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Trials and Tribulations: As Found in the Journals of Samuel Kirkland

Christine Sternberg Patrick

By day I edit the papers of George Washington, one of those increasingly popular dead white men. But on nights and weekends I spend my time with Samuel Kirkland, a not-so-popular dead white man whom I would classify as above-average. I was first introduced to Kirkland in the 1980s, and shortly thereafter I made him the topic of my dissertation. Although some might describe him as a “dour Presbyterian,” I find him fascinating.

By now I am sure that most readers are wondering, who is Samuel Kirkland? and, why is he above-average? So let me briefly answer these questions before I describe editing his journals.

The story of benevolent colonists struggling to bring civilization to Native Americans was once popular in American literature and history. But many scholars today would label those efforts “cultural imperialism,” and the story now would emphasize the injustice, racism, and violence that contributed to the demise of the Indian population and the loss of Native American land and sovereignty. While military personnel, land speculators, and politicians were essential components in this process, Christian missionaries were also important agents of change, and Samuel Kirkland was one such missionary.

He was born in Connecticut in 1741.¹ He attended Moor’s Indian Charity School in Lebanon, Connecticut, which was a forerunner of Dartmouth College.² He continued his studies at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton) to prepare for his ordination as a missionary to the Iroquois Indians. The Iroquois Confederacy consisted of six nations stretching from

¹For a biography of Kirkland, see Christine S. Patrick, “The Life and Times of Samuel Kirkland, 1741–1808,” Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York, Buffalo, 1993.

²On the history of Moor’s Indian Charity School and the founding of Dartmouth College, see Frederick Chase, *A History of Dartmouth College and the Town of Hanover, New Hampshire* (Cambridge, MA: J. Wilson & Son, 1891), 1:1–155.

east to west across New York State: the Mohawk, Oneida, Tuscarora, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca nations. The members of the confederation were bound together by an elaborate system of kinship ties as well as common political, economic, and military interests.³ Kirkland began his ministry in 1764 with the Senecas. But for security reasons, in 1766 he transferred his mission to the more easterly Oneidas.

By the time of his death in 1808, Kirkland had spent almost forty-four years among the Iroquois. He dedicated his life to the Indians because of his own ardent religious beliefs, and in doing so he endangered his life, neglected his wife and children, and sacrificed his health. He contracted malaria in the swamps of western New York, and unsanitary conditions made dysentery a frequent occurrence. The list of his numerous medical problems is too long to mention here.

Kirkland once declared that his work among the Indians was the only legacy he wished to leave. It would be a mixed and uneven legacy. Although he had converted many to Christianity, only a few met his stringent requirement to be “born again” for church membership, which then entitled an individual to receive communion. At the same time, he and his religion helped to crystallize inherent divisions within the Oneida nation.⁴ His complicity in convincing many Oneidas, Tuscaroras, and some Onondagas to ally with the colonists during the Revolutionary War contributed to the weakening of the Iroquois Confederacy, although it certainly helped the Patriot cause.⁵ His participation in the negotiations of several treaties whereby the Oneidas and other Iroquois nations ceded their lands to the United States, New York State, and private land developers laid the foundation for the eventual removal of most of the Oneidas to Wisconsin or Canada in the early nineteenth century.⁶ Even his honored memory as the founder of Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, is not without its tinge of failure,

³On the Iroquois Indians, see William N. Fenton, *The Great Law and the Longhouse: A Political History of the Iroquois Confederacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

⁴On factionalism among the Oneidas, see Jack Campisi, “Oneida,” in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15, *The Northeast*, Bruce G. Trigger, ed. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978), 482–83.

⁵On Iroquois participation in the Revolutionary War, see Barbara Graymont, *The Iroquois and the American Revolution* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1972).

⁶On the Oneida treaties and migration, see Jack Campisi, “The Oneida Treaty Period, 1783–1838,” in *The Oneida Indian Experience: Two Perspectives*, Jack Campisi and Laurence M. Hauptman, eds. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 48–64.

since the school's original purpose to educate both Indian and white youth was never achieved.⁷

Kirkland was just one of many eager young men who attempted to save Indian souls. He was, however, different from most of them. He learned three native languages well enough to forgo an interpreter, he carefully observed and followed native ceremonial and diplomatic customs, and his faith was strong enough to help him face the unpleasant living conditions and threat of death that accompanied every mission. Perhaps the most important fact about Kirkland for historians and ethnographers is that he kept journals. From his first mission in 1764 until his death in 1808, he recorded his own activities and thoughts, as well as what he saw and heard around him in the Iroquois world.

