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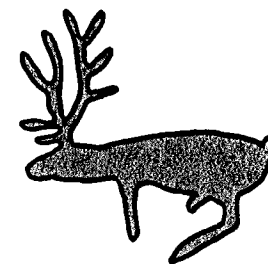
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At the End

The Beheading of Prehistory

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The French sailed up the broad St. Lawrence and anchored at Quebec among the incredible forests of Canada. Lowering their sails like an alighting seagull folding its wings, they reembarked upriver in the bark canoes that skimmed the shallower depths like waterbugs. In these light, tough craft they undertook journeys that would rival in distance and hardship the sail from Europe to Quebec itself. And in these fabulous journeys of sail and paddle they met a new race of men—men who literally stepped out of prehistory to help haul their boats ashore. As in Massachusetts and Virginia, in Florida and the Caribbean islands, in Mexico and Panama and Peru, men of two hemispheres came face to face on the St. Lawrence and learned of a branch of the family of man whose existence neither had had previous inkling.

Both were the inheritors of long histories. But one lacked writing and continually contracted its historical tail as generation followed generation; its oral myths and ceremonies recalled only a recent past. It was accordingly left to the ocean-crossers, who had writing and a literate tradition tied to a fixed calendar, to record those meetings. Despite a common humanity these were vastly different worlds that met, and incomprehension obscured the understanding of those whose long-separated paths now came together. But men being men, there were some things all held in common. This fact not only permitted communication to be successfully initiated in the first place, it also suggested in one's interpretation of the other where certain advantages might lie.

When the French went up the St. Lawrence and then ventured into the Ottawa River valley—the first of these rivers providing entry into the lower Great Lakes via the Thousand Islands, the second into the upper lakes by

pean influence, though translated and mitigated by Indian intermediaries before the physical arrival of European men, is that social and cultural changes, however subtle, had already commenced to shift native societies away from what they had been before the first European ever had opportunity, let alone inclination, to jot down his observations.

There is something of a mystery—an inescapable and pervasive quality of uncertainty—variable in intensity from region to region and time to time, regarding the precise nature of the indigenous societies whose careers were so dramatically redirected, if not terminated, by the coming of European man. Indian societies had started to change in adjustment to that coming before the actual event in any given instance following the initial landfall. Ideas, manufactured items, and disease organisms were carried by Indian middlemen to interior regions in advance of the ocean-crossers who were their source. What were the Algonkins (or Hurons or Iroquois or Ojibwas or Potawatomis) like when at last encountered by flesh-and-blood Frenchmen? How did they correspond to the Algonkins who had lived *immediately before* the first rumor ever reached them that there were new men in the world? In actual fact, prehistory was beheaded with the European discovery of America. The most we can know about what the Great Lakes Indians were truly like at the threshold of history is only an approximation. This approximation is a compound of ethnohistory (the study of the earliest documents describing the aborigines), ethnography and social anthropology (what has been learned about the nature of comparable societies elsewhere in the world), and archaeology. In general outlines and many matters of substance, the approximation is pretty clear. It is the details that are elusive, the details such as preoccupy us with our contemporaries. It is like seeing a head in shadows and not being quite able to make out the face.

The Great Lakes Indians upon Discovery: An Approximation

At the time when the agents of the French king and the Christian God first looked upon the shoreless horizons of Lakes Huron and Ontario and saw wealth squandered in anarchy and souls in the thrall of Satan, the lands surrounding the Great Lakes were peopled by a population divided into innumerable small-scale and politically autonomous societies, each of which, in at least some small measure, had its own distinctive culture. Many neighboring tribes spoke separate dialects or even mutually unintelligible languages as distantly related as modern English and Chinese. These societies varied so much in size, structure, and way of life, as well as language, that the term *tribe* when applied to them must be used in a loose sense to signify an ethnic group whose members *maximally* thought

of themselves as a people distinct from other such groups. Furthermore, *tribe* implies the sharing of a common culture and language, and the occupation of a more or less circumscribed territory. They were not nation-states in the political sense, despite the confusion of European observers. Centralization of authority, let alone power, was virtually nonexistent both in concept and actuality, and the social boundaries separating tribes were remarkably permeable. Alliances were even more unstable than among European states.

