

Book Reviews

On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess, a Pequot. Edited and with an Introduction by Barry O'Connell. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992. Notes, Textual Afterword, Bibliographic Essay, Index, lxxxi + 344 pp.

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"Having a desire to place a few things before my fellow creatures who are traveling with me to the grave," wrote William Apess in 1833, "and to that God who is the maker and preserver both of the white man and the Indian, whose abilities are the same and who are to be judged by one god, who will show no favor to outward appearances but will judge righteousness. Now I ask if degradation has not been heaped long enough upon the Indians? And if so, can there not be a compromise?" Apess invoked a theological argument and opened up discursive space in his stunning essay titled "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man." He aimed the looking-glass at New England and discerned some timely questions: "Is it right to hold and promote prejudices? If not, why not put them all away? I mean here, among those who are civilized." (155) Rev. Apess, a Pequot, would probably be amused to learn that some academic scholars are still debating whether Christianity is a native tradition, preferring their own social scientific (mis)representations of Indian identity over the reasoned testimony of native Christians themselves. Apess addressed this issue, along with many other questions and challenges facing the Indian communities struggling to survive on the margins of New England society during the 1830s, in five works originally published between 1829 and 1836 and now available in one remarkable volume edited by Barry O'Connell. *On Our Own Ground* emphatically demonstrates that William Apess knew "prejudices" can take many forms, and the "compromise" he sought was nothing less than social equity and religious self-determination.

A Son of the Forest (1829) is Apess's autobiography, and the earliest (known) autobiography written and published by an American Indian. Written in a form that echoes the conversion narratives popularized by Protestant revivalism, it covers his childhood confusion over identity, his spiritual struggles beginning at the age of eight, and his teenage conversion to Christianity—a conversion not from Pequot religious traditions, but from being "friendless, unpitied, and unknown, . . . surrounded by difficulties and apparent dangers." (20-21) Apess found in his Christian faith the rationale for an egalitarian social order, and he condemned the hypocrisies of white Christians who preached universal salvation while practicing exclusionary racism. The autobiography includes an Appendix detailing an extended defense of Indian character against the defamatory representations of Eurocentric colonial history. *The Increase of the Kingdom of Christ* (1831) is a sermon Apess published shortly after he was ordained by the Protestant Methodist church and appointed to serve as

the minister for his own people. It is his most theologically conventional expression and was clearly written to satisfy the requirements for doctrinal orthodoxy enforced by the white ecclesiastical hierarchy, a problem Indian Christians still face. Nevertheless, Apess articulated a radical social critique by asserting the priority of Christian equality over the racist inequality surrounding him. The sermon was published with a companion essay, "The Indians: The Ten Lost Tribes," in which Apess employed the "lost tribes of Israel" origin theory to make a sophisticated theological argument about Indian survival.

The Experiences of Five Christian Indians (1833) includes the conversion narratives of Apess, his wife Mary, and three other Pequot women, along with the essay "An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White man." The conversion narratives offer a revealing glimpse of the deprivation and brutality experienced by New England Indians during the early nineteenth century, and they force modern readers to take seriously the immediacy and urgency of religious faith in individual Indian lives. The concluding essay forcefully exposes the contradictions of white Christian racism from an unmistakably Indian perspective.

Indian Nullification (1835) is a documentary history of the Mashpee Revolt of 1833-34, a successful struggle by the Mashpees of Massachusetts to recoup a measure of political and religious self-determination. Apess was selected by the Mashpees as their preacher and was adopted by the tribe, and he played a key role as organizer and spokesman for the non-violent movement. As O'Connell points out, Apess's choice of the title *Indian Nullification* demonstrated his insistence that the Mashpee struggle be understood in a broader context, since (like the Nullification Crisis of 1832) it raised significant constitutional questions "about the political rights and status of America's first people. It is not fanciful to see him as one of the earliest indigenous leaders of an Indian rights movement." (163)

The Eulogy on King Philip (1836) was delivered twice in Boston on the occasion of the 160th anniversary of Philip's death. Apess intended to rescue Philip (who was his great-great-grandfather) from the margins of Eurocentric colonial history by recognizing him as an American hero on the order of George Washington. Apess then used this historical critique to call for social change.

O'Connell's excellent introduction places Apess's literary production in its biographical and historical contexts and offers a number of helpful theoretical perspectives for understanding its meaning and significance. O'Connell convincingly argues that Apess struggled with questions of identity and problems of representation in a consistently sophisticated manner, and that in Apess's understanding, "For a Pequot to convert to Christianity is not . . . to take on white ways but only to claim one of her rights as a human being." (lxvii) The introduction, textual afterword, and bibliographic essay reflect O'Connell's careful and thorough research and help make this volume an invaluable source for understanding and appreciating the complexity and dynamism of American Indian religious life.

Academic scholars will do well to consider O'Connell's sensitive, open-ended interpretations, and all readers should hear—and heed—Apess's prophetic peroration: "pray you stop not till this tree of distinction shall be leveled to the earth, and the mantle of prejudice torn from every American heart—then shall peace pervade the Union." (160-61)