Kirkland's journals are often very detailed. They contain lengthy descriptions of the many "trials and tribulations" he endured. The trials begin in his first journal. Some of its more memorable passages describe the repeated threats against his life and the near starvation diet that he endured during the winter of 1764–65. Meals included acorns fried in bear's grease, a pot of soup made from one squirrel (which Iroquois custom required he share), and a soup made from bear-meat infested with maggots. Tears ran down Kirkland's cheeks as he tried to eat this last dish. These entries leave the reader admiring his physical stamina and religious conviction.⁸ More importantly, this journal and all those that follow offer the reader an unparalleled look at Iroquois life in the second half of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is a time of dramatic change on the New York frontier and a time of "trials and tribulations" for the Indians as they struggled to survive, particularly as events in the Revolutionary War and the advance of white settlement threatened their traditional way of life. That is why I am currently editing these journals for publication.

In doing so, I have followed the usual editorial process—searching for journals, transcribing, collating, and annotating. Nevertheless, Kirkland's journals have presented some problems that are slightly different from those I encounter at the Papers of George Washington. The Kirkland project has its roots in the writing of my dissertation. When I started my research, one

⁷On the founding of Hamilton College, see Joseph D. Ibbotson and S. N. D. North, eds., *Documentary History of Hamilton College* (Clinton, NY: Hamilton College, 1922), 3–134.

⁸*The Journals of Samuel Kirkland: 18th-century Missionary to the Iroquois, Government Agent, Father of Hamilton College*. Edited by Walter Pilkington. (Clinton, NY: Hamilton College, 1980), 29–31.

of the things that convinced me to undertake this topic was that Kirkland's journals had already been published by Walter Pilkington in 1980. Only Kirkland's many letters remained to be read in manuscript form. My illusions were shattered during a visit to the Massachusetts Historical Society where I found thirty-five previously unidentified journals. Pilkington and other historians had overlooked these journals because most of them were not indexed under Kirkland's name, but rather were filed under that of his eldest daughter's married name. Thirty of the new journals were in the Lothrop Family Papers, a massive collection that continued into the twentieth century. The other five journals were in the papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America. After completing my dissertation, I decided that I would edit these "new" journals as a complement to the Pilkington edition, and I successfully applied to "Camp Edit" for training.

Unfortunately the Lothrop Family Papers were only on deposit at the society. My efforts to obtain permission to publish the Lothrop journals apparently produced visions of dollar signs in the minds of Kirkland's descendants, and they removed the entire Lothrop collection. The journals were then offered for sale, and I put my Kirkland material into cardboard boxes to gather dust. The journals from the Lothrop collection eventually found a new home at Dartmouth College, and I once again took up the Kirkland journals.

By now, however, scholars at the Conference on Iroquois Research had persuaded me that a comprehensive edition was needed, citing problems with the annotations in the Pilkington edition. I also knew from my training at Camp Edit that the earlier edition did not meet current editing standards. So the search for more journals began, and eventually I located several more in other repositories, for a total of ninety-one journals to edit.

Now the problems of editing began. Besides the usual poor handwriting, water stains, mold, faded ink, and missing pages, I faced the problem of Kirkland's shorthand, which he used primarily to indicate short and commonly used words and the endings of words, such as "-ing" or "-tion". An attempt to find the source of his system failed. Although I am not ready for a lucrative career of code breaking at the National Security Agency, I did manage to interpret most of Kirkland's shorthand. Pilkington had already deciphered some of the more frequently used symbols, such as "of" and "for". I was able to continue the process using some of the new journals. One of the other challenges of editing the journals became a blessing in this

instance because now I often had more than one version of a journal, and I could compare a journal with shorthand to a version without it. Kirkland also used shorthand in Biblical citations, making it easier to check for the meaning of some less frequently used symbols, such as “therefore”. While Pilkington did not distinguish when shorthand was being transcribed, I have decided to use boldface type to alert the reader to its presence.

However, the duplicate journals, so useful for deciphering the shorthand system, posed another problem—the selection of journals for publication. Kirkland was not writing his journals for personal use. The various philanthropic organizations that funded his missionary activities required them.⁹ Kirkland created the journals that he sent his financial supporters from what he called “minutes,” that is, notes written at or near the time of the events described. He then created an expanded journal by adding more detail, transcribing his shorthand, and expanding abbreviations and contractions. Either he or someone else would then create additional copies for submission to his financial supporters.¹⁰ Forty-eight of the ninety-one journals are in the handwriting of Kirkland; nine are copies made by his sons John and George. The copyists of the other thirty-four journals remain unidentified.

