

The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701 by Jon Parmenter

Gary Warrick

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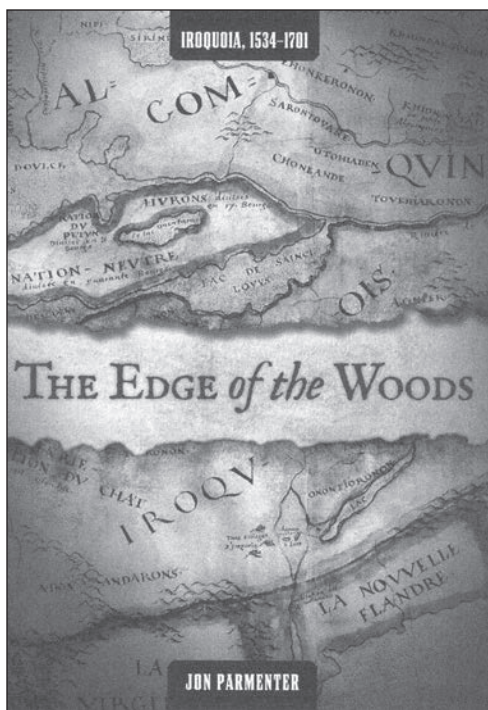
The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701

by Jon Parmenter

East Lansing: Michigan State University Press,
2010. xlix + 474 pages. \$49.95 US hardcover.
ISBN 978-0-87013-985-7 (www.msupress.msu.edu).

In 1667, the Five Nations Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) constructed four villages on the north shore of Lake Ontario and another one at the west end of the lake. Prior to this, villages had last been seen in Ontario in 1651 but had been abandoned when the Neutral and Wendat were dispersed by Five Nations attacks. Far from being newcomers to Ontario in 1667, however, Five Nations and their adopted Neutral and Wendat kin simply resettled old hunting territories, following a centuries-old strategy of keeping non-Iroquoians close but still at a safe distance beyond the settlements, at the “Edge of the Woods”.

Jon Parmenter’s *The Edge of the Woods: Iroquoia, 1534-1701*, written over a ten-year period, takes the reader on a journey through the history of the Five Nations Iroquois, from their first contact with Europeans to the signing of treaties with the French and English in 1701. It is Aboriginal history at its finest, weaving together documentary evidence from “multiple European accounts” with archaeological evidence, and then putting “all this information through the sieve of textualized Iroquois oral traditions.” (p. xv) The book is organized into six chronological chapters, with a preface, introduction, epilogue, and two appendices. The text is supported by extensive and highly informative endnotes and the book has a comprehensive bibliography, including the most recent research on Iroquois history, archaeology,



and oral tradition.

The goal of Parmenter’s book, outlined in both the “Preface” and “Introduction,” is to demonstrate that the Iroquois (and other related Iroquoian speakers) were not sedentary farmers who lived for centuries in fixed locales but instead they were people on the move, shifting their villages and territorial boundaries frequently to adapt to changing socio-politics and political economies of neighbouring Aboriginal communities and European settler colonies throughout the seventeenth century. In fact, Parmenter believes that spatial mobility is a hallmark of Iroquois identity, which was “imperative to Iroquois cultural integrity” (p. 276) and has “long been grounded upon the ability of Iroquois people to communicate, associate, and interact with one another at the Edge of the Woods” (p. 277). It has only been over the last 200 years that Iroquois

mobility has been curtailed by the appropriation and fragmentation of ancestral Iroquois territory in Ontario, Quebec and New York State and the confinement of the Iroquois to reserve lands.

For the Ontario history reader, Chapters 1, 2, and 4 will be the most interesting. Chapter 1 highlights the first encounters of the Iroquois with Europeans and the formation of the Five Nations Confederacy early in the seventeenth century and Iroquois relations with neighbouring Aboriginal peoples in Ontario. Chapter 2 documents the role of epidemics of European disease in the depopulation of the Iroquoian-speaking peoples in the 1630s and supports the “mourning war” interpretation of attacks on the Wendat and Neutral by the Iroquois in the 1640s and early 1650s as essentially a “civil war” to establish new buffer zones between Iroquoians and Algonkians and European colonists. Chapter 4 offers a fascinating look at Aboriginal and French relations in late seventeenth-century Ontario, a highly neglected story in Ontario history. Parmenter claims that the Iroquois and Wendat and Neutral adoptees set up communities on the north shore of Lake Ontario not to control the trade in beaver pelts but “to return to ancestral spaces of residency and use” (p. 134). Archaeological information is integrated with documentary and oral history to pinpoint the locations and estimate the populations of the “Iroquois du Nord” communities occupied between 1667 and 1687. Parmenter also reminds us of how active French missionaries (Sulpicians), traders, and explorers were in late seventeenth-century Ontario, establishing a trading post at modern Kingston (Fort Frontenac), living in or near Iroquois villages in the Toronto region, and exploring the Grand and Niagara rivers, and Lake Erie. There was consider-

able interaction between the French and the Iroquois north of Lake Ontario in the 1670s and 1680s, but not all of it friendly. The book ends with the 1701 Montreal and Nanfan treaties respectively with the French and English, which ended hostilities and recognized Iroquois territory in southern Ontario.

The “Epilogue” to the book reminds the reader that the contemporary world is the accumulation of historical processes and that history is not just an intellectual pursuit. Although contemporary Iroquois communities in Ontario, on the Grand River (Six Nations), Bay of Quinte (Tyendinaga), Thames River (Oneida), and Georgian Bay (Wahta), are situated in “ancestral spaces of use and residency” (p. 278), the “contemporary North American settler colonialism has imposed severe restrictions on Iroquois mobility” (p. 279). More importantly, Iroquois land claims, hunting and fishing rights, and sovereignty have been interpreted in the past by historians and anthropologists using an erroneous model of Iroquoian rootedness in geographically fixed locales which has disqualified “many Iroquois people and communities from effective claims to indigenous citizenship and nationhood” (p. 279). Parmenter’s book challenges us to “rethink our approach to the dynamic history of Iroquoia on its own terms” (p. 279). Jon Parmenter’s *The Edge of the Woods* is a superb volume and will come to be seen as an indispensable reference source for Iroquoian history. It should occupy a prominent place on the bookshelf of every serious scholar who is interested in the Aboriginal history of eastern North America.

Gary Warrick,
Brantford Campus,
Wilfrid Laurier University.