The Algonkin Indians exemplify some of the problems of indigenous Great Lakes sociology. Making up the Algonkin tribe in early historic times were a variable number of often separately named and socially and territorially distinguished subtribes, or *bands*, all of which enjoyed an incredible propensity for uncoordinated, independent action. These seem gradually to have disappeared or coalesced with the passage of time, people, and larger events. Counted as Algonkins were such named groups as the Weskarini, Onontchataronon, Kichesipirini (the latter infamous to many an early traveler on the middle Ottawa River, Indian and Frenchman alike, because they levied tolls with a heavy hand on all up- and down-river traffic), and the Otaguottouemin. Still other divisions of the Algonkins lived elsewhere on the Ottawa River and its tributaries or resided along the St. Lawrence above the Montagnais Indians in Quebec.

There were three major linguistic stocks represented among the multitude of separate languages and dialects of the Great Lakes region. These have come to be called Iroquoian, Algonquian, and Siouan. They must not be confused with the ethnic or tribal groups called Iroquois, Algonkin, and Sioux, though each of these spoke languages of the appropriate stock. Others spoke these languages, too.

Languages of the great Iroquoian family were spoken over a vast part of the lower Great Lakes. The most famous Iroquoian-speakers to readers of American and Canadian history were the Iroquois and Huron Indians. Iroquois was really the name of an alliance or confederation of five important and quite independent tribes. These member tribes of the League of the Iroquois all dwelt south of Lake Ontario in what is now New York State. From east to west these were the Mohawks, the "keepers of the eastern door" whose villages were located in the river valley still bearing their name, the Oneidas, the Onondagas ("keepers of the central fire"), the Cayugas, and, south of present day Rochester in the Genesee valley, the Senecas, "guardians of the western door of the great longhouse of the League." Well after the establishment of relations with European powers, the League accepted into membership a sixth "nation" composed of displaced southerners: the Tuscaroras. The constituent tribes of the Iroquois confederacy also had a remarkable facility for the large-scale absorption of fragments of other, sometimes formerly antagonistic, tribes. Because of

other northern Algonquians, and upon occasion individuals and entire Algonkin extended families went to live with friends and trading partners among the Hurons and the Great Lakes Algonquian tribes. We have already mentioned some of the subtribes or bands of which the Algonkin tribe was constituted.

Much of southern Ontario in the early historic period appears to have been distinctly underpopulated, even by Indian standards. It seems to have been a no man's land in which people from different tribes hunted, but rarely settled. The first groups of Algonquian tribes west of the Algonkins were thus neighbors of the Hurons and true Great Lakes dwellers. In the rugged country surrounding Lake Nipissing northeast of where Georgian Bay makes its great westward bend were the Indians known as the Nipissings or Nipissiriniens. About the central and northern shores of Georgian Bay and the north coast of Lake Huron westward to Sault Ste. Marie and the Straits of Mackinac, and then along the rocky northern coast of Lake Superior lived two related great peoples: the Ottawas (mainly in the southeastern portions of this range) and the Ojibwas or Chippewas (tending northward and westward).

Like the Algonkins, the Ottawas and the Ojibwas were really great folk societies or aggregations, each composed of a number of politically independent smaller subtribes, bands, and villages. These had their own headmen and occupied a generally respected home territory whose exact boundaries were more often than not in a state of readjustment as seasons progressed, years passed, and fortunes altered. For example, the Ottawa tribe included not only such major groups as the Kiskakons, Sables, Nassauketons, Sinagos, and Keinouches, but from time to time even unrelated people came temporarily to be known as Ottawas because they joined forces with them in fishing expeditions, overwintered in their territory, or were invited to participate in the trading activities for which the Ottawas were famous.

The sundry divisions of the Ottawa when the French first learned of their existence lived along the shores of Georgian Bay, including the Bruce Peninsula, to Manitoulin Island—the giant reclining at the north end of Lake Huron. Within this immense domain of lakes, rushing rivers, rocks, and forests the individual segments of the larger society wandered in highly knowledgeable response to the shifting seasonal resources on which life depended. They tended to congregate in the easy months of summer and to disperse in small family units for the ardors of interior winter hunting and trapping. As part of a general aboriginal adjustment to colonization and an unrelenting westward movement of formerly more eastern tribes, the Ottawas gradually retreated from their eastern ancestral estates and expanded their western frontiers. Depending on the date, few or many Ottawas came to dwell west of the Sault along the southern shore of Lake Superior as far away as Chequamegon Bay in northwestern Wisconsin.

