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Pauleena MacDougall

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THE HISTORIAN'S DILEMMA: CHOOSING, WEIGHING, AND INTERPRETING SOURCES

BY PAULEENA MACDOUGALL

In world history, those who have helped to build the same culture are not necessarily of one race, and those of the same race have not all participated in one culture. In scientific language, culture is not a function of race.

—Ruth Benedict, *Race: Science and Politics*, 1940.

CONTROVERSY WITHIN the historical profession forces us to think more clearly about some of the fundamental questions that confront us in our work. Ferland's provocative essay raises several critical issues concerning Maine history and the sources used by Maine historians, but unfortunately he falls prey to some of the dangers inherent in using a biased approach. While there is much in his essay to agree with, there are also some serious flaws in his discussion that must be addressed.

Ferland's essay focuses on an event that took place in Penobscot history in 1834-1835 which he characterizes as a "breach in tribal politics that shook the edifice of community and cohesion among the Penobscot people." He claims that historians have uncritically accepted earlier interpretations of this event, and thus perpetuated a false interpretation of Penobscot history. However, the evidence he presents does not support his conclusion.

Ferland faults Eckstorm's work as ahistorical, and in a sense, he is correct. The pieces he cites were not strictly historical (though they have historical underpinnings). Eckstorm was not trained as a historian, folklorist, anthropologist, or linguist. She held a bachelor's degree from Smith College and was trained in rhetoric. While she conducted an admirable amount of historical research and anthropological fieldwork,



This 1876 photo shows Manly Hardy surrounded by three of his children, including twelve-year-old Fannie (standing, center). The Hardy family maintained close relations with the Penobscot Indians for three generations, beginning with Manly's father Jonathan, a fur trader. Photo courtesy Bangor Public Library, James B. Vickery Collection.

she did not have the benefit of the kind of training received in a graduate program. Thus, what is significant about her contribution is what she accomplished *despite* having no formal training. She was an inquisitive person who laid the groundwork for many successive scholars of Maine history and culture. Her papers and writings are useful, but require careful assessment. As her biographer, I find it challenging to tell a story that balances the many facets of her character and her contributions to scholarship. By today's standards Fannie H. Eckstorm would probably be considered an "amateur folklorist," but sixty years ago no such academic discipline existed, making it unreasonable to judge her credentials using today's academic standards. If anything, she was a pioneer in the study of Maine folklore.

On the "Racist" Hardy Family

Let us examine Ferland's accusations concerning the alleged "racism" of Fanny Hardy Eckstorm and her family. Ferland states that while it is "understandable that Eckstorm absorbed the paternal influences, societal values and literary trends of her time, one must nevertheless assess her credibility on the basis of such influences and assumptions." I agree, but my reading of all of her work (not just *Old John Neptune*) suggests a more nuanced interpretation. I, too, find the language used to describe Native people in her writing and in other American literature during that time period disturbing. But Ferland wrongly accuses Eckstorm and her father Manly Hardy of a racism that undermines all other judgments. Eckstorm and Hardy had strong opinions and were sometimes critical of others. However, they applied their judgments to individuals, regardless of racial or ethnic status. Thus, in referring to Penobscot Indian Peol Saukies as a "rascal," they were commenting on his nature not as an Indian, but an individual.

To put these comments in perspective, consider Manly Hardy's comments about Dr. Elliott Coues, a nationally respected (and white) ornithologist and zoologist. In a 1910 letter to his friend, naturalist George Grinnell, Hardy wrote, "Dr. Coues shook his rattles, but was not near enough to strike. I do not know but it is an insult to a rattlesnake to compare him to one, as he was near the copperhead variety."¹ Pick your poison: which is more indicative of racial bias, "rascal" or "rattlesnake"? Ferland is wrong in arguing that the Hardys were overtly racist; nor does he supply evidence to show that they were wrong about the people they

critiqued. Who is to say that Saukies was indeed not a “rascal” in his dealings with the Hardys?

In a similar vein, Eckstorm clearly favored English-Protestant over French-Catholic perspectives in colonial history.² But this was not unusual among early twentieth-century New Englanders, many of whom, during this “Colonial Revival” period, focused on a history that best exonerated their Anglo-Saxon heritage. In her essay “The Indians of Maine,” Eckstorm states that the eastern territories from Berwick to the Penobscot River were “held only by incomparable English steadfastness.” Her loyalties to the descendants of English settlers (of whom she is one) are without question.³

Interestingly though, Eckstorm goes on to assert the superiority of the Penobscot Indians, contrasting them with other Abenakis who moved to Quebec and were mostly allied with the French. Clearly her prejudice on the part of the American-English over the British-English and the American-French extends to the Penobscots, who served shoulder to shoulder with American-Englishmen in Maine during the Revolutionary War.

