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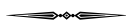
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He Comes Flying

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Editor's Note—Many thanks to our new columnist, Joseph Bruchac for his new column “ALN8BAL8MO: A NATIVE VOICE.” As a writer, performing storyteller, and musician, Joe has given voice to his Abenaki heritage and Native American heritage for over 30 years. We are very pleased to welcome him to *Voices*.



Have you ever heard of Peter Paul Wz8khalain? Probably not. But over the last several years, as I've become more familiar with his life story, the journeys he took, and the work he did during that complex span of some 90 years, I've come to consider him one of indigenous America's most fascinating early writers and publishers. He also was a true Native son of New York State, born in the Adirondacks on the Raquette River around 1800.

If he is so interesting, you may ask, why is he so little known? Three reasons for that. First is that his books, first appearing in print around 1830, were written entirely in the Abenaki language. Second is that he published from St. Francis (now known as Odanak), a Reserve (the Canadian equivalent of a reservation) in Quebec. Third is that few copies of his published books survived—for reasons I'll explain later in this story.

Wz8khalain. That name of his, one of the many names he was known by—including Peter Masta, Pial Pol, and Pierre Paul Osunkherhine—means either “The Birds are Flying” or “He Who Comes by Flying” in the Abenaki language he so loved. And fly he did, first to Moor's Indian School at Dartmouth College, which he attended from 1822 to 1829.

An unusual accomplishment for a Native American in the early 19th century, but not a unique one. Both Harvard and Dartmouth were founded with “Indian Education” as central missions. The money to start Dartmouth, in fact, came from the efforts of Samson Occom, a Mohegan Christian minister who raised over 12,000 pounds to fund an Indian school during his 1766–1767 preaching tour of England.

Though we have no birth certificate or papers specifying his percentage of Indian blood to identify Peter Paul as an Abenaki Indian, it's a good bet that he was, based on the fact that there were—and still are—many Abenaki families in the Adirondacks, a place where Algonquin and Iroquois people have lived and hunted for countless generations. (Such back and forth travel between Canada and the northern regions of New York and New England is a long established pattern—even today, despite border restrictions that treaties say were never supposed to apply to the first Americans.)

Peter Paul went from Dartmouth to the St. Francis Reserve in 1829. There he established a Protestant church and an English language school and began his publishing. He was accepted at St. Francis, though not by everyone, as an integral part of the Abenaki community.

The problem he faced was that the first Christian missionaries who had come to St. Francis in the 17th century were Catholic. It's hard for some people today to understand just how wide the gulf between Catholics and Protestants was in Canada during the 19th and much of the 20th century. Close to outright warfare. That Wz8khalain was introducing Protestantism to St. Francis made him the enemy of the “true faith.” So it was that the Catholic priest made a point to go about St. Francis obtaining every copy he could of the three books Peter Paul published in editions of about 500 each—to burn them.

Despite that, a few copies of Peter Paul's books survived. So, too, did that divide between Catholics and Protestants—reflected in the two surviving main clan divisions of Bear and Turtle. My old friend Maurice Dennis/Mdawelasis, who worked for years at the Enchanted Forest in Old Forge, New York, before returning to spend his last years on his home reserve, explained it to me: “Up at Odanak,” he said, “Turtles remain Catholics, and the Bears, Protestant.”

Peter Paul did not remain at St. Francis,

despite the fact that he married the daughter of the head chief Simon Obomsawin. Perhaps, the animosity was too much for him. For whatever reasons, he eventually left the reserve, going with his family to Port Huron, Michigan, sometime between 1858 and 1861. There he died in 1890. I've found no record that indicates he continued writing or publishing—though I hope that more work of his remains out there and may still turn up some day.

What was it that he wrote and published in Abenaki? Three books: *Kimzowi Awighigan*, *The Ten Commandments*, and *The Gospel of Mark*. Why do I consider his publishing so worthy of note? My answer is that—like the man himself—the books he wrote and published are complex, fascinating, and reflective of an important period in American Indian life, as well as supportive of a deeply endangered indigenous language.