Others lived for a while on the Door Peninsula in the northern Lake Michigan basin or roamed extensive areas of the lower peninsula of Michigan. At any given time following their withdrawal from their former haunts, there were some Ottawas living hundreds of miles away from other Ottawas and sometimes with Indians of other ethnic affiliations occupying interposed terrain. A general consequence of these movements was the inevitable blurring and loss of once important social and cultural distinctions whereby the Ottawa peoples had once more locally and unequivocally identified themselves.

The Ojibwa Indians are a classic example of a tribe originally constituted of quite separate and jealously independent smaller tribes. Usually called Chippewas in the United States, the Ojibwas, like their close relatives the Ottawas, never really existed as a tribal unit until some time after the beginning of the historic period and the coming of the Europeans. Originally, the ancestors of the Ojibwa tribesmen lived in small hunting, fishing, and gathering societies, each inhabiting its own traditional domain. Although they shared a fundamentally similar way of life, had much the same world view, spoke the same language, and intermarried frequently, they possessed their own names by which they identified themselves and were known to others. Significantly, these were most often the names of animals (e.g., Bear, Beaver, Catfish, Crane, Snapping Turtle). And their members typically felt, when all was said and done, that they were the truest and bravest men in all the world. Tragically, these brave little societies disintegrated under the combined blows of war and disease and the demoralization that sets in as traditional answers had to be squared with new questions. Among the survivors, many coalesced with others of their kind from far and near, and ultimately, phoenix-like, there arose the new, larger, and more formidable tribe known to history as the Ojibwa.

The small proto-Ojibwa tribes included the Amikwas, Missisauagas, Maramegs, Noquets, Ouasouarinis, Nopemings, Saulteurs, Mikinacs, Outchibous, and others whose names, if they survive at all, do so as labels on road signs—like fossils protruding from a rock. Some of the luckier proto-Ojibwa societies were later transfigured and became the great clans of the Ojibwa tribe, attaining through the extension of kinship ties a postponement of the mortality the others experienced more abruptly and unequivocally. Thus, while the Noquets (People of the Bear) lost their status as a separate people, they were not without survivors; their legacy is the Noka Clan (the Bear Clan) of their Ojibwa descendants. Similarly, the Amikwas (People of the Beaver) and the Ouasouarinis (Fish People), although long extinct as discrete ethnicities, survived as the Ahmik (Beaver) and Auwausee (Fish) clans of their merged and renaissance inheritors.

In prehistoric and early historic times these precursors of the Ojibwa tribal people were thinly spread over an enormous country along the southern reaches of the Canadian Shield along and inland from the north-

particularly in big game, which the interfingering prairies introduced into their homeland; elk and bison hunting provided excitement as well as a supply of red meat. Because they were the most prairie-oriented of the Great Lakes Indians, the Miamis not surprisingly made little use of canoes. They felt much more at ease dry-shod on firm ground.

At various times the Miamis went north to Green Bay to trade with the Indians there as well as with the French. But they were usually found much further south. Indeed, they claimed territory reaching well into the Ohio-Mississippi drainage. When the expansion of the Potawatomis took place, the Miamis were among those who lost the most. A neighboring people who sometimes camped with them, the Illinois (actually a confederacy of the Cahokias, Kaskaskias, Peorias, and others), were not a Great Lakes group although they sometimes turned up in the early history of the western lakes. They occasionally sent trading parties to Green Bay and even Lake Superior, and they blocked or facilitated French movements between the lakes and the Mississippi Valley as they fancied. They fought the Winnebagos and the Iroquois, and they were eventually dispossessed of their ancestral estate by the Potawatomis, Kickapoos, and other formerly more northern and eastern tribes.