Her reverence for the Penobscots does not end there. Calling them the “most stable” of the Abenakis, she writes: “after three centuries of contact with the whites, the Penobscots still occupy their ancestral homes and still bury their dead among their forefathers; nor can it be said of them that since they first had near white neighbors they have ever been treacherous or unfriendly, nor in a century and half has their loyalty to the Americans ever been open to question.” Elsewhere she describes the strength and perseverance of the Penobscots: “there is a sentimental tendency to bewail the hard fate of the Indian and to blame the English for exterminating his race. But the Maine Indians never were ‘exterminated’ save in the rare literal sense of being driven beyond their own boundaries.” Their worst foes, Eckstorm asserts, were not the English but men of their own race, the Mohawks. And she blames the French for prompting enmity between the English and the Penobscots. Of course, this ignores many instances of English and American aggression against the Penobscots, but in directly addressing the racist notions of her Anglo contemporaries — “the ‘lazy Indian’ is a figment of the white man’s prejudice” — Eckstorm strikingly contrasts the biases of many early twentieth-century white Americans.⁴

Given this, along with her obvious admiration for some Native people and her tendency to judge individuals on their character rather than their “race,” I would have to disagree that Fannie Hardy Eckstorm’s writ-

ing is racist. She is a complex woman who exhibits many contradictions. Clearly, however, she and her father did not treat people as stereotyped members of a race, nor of a sex (consider how Hardy educated his daughters as well as his son), nor of a socio-economic class (they had wealthy and poor friends, uneducated as well as highly educated acquaintances).

Of course, the Hardys were products of their society and their times — as are all people. And because times and societies change, they held views that some of us would see in a different light today. But insisting that they are guilty of “white aggression” is a conclusion contrary to the evidence at hand. To the best of my knowledge, neither Manly nor Fannie ever claimed that their relationship to Native Americans was based, as Ferland argues, on “unconditional generosity.” Instead, they stressed that their relation was rooted in business (making and selling paddles and canoes; trade in meats, hides, and furs) as well as personal acquaintance (playing together as children and hunting together as adults). The complexity of the Hardys’ three-generation relationship with Native Americans, especially the Penobscots and Passamaquoddys, is over-simplified in Ferland’s harsh and unfounded criticisms.

On Eckstorm’s story about “The Death of Thoreau’s Guide”

Ferland asserts that “Eckstorm’s respect for white authority overshadowed her regard for true collective memory of Maine’s working people,” referring to “The Death of Thoreau’s Guide” and her preference for drive boss John Ross’s version of the tale over others she had heard. Yet Eckstorm provided both versions, and ironically, Ferland uses this to accuse her of biases against Native Americans. Is she biased because she tells both versions? Or because she favors the version which Ferland does not? I would argue that telling only one side of the story would indicate bias, but then Ferland would have no “evidence” to discuss.

Reason tells us that the drive boss would likely be the person to order a man (Prouty) into the bow of a boat, because that was his job. Eckstorm’s acceptance of Ross’s story is not indicative of racial prejudice on her part; rather, having talked to a number of people about the incident, she presented all sides of the story. And in trying to sort out the truth, she weighed the stories she heard about Dingbat Prouty causing Attean’s death and admitted the difficulty of ascertaining the truth, given so many different versions of the tale. Eckstorm deduced that the men were

fond of Attean but did not like Prouty, thus leading them to blame the latter. But contrary to Ferland's reading of the story, she did not conclude that Attean himself was to blame for his own death. Rather, her intent was to tell a hero story. "And Joe Attien (sic) stayed with them (the men in the boat who could not swim) — not clinging as they did, buried in water; not crouching and abject, waiting for the death that faced him — not a coward now, never, but paddle in hand, because the water ran too deep for pole-hold.... It is the last one sees of Joe Attien, no one has reported anything after that; one remembers him always as standing high in the stern of his boat, dying with and for his men."⁵

