

## **Iroquet's World: Champlain, Trade, and Indigenous Deathways**

By Douglas Hunter, PhD

*Presented at Circles of Interaction: The Wendat and Their Neighbours in the Time of Champlain, a joint symposium of the Ontario Archaeology Society and the Eastern States Archaeology Federation. Midland, Ontario, October 2015.*

In the summer of 1609, Samuel de Champlain tells us, an Indigenous leader emerged from the world beyond the Grand Sault (Lachine) rapids at present-day Montréal, seeking an audience with the Frenchman who had built the new trading habitation at Quebec the previous year. Iroquet (Yroquet) was the leader—perhaps we should say *a* leader—of an Algonquian-speaking group that Champlain would also call the Iroquet. Iroquet's people lived in easternmost Ontario, within an area roughly described by a triangle formed by Ottawa, Kingston, and Montréal. Iroquet's son had observed Champlain in 1608 and had persuaded his father to make the trip down the St. Lawrence to meet Champlain. Iroquet brought with him Ochasteguin, a leader of the people the French would call the Huron. It was the first time Champlain met a member of the Iroquoian-speaking confederacy we now know as the Wendat. The Wendat occupied an area between southeastern Georgian Bay and Lake Couchiching called Wendake. Ochasteguin's tribe, the Arendaronon, lived in the easternmost part of Wendake and were closely allied with Iroquet's people, who were known by a Wendat name as the Onontcharonon and wintered with them there.

According to Champlain, Iroquet and Ochasteguin were seeking a special relationship. They wanted his support in their ongoing conflict with the Iroquoian Haudenosaunee, or Five Nations, of what is now upstate New York. So did the Naskapi (Montagnais), the people who were the established trading contacts of the French on the north shore of the lower St. Lawrence, foremost around Tadoussac. Champlain agreed to the overtures of Iroquet and Ochasteguin. He and a few companions joined their multinational war party that traveled into Lake Champlain that summer for the historic encounter with Mohawk of the Five Nations. Four years after that initial skirmish, in 1613, Champlain was able to make his first journey beyond the Grand Sault rapids, up the Ottawa River. And in 1615, he would make his more celebrated journey to the lands of the Wendat and their Iroquoian neighbours, the Pétun—his last such exploration venture, even though he would live another 20 years, most of them at Quebec.

I titled this presentation "Iroquet's World," but I'm not here to attempt an ethnohistorical sketch of Iroquet and his people. What I want to relate is my current state of thinking about how historians like myself have interpreted the relationship between Iroquet's people, their Anishinaabe and Wendat allies, and the French led by Champlain. I'm most interested in those crucial initial years, between 1608 and 1616, and in placing them in the context of the Euro-Indigenous trade relationship that had functioned for decades before Champlain's appearance. Foremost, I'm going to be thinking out loud about the stuff that has been bugging me lately about

interpretation, my own interpretation included, of what was going on. Mainly I want to think harder about why this relationship even existed from an Indigenous perspective in the early seventeenth century.

Rejecting the brutish insanity attributed to Indigenous peoples by earlier historians like Francis Parkman, historians typically cast the relationship between Champlain and his Indigenous allies from the perspective of rational negotiation and exchange, empowering Indigenous peoples with agency. But in the process we have yet to incorporate adequately the central significance of what Erik Seeman, in *Death in the New World*, called “deathways” in this cross-cultural grappling, especially in their fundamental role for Indigenous peoples in trade with Champlain’s associates, indeed in trade with Europeans that long predated Champlain’s arrival in the theatre of the St. Lawrence. By Indigenous agency, I would like us to empower an Indigenous worldview, an Indigenous ontology, and place it at the heart of the relationship. I am at the point in fact, where I want a clean sheet of paper to make my own fresh start on this history.

