The Powerful Influence of Iroquois Women

BY **JAN NOEL**

The Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, allocated a degree of importance to women that was quite singular. They diverged from most known societies across the millennia in that theirs was not a patriarchy. Fortunately, European colonizers and North American settlers who observed this group after 1500 left extensive records. Some of the observers were guests, missionaries or captives in longhouses and villages, while others encountered the Haudenosaunee in the course of trade, diplomacy or war. Because interactions were so extensive, there have been concrete descriptions of this rare situation in which men did not have the upper hand. Truly, neither sex did.

One knowledgeable commentator was early 18th-century Jesuit missionary Joseph-François Lafitau, who lived for five years among the Haudenosaunee at the Kahnawahke mission near what is now Montreal. While the group at that time had more than a century of interchanges with Europeans, it still possessed many of its pre-contact attributes. Lafitau's writing, a foundational text for scholars of Haudenosaunee gender, attests to female hegemony in many specific areas, in startling contrast to the position of women in most societies. In *Moeurs des sauvages Amériquains*, he wrote in 1724:

> Nothing is more real than this superiority of the women…. All real authority is vested in them. The land, the fields and their harvest all belong to them. They are the souls of the Councils, the arbiters of peace and of war. They have charge of the public treasury. To them are given the slaves. They arrange marriages. The children are their domain, and it is through their blood that the order of succession is transmitted.

Some of these themes are echoed in the contemporary work of scholars such as Haudenosaunee scholar Barbara Alice Mann and Université de Montréal anthropologist Roland Viau. Mann,

On this 17th-century map of New France, the cartographer depicts First Nations women and men, settlements, natural resources and waterways.

author of *Iroquoian Women: The Gantowisas,* has documented the way some observers, and scholars who came after them, ignored clear evidence of unusual female agency—partly because their patriarchal assumptions meant they simply could not believe what they saw. Viau likewise affirms evidence of the highly unusual position of Haudenosaunee women. He points out the frequency of marriages in which brides were older than grooms, as well as the preference for female infants.

Viau also notes the primacy of Sky Woman in the Iroquoian creation myth and the religious celebration of the Three Sisters (corn, beans and squash cultivated by women), as well as women's work alongside men as spiritual leaders and healers. In *Femmes de Personne: Sexes, genres et pouvoirs en Iroquoisie ancienne,* Viau singles out the Iroquois as having "the human society which, from an anthropological point of view, appears to have come closest to the definition of a matriarchy."

Older women in a lineage, called matrons or clan mothers, directed longhouse life where multiple related families, typically 25 to 60 people, lived under a maternal hand. Kinship, names, titles and longhouses were all transmitted through the maternal line. Though there was some variation, a new husband generally moved into his wife's longhouse. Particularly important were female rights to the cache of goods or "treasury"—the year's harvest, dried meat, fish, furs and wampum belts, stored in casks or pits. Longhouse matrons, as anthropologist Judith K. Brown observed, exerted control by allocating the necessities of life. They were capable of denying provisions to war parties heading out of the village and denying shelter to husbands who failed to contribute game from the hunt.

Women were the chief horticulturalists. As Seneca women (part of the Iroquois confederacy) asserted to a U.S. agent in 1791, "we are the owners of this land, and it is ours. It is we who plant it…." Haudenosaunee women travelled long distances to barter the crops the soil produced, trading them along with fur and fish to settlers or to merchants in colonial Albany and Montreal.

Clan mothers were political agents. They had the right to choose various kinds of chiefs, as well as to depose or "dehorn" chiefs who ignored warnings that people were dissatisfied with their leadership. The women in a matrilineal line could convene their own councils and raise matters for village discussion. Women also had the right to decide the fate of captives brought to their villages by war parties of men.

All political powers, male and female, were based on extensive consultation. The Iroquois worked hard and talked long around the fires of council, village and longhouse to reach a consensus—a process they apparently considered better than issuing decrees or counting votes. These flexible arrangements make comparison with modern states difficult; however, there is no question that the voices of women were built in to political structures.

It was not a matriarchy, however, as Iroquoian men reigned supreme in their own realms of warfare and the hunt, and also held the most visible political positions as chiefs and councillors. It seems that there was a rough balance, and neither sex dominated the other. Viau characterizes this society as a gerontocracy, one that looked up to elders of both sexes as the authority figures.

THANADELTHUR

In 1713, a young Chipewyan woman named Thanadelthur was taken captive during a raid by Cree in what is now northern Manitoba. She escaped and, after a difficult journey, arrived at York Factory. Thanadelthur spoke three languages and became an invaluable aid to Hudson's Bay Company governor James Knight. Night sought to increase trade with the Chipewyans, but long-standing animosity with the Cree, York Factory's main fur suppliers, made it all but impossible. Thanadelthur brokered a May 1716 peace accord, a three-way negotiation between 150 people that included Chipewyan representatives, several Cree bands and Hudson's Bay Company representatives. *Illustration: Amanda Dow from the book* Blackships/ Thanadelthur *by Rick Book, published by Heartland Associates.*

Here was a gender balance that is rarely found, even today. Men occupied esteemed positions as chiefs, but these were not more important than the positions women occupied. Lest it be thought this was a utopia, it can be noted that men and women alike could embrace aggressive activities such as the instigation of war parties and the torture of prisoners. What makes us sit up and take notice is the very rare, very well documented case of a society where relations between the sexes were conducted with little sign that one sex exploited or dominated the other. For developing a degree of gender equality that most societies today only dream of, *vive l'Iroquois!* ❁

contributors

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Sarah Carter is a professor in the department of history and classics and the faculty of Native studies of the University of Alberta. Her article on how colonization undermined Aboriginal women's power is drawn from her book *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation-Building in Western Canada*. Her other books include *Recollecting: Lives of Aboriginal Women of the Canadian Northwest and Borderlands*.

MICHELE LANDSBERG

Michele Landsberg worked as a feminist columnist for the *Toronto Star* for 25 years. Her latest book, *Writing the Revolution,* provides reflections on decades of feminism. A lefty activist and an officer of the Order of Canada, she is married to Stephen Lewis. Michele focuses her energies these days on refugees, political outrage and grandmothering.

WENDY ROBBINS

Wendy Robbins became the University of New Brunswick's first full professor of English in 1988 and was a founder of the university's gender and women's studies interdisciplinary program, which opened in 1986, exactly 100 years after the entrance of the university's first woman student, Mary Tibbits.

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Lianne Leddy (Anishinaabe) is an assistant professor of Indigenous studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. She is a citizen of the Serpent River First Nation, thanks to the efforts of Indigenous women like Mary Two-Axe Earley, two of the women she writes about in this issue. As a historian, Lianne Leddy writes about environmental and gender issues as they pertain to Indigenous communities.

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Jan Noel teaches comparative North American colonial history and Canadian gender history at the University of Toronto. In addition to her award-winning *Canada Dry: Temperance Crusades before Confederation*, she has published extensively on colonial and gender topics. Her 2013 book, *Along a River: The First French-Canadian Women,* explores two centuries of settlement in the St. Lawrence Valley.

PENNEY KOME

Journalist and author Penney Kome has published six non-fiction books and nearly a thousand periodical articles, as well as writing a national women's column for 12 years and a Calgary newspaper column for four years. Her books include *The Taking of Twenty-Eight: Women Challenge the Constitution* (Women's Educational Press, 1983), the origin of her account of the constitutional conference that led to the strengthening of Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

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