For a student of our language, someone trying to learn how to speak it fully and well, his books contain a wealth of information. Although it was published in Abenaki alone, *The Gospel of Mark* is a translation from English into Abenaki. Thus, we have a well-known text to use as comparison. So, too, his *The Ten Commandments*.

But *Kimzowi Awighigan* is of even greater interest. Designed as a primer for Abenakis themselves, containing traditional stories and some religious instruction, it provides us with a glimpse into the worldview of Abenakis at a time when few authors—Native or non-Native—were paying much attention to American Indian folklore and cultures. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's *Algic Researches* (1839) is one of the rare examples of anyone in that period taking Native stories seriously. Lewis Henry Morgan's *League of the Iroquois* would not be published until 1851.

Until very recently, none of Peter Paul's work was translated into English. But that is changing. Two years ago, my son Jesse Bruchac published a trilingual edition in English, French, and Abenaki of

Ol8jmon8gan Wji Malk/ The Gospel of Mark (Bowman Books, 2011).

And now Jesse and Elie Joubert²—an Abenaki elder who has devoted much of his life to the teaching and preservation of his beloved language—are working through a translation of *Kimzowi Anighigan*. They are turning up some treasures as they do so. For example, there is an almost identical telling of one of the stories, about Partridge and Fox, that appears as “Rooster and Fox” in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States*.³ And Peter Paul’s tale of the turtle captured by his enemies who convinces them the only way to kill him is to drown him was collected as a Cherokee story decades later and parallels the familiar African American story of Bre’r Rabbit and the briar patch.

I have no doubt that when Elie and Jesse finish that translation of *Kimzowi Anighigan* that it will show just how important a

pioneering writer and publisher Peter Paul was. His contributions—like our Abenaki language—will live on.

Peter Paul Wz8khalain. I hope that from now on you may remember his name. ▼

Endnotes

¹ In writing the Abenaki language, the number 8 is used to stand for a sound like that of the “un” in Uncle. Aln8ba means “human being.” Wilal8 means “tongue” or “voice.”

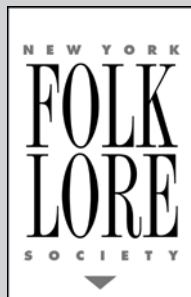
² Elie Joubert’s own initial book in English and Abenaki, *The First Council Fire* (Bowman Books, 2012), is just one example of the amazing work he has done and continues to do.)

³ Collected by Hurston in 1927, and eventually published in 2001 as *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-tales from the Gulf States* (Harper-Collins).

Joseph Bruchac is a writer, musician, and traditional Native storyteller whose work often reflects his American Indian (Abenaki) ancestry and the Adirondack Region of northern New



York, where he lives in the house he was raised in by his grandparents. Author of over 120 books for young readers and adults, including the award-winning volume, *OUR STORIES REMEMBER, American Indian History, Culture and Values through Storytelling*. In addition to performing traditional and original Native American music, often with his son Jesse, his experiences include running a college program in a maximum security prison, three years of teaching in West Africa, and four decades of studying and teaching martial arts.



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SNOWFLAKES IN THE GALLERY

Thank you to all those who contributed to our snowflake wall. The snowflakes were displayed at the NYFS Gallery main window throughout December 2013:

Lynn and John Aber, University of New Hampshire
Karen Park Canning
Linda Sweet, Mayor’s Office, Schenectady, New York
Mayor’s Office, Schenectady, New York
Kathryn McCormick
Libby Tucker

And a special thank you for the dinosaur pencil drawing.

Thank you to Trader Joe’s, 79 Wolf Road, Albany, New York for donating a mystery gift basket to benefit the New York Folklore Society. Our holiday raffle winner received a \$75.00 Trader Joe’s gift certificate.



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