Except for the Winnebagos in northeastern Wisconsin, there were no Siouan-speakers habitually resident in the Great Lakes. Some eastern divisions of the Sioux, or Santee Dakota, occupied lands with ill-defined and fluctuating boundaries which, over many centuries, repeatedly brought limited numbers of them into the westernmost reaches of the Great Lakes system. After the westerly movements and ethnic consolidations of the southern Ojibwas brought those people in force to the hunting lands south of Lake Superior, an initial period of mutually beneficial interaction was followed by bitter and prolonged warfare between the Ojibwas and the Sioux. The latter were gradually forced out of any and all countries draining into the Great Lakes (always before only a small and marginal part of their customary haunts anyway) and retired westward. Those early documents relating to the Great Lakes that speak of the Siouan-speaking Ioways and Assiniboins are referring to hunting or trading parties briefly entering the drainage basin; they were not long-time residents like the Winnebagos.

When the French first heard of the Winnebagos through their Algonquian connections in the upper lakes (Champlain dispatched Jean Nicolet in 1634 to meet them), they were reported as arrogant and contemptuous of outsiders. As potential middlemen in a developing trade, the Algonquians were probably not adverse to portraying the Winnebagos as more inhospitable than they really were (Nicolet, it seems, was well received). However that may be, news of their eating Ottawa and Illinois visitors did little to enhance their reputations. Their relations with the Menominitis, at least, appear to have been marked by tolerance if not cordiality. Despite

their language, the Winnebagos were not greatly dissimilar to their Algonquian neighbors, particularly the Miamis. Like the latter they were expert farmers. They also hunted, fished, gathered river mussels, and collected the natural plant resources of their aboriginal estate, including wild rice. Just a few years after Nicolet's mission, the Winnebagos lost much of their land to the incoming Michigan tribes, and most of their remaining population was absorbed in intertribal marriages.

Stone Knives and Old Ways

In more than technology the Great Lakes Indians were Stone Age people. But to take material attributes first, the sometime use of a regionally abundant metal in ways only quasi-metallurgical removes none of the force of the generalization. Native copper was obtained by shallow surface mining on Isle Royale and along the shores of Lake Superior where unusually pure deposits could be worked out with a little digging and a lot of prying and hammering. Usable chunks of the metal could also be picked up from time to time in the ubiquitous gravel plains and hills left behind by Ice Age glaciers. Given the pattern of its distribution, it is not surprising that copper was more used by the westerners than by the Indians of the eastern lakes. Unalloyed, unsmelted, and never cast, copper was hammered either cold or after heating in a fire, then turned into such ornaments as beads, tubes for stringing on braids of hair, and bracelets, or such implements as awls or bodkins, knives, fishhooks, and gorges. Some copper was traded eastward to the lower lakes. It is reasonable to assume that when the French and their Indian associates extended the fur trade westward, they were following ancient routes of trade.

Everything else with which the Indians manipulated their world was made more or less directly out of raw materials more widely distributed. Stone is the most conspicuous of these other materials because on many archaeological sites it is all that has survived to bear witness to man's onetime presence. "Stone Age" is really a convenient abbreviation for "Stone-Bone-Antler-Wood-Bark-Hide-Sinew Age."

Throughout the lakes country, cherts and other flinty stones were worked into knife blades, scrapers, and drills which were usually hafted in wooden, bone, or antler handles. Arrowheads were almost always triangular in shape but showed a wide range in workmanship from crudely trimmed slivers of chert to precisely crafted equilateral or isoscles triangles beautifully thinned on both faces. Some wedging and graving tools were shaped strictly for or as the result of use and were not modified in any way to accord with aesthetic considerations. Heavy-duty tools such as hammers and celts (grooveless axes) were laboriously pecked and ground out of

might take along a couple of rolls of sewn birchbark to throw over a makeshift lean-to frame, the next morning abandoning the frame but retrieving the bark rolls. In good weather, or if there were some reason to avoid attention (as in a war party), people thought nothing of sleeping without benefit of artificial shelter.

More permanent, true domiciles were double lean-tos with closed back and circular dome-shaped or conical tentlike wigwams. The latter was fashioned by screwing poles or even freshly cut saplings several inches to a foot into the ground and tying them together at the top. Partly depending on the area, such frames were then covered with overlapping sheets of bark, animal skins, or bullrush or other woven mats. A smokehole was left at the top and the entranceway was closed, if needed, with more of the same material or with a blanket or even a boardlike rawhide. Such structures were meant to shelter single families, perhaps accompanied by an odd friend or relative. They rarely exceeded 4.6 m (15 ft) in diameter. In breaking camp the wigwam cover was removed, rolled up, and carried to the next campsite. Alternatively, it might be cached if the people were laden with the rewards of a successful hunt or if returning from a fishing trip. The pole frames were left standing.

