2018

Maine Indian Folk-Lore 1919

Fannie Hardy Eckstorm

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eckstorm_papers

Part of the Anthropology Commons, History Commons, and the Linguistics Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/eckstorm_papers/35

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fannie Hardy Eckstorm Papers by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.
Maine Indian Folk-Lore

My father used to say that there were very few Penobscot Indian legends; that he had never heard but two; and when Leland published his "Algonquin Legends of New England", he was positive that the Indians had made them up to deceive him. For my father knew how the Indian loves to fool the white man and how cleverly he does it.

A few years later, when I was out of college, I myself made an honest attempt to verify Leland's work, even having an Indian girl visit me and going to Indian island and spending several days in an Indian home. I had the good-will of some of the best of the tribe and was not unversed in the subject; but the total result was two scraps of Indian myth so meagerly narrated that they were no more satisfactory than the story of Cinderella would be to us if all we were told was "'Oh, it's all about a girl who wanted to go to a dance when she ought to have been home washing dishes; and she lost one of her shoes.'"

"Was it true," I asked the man I always had and still do call Uncle Lewey, "was it true that Old Governor could do magic?" Uncle Lewey denied it promptly. So had my father done who had known Old Governor all his life. "Do you suppose Old Governor could come to our house every week of his life and sit by our fire and eat with the family and I not know whether they thought he could make leaves grow in winter, and green corn in January and silver quarters out of nothing? I tell you they were fooling Leland to the top of his bent" So my father. So also Uncle Lewey. "Why, he was like one of the..."
family? If the tribe had thought such things about him, would not my grandfather and father have known it? Absurd!"

"But, Uncle Lewey, were the stories Maria Saukees told, old Indian tales?"

And he answered— I remember his very words after thirty years; "Well, you see, Fannie, you knew that Maria Saukees; she would lie the legs off from a brass monkey." Unfortunately I did know all about Maria and her easy gift of speech and easy honesty of purpose. My father I admitted that there was nothing in it, and he smiling said, "I told you so." If there had been don't you think that with my opportunities I should have heard some of these things?"

Time went on, and my old friends among the Indians died; the tribe drifted farther and farther away from its early customs and traditions; it was too late to learn anything new about the Indians. And then one day a single word proved to be the key which opened the door to the ancient treasure-house, and I went in and was as amazed as if I had suddenly walked behind the looking-glass. It was true, all that Leland had written and much more. And it was a strange world of the most amazing impossibilities and contradictions, so unlike the mental world we live in that after five years of getting wonded to it I still feel dizzy when my old Lady opens up some new aboriginal vagary.

My old Lady came one day as usual, with her baskets to sell and her pack of cards for fortune-telling and her stubby black pipe hidden in her bag. She had erysipelas in her hands so that they were all plastered with plantain-leaves and she was discouraged. It was hard for an old woman in poor
health to earn enough to support herself and her grandson. And as she ate she confided her sorrows. "My gran'son he say sometime, wish we was Old Injun, then just go out in woods an' get tobacco and money an' things--"

I had never heard the phrase "old Injun", but I guessed at once what she meant. "M'teoulin?" I asked her.

"Oh, yah/ Medeowlin!" And she ran on into such an account of the old Indian magic that if the famous roo of Marco Polo had swooped down and seized me in his talons and carried me off, I could hardly have been more surprised. Yes, Old Governor was a magician; he could do all that was said of him; he could do much more, indeed, his magic was wonderful. And so-and-so was also m'teoulin; and her sisters and her sister's son, and this one and that one. Suddenly all these old dead and departed Indians whom I had heard of since babyhood, perhaps had known for years myself, who to my father and his father had been just ordinary people, became lighted up inside like jack-o-lanterns and I saw the strange power which they believed they had and the others accorded to them. It was their secret, which enabled them to be a race despised and yet walking with dignity among their traducers, because they knew something the white people did not know. They had fought with spirits, had vanquished demons, they held the power of life and death over their enemies, nothing was impossible to those among them who had acquired what they called "spiritual power." White folks did not know it. They had their own life apart which white folks could not share.

How little white folks do know of this side of the Indian is well shown by this. Mr. George H. Hunt of Oldtown
knows the Penobscot Indians as no other man does. Born in Oldtown, brought up to play with the Indian boys, speaking the language, he served as Indian Agent for twenty years, the longest term any one ever held the office, and since leaving the agency has conducted an Indian trading store next door to it. About two years ago I asked him if he knew that Old Governor was m'teoulin. He said he had never heard of such a thing. Most likely if he has tried to discuss the matter since with Uncle Lewey, or others of the old people, he is convinced that there is "nothing in it".

