

*MIXED-DESCENT PEOPLES AND
THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN WEST*

BORN OF LAKES AND PLAINS



*PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST
ANNE F. HYDE*



BOOK REVIEW

Born of Lakes and Plains

Mixed-descent Peoples and the Making of the American West

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The Wyandot (known also as Huron) north of Great Lakes in southeastern Canada and northeastern United States of America are said to have set up permanent communities in what is now referred to as the St Lawrence Valley 7,000 years before the present. While living foragers and as hunters of caribou in the spruce forests the changing landscape caused the Wyandot in about AD 800 to become cultivators of corn (mahiz in the language of the Taino in the Caribbean) squash and various beans. They eventually became a confederation of communities people numbering more than 30,000. They were cultivating 7,000 acres of land and controlling trade exchanging furs, meat, and corn. But how did the Wyandot become cultivators of mahiz when this enormously productive cereal was first domesticated 10,000 years before the present in the far southwest of what is now the state of México? And what is the significance of mahiz as a factor in the Wyandot and then the Anishinaabe, Cree and Haudenosaunee history and ultimately the history of French, Dutch and English history in the making of the United States and Canada?

Corn was traded north by the Yucatecs from the Yucatan peninsula in the Caribbean up what was later called the Mississippi River to the Great Lakes Region beginning in about AD 800. Between about AD 1100 and 1500 the Haudenosaunee had pushed north engaging battles and wars with the Seneca and other nations including the Oneidas, and Cayugas that had also moved north from the coasts. Along the way contests of strength in wars and need for foods, shelter and security drove these nations into the territories of the Wyandot, Anishinaabe, nations of the Nitassinan and the Cree. The Great Law of Peace negotiated by the Wyandot spiritual leader Dekanawida (who had lived among the Kanienkehaka – Mohawk) settling conflicts between the Seneca, Oneida, Cayuga, Mohawk, and Onondaga established the Five Nation confederacy. Dubbed the “Great Peace Maker” Dekanawida demonstrated the virtues of peace by breaking a single arrow in two pieces but took five arrows between his hands showing they would not break. Onondaga was reluctant to join in the confederation until they were given central authority in the new confederation.

Spiritual elder Tadodaho had to be convinced by spokesmen from the Seneca and Cayuga offered the Great White Roots for the Tree of Great Peace that would be planted among the Onondaga. The Onondaga would from that point on serve as the central authority from the village of Ganondagan—the Peace had been confirmed.

This was the world that the French and Dutch followed by the English and later the Americans entered in the 16th and 17th Centuries. This was a world defined by its own history and its own practices evolved over thousands of years.

Historian and professor of history at the University of Oklahoma and editor-in-chief of the Western Historical Quarterly Anne Hyde tells a portion of this story in her remarkable, revealing book *Born of Lakes and Plains*. Hyde writes easy to read initial chapters setting the cultural, political, and geographic stage in the 17th and 18th centuries. This period was when the Wyandot, Haudenosaunee, Cree, Weskarini, and the Dutch, French, and English contested valuable beaver, ermine, foxes, and rabbit furs in what was first called the Beaver Wars and wars that followed. The story she weaves centers on native women and their dominant social, cultural, and political influences in the vast geographic expanse of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley. Through their decisive role as “makers of life,” the women of virtually all the different peoples in the Great Lakes region before the Europeans arrived in the 16th century determined the organization of communities. They peopled the communities and managed the transition of the various nations to sustained and enriched nations in many instances. Hyde’s Prologue sets

the tone for her narration leading to stories of European men currying favor and benefits from native women to gain access to valued beaver skins for transport to the commercial markets in Europe. Hyde writes,

When warm bodies lay close in winter, they created new hearts beating by summer. Too often, only one body was willing, and the other was captive, raped, or abandoned. But sex has stunning generative power, and that power to make kin, blend villages, and build clans anchors this account of mixed-descent families and how war, trade, and love extended them across North America.

Born of Lakes and Plains explains the untold story of how long before the Europeans arrived, women were instrumental in forging alliances between nations, creating trade arrangements, and affecting outcomes to wars. And from this telling, Hyde explains how the same practice was applied in the commercial fur trade, diplomatic and warfare interactions between America’s nations and Europe’s commercial, military, and diplomatic relations.

Hyde writes the history of five “mixed-descent” families. She tells the stories of Otoe, Wyandot, Cree, Ojibwe (Anishinaabe), Cheyenne, Cayuse, Chinook women “blending” through sexual, social, and cultural connections with French, Dutch, English, Irish, German hunter, military, and fur trading men. She explains how these connections changed the trajectory of native peoples and European kingdoms and what would become Canada and the United States. Relying on letters, family account books, diaries, deeds,

financial accounts, memoirs, drawings, and the narratives of Jesuit records, Hyde explains how over the sweep of time from the 15th century to the early 20th century, the native women absorb many European men into native communities. She describes how they produced “mixed offspring.” The children would become productive social, economic, cultural, and political go-betweens for native and non-native societies. They became interlocutors (between nations and the French, Dutch, English, and later the American commercial, military, and diplomatic representatives seeking access to lands, wild and cultivated foods, medicines, and materials for building European-like villages and towns.

According to the US and Canadian census for 2022, more than 8 million people of American Indian and Canadian Indian descent identify with their heritage rooted in the original peoples

of North America. Most hid their identity until recently. Hiding their heritage and family relations by registering as “white” in the records of both the United States and Canada revelations about their existence is, for some readers, a surprise. Due to racial discrimination born from these countries’ bigotry and racial policies, native people and their relatives who are mixed-descent, according to Hyde’s reporting, could obtain educational, commercial, and political opportunities only if they were documented as other than “Indian.” The families of mixed descendants and their relatives living on and near traditional territories played and continue to play a critical role in the survival of North America’s Indian peoples today. They determined by many of their relatives serving as “go-betweens” the rise of the social, economic, political, and strategic existence of Canada and the United States.

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