

Lumen

Selected Proceedings from the Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies
Travaux choisis de la Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle

LUMEN

Swift's Very Knowing American

Jay MacPherson

Volume 13, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1012526ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012526ar>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude
du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

1209-3696 (print)

1927-8284 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

MacPherson, J. (1994). Swift's Very Knowing American. *Lumen*, 13, 109–116.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1012526ar>

9. Swift's Very Knowing American

A fifth of the way into *A Modest Proposal* (1729), Swift says:

I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be lyable to the least Objection.

I have been assured by a very knowing *American* of my acquaintance in *London*, that a young healthy Child well Nursed is at a year Old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome Food, whether *Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boyled*, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a *Fricasie, or Ragoust*.

The last is the hinge sentence of the essay, announcing what the proposal is all about: the footnote in Tillotson's *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* comments a bit superciliously, '**American**: a prototype of barbarism to many British at this time.'

The annotator is reading 'American' as it is used after the late eighteenth century, meaning 'white North American, European-descended' — whereas earlier it normally meant 'indigenous native of the Americas,' as in Milton's use, 'Such of late/Columbus found th' American so girt/With featherd Cincture, naked else and wilde/Among the Trees on lles and woodie Shores' (*Paradise Lost* 9. 1115-18), or the reference in the *Spectator's* story of Inkle and Yarico to the 'wild Graces of the naked American' (Steele, *Spectator* 11, 13. iii. 1711).

'Americans' in the old sense in London in Swift's time weren't far to seek: the necessary information has been gathered by Richmond P. Bond in a very hardworking, sprightly little book, *Queen Anne's American Kings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), which makes almost all the essential historical and literary connections with the visit of four Indian sachems to Queen Anne in 1710. Further, in 1977 the Public Archives in Ottawa acquired what appear to be the four full-figure portraits by John Verelst that Queen Anne had painted on the occasion, and in 1985 mounted an exhibition around them and published, with assistance from Bond, a handsome catalogue titled *The Four Indian Kings*,¹ exploring the iconography of the visit.

Accordingly, this paper by no means ploughs virgin ground; but with all the connections he makes Bond omits that with the *Modest Proposal*,

so that a blank remains to be filled in regarding this familiar and oft-taught text. The summary that follows depends chiefly on Bond.

'Queen Anne's American kings' were four Iroquois sachems brought over from the Mohawk Valley near Albany in the province of New York as part of the strategy of colonial leaders who wanted Britain to move more strongly than heretofore against the French in Canada: Britain was to be assured of the desire of the Five Nations to support her interests, and the Indians were to be impressed with the splendour of London and the court and with the strength of British troops and ships. The Iroquois were in the uncomfortable position of buffer between the British of New York and the French with their Indian allies, who cut them off from old hunting and trading routes, launched raiding and privateering parties, and infiltrated Jesuit missionaries with a gospel largely identical with French state policy (reports bear out Robert Rogers's later satiric portrayal in his play *Ponteach*, 1766). Largely to keep the Iroquois from wavering, an attack was planned in 1709 against Quebec and Montreal: men were gathered, money and supplies and transport raised, and a British fleet was promised at Boston for mid-May — with great difficulty men and equipment were held in readiness over the summer, till on October 11 arrived the news that the fleet had been sent to Portugal instead. The visit of the sachems the next year, accompanied by Colonel Peter Schuyler the mayor of Albany, his soldier cousin Abraham who served as interpreter, Francis Nicholson the military commandant of Upper New York, and another officer, was designed to impress Queen and Council with North American realities. The chiefs' address to Queen Anne pressed for the building of forts and the complete destruction of New France. Nicholson brought back a small group of English ships and soldiers: not enough to attack Montreal and Quebec, but they sailed in September of the same year, 1710, and succeeded in taking Acadia from the French — further victories had to wait till 1759. Meantime the forts built at the chiefs' request gave security less to the Mohawks than to the Dutch and Palatine settlers who started crowding onto their lands.