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On the matter of agency, let’s begin by acknowledging the initiative to extend Champlain’s activities and ambitions beyond the Grand Saults rested with the Anishinaabe leader Iroquet and his Wendat associates. After the disastrous overwintering at Quebec of 1608-09, Champlain was focused on using his Montagnais/Naskapi connections to reach the Northern Sea via the Saguenay River. But after going to war against the Mohawk with Iroquet and Ochasteguin in 1609 and meeting with them again in 1610, Champlain decided he “had two strings in my bow, and if one failed, the other might stay taut.” (Champlain, 2: 119) If things didn’t work out with the Montagnais, he now had the connection with Iroquet and Ochasteguin to exploit. Their overture opened a new world of opportunity, and became the immediate focus of Champlain’s ambitions.

The more one considers Yroquet, the more he surpasses his sideman role in Champlain’s narrative as a useful ally and becomes an architect of Champlain’s relationship with the peoples of the Great Lakes, a world Champlain was only beginning dimly to understand. Yroquet I believe was involved on every occasion the Frenchman waged war against the Iroquois, in 1609, 1610 (when he arrived too late with 80 men to join the attack) and 1615. This Anishinaabe leader was also responsible for the successful placement of two French interpreter-trainees, or *truchements*. Yroquet took responsibility for Étienne Brûlé and the young man remembered as Thomas, a servant of Champlain’s trading associate, the surgeon Daniel Boyer.

We don’t know how Iroquet and his Wendat associates perceived their special relationship with Champlain. With his European colonialist perspective, Champlain saw a trade and military-political relationship, within a territory he was laying claim to on behalf of the French monarchy. These *sauvages* would become subjects of his own monarch and their lands part of his realm. Ochasteguin and Iroquet, on the

other hand, may have been determined to draw the French into their own world, which was one of westward movement and consolidation at Wendake.

The Arendaronon may have been part of the St. Lawrence Iroquoian diaspora, and appear to have settled in the Kawartha Lakes before moving still further westward to join the Wendat confederacy around 1580 or 1590, which was within living memory. The Arendaronon relationship with Iroquet's people, may have predated their own Kawartha period. The Wendat name for Iroquet's people, the Onontcharonon, meant "people of the mountain," and suggests that Iroquet's people once had lived around Montréal. This coalescing around southern Georgian Bay was not limited to the Wendat. Their fellow Iroquoians to the west, the Pétun, appear to have made a recent migration in the late sixteenth century to the area from points south.

At the 1611 meeting in Montreal, the Arendaronon invited Champlain and any Frenchman he named to visit Wendake. They in turn would send as many of their people as he wished with him to France. Champlain promised that if he found Wendake favourable and fertile, he would establish French settlements there. We don't know if this settlement proposal was Champlain's idea, or if it originated with the Arendaronon. But we should consider the possibility of an Indigenous initiative. It would have meant some of Champlain's French making the same westward settlement migration to the lands of the Wendat confederacy that Ochasteguín's Arendaronon had. Champlain for that matter did not yet understand where Iroquet's people lived. He initially thought their territory was some seventy leagues (more than 200 miles) to the west, when in fact they lived in eastern Ontario and only overwintered to the west with the Arendaronon in Wendake. Nor could he know at this point that another Anishinaabe group, the Epicerini or Nipissing, who lived around Lake Nipissing, also wintered in and around Wendake. At the same time, the Anishinaabe Odawa of Georgian Bay overwintered on the western boundary of Wendake, probably in association with the neighbouring Pétun. These Anishinaabe groups were long-distance traders who had formed a symbiotic relationship with the Wendat and Pétun. For example, Wendake maize was being exchanged for Anishinaabe fish, furs, and other items. And so there was a marked convergence or concentration of Pétun, Wendat, and their Indigenous allies unfolding at strongholds in southern Georgian Bay. It shouldn't surprise us if the Arendaronon for one wanted the French to become part of it.