I know that if my father could sit and listen to my Old Lady talking to me, though he would be convinced against his will, he would still object, "Well, there's no truth at all in what she says." Of course there is no truth in it. The important point is that she believes her stories implicitly though they have not a shred of probability. And that marks the gulf between the red man's mind and the white man's. The white man demands a reasonable tale; the red man doesn't care a fiddlestick for rationality. When my Old Lady, sitting before my fire, tells me seriously about the old woman she knew, who about twenty-five years ago hanged her twin children to the rainbow, and everyone knew it was so because they could see them hanging there, it seems weird to me that anyone residing prosaically and apparently decently in a quiet town like Lincoln should even think of such a thing as hanging her own children to the end of the rainbow. The end of the rainbow is proverbially hard to find, else we should all be rich. But some one did think of it, not many years since, and here lies the real problem. Our Yankees' failure to listen sympathetically to tales like this is responsible for the loss of an aboriginal literature, as fine and as abundant as any
body of tradition in the world. We had in Maine such a wealth
of legendary lore as was nowhere surpassed—and we have thrown
the most of it away. The attitude of the white man to this
white man is well illustrated by Henry D. Thoreau's comments
on what came under his own observation. "While we were cross-
ing this bay [of Moosehead Lake] where Mount Kineo rose dark
before us, the Indian repeated the tradition respecting this
mountain's having been anciently a cow moose,—how a mighty
Indian hunter, whose name I forget, succeeded in killing this
queen of the moose tribe with great difficulty, while her
calf was killed somewhere among the islands in Penobscot Bay;
and to his eyes this mountain had still the form of a
moose in a reclining posture, its precipitous side presenting
the outline of her head. He told this at some length, though
it did not amount to much, and with apparent good faith, and
asked us how we supposed the hunter could have killed such a
mighty moose as that, how we could do it. Whereupon a man-
of-war to fire broadsides into her was suggested, etc. An
Indian tells such a story as if he thought it deserved to
have a good deal said about it, only he has not got it to say;
and so he makes up for the deficiency by a drawling tone,
long-windedness, and a dumb wonder which he hopes will be
contagious." Mr. Thoreau furnishes an admirable illustration
of how not to get an Indian's confidence. This "mighty
hunter, whose name he forgets" was none other than Glusgebeh, or
Glooscap of the Micmacs, much the same as Hiawatha, the
most venerated character in Indian myth, himself god and
man, the creator, with the Great Spirit of all living and inani-
mate things. The story of his hunting was one of the tales
the Indian believed most implicitly, and the cheap fun which
Thoreau and his friends made of it must have been shocking to
Joseph Pelis. This incident explains why so much Indian lore
has been lost forever.
Henry David Thoreau found little of interest in the Indian mind and why so much has been left to fall into oblivion.

The Glusgehbeh story, of which this hunting formed a part, was a great Indian edda. It must have been incredibly voluminous in its original form, for the fragments which have come down to us are enough to make at least two good-sized books. Some of it was poetry and undoubtedly was sung or chanted; some of it serious narrative, embodying the Indian's highest philosophy of the origin of the world, its phenomena, of man, the animals and inanimate life; some of it, still quasi-philosophy in that it usually undertook to account for some trifle was humorous and grotesque, existing merely for amusement.

Glusgehbeh, or Klosekurbeh, as Joseph Necolar calls him, is the same as the Micmac Glooscap, by which name he is generally known in books. If not the same he is very similar to the Iroquois Hiawatha and the Chippewa Manobozho. (Longfellow has transplanted his Hiawatha from Schoocraft's Iroquois tales to the west Chippewas, or Ojibways, who in language and customs are very like our own Indians. That Longfellow's poem is in many parts, notably the discovery of the Indian corn, the coming of winter, the coming of the white man, and so forth, so much like our Maine Glusgehbeh stories, is evidence how wide-spread and how important was this great body of philosophical legend.)

The name Glusgehbeh Beland says means "The Liar" and his Indians cynically explained it by saying that he promised to come again and never had done so. In reality it belongs to the old and now extinct Indian language, which no one today understands, and meant "the man out of nothing", that is the first created man, as Joseph Necolar has shown. As a lie is also
is also something out-of-nothing, it is not strange that the Indians themselves have confounded the two. Another instance of the same thing happening is in the evil witch Pookajinsquess, who appears in so many of the stories. The Indians say the word means "pitcher", "glasses jug", "syrup pot"; but as the name is clearly very much older than any of these utensils, known to the Idians only since the white men came, the original meaning must have been lost.