Among the Five Nations² the leading tribe, and the one most consistently allied to British interests, were the Mohawks. They made a treaty with the Dutch settlers of New Netherland in 1644, and remade it with the English when they acquired the territory in 1664; thenceforward on their side it was never broken. Three of the four chiefs who came to London were Mohawks. Te Ye Neen Ho Ga Prow, called Hendrick, was a notable figure all his life, destined to visit England again about 1740, and to die fighting alongside Sir William Johnson against the French near Lake Champlain in 1755. As evidently the natural leader of the group, Hendrick was sometimes dubbed the Emperor. With him was a relative, Oh Nee Yeath Ton No Prow, called John; then Elow Oh Kaom, or

Nicholas, evidently not a Mohawk unless by adoption; and Sa Ga Yean Qua Prah Ton, called Brant — he died shortly after reaching home, but was the grandfather of Joseph Brant (whose mother incidentally was a niece of Hendrick). When Joseph Brant brought the New York Mohawks north after the American Revolution, they carried with them part of Queen Anne's gift to the four chiefs of church silver; it is preserved in the Mohawk Chapel on the Six Nations reserve near Brantford, Ontario.

The Indian Kings, so called, made a great stir in London: it seems to have been deliberate policy, perhaps to stir up sympathy for forthcoming military action, to have them widely seen. During their stay in town from April 19 to May 3, they lodged in Covent Garden, by coincidence at The Two Crowns and Cushions, King Street; their landlord was Thomas Arne, upholsterer, father of an infant of the same name. Their audience with the Queen at St James's was widely reported, with their speech requesting a decisive effort against the French. One account says they offered 'to run down a Buck or Stag' in any of her parks to amuse her (another group, eleven Osages from Louisiana, were to perform this feat in 1730 in the Bois de Boulogne). Following her gracious reception, they were entertained in several noble houses, by New York merchants and William Penn, by the Bishop of London, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the boys of Christ's Hospital — appeared before the Commission for Trade and Plantations and the Board of the recently-formed Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts — attended a military review, visited Greenwich, Leadenhall Market and the Tower of London, Windsor and Hampton Court, Bedlam and Gresham's College, and attended a bear-fight at Hockley-in-the-Hole and a special performance at the Haymarket of *Macbeth*, where the mob insisted they be seated on chairs on the stage.

A contemporary unsigned pamphlet, *The Four Kings of Canada*, reports: 'they are well form'd... their Habits are robust, and their Limbs muscular and well shap'd; they are of brown Complexions, their Hair black and long, their Visages are very awful and majestick, and their Features regular enough, though something of the austere and sullen.' All but Hendrick were tattooed, Brant very impressively so: it goes on, 'the Marks with which they disfigure their Faces, do not seem to carry so much Terror as Regard with them.' The same source describes as their everyday London dress the costumes they wore at court and for the Verelst portraits, actually supplied by a playhouse tailor. These consisted of black tunics, breeches (bagged at the knees from their habitual squatting), and stockings, with turban-like caps and scarlet mantles; their 'Yellow Slippers' may well have been the moccasins shown in the paintings. Clearly they were striking figures, and crowds pressed after them all day long.

During all of this seeing and being seen, the four comported themselves with great decency; they enjoyed 'a Glass of Brandy or strong Liquors' when offered, and seemed to prefer English pale ales to 'the best French Wines'; but the entire record during and after their visit suggests they maintained a dignity consistent with their kingly character — 'Men of good Presence,' with 'excellent Sense, and a quick Apprehension.'

Swift, who was as avid as any of the London crowd to see any curiosity, was in Ireland during their visit, but the *Dublin Intelligence* carried full reports. In April 1711 Addison published as *Spectator* 50 a satiric description of London life purporting to be notes left behind by one of the kings — an early example of the guileless stranger's report; Swift, who had then been six months in London, wrote to Stella that it 'was made of a noble hint I gave [Steele] long ago for his *Tatlers*, about an Indian supposed to write his travels into England. I repent he ever had it. I intended to have written a book on that subject. I believe he has spent it all in one paper, and all the under-hints there are mine too.' Swift was a keen reader of voyages; in 1704, shortly after Dampier's voyage to Australia, he had listed in *A Tale of a Tub* among forthcoming further books by its author, 'A Voyage into England, by a Person of Quality in Terra Australis incognita, translated from the Original' — a promise realized most nearly in Addison's essay and in *Gulliver*.³

Swift's 'knowing American' is first of all an objective informant whose statements can be trusted. He's acquainted with the basic ways of cooking meat, but it's the Modest Proposer who suggests that infants' flesh would be equally good in fancier dishes. A couplet of 1764 supplied by the *OED* to illustrate 'ragout' runs:

Borrows fine shapes, and titles new,
Of fricassee and rich ragoût.