In another misreading of Eckstorm's work, Ferland argues that Manly Hardy was responsible for slandering Joseph Attean's reputation by referring to the latter as a drinking man. But Ferland fails to provide the rest of the story. Eckstorm wrote of Attean: "Hurt to the quick, he avoided his former friend, yet said nothing. When he discovered that the false accusation had arisen from a wholly innocent and most natural mistake, without a word in his own justification, leaving the charge to stand undenied, he renewed the old friendship, and his friend never knew what just cause he had given for resentment till, years after Joe's death, it was accidentally revealed by one who had heard the misunderstanding explained. Such was the man."⁶ In my understanding of this quote, Eckstorm is reporting that the white man (if indeed it was her father) only came to know about the hurt he had caused after Attean's death — too late to make amends. Further, she writes about Attean's character with great admiration.

Later in his essay, Ferland again critiques the way Eckstorm related the stories told to her by Sylvia Stanislaus, saying that she ignored incidents of white aggression. Since Eckstorm was the one who recorded and preserved these notes, Ferland again would have no "evidence" to discuss if it were not for her work. Just because she chose whether or not to use a piece of information does not necessarily mean she purposefully ignored this information to exonerate her own race. Given the theme of *Old John Neptune*, perhaps Eckstorm simply did not see a direct connection between her book and the tragedies Stanislaus mentioned.

On Attean and Neptune

Ferland launches yet another attack at Eckstorm, arguing that she "wove a fictional web of personal motives and negative attributes" to explain the disagreements between John Neptune and John Attean. Eck-

storm examined the rift as a possible cause of a political schism that led to Neptune leaving Indian Island and moving to Brewer. Exactly what is the evidence that this is fiction? Did these two men have serious differences of a political or personal nature? Are there documents other than what Eckstorm used that could shed light on this central point?

If in fact there was a division within the tribe (which Ferland concedes), then exactly what would this “factual evidence from the tribe” be? If there was a division, there would be — by definition — at least *two* sets of facts, not one “truth” as implied here. Perhaps, Eckstorm leaned a little too much toward one version of the cause of the tribal division. But a division *is* in fact evidence of tribal dissent — though *not* necessarily of racial bias in Eckstorm’s telling of the story.

Eckstorm gave credit to individual Indians for their knowledge, something rarely done by writers of her time. For example, when writing about a place called Scalp Rock she noted: “Both stories have been told by Sockabasin Swassin and are in print somewhere.” Eckstorm advocated listing Indian authorities by name, stating in *Indian Place Names* that “among the Penobscots, the writer has consulted almost exclusively her old friends Mrs. Clara Neptune and Lewis Ketchum.” She lauded historians and writers who mentioned Indian authorities by name and condemned those who did not. Thus she revealed herself as someone perhaps more respectful of Indian knowledge and intellect than many during her time. In the early twentieth century, few editors would have accepted native people as co-authors; nor would Eckstorm have considered it. However, she consistently named the people she worked with, gave them credit, and insisted on having Nicolar’s essay included in her place-name book. If, as Ferland claims, Eckstorm was racist, why would she demonstrate such care and effort in citing and crediting Native authorities? Furthermore, why was she so exacting — especially given her “amateur” status — in ferreting out the meanings of place names and asking tribal members what the words meant?

Ferland’s own research into the Indian Affairs records is admirable, as he seeks primary documents with which to unravel the mystery surrounding the events of 1834-1835. However, in weighing Eckstorm’s notes and articles, he presents only the negative and little of the positive. (He does consider Eckstorm’s description of interracial bonds among the lumbermen positive, but only as a “fascinating exception” to her later writing.) In fact, Eckstorm was especially adept at portraying Indians’ humor in the little vignettes she provided her readers, and she captured the compassion, intelligence, and kindness of the Indian people she knew. In one of her earliest publications, she described Sebattis Mitchell,



A graduate of Smith College, Fannie Hardy Eckstorm began writing about the Maine woods at a young age — not surprising given her family’s history of trapping and fur trading. Photo courtesy Maine Folklife Center.

the Passamaquoddy hunter with whom her father most regularly went porpoise hunting. This type of hunting was extremely dangerous, something one would only do with someone one respected and trusted — fully and totally. Eckstorm referred to Mitchell as a “man of fine sensibilities despite the two hundred and sixty odd pounds of flesh which obscured the inner light to strangers, alive to beauty, exquisitely humorous, softer-hearted than even the generality of woodsmen.” Eckstorm wrote that Sebattis was a “consummate raconteur” and described in detail the skills he used to tell his stories about hunting, his tenure as governor of his people, old legends, and tales of the sea: “A literary instinct guided him to the telling points of his narrative, and he grasped them with firm hand; repetition he used when effective, but never the aimless retrogressions of the ignorant and unskilled; when he digressed it was to express some quaint, original thought or call up some philosophical question. He never doubted that his stories were worth hearing and he never apologized for their length. He was a master of the use of details and had to tell long stories. He never quarreled with his genius nor cropped the tail of his Pegasus.”⁸