To undertake to write out the story of Glusgehbeh's life would take too much time. The information comes from two kinds of sources. On the one hand the traditional story tellers have narrated a large number of Glusgehbeh tales, which usually are quaint, curious and entertaining, but are scarcely above the level of Uncle Remus's stories of B'rer Rabbit and B'rer Fox. My Old Lady frequently has said: "This is Glusgehbeh stuff," yet Glusgehbeh's name did not occur at all. On the other hand is a document which stands by itself for uniqueness and authenticity. This a book privately printed, not published, in 1893, by Joseph Vecolar of Olotown. An Indian writing for his own people, he has undertaken to set down what he remembers of the traditions of his race. He was himself the last of the guardians of the great tradition, "the spiritual men" as he calls them and this rambling, confused, incoherent story of Glusgehbeh, his works and teachings, is without doubt the most authoritative work existant upon the religion of the Indian. It mentions none of the animal maerchen of the ordinary story-tellers, is not designed for entertainment, has no dramatic interest, but it tells of Glusgehbeh's travels, of his companions, of the discovery of fire, of cooking food, of fishing, how the first
mother became corn and tobacco for them, how he taught the arts of hunting, of fishing, of building the canoe and snow-shoe, how he subdued the wild creatures and named them all; of the seven years of famine and the white man's track and his coming.

In his words, "Klose-kur-beh was claimed by all the children of the red men to be the first person who came upon the earth. And he was their teacher. He taught them how they must live, and told them about the spiritual power, how it was in every living thing, and it was the same power that has sent him to prepare the way on earth for the generations to come; and to subdue all obstacles which are against the nature of mankind; and to reduce the earth to such a state as to become a happy land for the people."

This is not easy reading. It is very much harder to understand than Darwin's "Descent of Man", or Kant's "Critique's" or even Spinoza's "Ethics". It is not recommended for entertainment. Yet in it is much beauty of thought and expression, as in this passage, evidently a poem:

"It was here when Klose-kur-beh for the first time felt tired; May-May going away made him feel lonely and he wanted to see his own people. When night came this same lonely feeling was still upon him; he prepared a place for a night's rest. After the darkness had come and before laying down to sleep, to cheer himself Klose-kur-beh did sing. When this was done the seven trees that stood nearest bent their tops down and listened to the singing of Klose-kur-beh, and when the singing was over, the largest of the seven straightened its body up and said, 'How grateful the heart of man ought to be when he can bring cheer to himself by singing when lonely."
When my kind and I sing, we sing in distress; when the fury of the winds shake our limbs we sing in wailing, our roots are many and strong and we cannot move to avoid the fury of the heavens. We stand and wait for whatever befall us. How much better off, indeed, is man than a tree! He can move at his pleasure, and he can sing for solace!

After this the trees give directions to Glusgahbeh for making a long journey, many times seven moons in length, and they send him Alemos, the dog, who says to him, "I have come to stay with you.... I was sent to be your companion. There shall be a time for man to weep and a time to laugh, a time to be happy and a time to be lonely, but in time of loneliness you will have a great comfort in me!" — (Good dog, the same then as now!) — "And when Klose-kur-beh heard this his loneliness left him and he said to the animal, 'Welcome, Arl-moose — dog.'" He called him M'dasmus, which ever since has been the name of this mythical first dog.

Now Glusgahbeh had had other dogs. Mikwek, the Red Squirrel, served him as one often and here is a micmac tradition in the very words of an old Indian: "Glooscap had two dogs. One was the Loon (Kweemoo), the other the Wolf (Mal-sum). Of old the animals were as men; the Master gave them the shapes they now bear. But the Wolf and the Loon loved Glooscap so greatly that since he left them they howl and wail. He who hears their cries over the still and lonely lake, by the streams where no dwellers are, or afar at night in the forests and hollows, hears them sorrowing for their Master."