Fielding uses 'ragout' with the same implication of decadent luxury in *Tom Jones*, 1749 (I.1).

The Indian kings, after all, were renowned for their 'naked Simplicity and uncultivated Innocence' (Elkanah Settle); *The Four Kings of Canada* puts the popular view that 'that Sort of People... tho' unpolish'd by Art and Letters, have a large Share of good Sense and natural Reason,' and links their robust health to the simplicity of their diet. But they were also believed to be cannibals; while not a word of this was mentioned, or seems to have occurred to anyone, during the visit, less than two years later a dark counter-image to natural innocence and reason came into lurid prominence in the activities of a gang of drunken rowdies calling

themselves the Mohocks, who for a few months ran riot in the city streets at night. Throughout the visit the four were always 'the Indian kings,' with Hendrick sometimes 'the Emperor'; but shortly after they left London Steele in *Tatler* 171 (May 10) titled Hendrick 'the Emperor of the Mohocks'. In *Spectator* 324 (12 March 1712) he accepted from a correspondent, 'Philanthropos,' an account of the Mohock gang either fanciful or strangely garbled⁴ that uses the term again: Philanthropos suggests a proposed 'general History of Clubs' should include

a Nocturnal Fraternity, under the Title of The Mohock Club, a Name borrowed it seems from a sort of Cannibals in India, who subsist by Plundering and Devouring all the Nations about them. The President is stiled Emperor of the Mohocks.... An outrageous Ambition of doing all possible Hurt to their Fellow-Creatures, is the great Cement of their Assembly.

John Gay borrowed from this essay for his first play, a short farce titled *The Mohocks*: published 10 April 1712, just as the Mohock scare was passing, it describes how a gang of swaggerers capture a constable and the watch, forcibly change clothes with them, and carry them all before the justices as captured Mohocks. The real Mohocks have an Emperor, who holds ritualistic state: an alleged victim claims to have seen 'all the Ground covered with Noses — as thick as 'tis with Hail-stones after a Storm,' and a newly-received candidate is christened Cannibal. In the same year Gay probably wrote a quasi-Biblical 'Wonderful Prophecy,' attributed at different times also to Pope or to Swift, making play with Mohocks as among the destructive forces to afflict the earth in the last days. He returned briefly to the topic in *Trivia*, his account of the hazards of the London streets:

Who has not heard the Scowrer's midnight fame?

Who has not trembled at the Mohock's name? (3.325-6)

Steele's correspondent was set right very shortly (15.iii) by Defoe in his *Review*:

With Submission to the Ingenious Spectator, I must dissent from his Opinion, That the Mohocks, from whence these People are Sirnam'd, are a People of India, tho' the End of the Argument is the same; the Mohock, or Mohawks, are, or rather were, for they are Extinct now, or very near it, a small Nation of Savages in the Woods, on the back of our two Colonies of New-England and New York, the same from whence our four pretended Indian Kings came lately of their own Fools Errand; they were always esteem'd as the most Desperate, and most Cruel of the Natives of North-America....

There is still not a word about cannibalism, here or in the rest of the Indian Kings/Mohocks literature, except for Gay's reference three months later. However, reports of it aren't lacking: it seems to have been the practice both of the Hurons and of the Iroquois, taking place regularly (at least since the early seventeenth century) after raids or battles, and perhaps intensified in hard winters. The Jesuits reported such actions by the Iroquois, while Radisson's journal describes how he with his Huron companions committed one: 'they filled their bellies with the flesh of their ennemyes, we broiled some of it and kettles full of the rest.... At the brake of day we cooked what could accommodate us, and flung the rest away.'⁵ Part One of Cadwallader Colden's *History of the Five Indian Nations*, published two years before the *Modest Proposal*, describes how the Marquis de Denonville, who functioned as Governor of Canada between Frontenac's two appointments, set out to attack the chief village of the Senecas, on the south shore of Lake Ontario, but found the Senecas had burned it and withdrawn — 'Two Old Men only were found in the Castle, who were cut into Pieces and boyled to make Soop for the French Allies,' namely the Hurons. Part Two, not published till 1747, reports from French published sources a couple of episodes when Frontenac himself ordered prisoners to be tortured and burned in order to feast his allies; and from the mouth of the Mohawks' friend Peter Schuyler, how on a campaign in a hard February about 1692, when the retreating French were forced to eat their shoes, he was 'invited to eat broth with them... which he did, till they, putting the Ladle into the Kettle to take out more, brought out a French Man's Hand, which put an End to his Appetite.' The latest known report of Iroquois cannibalism concerns the year 1756.

