

The Huron-Wendat Feast of the Dead: Indian-European Encounters in Early North America by Erik R. Seeman

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Book Reviews

Spring 2012

The Huron-Wendat Feast of the Dead: *Indian-European Encounters in Early North America*

by Erik R. Seeman

Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2011.
163 pages. US\$19.95 softcover. ISBN 978-0-8018-9855-6 (www.press.jhu.edu)

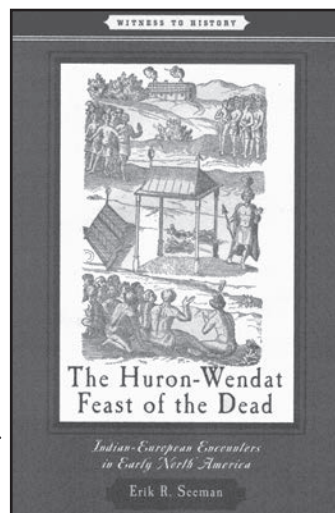
On 12 May 1636, Jean de Brébeuf, a Jesuit priest, was an eyewitness to a communal burial ceremony of the Huron-Wendat near the large longhouse village of Ossossané, located southwest of Midland, Ontario. The remains of almost 700 Wendat were placed in a large pit lined with beaver furs and sprinkled with gifts of European trade goods and Aboriginal beads of shell and stone and smoking pipes. Using the written words of the Jesuits, the interpretations of historians, and the findings of archaeologists, this book uses the Feast of the Dead at Ossossané to transport the reader into the world of seventeenth-century Ontario and the early encounters between the Wendat and French missionaries.

The Huron-Wendat Feast of the Dead recounts the story of the Huron-Wendat and their interaction with French Jesuit missionaries in the early seventeenth century. The story is told from the rather unique and fascinating perspective of death in Wendat and French society. Written for undergraduate students in the “Witness to History” series by The John Hopkins University Press, the book is relatively short and organized into six chapters, in addition to a prologue and epilogue. The text is supported by a brief set of endnotes and a recommended reading list.

The goal of Seeman’s book is to better

understand the cultural encounter of Aboriginal and European peoples in colonial Canada by examining “deathways” (i.e. “deathbed scenes, burial practices, funerals, mourning rituals, and commemoration of the dead”, p. 2) of both the Wendat and the French in the seventeenth century. The history of death is a theme that characterizes Seeman’s research and writing [e.g. “Teaching History of Death in Colonial North America”, *OAH Magazine of History* 25(1): 31-34 (2011) and *Death in the New World: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1492-1800* (Philadelphia, 2010)]. In this book, Seeman uses the Feast of the Dead “as a metaphor for Indian-European encounters in North America” and he argues that the “veneration of human remains and the centrality of mortuary practices” in both Wendat and French culture “allowed for understanding across cultural boundaries” (p. 2).

The Huron-Wendat Feast of the Dead begins with a “Prologue” that outlines the purpose of the book and the importance of combining written documents and archaeological data when writing the history of the Wendat and French in the seventeenth century. Chapter 1 “Origins of Wendake”



and Chapter 2 “Catholicism and Colonization” are complementary and provide background on the Wendat and French Jesuits respectively. Wendat origins, spirituality, and death and burial are provided in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 documents the origins of the Jesuit order and death and burial in seventeenth-century France, as well as providing a brief biography of Jean de Brébeuf, the chronicler of the Feast of the Dead. Seeman notes the remarkable similarity between the Wendat and French in their reverence for the bones of ancestors and secondary burial of remains from original graves (p.34). Chapter 3 “First Encounters” introduces the reader to the French explorers and missionaries who preceded the French Jesuits in the Wendat country in the early seventeenth century. Brébeuf’s early efforts as a missionary to the Wendat are recounted, with an interesting presentation of the Wendat perception of the Christian baptism rite. In Chapter 4, entitled “The Feast of the Dead,” Seeman describes the origins of ossuary burial and the link between the Feast of the Dead ceremony and the use of European items as gifts for the ancestors. A detailed description of the 1636 Feast of the Dead at Ossossané weaves together in a masterful way Brébeuf’s account and Kenneth Kidd’s 1947-48 archaeological excavation of the ossuary, capturing a historical event in its totality. This chapter is the highlight of the book and Aboriginal history at its finest. Disease epidemics that decimated the Wendat in the late 1630s are the subject of Chapter 5 “Epidemic Tensions.” Seeman describes the efforts of the Jesuits (e.g. bloodletting, prayer) and Wendat shamans (herbal medicines, chants, dances, feasts, sweatbathing) to cure the sick, all sadly futile, and the rumours that were circulated about the Jesuits as the agents of disease. Chapter 6 “Conversion and Conflict” car-