Yet the place of honor belonged to Alemos the true dog, that crouched by their camp-fires and ate the remnants of their feastings or fasted when they did. To commemorate his
prowess Glusgahbeh set marks in this country which exist to this day. The original is too long and repetitious to quote, nor does the whole of it exist in any one version I have seen. That scrap of legend which Thoreau so slightingly preserved forms the beginning of it, and Secola has told the rest. But seems that one day when Glusgahbeh and his dog were hunting up in the north woods, they started a cow moose and her calf. The cow he killed at Moosehead Lake and Kineo is her body. The calf he followed on his snow-shoes through the woods. As the chase became hot he threw down his pack and his kettle, sabotawan and kokadjo, and there they are today, Big and Little Spencer Mountains. They pursued the moose toward the coast and when they reached Penobscot Bay the moose swam across while Glusgahbeh, with a great leap, vaulted it and landed on Dyce’s Head, M’d’ogahmoosook, his snow-shoe tracks, they used to call it before the white man effaced the holy footprints. The dog remained upon the other side, either near Belfast or Islesboro and sat waiting. But hotly pursuing the young moose Glusgahbeh killed him on Cape Rosier at Moose-cochattick, the moose’s rump, which is there to this day, as I can bear witness. At high tide this great rock on the shore very much resembles the hind quarters from the hump on the shoulders backward of a moose lying down. The forequarters he removed, leaving the rest as a sign, and he disembowelled the moose here, leaving Osquoon, the liver beside the carcass, where it is today, a reddish iron-stained rock, while he took the better meat to cook it in the pot-holes at the rapids of the Bagaduce River. But the faithful dog he rewarded with the entrails, oč-lakoosee, which he threw across
the water to him. In the words of Necolar: "Some part of the intestines which he threw at his dog, dropped down very near the spot where the body of the moose lay and the other part reached near where the dog was sitting, so that the whole part did not break or disconnect, but strung along the whole distance, which can now be seen, resembling the intestines of an animal, with its white fat and blood on the ledges near the moose body, coming out at where the dog is. All along the whole distance this mark can now be seen, according to the modern measurements and reckoning, a distance of seven miles; these intestines lay along the bottom of the sea, which can be seen wherever the water is shallow enough so the bottom can be seen; they lay on the ledges and on the small rocks the whole way." And it is even so today. From the eastern shore of Penobscot Bay, notably visible at Dyce's Head irregular veins of quartz extend under water for miles across the bay. One makes the shore on Islesboro a quarter mile below Ryder's Cove, and the Indians tell me that it continues to the western shore near Northport or Belfast, where no doubt were formerly the stone dogs stood, which he set for a mark of the event. That the bones of the moose were at Bar Harbor and at Eastport of course constituted no hindrance to the Indian's belief in the story. Improbabilities do not trouble his mind and he accounts for one mystery by making a larger one.

To a very large extent the more familiar stories are attempts to explain something. The howling of the Wolf and the mad crying of the Loon have been accounted for as we have seen. But why do the Toad and the Porcupine have no noses? Oh, that was Glusgahbeeb, too. They were malevolent witches, who said they would kill him, and he touched their noses softly.
"But the two witches, looking at one another, saw presently that their noses were both gone, and they screamed aloud in terror, but their noses were none the less flat. And so it came about that the Toad and the Porcupine both lost their noses and have none to this day". (Teland, p.108)

The Rabbit has a hare-lip. One story says that he was trying to get wood-worms like the woodpecker girls and tore it, another that in making wampum a bit of rock flew and cut it; and his tail is short because it was pulled off by someone whom he was helping out of a deep hole, and his loins so small because this same person in the hole next grasped him about the middle. The Raven was white once, but Moseek, the wood-worm bound him and tried to burn him and the smoke of the birch-bark torches blackened his white plumage so that now he is K'chi-gah-gook, "the big black one". (We note that this is precisely the same as Chingahgook, the Delaware chieftain of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales and the Maquas whom Cooper talks so much of, that is the Mohawks, or Iroquois, are still called today by all Penobscot Indians, by the same name, Mayquay.) Why is Partridge's leg all sinew while his breast is plump and good? Why does he drum by himself in the woods? Why does he avoid the water? Why he fly up with such a buzzing? All these questions and many more the legends answer.
them. In a general way they are classed as a part of the Glusgahbeh legend, though upon the face they are but plain animal tales, like the Reinecke Fuchs of Europe and the French fabliaux, in which the animals talk and act humanly. One of the chief differences is that the Indian tale usually undertakes to explain some natural phenomenon; it never has any concealed political satire.

Partridge, Pulowech, to the Quoddies, Marjeelehsoo to the Penobscots is a particular favorite. He is a warrior, a hero, a being of power and mystery. His wife is Pockajinsquess a mighty witch and he himself has magic. Now this is one version of the reason why the Partridge drums in the spring. It is because he is building himself a boat. In another variant explains why he never goes near the water.

"When the water was first made, all the birds and the fowl came together to decide who should make their canoes for them, so they might venture out upon the water.

"The Owl proposed that Loon should do the work; but the Black Duck said: "Loon cannot make canoes; his legs are set too far behind. Let the Owl make them."