'Mohawk' evidently means 'man-eater.' Deganawida, the Iroquois Lord of Life who introduced the Great Law of the Five Nations, cured Hiawatha of cannibalism before making him his assistant, and the Great Law forbids the practice: however, it seems that what's forbidden is endophagy, or eating the neighbours. A Dutch report of 1651 quotes a prayer of propitiation to their deity Aireskuoni: 'We know that we have offended against thee, inasmuch as we have not killed and eaten our captive enemies' — they promise to mend their ways.

While North American Indians to the best of my knowledge ate only full-grown men, Cortés's men in Aztec territory once came on a store of corn and roasted children. The word 'cannibalism' comes from a Latinized form of 'Caribs,' a tribe living in Venezuela, Guiana, Brazil, and some Caribbean islands: Crusoe's Friday is a Carib, converted from the practice after almost becoming its victim. When Columbus on his first voyage discovered Hispaniola (Haiti), its peaceable inhabitants at first took him and his men for the dreaded cannibals: 'when soeuer they take

any of them vnder the age of .xiiij. yeares, they vse to gelde them, and francke them [= enclose and feed up] vntyll they be very fat, as we are wont to doe with capons or hennes: and as for suche as drawe towarde. xx. yeare olde, to kyl them forthwith and pull out theyr guttes, and eat the same freshe and newe, wyth other extreme partes of the bodye, poudering the residue with salte, or keping it in a certayne pickle as we do iegottes or sausages [these words are synonyms]. Yet eate they not the women, but reserue them to encrease, as we doe hennes to lay egges.' This suggestive passage was translated in 1553⁶ from Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia Universalis*, 1544, a major work of Renaissance scholarship (with more than 120 collaborators) whose Latin, German, and French editions to 1628 numbered at least fifteen: a work, then, quite conceivably known to Swift.

Swift in *A Modest Proposal* leads his reader very cunningly into his design, glazing it over with a marvellous urbanity. In this fantasy of comparing notes with a visiting American, he almost alone of the authors I've looked at — the exception is Lahontan — sets the man from the woods on the level of an acquaintance, an equal; but long before we reach the end of the essay, the respect in which the Proposer, his acquaintance and we are all on a level stares us in the face.

JAY MACPHERSON
Victoria College
University of Toronto

Notes

- 1 John G. Garratt, *The Four Indians/Les quatre rois indiens* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1985).
- 2 The first indication that the confederacy formed about 1570 of the blood-related tribes of the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas now included the Tuscaroras as a sixth occurs in the sachems' address to the Queen; cf. the engraving by Bernard Lens the Elder of his son's composite portrait, where Hendrick's caption calls him 'Emperour of the six Nations' (*Four Indian Kings* 133).
- 3 Swift's 'Fragment' titled *A Discourse concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, addressed to 'a Friend' in New-Holland (Australia), first appeared in the 1704 *Tale of a Tub* volume. Its references to 'the Iroquois Virtuosi' and 'the Literati of Topinambou' (a tribe in Brazil) derive from an epigram by Boileau that, featuring in the French 'quarrel of the ancients and the moderns,' was included in Sir William Temple's *Defence of the Essay upon Antient and Modern Learning* published by Swift in 1701 (see note in *The Tale of a Tub*, ed. A.C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith, 1942); Swift has substituted the name of England's allies for Boileau's Hurons.

- 4 Hendrick's title 'Emperour of the Six Nations' (n. 2 above) reappears under his bust-portrait engraving by John Faber; the reversed copy by P. Schenck in Amsterdam, still 1710, adds, 'One of the four kings of India... frayning [=requesting] assistance against ye French in America...' (*Four Indian Kings* 118, 122).
- 5 Pierre Radisson's account of his fourth (Lake Superior) voyage, published in *Canadian Exploration Literature in English: An Anthology*, ed. Germaine Warkentin (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993), 7.
- 6 Richard Eden, *A Treatyse of the newe India, and other new founde lands and Ilandes... after the descripcion of Sebastian Munster in his boke of universall Cosmographie* [book 5]. Reprinted by Edward Arber in *The First Three English Books on America, [?1511]-1555 A.D. Being chiefly Translations, Compilations, etc., by Richard Eden* (Birmingham, 1885), 29.