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Balancing Two Worlds: Jean-Baptiste Assignack and the Odawa Nation, 1768-1866

By Cecil King

Saskatoon: the author, 2013, 329 pp. \$40.00 paperback + shipping. ISBN 978-0-99199-950-7 (Order from the author: cathyandcecil@sasktel.net)

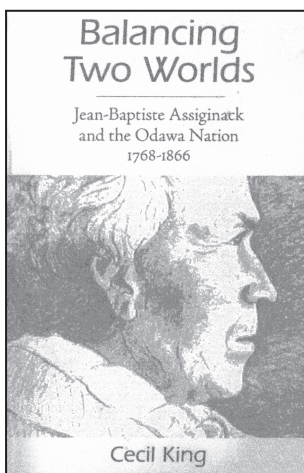
Jean-Baptiste Assignack was an important member of the Odawa (or Ottawa) nation who witnessed the tremendous transformations of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they affected the First Nations of the upper Great Lakes. His long life spanned the decades when the Odawak (or Odawas) moved from a state of independence at the time of his birth in the 1760s to the limitations of the reserve system when he passed away in the 1860s. Assignack (one of a number of individuals also known as “Blackbird”) came into the world in the Arbre Croche region towards the northern end of Lake Michigan, on its east side within today’s state of Michigan. He fought in the War of 1812 as an ally of Great Britain, apparently in the upper lakes region, on the upper Mississippi, and along the Niagara River. After the return of peace, he worked as an interpreter, fulfilled important roles in Native-newcomer relations, and promoted Roman Catholicism among indigenous peoples, particularly at Arbre Croche, Penetanguishene, Coldwater, and on Manitoulin Island. Although he suffered numerous disappointments when trusting Euro-Americans to address indigenous concerns with integrity, one of Assignack’s final actions was to support the Province of Canada’s desire to

open much of Manitoulin Island for Euro-American settlement in the land surrender of 1862. That effort late in his life tarnished his name in the minds of a good number of people from the island’s aboriginal inhabitants at the time and among their descendants afterwards. Jean-Baptiste Assignack passed away in 1866 at Manitowaning and was buried at Wikwemikong.

Sixty-six years later, Cecil King was born in his grandparent’s home into an Odawa family on Manitoulin’s Wikwemikong Peninsula. He spent his formative years on the island and pursued a career in education as an adult, which, among other accomplishments, included promoting Native-led education for First Nations people, earning a PhD, becoming director of

the Aboriginal Teacher Education Program at Queen’s University, and serving as dean of the Saskatoon campus of the First Nations University of Canada. Dr. King grew up hearing stories about Jean-Baptiste Assignack, wanted to learn more, and therefore began a multi-year research project on his subject. It culminated in the publication of *Balancing Two Worlds*, centred on understanding the life and times of Assignack from a perspective anchored deeply in Odawa traditions and perspectives.

Taking on a century’s worth of complex history is a daunting task, and the strains of



doing so show up in this self-published book (which would have benefited from professional copyediting and inclusion of an index). Consequently, it is not surprising that there are more factual errors, interpretive weaknesses, and other glitches than inevitably afflict most extended works, and which inhibit use of the book as a core text (but which have nothing to do with the Odawa-centred nature of the work.) Nevertheless, Cecil King's narrative offers general readers and scholars, both within and beyond the First Nations world, riches that transforms his effort into something that demands our attention and rewards our engagement with the text. Of most obvious value, of course, is that it presents a detailed biography of an important figure who has not been explored adequately by historians before. Beyond that, the book examines this story through a combination of secondary studies, archival documents, and Odawa and other indigenous traditions. In many ways, this combination, especially given the unusually extensive use of Native material (even though the endnotes are dominated by Euro-American sources), demonstrates the possibilities that await scholars should they embrace aboriginal knowledge with more vigour than they generally have done in the past, even among those who are sensitive to, and respectful of, indigenous views. (A challenge, of course, for non-Native scholars concerned to investigate the shared history between First Nations and the rest of the world lies in gaining access to aboriginal knowledge without intruding improperly into a community's right to privacy or undermining its concern to protect the use of particular information.)

The Native base upon which Dr. King builds his narrative makes it fascinating on numerous levels. On one, for instance, it places Assiginack's life squarely within the thought patterns, traditions, and values of the Odawa people, and thus helps make

better sense of his and their actions in dealing with the difficulties they faced. His literary choices, including the extensive use of "our" and "we" to describe the behaviour of his ancestors, underscores the distinctive Odawa, and even personal, voice of the story. Another example of the book's indigenous persona lies in Dr. King's decision to use Native proper nouns extensively, which helps readers conceptualize how different the perspectives of the First Nations looking southeast in the Great Lakes region were from those of Euro-Americans looking northwest, especially around Lakes Huron and Michigan. (The book includes a glossary to enable readers to match these terms with those in common use.) Thus, the Americans appear as *Kitchimokomanuk*, or "Big Knives," and the War of 1812 as *Gee meegaading kitchi gindaaswan a pee*, or "the War of the big numbers" – the latter

conveying concepts that speak to the distinctions between the perceptions of the dominant societies and the numerically small Odawa and other aboriginal nations of the upper lakes. In summarizing his book, the author points out that Jean-Baptiste Assiginack's story is a universal one, of the "dilemma of individuals from traditional societies who must confront the consuming force of a persistent and ruthless society overwhelming their own" (p. 256). That theme is the primary concern of the book, and of course is a story well worth understanding. One would hope that this book's self-published character and restricted purchasing opportunities ultimately will not prevent Cecil King's work from being read widely by people interested in First Nations history and the record of Natives and newcomer interactions across the upper Great Lakes and adjacent regions.

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