquois* (1851; reprint, New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1904), 1:317.

14. Judith K. Brown, "Iroquois Women: An Ethnohistoric Note," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (1970; reprint, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 239.

15. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 1:315.
16. Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians*, 1:69. Morgan, *League of the Iroquois*, 1:315.
17. Arthur C. Parker, *The History of the Seneca Indians* (1926; reprint, Port Washington, NY: Ira J. Friedman, Inc., 1967), 7.
18. *Ibid.*, 71, 75, 76.
19. *Ibid.*, 72, 76.
20. *Ibid.*, 71.
21. *Ibid.*, 110, 123. Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1972), 47.
22. A convenient collection of some of these works is W.G. Spittal, ed., *Iroquois Women: An Anthology* (Ohsweken, ON: Irocrafts, 1990).
23. Allen W. Trelease, *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century* (1960; reprint, Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1971), viii, ix.
24. *Ibid.*, 20, 21.
25. James Axtell, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America: A Documentary History of the Sexes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 160, 161; Brown, "Iroquois Women," 238, 240; Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians*, 2:163; Randle, *Iroquois Women, Then and Now*, 172; Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 33, 35, 36, 56, 60, 185, 306; Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (1969; reprint, New York: Random House, 1972), 46.
26. Randle, "Iroquois Women," 172.
27. Reuben G. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, 1610–1791* (Cleveland, OH: The Burrows Brothers, 1897), 43:265.
28. Trelease, *Indian Affairs*, 48. Direct participation of Indian women in trade, although not specifically about Iroquois women, may be found in Sylvia Van Kirk, "Many Tender Ties": *Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670–1870*, 71–73. That the fur trade did not disrupt Iroquois society (and therefore the position of women) as it did groups farther north is discussed in Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 76. Regarding Iroquois women and alcohol, see Richter, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America*, 266; Wallace, *Death and Rebirth*, 27.
29. Trelease, *Indian Affairs*, 17.
30. Wallace, *Death and Rebirth*, 3.
31. Handsome Lake had the first of a series of visions in 1799 and died in 1815.
32. *Ibid.*, 24.
33. *Ibid.*, 29.
34. *Ibid.*, 28–30.
35. *Ibid.*, 28.
36. For examples of Iroquois women's roles today, see Cyndy Baskin, "Women in Iroquois Society," *Canadian Woman Studies* 4:2 (Winter 1982); Cara E. Richards, "Onondaga Women: Among the Liberated," in *Many Sisters: Women in Cross-cultural Perspective* (New York: The Free Press, 1974).
37. Wallace, *Death and Rebirth*, 241.

38. Ibid., 292, 93; Jensen, "Native American Women and Agriculture," 55, 56.
39. Wallace, *Death and Rebirth.*, 284.
40. Ibid.
41. Jensen, "Native American Women and Agriculture," 55.
42. Diane Rothenberg, "Mothers of the Nation: Seneca Resistance to Quaker Intervention," in *Women and Colonization*, ed. Mona Etienne and Eleanor Leacock (New York: Praeger, 1980), 77.
43. Cyndy Baskin, "Women in Iroquois Society."
44. Graymont, *The Iroquois in the American Revolution*, 2.
45. Ibid., 30, 47, 158, 13.
46. Francis Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire: The Covenant Chain Confederation of Indian Tribes with English Colonies from Its Beginnings to the Lancaster Treaty of 1744* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1984), xv.
47. Ibid., xviii.
48. Axtell, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America*, 154, 155.
49. Jennings, *The Ambiguous Iroquois Empire*, xx.
50. Axtell, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America*, xv.
51. Ibid., xx.
52. Ibid., 157.
53. James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), x.
54. Ibid., xi.
55. Axtell, *The Indian Peoples of Eastern America*, xv.
56. Richter, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 1, 2.
57. Ibid., 4.
58. Ibid., 43.
59. Ibid., 124-26.
60. Ibid., 33, 35, 56, 60, 185.
61. Unfortunately, there is not space here to discuss the treatment of Iroquois women in the anthropological literature. A comparison of the anthropological and historical approaches concerning these women is needed to increase our understanding of the portrayal of Indian women in the scholarly literature.
62. Brown, "Iroquois Women"; Jensen, "Native American Women and Agriculture."