When Eckstorm wrote down the local legends about river-drivers who were the “cowboy” heroes of the great north woods, she included the essential stories of Indian “crack watermen.” Irrefutably oppressed throughout their history, these Penobscot and Passamaquoddy heroes were preserved in Eckstorm’s writing. Most stories about Indians in New England told tales of nameless warriors capturing or killing settlers. Eckstorm preserved stories told about real people who had names and personalities. That is the essence of her contribution.

On the Critique of Combining Folklore and History

In his criticism of Eckstorm, Ferland writes: “the inter-disciplinarity between folklore and history becomes objectionable when fictions like the old John Neptune story acquire greater historical veracity than documentary research and comprehensive fieldwork.” He later refers to her writing as “folkloric fiction.” In order to refute this statement, it is important to understand what folklore has contributed to history, and the ways in which historians might interpret Eckstorm’s writings.

Folklorist Richard Dorson, in his book *American Folklore*, described the development of heroes in this way: “When a close-knit group of people spins tales and ballads about a character celebrated in their locality or occupation, a true hero of the folk comes into existence.” For people engaged in difficult and dangerous occupations, the hero takes on the aspect of “noble toiler.” Eckstorm’s stories of lumbermen, particularly “The Death of Thoreau’s Guide,” fit within this genre. In addition, her stories illuminate the Maine landscape. As Dorson writes, local legends, “continually told, orally and in print, ... reveal themselves the hardiest of native prose narrative types.”⁹ Any number of New England authors — John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Holman F. Day — used folktales to craft colorful characters for their novels and poems. Eckstorm, writing within this tradition, differed from the other writers in one very important way: her knowledge of the folk tales and heroes often came from firsthand experience with the people and places of oral tradition.

Although some scholars may look askance at such tales — do they accurately describe what happened? — they are of great interest to folklorists and other students of culture, and of great significance to historians. As folklorist Lawrence Levine wrote, “trained to use written materials as sources, historians are often not willing to tackle the grave problems involved with utilizing the materials of folklore for the pur-

poses of history.”¹⁰ Folklorists Lynwood Montell and Barbara Allen described three ways in which history and folklore intersect: 1) history as a means of interpreting folklore; 2) folklore as a source of historical evidence; and 3) folklore and history as interdependent endeavors.¹¹ They cite Dorson as a good example of the first because he interpreted folklore in its historical context. He saw the development of American folklore as a result of the development of American civilization, reflecting the changes and transitions in colonization, the exploitation of Native American cultures, slavery, immigration, and industrialization.

In the second view, folklore used as evidence in historical reconstruction and interpretation fills gaps in the written record and challenges the prevailing view of the past by presenting a folk perspective on it. So, for example, Allan Nevins used cowboy prose and ballads to shed light upon the culture of cowboys of the western range, and Thomas D. Clark cited various elements of traditional games and pastimes to write about the trans-Appalachian West. Many scholars draw upon the traditions of particular groups to uncover a folk perspective not available in other sources. The collection of slave narratives by Federal Writers’ Project workers in the 1930s has provided such a perspective. Lawrence Levine, a historian interested in the consciousness of people whose views of themselves and their world do not appear in standard historical writings, gleaned folklore for information to write his well-known *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*.¹²

The third approach, using folklore and history as complementary, is the approach to which I subscribe. As a student of folklorist Edward D. Ives, I admire the way he regularly combined folkloristic with historical methods in his books about Maine woodsmen and song makers. Henry Glassie’s *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community* is another example. In 1988 Montell and Allen declared, “the work of Ives, Glassie, and others is a clear sign that the present relationship between folklore and history is more cordial than it has been at any point in the past one hundred years... Acrimonious debates over the ‘reliability’ of folklore as historical data seem largely to have died down, thanks in part to the coming of age of oral history.”¹³