My main interest here is in exploring how Champlain, in trade and war, became entwined in, and contributed to, an already complex and evolving Indigenous world of "deathways," a system of beliefs and practices that encompasses "deathbed scenes, corpse preparation, burial practices, funerals, mourning, and commemoration." (Seaman: 1) Deathways are inseparable from "lifeways" which encompass spiritual beliefs and ritual practices and ontological conceptions of the nature of living and other-than-living beings and the relationship between the living and the dead, and for that matter what it means to be alive or dead. Champlain's Indigenous allies would be drawn into Champlain's alien "deathways" through his

insistence on sending missionaries (first Récollet in 1615, then Jesuit) to proselytize and to harvest their deathbed souls for the glory of their god. For that matter I wonder what Yroquet's son would have thought of Champlain displaying the head of the traitorous locksmith Duval at the Quebec habitation in 1608 as a warning to anyone else thinking of crossing him.

Historians are tremendously indebted to what archaeology can tell us about historic Indigenous societies, recognizing at the same time that many of my Indigenous colleagues are not happy with grave digging as a research tool. Archaeology and European documents tell us a much different story than the popular history notion that Europeans brought practical wonders like iron axes and knives and guns as well as cheap shiny trinkets in exchange for furs. We know two significant changes occurred in the lives of Indigenous peoples of northeastern North America in the late sixteenth century. First, there was an eruption in trade volume in the 1580s, with French and Basque merchants beginning to send ships dedicated purely to trade for furs. Through Indigenous trade networks, unprecedented volumes of European goods entered the Great Lakes region, beyond where Europeans themselves (so far as we know) had yet to venture. Second, the archaeological record shows a significant and widespread change in Indigenous mortuary practices. Mortuary practices in the Great Lakes region and among Algonquian speaking peoples in what is now the Canadian Maritimes and New England began to feature copious amounts of European grave goods and in group rather than individual burials. These goods often were "as new." Most of the time, as Laurier Turgeon recounts, objects of European origin were buried soon after their acquisition and without ever having served their designed utilitarian function. (Turgeon, *Échange d'objects*: 166) Copper kettles, a ubiquitous trade item of the Basques, in particular were interred without having been used for their intended purpose. Glass and porcelain beads are also well represented in these interments. The importance of European trade goods as mortuary items extended to the Haudenosaunee as well.

This is not to say that all European goods acquired by Indigenous people through exchange were acquired as mortuary items. Axes, swords, knives, and other iron implements appeared in large quantities in Basque trading cargos in the late 16th century. (Turgeon, *Échange d'objets*: 163). Champlain during his 1615-16 visit to Wendake witnessed a deer hunt in which men used half pikes fashioned from sword blades, and such blades are known from Petun sites. Turgeon however has written that objects that in their culture of origin had a utilitarian function, commonplace things of little intrinsic value in Europe such as household items that included axes, knives, kettles and even beads, became in the receiving culture highly demanded, precious and invested with symbolic power and also used to convey status. (Turgeon, *Échange d'objets*, 165) There was a symmetry in this cross-cultural transference of significance. The commodity most desired by European traders, beaver pelts, may have been unremarkable furs of water rodents to Indigenous people, but they fulfilled a narrow prestige role in French society, the hats worn by elites. A large volume of European trade goods was comprised of copper kettles and

glass and porcelain beads. Beads could be fashioned into adornments for the living and also in curing ceremonies, in direct substitution for Indigenous materials, and copper kettles were cut up and made into personal adornments and arrowheads. And so a major component of the late sixteenth-century surge in trade involved Europeans goods that were valued for spiritual qualities, even when they were used by the living, and they were destined to be used in mortuary ritual to a degree Indigenous materials previously had not.

The spiritual or ritual significance of European trade goods, expressed in preferences in colours and materials, was addressed by Christopher Miller and George Hamell in 1986 and by Hamell again in 1992. As Miller and Hamell wrote: "During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Indians did not perceive European copper or glass as something new. Rather, imported copper goods and glasswares were assimilated into traditional native ideological systems alongside native copper, exotic siliceous stones, and shells as material components of great ritual significance. It was that conventional but highly charged ideological value, not some Indian psychosis, that made European trade goods so enormously attractive." (Miller and Hamell, "New Perspective": 315.)

