



**Gabriel Sagard, *Le Grand Voyage du Pays des Hurons* (1632)**

As the title page of his book indicates, Sagard offers an overview of Huron culture and a review of missionary efforts in New France. The book includes one of the earliest translations of a Native American oral story, as well as a dictionary of the Huron language.



who married the half-Ojibwa daughter of a fur trader and learned both the language and much of the lore of her tribe. His wife, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft (1800-1841), was one of the first Native Americans to write short stories based on Indian lore, while Schoolcraft himself published over twenty books about Indian history, customs, and language, notably his *Historical and Statistical Information Respecting . . . the Indian Tribes of the United States* (6 vol., 1851-57).

Throughout the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, hundreds of other anthropologists and historians also attempted to preserve the oral traditions of Native Americans. Versions of the same story often differed dramatically. By its very nature, an oral tradition is evolutionary and adaptive, so stories inevitably change from generation to generation. Moreover, different tellers shaped stories in various ways, while individual interpreters imposed their own cultural beliefs on the stories they transcribed and translated. Differences in language presented additional obstacles to these

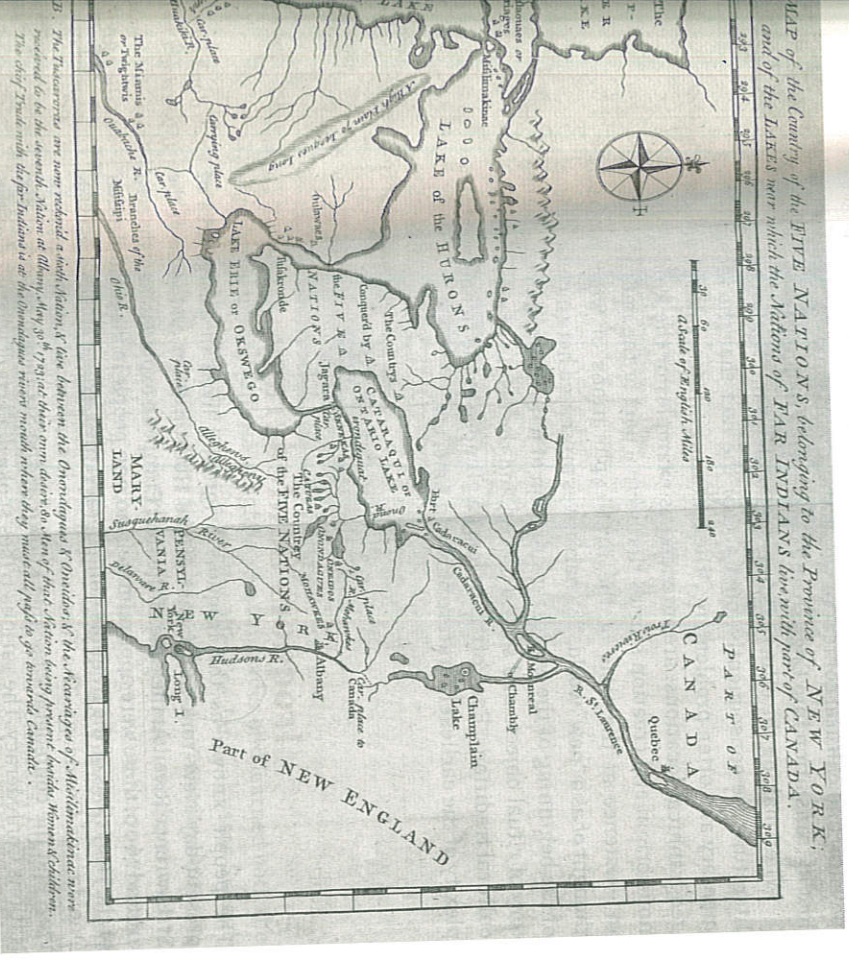
early interpreters, since there was no English equivalent for many of the concepts and words in Native American languages. In the Lakota story included here, “*Wotpe* and the Gift of the Pipe,” for example, the term *wakan* has often been translated as “holy,” especially by missionaries eager to put a Christian spin on a narrative. But the term actually has a much more complicated meaning, blending the concepts of both mystery and power. Finally, the force and meaning of many Native American poems, songs, and stories depends on oral performance, which is difficult to capture on the printed page, especially in translation. Indeed, crucial elements of oral performance—the expressions and gestures of the speaker, the rhythms and sounds of the original language, and both the physical and cultural context in which the story is told—are quite literally lost in translation into English and onto the printed page.

When making the effort to study and understand Native American oral literature, we consequently must accept the fact that the record is fragmentary and often problematic. The following stories, taken from several geographical locations, are intended as examples of the kinds of indigenous origin and creation stories that were a part of the multiple cultures in existence at the time of the first explorations of what Europeans thought of as a “new” world. The narratives presented here include accounts of the beginning of the world, the creation of natural phenomena, the history of ritual objects and sacred places, and the origin of ceremonies and cultural traditions. Each offers at least a glimpse of the richness and complexity of the earliest literature of North America.