"Then the Loon said: "The Owl cannot make canoes; his eyes are too big. He can't work in day-time for the sun would put out his eyes."

"Then the Duck laughed and made fun of the Owl. This made the Owl angry, and he said to Black Duck: "You ought to be ashamed of your laugh. It sounds like the laugh of Kettagus, quack, quack, quack."

"Then all the fowls laughed aloud at the Duck. The Owl said "Let Sips, the Wood Duck, build our boats."

"How can he build canoes," cried all the rest, "with his small neck?"
"He is too weak," said the Loon.

"The birds were quite discouraged; but they liked the look of the water very much. At last Kosqu', the Crane, spoke: "My friends, we cannot stay here much longer. I am very hungry already. Let us draw lots, and whoever draws the lot with the canoe marked upon it shall be the builder of boats.

Then they try to get the animals to prepare the lots from birch bark. At last they get Miqueh, the Squirrel, to do it. Each bird stepped forward and drew one with his bill and the lot fell to Partridge.

"Now the Partridge is always low-spirited and hardly ever speaks a word; and this set all the other birds in an uproar, and they all sang songs, each after his own fashion, and they decided to have a great feast.

"Get the horn," said the chief. When it was brought he gave it to Seeps, the moothahquessit, or dance singer; then the big dance began, and it lasted many days.

"When the feast was over, the chief said: "Now, Partridge, you must make the canoes, sound and good, and all alike. Cheat no one, but do your work well."

The first one he made had a very flat bottom; this he gave to the Loon, who liked it much. The next, flat-bottomed, to Black Duck; then one for Wabekeloch, the Wild Goose. This was not so flat.

"Another was for Crane. It was very round. The Crane did not like his boat, and said to Eagle: "This canoe does not suit me. I would rather wade than sit in a canoe."

"The Partridge made canoes for all the birds, some
large, some small, to suit their various size and weight. At last his work was done. "Now", said he to himself, "I must make myself a better canoe than any of the rest. So he made it long and sharp with a round bottom, thinking it would swim very fast.

"When it was finished, he put it in the water; but alas, it would not float; it upset in spite of all that he could do. He saw all his neighbors sailing over the water, and he fled to the woods determined to build himself a canoe.

"He has been drumming away at it ever since, but it is not finished yet."

Another version of the tale says that partridge reasoned that if a canoe with a pointed end could go so fast in one direction a canoe with two sharp ends could go in two directions, one that was all ends could row equally fast in every direction, so that he made one that was all ends, that is round. It would not go at all but turned round and round; so that it is for shame that he hides himself in the woods.

Still another version, told me by an old Indian is that in his anger he burst up with a great whirring of his wings, such as all partridges use ever since, and "He got mad and flew off into the woods humming", was his expression. They used to say, he continued, that if anyone took the partridge's feathers for a pillow they would be disturbed; they would hear him drumming. Then the man's wife spoke to him in Indian. we laughed and said, "Wife says they do!"

Many more are the tales told of Partridge, explaining all his ways.
and taught them all they knew of arts, crafts and religion. There are two forms of the story extant, the collection of twenty-seven tales, chiefly Passamaquoddy and Micmac, collected by C.J. Leland, and the long Penobscot version by Joseph necolar. Neither repeats the other. Leland was obsessed by the idea that the Indians derived much of their mythology from the Norsemen, and necolar's work is deeply tinctured with Christian teaching and as some of it puerile, as the command of Glusgehhe that before he marries the Indians youth shall betake himself to the woods and remain there "seventy times seven moons", or thirty eight years, (the Indians counting thirteen moons to a year) before he marries. It is however the serious attempt of an intelligent Indian to record what he has heard traditionally. He shows conclusively that Leland was hasty in adopting the modern signification of his hero's name without investigation of its roots. Glusgehheh is not "The Liar", but "The-man-out-of-nothing", that is, the Indian Adam. The Abenaki mythology was wild and terrible. The strange guest who came into the wigwam might be a cannibal Keewahqu (the Chenoo of the Micmacs), come to eat you, if you Aboo-com-k'n, half fish, half woman, or else went to dip a kettle of water from the lake, some great snake living beneath it might seize you and pull you under. Bumolai (the Pomola of the whites), spirit of the night air, all head, legs and arms, sitting in a tree, might grin at you. The mountains were inhabited by the "stonish men" The great Thunder Bird might drop the lightnings from his claws upon you and Wuchowsen, the wind-blower, might flap his wings too make an adverse gale.