On the Use of the Term Oral History

Ferland uses the term “oral history” to describe the stories Eckstorm collected from lumbermen. I argue that is not what she was doing. Eck-

storm was interested in writing the stories she heard from lumbermen as a way of describing Maine people to others as “true Americans.” It was part of a literary movement of the time in which she was educated, that strove to separate American culture from European culture by developing an American vernacular literature. Oral history, on the other hand, is a method of acquiring historical evidence. The method was pioneered by people such as Allan Nevins and Louis Starr in the 1950s as a means of capturing the unwritten recollections of prominent individuals for future historians. Another use of oral history was discovering the history of people without written documents. Jan Vansina’s 1961 book, *Oral Tradition*, was hailed internationally as a pioneering work in the field of ethnohistory. Reviewers were unanimous in their praise of Vansina’s success in subjecting oral traditions to intense functional analysis in African history. Oral history has since expanded as a methodology to be used in conjunction with other historical research methods.¹⁴ Tape-recorded interviews are conducted with people who have experience in some time, place, event, or occupation, and can expand upon the information acquired in written sources. The method did not exist when Eckstorm was collecting stories for her writing, and should not be used to describe the work she was doing.

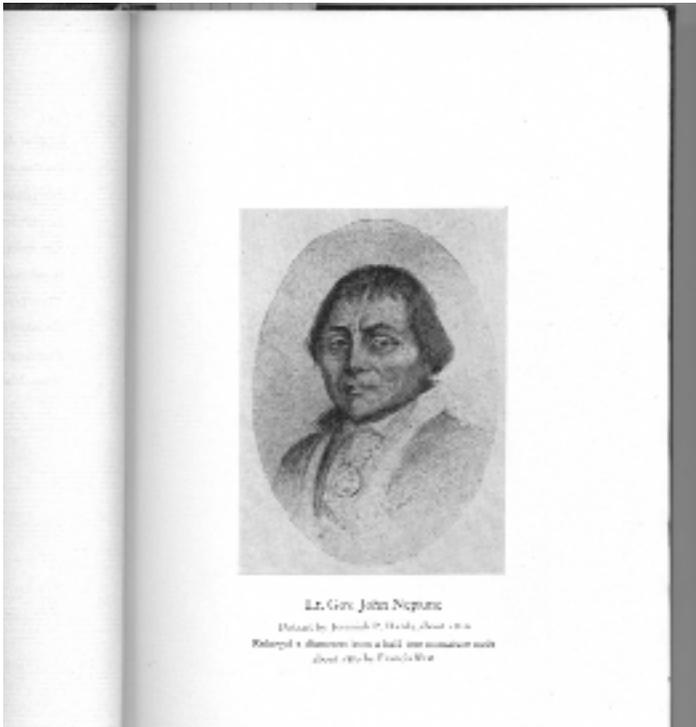
The Tribal Schism

Ferland makes some curious statements about the chapter titled “Retaining political sovereignty” in my book, *The Penobscot Dance of Resistance: Tradition in the History of a People* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2004). He states that I use tribal factionalism to explain Penobscot history. I do not. My interpretation of tribal history is that the Penobscots’ culture strengthened them in their efforts to resist oppression by outside forces (especially Maine’s state government). The statement that cultural resistance was the source of intratribal strife is taken out of a context in which I explained that the tribe was being buffeted by outside forces — using most of the same references cited by Ferland of protests by tribal leaders to the state’s efforts to take away their lands and to force them to assimilate. I also wrote that cultural resistance was a survival mechanism against oppression, pressure to assimilate, and efforts to remove the Penobscots from their lands. I mentioned the tribal schism only by way of illustrating the stresses the tribe was under at the time. When I discussed the tribe’s success in hold-

ing onto their lands, I cited the letters that tribal leaders wrote in protest to the state government. I described the two sides of the factional dispute not in terms provided by Eckstorm in *Old John Neptune*, but as they were described in the protest letters written by Penobscot leaders themselves. And I did not explain tribal weakness as a result of their disputes, but instead stated that “the two factions played an important role. Compromising between the two sides led the tribe to adapt to a changing world.” This is not a statement of internal weakness; it ascribes to them the strength of reasoned debate and decision making. Therefore Ferland’s statement that “this old history and folklore still receives equal or greater weight than all Penobscot Indian testimonies” misrepresents my position.¹⁵

I also described how the state’s division of Penobscot territory into family plots created stress on the community, using letters from the New Party and the Old Party as sources. This was not “a narrative centered on state agents and religious officials,” but a balancing and weighing of sources to discover the truth. In the conclusion to the chapter I wrote, “historical documents suggest that Penobscot leaders repeatedly requested that they be consulted whenever the state’s governor or legislators made decisions about their lives.”¹⁶ Nowhere did I suggest that tribal history was the result of “internal flaws, feuds, and factions,” as Ferland argues.

