

Frederic Baraga's Short History of the North American Indians Edited and translated by Graham MacDonald

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Volume 98, numéro 2, fall 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065829ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065829ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (imprimé)

2371-4654 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Sieciechowicz, K. (2006). Compte rendu de [*Frederic Baraga's Short History of the North American Indians* Edited and translated by Graham MacDonald]. *Ontario History*, 98(2), 254–255. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065829ar>

Book Reviews

AUTUMN 2006

Frederic Baraga's Short History of the North American Indians

Edited and translated by Graham MacDonald. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005. xvi + 228 pp. \$34.95 softcover. ISBN 1-55238-102-1.

This is a delightfully fresh, heretofore relatively unknown work by a missionary who is best remembered by those in Algonquian studies as the compiler of *A Dictionary of the Ojibway Language*, first published in 1853. *Short History* is obscure because, from its publication in 1837 until now, it has existed only in French, German, and Slovenian. Frederic Baraga (1797-1868) is not very self-impressed with his knowledge and experiences; rather he is self-effacing and generous to the reader. Though very much a man of the mid-nineteenth century, and bearing quite a few of the prejudices and assumptions about Native peoples so typical of the time (a fascination with warfare, for instance), Baraga's approach to Native peoples is, at the same time, leavened by

- ◆ Frederic Baraga's Short History of the North American Indians Rendezvous at the Straits
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- ◆ The Lady Lumberjack: an annotated collection of Dorothea Mitchell's writings.
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- ◆ In the Shadow of Detroit: Gordon M. McGregor, Ford of Canada, and Motoropolis

his experiences as a cleric in his home country of Slovenia.

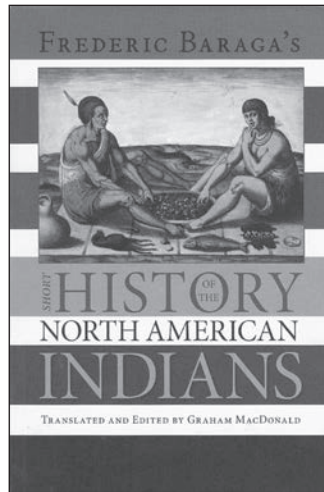
In his excellent and very informative editorial introduction, Graham MacDonald recounts that the young Baraga favoured ministering with one's congregation in the vernacular, using phrasing that all could understand. It pitched him and others into a warmer perception of their flock and is very apparent in the style of the book. This approach is important because Baraga was working in the American mid-west precisely at the time of the presidency of Andrew Jackson, infamous for initiating the reviled 'Indian Removals' in the 1830s. Baraga's book was his reasoned response, and "the issue of removal and alcohol would exercise Baraga for all of his working life among the tribes of the Upper Great Lakes." (p. 6) He viewed Native peoples as "kindred humanity," and his approach had all the markings of an anthropological understanding of the complexity and genius of society. How

much influence *Short History* had is questionable, as it was published in languages not normally read in the United States; the critique would have been more accessible to Europeans. Obviously Baraga and his small but vocal group of reformers were not taken seriously by the Jacksonian presidency.

Given that *Short History* was written by a missionary, it immediately bears comparison with another French-language text, the multi-volume *Jesuit Relations*. There are quite a few points of similarity. Baraga has provided an accessible account of an 'exotic' people intended for a continental European readership. He wrote with the intention of garnering financial support for the missionary efforts. He emphasized the more exotic aspects of Native life, perhaps as a not-so-transparent statement contrasting European and North American life.

Although the book purports to be a history of all of North America, this is an over-exaggeration. Baraga begins his sweep of North American history with the advent of Columbus, and within a few pages we learn of the key battles and massacres of the 1600s. A discussion of the decline in Native population follows, which speedily brings the reader to the mid-1800s – quite foreshortened history indeed. To Baraga the definitive moment tipping the political scale against the Native people was the death of King Philip in 1676. Thereafter, he states, "the Indians of North America were no longer an historical force in their country." (p. 64) Readers familiar with the argument of Richard White in *The Middle Ground* might wish to argue the point.

Nor is this a history of all native groups. Baraga was an active missionary in the



Great Lakes area, centred on the interlake region between Lakes Huron, Michigan and Superior, and it is those groups about which he writes. The exaggerated title notwithstanding, there is much to recommend this book. The sections are organized rather in the style of an ethnological account of about one hundred years ago, and are quite lively. The author is very much in the

story and disarmingly honest in presenting what he knows about the people with whom he had spent the latter half of his life. The oral history section might be of interest to those working in the field and given the importance of oral history today in court cases, this short chapter is well worth a look. *Short History* should be of interest to Algonquianists, and to historians of early Canada and early America.

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