

Glimpses of Oneida Life by Karin Michelson, Norma Kennedy, and Mercy Doxtator, eds.

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Book Reviews

Spring 2017

Glimpses of Oneida Life

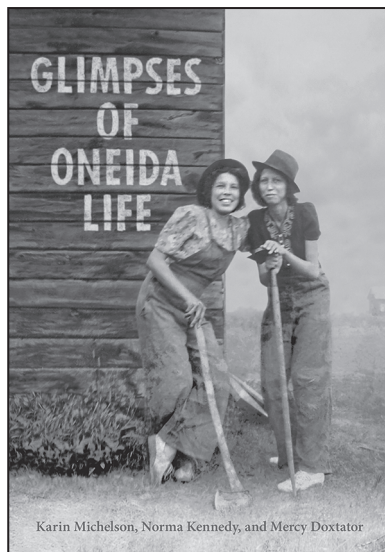
by Karin Michelson, Norma Kennedy, and Mercy Doxtator, eds.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. 472 pages. \$100 cloth, \$49.95 paper, \$49.95 ebook. ISBN 9781442650305 (cloth), ISBN 9781442628335 (paper), ISBN 9781442622760 (ebook).

Centered in the territory of the Oneida Nation of the Thames Settlement, a community of approximately 2,100 people located thirty minutes from today's London, Ontario, *Glimpses of Oneida Life* is a detailed, intimate, and profoundly human portrait of the memories, experiences and observations of community life as both lived and remembered by its residents. Edited and written by Karin Michelson, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Buffalo, Norma Kennedy, teacher and master Oneida speaker at the Oneida Language and Cultural Centre, and Mercy Doxtator, teacher and founder of the Centre, the volume consists of fifty-two stories, as told from the perspectives of fourteen Oneida speakers. Collected over a period that ranged

from the early 1980s to the present, the stories provide readers with an incredibly rich introduction into the lives of a people, place, and time. More than that, however, the volume also stand as a welcome testament to the benefits of long-term, collaborative, and relationship-driven research.

Organized into three sections—consisting of an introduction, the stories themselves, and a final section on grammar—the work is both study in the Oneida language, and a social history of a people navigating, with greater frequency, a non-Indigenous world and economy—the language of which they often either did not speak, or only spoke very little. While often revealing of the trials and tribulations of those involved, the stories—told decades af-



terwards—are done so with humour and compassion, providing readers with new insight into the dynamics of family and home, the tenor of cross-cultural encounters, as well as the ethics and attributes of a community working its way through post-war southern Ontario. “A Man Tells Off His Boss,” a short but humorous story of an Oneida man with limited command of English who finally confronts an abusive employer, recalls the efforts of Oneida labourers to secure equal standing with their white neighbours, is one such example. Notable also, are the series of longer stories included in the sub-section “Growing Up Working” whose details of Oneida travel, and migration is rich in ethnographic detail and descriptions of Oneida conceptions of work, family, and community.

However, while themes of work and travel are well represented in the stories assembled here, the text is by no means reducible to them. Included also are stories whose topics range from explorations of Oneida customs, to encounters with the supernatural, pranks and mishaps, as well as the more personalized reflections of events specific to individuals. Learners of Oneida will also welcome the presentation of the stories, each of which are told and recorded first in Oneida, but which also include an interlinear, word-by-word translation, as well as a more conversational English translation. Additional grammatical information, which might be of interest to linguists as well as language learners may also be gleaned from the book’s third section which details the patterns and structures in the stories themselves.

Aside from its utility as a learning aide for language learners, or its value as community micro-history, what makes this text unique is its scope. In contrast to other works in this genre, *Glimpses of Oneida Life* is concerned less to ‘preserve’ stories of life

as it was, or remembered, by the speakers in its pages, so much as it is to document a community in *motion*. This is particularly evident in the way the stories foreground community engagement with modernity, the wage economy and the welfare state, but also the terrain on which these engagements occurred. Here, Oneida tradition and culture stands not juxtaposed with the experience of modernity, but as the guide, prism or more simply, the ground through and by which experiences, events, and lessons were ascertained, interpreted, and acted upon. And yet, in contrast to much of recent Indigenous historiography, which has been focused on finding lines of continuity between past and present, those encountered in *Glimpses of Oneida Life* are cognizant of the changes the community has undergone. This is made especially clear in the volume’s retrospective commentaries, most notably “An Oneida Childhood,” and “A Lifetime of Memories.” Here, storytellers note with concern the growing social and cultural dislocation that has radically altered not only the relationship between the generation of Oneidas whose stories are contained in the volume, and those which followed, but also their relationship to their language and culture.

It is not often that those outside First Nations communities are afforded the opportunity to ‘listen in,’ or experience the diversity of contemporary First Nations life. It is even rarer to hear from the perspectives of those whose lives, past and present, were shaped and were in turn shaped by, the transformational decades of mid-to-late twentieth-century southern Ontario. In *Glimpses of Oneida Life*, readers are provided with one such opportunity. The result of a decades-long collaboration between the authors, it is their shared passion for the Oneida language that binds the concurrent threads of this

unusual book together. As such, it would be of interest and benefit not only to those interested in this history and ethnography of the community and its residents, but also to those either engaged in linguistic

research, or in the process of learning the language itself.

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*Planning Toronto: The Planners, The Plans,
Their Legacies, 1940-1980*

by Richard White

Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 2016. 464 pages. \$50.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-0-7748-2935-9 (ubcpres.com)

Richard White has written a remarkable new book on the history of Toronto's postwar planning. The central thrust of his analysis is that, in the period of rapid postwar growth and heightened faith in government and technology, Toronto undertook a halting attempt at modernizing its infrastructure to accommodate the city's increasing population and demands associated with rising economic prosperity. Beginning during the Second World War, and accelerating after the creation of Metropolitan Toronto in 1954, professional planners articulated a comprehensive vision of the city in which land uses were separated within the city and between it and its surrounding area, neighbourhoods were creatively shaped with cul-de-sacs and large open spaces, high rise apartments were built in park-like plots, and accommodations were made for the increased use of automobiles. Yet during the late 1960s, substantial resistance to this approach materialized, namely, the "reform" era of planning. It rejected both the processes and outcome of postwar planning, advocating for local citizen participation instead of technocratic management, repurposing of existing buildings instead of demolition and replacement, mid rise residences instead of high rise apartments,



and an end to thoroughfare construction. White points out that this lefty critique of expert-led modernization was insidiously conservative. Its valorization of neighbourhood participation in decision making and general expectation of public consultation spelled the end of comprehensive planning. A "paradigm" shift thus occurred in Toronto's planning. Its objectives fundamentally changed from, initially, accommodating