Ferland argues that the cause of the political schism in the tribe was due to white aggression, not internal disagreements. He presents substantial evidence of white aggression against the Penobscots and their protests against it. However, it is not clear how the aggression caused the split. In *Dance of Resistance*, I noted that the factions identified in documents from the seventeenth, late eighteenth, and early nineteenth century were different from the nineteenth-century factions. They “could not be divided neatly into two sides.... Neither faction was entirely conciliatory — they never compromised with the state over rights to govern their own people and land ownership.... People changed sides on different issues.”¹⁷ The biggest disagreement the tribe had with the state related to sovereignty. When Maine became a state, the government pushed the Indians to assimilate, expecting the native people to disappear. The Penobscots resisted these efforts, and the acts of aggression cited by Ferland added to the Penobscots’ will to resist the state’s efforts to control their lives. But in fact the acts were less likely to create a schism than to a create unity of purpose within the tribe.



This early portrait of Lieutenant Governor John Neptune was painted by Fannie Hardy Eckstorm's great uncle, Jeremiah Pearson Hardy, about 1826. A front-piece in Eckstorm's book *Old John Neptune*, the image was taken from a half-tone miniature made about 1880 by Francis West.

Dialect Writing

Ferland uses the term “phonetically deformed” to describe a passage in a newspaper that reports the testimony of John Neptune in dialect. He later refers to it as a “phonetic mockery.” Scholars disagree about the effect of dialect writing, but it was common at the time. Some criticize dialect writing as perpetuating stereotypes, trivializing and misrepresenting the life of the speaker; others explain that early scholars studied dialect literature as part of a sincere, democratic interest in recording the speechways of ethnic or cultural groups — a view supported by the *Cambridge History of American Literature* in 1918. A good example of an author who wrote in dialect is Rowland E. Robinson, who crafted short stories about his Vermont friends and neighbors. Robinson clearly was not trying to belittle his fellow Vermonters; rather he hoped to cap-

ture the way they sounded when they spoke. Would it be more honest to do otherwise? Manly Hardy apparently thought not, as he enjoyed, and praised, Robinson's published writings.

On the other hand, American dialect writing was, in part, also a confirmation of cultural hegemony. The focus on "incorrect" dialects sanctioned belief in the pure, standard speech of the dominant elite. The call for authors to inject the vibrant speech of the folk into their literary language was a call to reestablish the Anglo-Saxon roots of American culture. Much of the literature of the first part of the twentieth century used dialect writing as a way of characterizing the ethnicity of the speaker. Although an individual might not react negatively to dialect in actual speech, writing that dialect creates a more powerful and negative impression of a lower social status. However conflicted the practice, Eckstorm's interest in American dialect was clear; she wrote at least one article in *American Speech*, and she was interviewed by Miles Hanley of the American Dialect Society for the Linguistic Atlas of New England about words used in Maine.¹⁸

Ferland's Conclusions

In his conclusion, Ferland reiterates his belief that non-Indian writers referred to the Indian character in only negative stereotypical terms. Yet he presents only the negative instances and ignores the positive, including evidence that the Hardys mostly wrote about individual people, not stereotypical groups of "Indians."

Ferland ends the paper by declaring that he has presented both paradigms — indigenous testimony and non-Indian literary constructs — and he concludes by resolving the problematic question of who constitutes a credible authority in favor of these indigenous testimonies. Ferland's closing words are telling: he began with a perceived idea, as he points out in his closing sentences. Reasoned scholarship requires that one start with the facts (as imperfect as they may be), build a fair-minded case based on these facts, and then form a conclusion based on the preceding. As Ferland admits, he set out to prove that white aggression caused the Penobscot tribal split, and that the Hardys joined in a tacit agreement among whites to expunge the history of this aggression. I argue that one cannot simply choose a single authority and ignore all of the rest. All of the testimony should be considered, evaluated, and used to provide a portrait of the past to the extent a historian can do so.

While in the past some writers may have ignored Penobscot letters and other testimony, it does not make good historical practice to throw out all other sources now that these have come to light.

NOTES

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