ries the story into the early 1640s, focusing on the establishment of the Sainte Marie mission complex and the emergence of pro-French Christian and anti-French traditionalist factions amongst the Wendat. The death of Wendake is told in Chapter 7 “Destruction” with an emphasis on Wendat factionalism along lines of spiritual belief. Seeman paints the destruction of the Huron-Wendat confederacy as a civil war between Christian and traditional Wendat (and the Seneca and Mohawk). The torture and martyrdom of Brébeuf and Lalemant, one of the classic scenes in seventeenth-century Ontario history, is presented the final chapter with an interesting afterword about the burial and eventual use of the bones of these Jesuits as Christian relics for spiritual healing. The “Epilogue” traces the Wendat’s abandonment of their homeland, the 1649-1650 refugee camp on Christian Island, the founding of a Catholic Wendat community in Quebec and a somewhat estranged Wyandot community in the U.S. The “Epilogue” ends with an account of the 1999 repatriation and reburial of the bones and grave goods of seventeenth-century Wendat in the original ossuary pit at Ossossané. Seeman has carried the story of the Feast of the Dead full circle, linking the seventeenth-century Wendat to their contemporary descendants through a continuity of belief in the sacredness of dead ancestors and the Wendat homeland.

The significance of this book lies in the telling of a familiar story from a new vantage point—deathways. Erik Seeman’s thesis is that Wendat beliefs surrounding sickness, death, burial, and the afterlife structured their relations with the French, particularly the Jesuits who lived amongst them from the 1620s to the 1640s, and partly motivated their participation in the fur trade. Seeman argues that trade for European goods was ultimately for the

benefit of dead ancestors (p. 95). This interpretation of Wendat history may not be acceptable to historians and archaeologists who hold a less ideological and more materialist interpretation of the human past. Whether or not you agree with Seeman about the importance of Wendat spirituality and the dead to their culture and history, *The Huron-Wendat Feast of the Dead* offers a well-written, concise narrative of the relationship between the Wendat and French in early seventeenth-century Ontario, with rich insights into the lives of Jean de Brébeuf and his interaction with certain Wendat (e.g. Chiwantenhwa and

Tonnerawanont), all agents of history. The book leaves you with a desire to explore the published literature on seventeenth-century encounters of Aborigines and Europeans, beginning with Seeman's list of suggested readings. It would be an excellent text for university and college courses on Aboriginal history in Ontario and would be a welcome addition to the library of any historian interested in early seventeenth-century North America.

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Dictionnaire des écrits de l'Ontario français, 1613-1993

Edited by Gaétan Gervais and Jean-Pierre Pichette

Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2010. 1,097 pages. \$59.95 hardcover.
ISBN 978-2-7603-0757-5(www.press.uottawa.ca)

In keeping with the celebrations surrounding Acadie's and Québec's 400th anniversaries, the 1610 passage of Étienne Brûlé in modern-day Ontario is also commemorated, by the publication of the *Dictionnaire des écrits de l'Ontario français* (DÉOF). For the first time, all French-language writings produced in Ontario are indexed, from Samuel de Champlain's account of his 1613 passage up to numerous writings of 1993.

An undertaking of such scope is not without a political objective, in this case, that of promoting "*la nature et l'ampleur du patrimoine des écrits de la francophonie ontarienne*" (p. vii). Benedict Anderson believed that public memory is necessary to the consolidation of a nation and the DÉOF emerges as the pinnacle of the efforts undertaken by the Société historique

du Nouvel-Ontario, the Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française, and since the 1970s, a few publishing houses and periodicals. One might be surprised to find Lionel Groulx, Robert Rumilly or Pierre Trudeau amongst obvious Franco-Ontarian authors such as Patrice Desbiens, Germain Lemieux, Séraphin Marion, and Daniel Poliquin. If the first group did not consider itself Franco-Ontarian, the authors argue, their activity during their residence or their interests still contributed to the advancement of French culture in Ontario.

This monk's task of identifying, finding and summarizing 2,537 essays, histories, novels, songs, and voyageur accounts took almost thirty years to accomplish. In 1982, Université Laurentienne historian Gaétan Gervais and ethnologist Jean-