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J. N. B. Hewitt: A Voice from the Sixth Nation

BY JOSEPH BRUCHAC

Until their forced exodus from the south, the Tuscarora Nation was not part of the great Iroquois Confederacy. Only upon their arrival in 1722, were the Tuscarora allowed to locate among the Oneidas and given a space by the great council fire, as the Sixth Nation of the Haudenosaunee. Forced to relocate again after the American Revolution, they were granted land from the Seneca Nation in 1803. That western New York Tuscarora reservation, diminished when, in 1959, hundreds of acres were seized by New York State for a reservoir, still remains in what is now Niagara County.

The person who is the focus of this profile, John Napoleon Brinton Hewitt, while not a creative writer per se, did much to preserve the language and oral traditions of the Tuscarora and other Iroquois nations.

Born in 1859, on the Tuscarora Nation on the right bank of the Niagara River, Hewitt's ethnic background was mixed—like many Iroquois people of his day. Since descent among the people of the Six Nations has traditionally been reckoned maternally, it's not uncommon even today for Iroquois people to say they are full-blood Iroquois, as long as their line of maternal descent is unbroken.

Hewitt's father, David Brainard Hewitt, was of English and Scottish descent. When the young David Hewitt's parents died, he was adopted by a Tuscarora family and raised within their community. The woman David Hewitt married, Harriet Printup—J. N. B. Hewitt's mother—was an enrolled member of the Tuscarora Nation. Thus, J. N. B. Hewitt was Iroquois by birth.

Although both his parents spoke Tuscarora fluently, the language of their home was reportedly English, and he was homeschooled in English til the age of 11. Then the young John Hewitt began attending the reservation school. There, though instruction was in English, all his classmates spoke Tuscarora. He loved the sounds and rhythms of Tuscarora and his own fluency was established during those school years.

By the time Hewitt was in his early 20s, despite the lack of formal training beyond elementary school, he was one of the

most educated people in the Tuscarora community.

At this point, Hewitt was “discovered” by none other than Erminie A. Smith, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology. Called the “first woman field ethnographer,” Smith was active throughout her career (which ended too soon with her death at 50) in collecting Iroquois legends and publishing works on the Iroquois people. In 1880, she engaged Hewitt as her field assistant in putting together a Tuscarora dictionary. He quickly learned the mechanics of phonetic transcription, becoming so adept that when Smith died in June 1886, Hewitt was hired by John Wesley Powell, the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) head, to complete the dictionary (Rudes and Crouse 1987, xi).

Until his own passing in 1937, J. N. B. Hewitt was employed by the US government for 51 years, as a professional ethnologist. Although the number of publications, credited to Hewitt, is relatively small, the publications are deeply impressive for their close attention to accuracy and detail, reflecting Hewitt's lifelong commitment to collecting material related to the Iroquois. Quiet, studious, and unassuming, every year he spent as much time as possible in the communities of the Tuscarora, Seneca, Onondaga, and Mohawk nations, collecting texts that he would then pore over and analyze.

Hewitt's quiet intensity, never calling attention to himself, always burying his own identity in accurately recording languages and traditions that might otherwise not be preserved, may explain why he remains little known to this day. Some even suggested (with no awareness, it seems, of their racist assumptions) that Hewitt's small number of publications reflected a sort of Indian laziness on his part.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. According to Blair Rudes (and other more careful commentators), “a major reason why Hewitt did not publish more” was that he “was meticulous to a fault.” His many preserved manuscripts show neatly and legibly writing, with almost no errors. (Rudes and Crouse 1987, xi)

Further, much of Hewitt's work remained unpublished after his death, held in the BAE archives until the demise of that office, at which point the manuscripts migrated to the National Anthropological Archives. It's a tribute to how well he did his recording that, in 1987, the National Museums of Canada saw fit to bring out a 652-page, two-volume publication of his previously unpublished manuscripts of Tuscarora language and stories entitled *The Tuscarora Legacy of J. N. B. Hewitt*, edited by Blair A. Rudes and Dorothy Crouse.

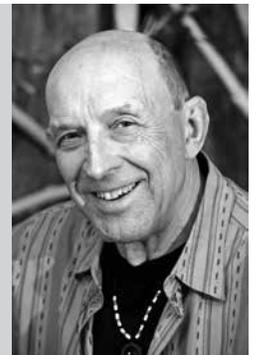
Perhaps, one day, a book may be written about this elusive, brilliant, largely self-educated man who was a true voice for his people. I would love to read it. Meanwhile, as probably Hewitt would have wanted it, we have his published work to treasure, especially the massive volume *Seneca Fiction, Legends and Myths*. Published in 1918, by the Bureau of American Ethnology, collected by Jeremiah Curtin and Hewitt, and edited by Hewitt himself, its 819 pages should be required reading for anyone interested in the traditional stories of the Haudenosaunee. ▼

Reference:

Rudes, Blair A., and Dorothy Crouse, eds. 1987. *The Tuscarora Legacy of J. N. B. Hewitt*. Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No 108. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada.

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