Bruce Trigger, in a new forward in 1987 to his classic study of the Huron/Wendat *The Children of Aataentsic*, acknowledged the recent insights of Miller and Hamell, but the text of this standard reference work otherwise remained unchanged from an interpretation of a "rational" exchange of goods between Indigenous and French parties that apparently only left "a few scraps of metal" in the archaeological record. (245) Trigger proposed the trade goods reaching Wendake "do not appear significantly to have altered their daily life during the late prehistoric period. In particular, the technological impact of these goods must have been negligible." The most obvious change was the inclusion of trade goods and other valued items in ossuaries for the first time. It paralleled the Haudenosaunee burial of European goods with the dead and seemed to indicate a growing interest in mortuary ceremonialism among both groups. (243-244) Trigger thought the impact of these goods was felt in political organization and foreign relations in response to the associated trade. (245) But I think limiting the assessment of the impact of trade goods on daily life to technology, or things useful from a task perspective, marginalizes the enormous importance these goods evidently filled in life's spiritual component. Moreover, the spiritual component must have been a driver of trade that produced the political and diplomatic changes Trigger proposed. Before contact with Europeans, Indigenous peoples had traded materials infused with spiritual or ritual significance over tremendous distances. That trade presumably would have influenced political or diplomatic changes no less than the ensuing one with Europeans for materials that served the same purposes.

The idea of rational trade ought to reflect the fact that both sides acted with rational objectives, but in the service of distinct and even mutually incomprehensible rationalities. I don't know if Miller and Hamell were correct in every aspect of their analysis of the ritual significance of the properties of trade materials, but they

certainly put forward important ideas that have not been adequately engaged by historians considering Champlain, which is striking when the sources I am referencing were published in the 1980s and 1990s. The dominant biography of Champlain, David Hackett Fischer's *Champlain's Dream* of 2008, does not recognize Hamell's work at all. I searched the Kindle version and could not find the words "mortuary" or "ossuary," either. I am not going to beat up exclusively on Fischer here, because my own book, *God's Mercies*, of 2007 did not engage Miller and Hamell or explore the symbolic transformations of trade goods or the spiritual/deathways aspect of trade. If we continue to view Indigenous-French relations, especially in the period up to 1615, within a Eurocentric model of profit-based exchange, military action, and territory (in which the Natives make a bad deal of providing valuable furs for shiny trinkets), regardless of how much agency is granted to the Indigenous parties, we fail to perceive why that trade existed, and what role it served within Indigenous societies.

There should be little doubt that Champlain was unable to grasp the role his trade and military support filled in the deathways of his Indigenous allies. But I don't want to be too hard on Champlain. The Indigenous "deathways" in which Champlain was attempting to insert a Eurocentric and militarized trade and colonization program were operating at a level of complexity we can only begin to grasp. These deathways involved not only mortuary practice, but also for want of a better term "ritualized" warfare or mourning wars that prized war captives as replacements for dead relatives, and also included death through ritual torture in the case of Iroquoian societies. These wars may have been fueled by crises of the first large-scale community deaths caused by European pathogens, which in turn could have been a factor in the shift towards foreign goods in mortuary rituals.

And so, I leave you with a scenario to consider. The early seventeenth century for Indigenous peoples allied with Champlain was a spiraling feedback system of mortality that was already functioning when Yroquet and Ochasteguain made the long paddle from Wendake to seek out Champlain in 1609. It involved replacement of the dead through warfare, ritual torture, and mourning, and deathway practices of interment that had arisen perhaps to contend with unprecedented losses of the living, all of which created a strong demand for grave-goods trade items. Goods offered by Champlain's associates, which to European eyes were utilitarian items, were being infused with spiritual or ritual significance by the receiving cultures. The trade for those goods itself had become a vector of conflict and death with the Haudenosaunee, who had their own mortuary practices to sustain, and that conflict could have factored in the coalescing of a Wendake stronghold in southeastern Georgian Bay. Champlain would also insist on priests proselytizing among Indigenous allies. The Jesuits were bent on harvesting souls at the moment of earthly departure according to their own culture's particular Christian deathways. Nowhere did this traumatizing scenario play out more starkly than here, in historic Wendake.

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