## Iroquois Confederacy

The people known as the Iroquois originally lived in a large area of present-day New York State, east of the Hudson River and south of the St. Lawrence River. At the time of the first European explorations of the area around 1600, there were approximately 20,000 people in the political union of the five tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy: the Cayuga, Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, and Onondaga. The Tuscarora were incorporated into the league in 1722, and the confederacy became known as the Six Indian Nations or Six Nations Confederacy. The various tribes spoke dialects of what is called the Iroquoian-Northern language. The Iroquois were farmers and hunters who lived in small villages, a distinctive feature of which was the “longhouse,” a large multifamily dwelling that often housed an entire clan. In fact, the Iroquois called themselves *Haudenosaunee*, or “the people of the longhouse.” Their social structure was matrilineal. In addition to determining kinship and making many family decisions, women also owned property. When a couple married the man moved into the woman’s longhouse.

Known for their military prowess, the Iroquois were powerful and savvy warriors who used their strong political organization to their advantage. Despite their relatively small numbers, the Iroquois successfully resisted the incursions of European settlers until the Revolutionary War, when they sided with the British. American troops invaded their homeland in 1779, driving many of the Iroquois into southern Canada. In the decades following the war, they lost much of their land through deceptive treaties. Many of the Iroquois were removed to reservations in New York, from which some tribes were later relocated to Wisconsin, now the home of most of the Oneida, and to the Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, home of the modern-day Seneca-Cayuga tribe.



**Map of the Country of the Five Nations**

This map of the territories occupied by the members of the Iroquois Confederacy was included as a frontispiece to Cadwallader Colden's *The History of the Five Indian Nations* (1747). Colden was a Scottish-educated scientist and physician who moved to Philadelphia in 1710 and later relocated to New York, where he held a number of important colonial positions, including the province's first representative to the Iroquois.

**Reading the "Origin of Folk Stories" (Seneca).** The most populous of the original five tribes of the Iroquois Nation, the Seneca occupied an area between the Genesee River and Seneca Lake in the Finger Lakes region of present-day New York State. Like the other Iroquois tribes, the Seneca lived in villages with longhouses—dwellings for extended families—and were primarily agricultural, raising corn, squash, and beans. They also followed the political organization of the larger Iroquois Nation, holding elections to remove leaders who were proven to be corrupt or incompetent. The Seneca were fiercely protective of their homes and were skilled in warfare. One of their most famous leaders was Red Jacket (1750–1830), known for his skill as an orator, his political leadership, and his valiant efforts to maintain tribal lands and culture in the face of constant incursions by white settlers. In a speech attributed to him in 1805, Red Jacket is recorded as saying, "The Great Spirit . . . has made a great difference between his white and red children; we do not wish to destroy your religion or take it from you. We only want to enjoy our own." The oral cultures of Native American tribes depended on the telling of stories to preserve their history, religion, and traditions. There was, consequently, considerable interest in how stories originated. In the following Seneca story, which is variously known as the "Origin of Folk Stories" and "The Story-Telling Stone," an outcast orphan becomes a hero through his knowledge of the source, or origin, of stories. The text is taken from *Seneca Myths and Folk Tales* (1923), collected by Arthur C. Parker, a Seneca.

**ORIGIN OF FOLK STORIES**

There was once a boy who had no home. His parents were dead and his uncles would care for him. In order to live this boy, whose name was Gaqka, or Crow, made a bowe branches for an abiding place and hunted birds and squirrels for food. He had almost no clothing but was very ragged and dirty. When the people from village saw him they called him Filth-Covered-One, and laughed as they passed by, hitting their noses. No one thought he would ever amount to anything, which made him heavy-hearted. He resolved to go away from his tormentors and become a great hunter. One night Gaqka found a canoe. He had never seen this canoe before, so he took it. Stepping in he grasped the paddle, when the canoe immediately shot into the air, and paddled above the clouds and under the moon. For a long time he went always southward. Finally the canoe dropped into a river and then Gaqka paddled for shore. On the other side of the river was a great cliff that had a face that looked like a man. was at the forks of the river where this cliff stood. The boy resolved to make his home at the top of the cliff and so climbed it and built a bark cabin.

The first night he sat on the edge of the cliff he heard a voice saying, "Give me some tobacco." Looking around the boy, seeing no one, replied, "Why should I give tobacco?" There was no answer and the boy began to fix his arrows for the next day's hunt. A while the voice spoke again, "Give me some tobacco."

Gaqka now took out some tobacco and threw it over the cliff. The voice spoke again: "Now I will tell you a story."