In the larger and more sedentary villages, the houses tended to be more carefully constructed, and here also were found the largest domiciles. Architecturally, the most impressive were the famous Iroquoian longhouses. Actually, the longhouse was by no means confined to Iroquoian-speaking tribes, though it was most common among them; also, it was not the only style of house they built. There were many minor variations on the longhouse theme in the Great Lakes area. For example, Mohawk and other League Iroquois longhouses were square-ended, while those made by the Hurons tended to be round at both ends. But the common function of the longhouse was to serve as home for several closely related families. Like the wigwam, it was a pole-frame building. It usually had an entrance at both ends and was covered with birch, elm, or cedar bark which was sometimes supplemented with pieces of hide or some sewn rush mats. In summer months sections of covering were removed to allow easier access to cool breezes and more light. In winter they were closed as tightly as possible. Although this helped to retain welcome heat from the several cooking fires maintained along the centerline of the longhouse, it likewise hindered the escape of smoke. Chronic eye ailments were a time-immemorial accompaniment of winter quarters. The combination of jostling human bodies, scratching dogs, hustling mice, and biting lice and fleas, all congested in a winter longhouse where red fires and greasy smoke obscured the air, drove one desperate Jesuit missionary to liken a visit to such an abode as a veritable descent into Hell.

Pole-frame benches lined the walls of the longhouse. Covered with bark, woven rush mats, and fur robes, these served as seating accommodations

during the day (though the ground was often used for this purpose) and as beds at night. Most longhouses appear to have been internally partitioned into a series of small compartments or cubicles on either side of the central aisle. In many cases the central fires were shared by the two families occupying opposite compartments. Dogs as well as people roamed the longhouse, so the rafters were employed to store food, skins, ritual paraphernalia, and items of personal value. Storage pits were also dug into the dirt floor.

Great Lakes longhouses ranged upwards in size to about 6 or 8 m wide by 15, 24, 31, or even 61 m long (20 or 25 ft by 50, 80, a 100, or 200 ft). They were clustered together, often inside a wooden palisade for protection from attack, and were adjacent to or even surrounded by the community's corn fields. Such towns were exceedingly vulnerable to fire, and even if they did not burn down, they had to be abandoned every 8-15 years due to soil exhaustion, overhunting of the local game, and depletion of ready supplies of firewood and building materials. Many Iroquoian villages required 15,000-25,000 stakes to be enclosed within a palisade. These were usually circular with the entranceway framed by overlapping walls. The French and British did not think highly of these primitive fortifications, and they were sometimes able to induce their Indian allies to build more defensible squares, pentagons, and hexagons, sometimes with corner bastions.

All of the Indians of the Great Lakes hunted, fished, and gathered wild plant foods. But whereas the northern Algonquians relied on the natural munificence of wild foods almost entirely, or traded for corn and dried squashes, such lower lake peoples as the Ontario and League Iroquoians were mainly farmers who sought out the produce of the forest to supplement and vary their diet as well as to provide a little insurance against a bad crop. Corn or maize was easily the dominant domesticated plant, but squashes (including pumpkin), beans, and sunflowers were also grown. Invariably, while men did the strenuous labor of clearing lands for cultivation, the actual planting, tending, and harvesting was women's work. Men, however, raised tobacco. Children were useful in chasing away birds and squirrels and other pests to agriculture, and by their chatter provided company.

The Central Algonquians in Michigan and Wisconsin and in northern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois had dual subsistence economies. They planted extensively, but they also went off on extended hunting expeditions with sometimes whole villages—men, women, and children—actually migrating into the prairie lands to spend weeks or even months hunting elk and buffalo. They then returned in late summer or early autumn to harvest what the insects and birds had left of their crops. Entire communities of Miamis and Siouan-speaking Winnebagos annually migrated across the Mississippi to communally hunt buffalo. This pattern was especially developed after the introduction of the horse made large-scale movements