Feeling greatly awed the boy listened to a story that seemed to come directly out of the rock upon which he was sitting. Finally the voice paused, for the story had ended. Then it spoke again saying, "It shall be the custom hereafter to present me with a small gift for my stories." So the boy gave the rock a few bone beads. Then the rock said, "Hereafter when I speak, announcing that I shall tell a story you must say, 'Nio,' and as I speak you must say 'He'"; that I may know that you are listening. You must never fall asleep but continue to listen until I say 'Dā'neho nigagā'is.' (So thus finished is the length of my story). Then you shall give me presents and I shall be satisfied."

The next day the boy hunted and killed a great many birds. These he made into soup and roasts. He skinned the birds and saved the skins, keeping them in a bag.

That evening the boy sat on the rock again and looked westward at the sinking sun. He wondered if his friend would speak again. While waiting he chipped some new arrow-points, and made them very small so that he could use them in a blow gun. Suddenly, as he worked, he heard the voice again. "Give me some tobacco to smoke," it said. Gaqka threw a pinch of tobacco over the cliff and the voice said, "Hau' nio," and commenced a story. Long into the night one wonderful tale after another flowed from the rock, until it called out, "So thus finished is the length of my story." Gaqka was sorry to have the stories ended but he gave the rock an awl made from a bird's leg and a pinch of tobacco.

The next day the boy hunted far to the east and there found a village. Nobody knew who he was but he soon found many friends. There were some hunters who offered to teach him how to kill big game, and these went with him to his own camp on the high rock. At night he allowed them to listen to the stories that came forth from the rock, but it would speak only when Gaqka was present. He therefore had many friends with whom to hunt.

Now after a time Gaqka made a new suit of clothing from deer skin and desired to obtain a decorated pouch. He, therefore, went to the village and found one house where there were two daughters living with an old mother. He asked that a pouch be made and the youngest daughter spoke up and said, "It is now finished. I have been waiting for you to come for it." So she gave him a handsome pouch.

Then the old mother spoke, saying, "I now perceive that my future son-in-law has passed through the door and is here." Soon thereafter, the younger woman brought Gaqka a basket of bread and said, "My mother greatly desires that you should marry me." Gaqka looked at the girl and was satisfied, and ate the bread. The older daughter was greatly displeased and frowned in an evil manner.

That night the bride said to her husband, "We must now go away. My older sister will kill you for she is jealous." So Gaqka arose and took his bride to his own lodge. Soon the rock spoke and began to relate wonder stories of things that happened in the old days. The bride was not surprised, but said, "This standing rock, indeed, is my grandfather. I will now present you with a pouch into which you must put a trophy<sup>1</sup> for every tale related."

All winter long the young couple stayed in the lodge on the great rock and heard the wonder tales of the old days. Gaqka's bag was full of stories and he knew all that of former times.

As springtime came the bride said, "We must now go north to your own people you shall become a great man." But Gaqka was sad and said, "Alas, in my own country you shall be called by an unpleasant name."

The bride only laughed, saying, "Nevertheless we shall go north."

Taking their pelts and birdskins, the young couple descended the cliff and seated selves in the canoe. "This is my canoe," said the bride. "I sent it through the air to you." The bride seated herself in the bow of the canoe and Gaqka in the stern. Grasp paddle he swept it through the water, but soon the canoe arose and went through the air. Meanwhile the bride was singing all kinds of songs, which Gaqka learned as he paddled.

When they reached the north, the bride said, "Now I shall remove your clothing take all the scars from your face and body." She then caused him to pass through low logs, and when Gaqka emerged from the other end he was dressed in the finest clothing and was a handsome man.

Together the two walked to the village where the people came out to see them. A while Gaqka said, "I am the boy whom you once were accustomed to call 'Gā' dā'neho' have now returned." That night the people of the village gathered around and listened to the tales he told, and he instructed them to give him small presents and tobacco would plunge his hand in his pouch and take out a trophy, saying, "Ho ho'! So I am another one!" and then looking at his trophy would relate an ancient tale.

Everybody now thought Gaqka a great man and listened to his stories. He was the first man to find out all about the adventures of the old-time people. That is why there are so many legends now.

## Cherokee

The Cherokee originally occupied an extensive area of the Southeast, including parts of present-day North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Virginia, Tennessee, and Kentucky. When they were encountered by the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto in the mid-sixteenth century, the Cherokee formed a large and complex nation made up of many smaller tribal units. Only rough estimates of the combined population of these units are possible, but it is thought that there were about 50,000 Cherokee in 1670. A series of smallpox epidemics introduced by European explorers decreased the Cherokee population by as much as 50 percent by the mid-1700s. The well-organized Cherokee were an agricultural people who lived in small villages with a central council house devoted to meetings and religious ceremonies. Although the social structure was matrilineal, women did not have as much power as they did in the tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy.

1. trophy: A token or an object used as an aid to the memory of an occasion or event.