Coming up with a logical, consistent selection process has been one of the tougher challenges of this project. The ethnographic nature of the journals and the known errors introduced into the journals by the various copyists meant that I could not neatly adopt the guidelines used for letters at the Washington Papers. After considerable thought about the scholars who would be using the Kirkland journals, I have decided upon my own unique system, for which there are the inevitable exceptions, and for which I expect criticism. My goal is to provide the most complete and accurate version of a journal, and that may not be the one actually received by the financial supporters. Therefore, when more than one version of a journal exists, the text is taken from an expanded journal or copy written by Kirkland; if none exists, then preference is given to a copy by his eldest sons, who seem to have had more familiarity with the people, places, and Iroquois words mentioned by Kirkland than the unidentified copyists. Any significant differences between existing journals appear in the notes.

⁹Kirkland’s supporters included the Corporation for Harvard College, New England Company, Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America, and Northern Missionary Society in the State of New York.

¹⁰Other forms of the journals include a transcript made in the nineteenth century from a journal later destroyed by the 1911 fire in the New York State Library, contemporary published versions, abbreviated journals in the form of a letter, and in one case, a very detailed expense account from the Revolutionary War.

Ethnologist William Fenton has described Kirkland's observations as "keen, systematic, and thorough" and his journals as "ethnologically superior" to his contemporaries.¹¹ This very fact presents another challenge for me. I was trained as a historian. Therefore, I have had to familiarize myself with ethnographic material so that I can annotate entries such as one from a 1775 journal, in which Kirkland refers to "Albany—the place of their ancient counsel fire" and "Quedel Kera—or Col. Schuyler—whose counsel fire was then to be rekindled." While I immediately saw the need to identify Peter Schuyler (1657–1724) and his connection to the Iroquois, I needed a second reading to realize that I should also mention the significance of kindling a fire. Fortunately for me I could turn to page 118 in Francis Jennings' work, *The History and Culture of Iroquois Diplomacy* for the use of the terms "fire" and "to kindle a fire" in treaty negotiations.¹²

The term "Quedel Kera," however, has proved to be more perplexing. I know from my readings that Quedel, or Quider, are Iroquois versions of Peter, but what is Kera? I had high hopes that I would find an answer during my recent attendance at the Conference on Iroquois Research. One Mohawk woman told me it meant Peter, having been derived from the French word Pierre. Since the Iroquois do not have a sound for "P" in their language, Pierre becomes Ker. Others did not believe that it was logical for the Indians to refer to Schuyler as "Peter Peter." Is the problem Kirkland's understanding of what they said, or, heaven forbid, is it my transcription?

The question of "Quedel Kera" illustrates a common challenge for editors of eighteenth-century ethnographic material. Transcribing and translating any foreign language is tricky, especially if the editor is not fluent in that language, and I am not the least bit fluent in any Iroquoian language, whether it be an eighteenth- or twenty-first-century version. Fortunately for me, I have no real need to translate any Iroquoian language since Kirkland usually provided an English equivalent for the Iroquoian words and phrases he wrote. I do, however, need to transcribe these words accurately, especially for those linguists who will use the journals. This task is difficult because the Iroquois had no written language other than that imposed upon them by French or English colonists. There was no English dictionary of either the Oneida or Seneca language when Kirkland began his mission. This fact, and

¹¹Fenton, *Great Law*, 13–14.

¹²Francis Jennings's *The History and Culture of Iroquois Diplomacy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 118.

Kirkland's increasing fluency, means that he changed his orthography over time.

To give you a flavor of what I am trying to master, let me present a brief description of Iroquoian languages: "Colonial scribes spelled Indian names as best they could, and to guess what they heard is for the most part impossible. Sometimes the shapes of the names in the documents reveal to the Iroquoianist what the scribe was trying to spell." These words by William Fenton are particularly comforting, and his rules explaining the sounds of Iroquoian speech are very useful for novices like myself: "Iroquoian speakers voice *k* and *g*, as well as *t* and *d*, somewhere between the two extremes." Personal names beginning with an aspirated *t* are written *th*. The vowels are *a*, *e*, *i*, and *o*; nasal *e* and *o* are written as *en* and *on*. "The consonants are *h*, *j*, *k(g)*, *n*, *s*, *t(d)*, *w*, and *y* . . . Mohawk preserves an *r*, which becomes *l* in Oneida."¹³ Needless to say, the transcription of Iroquois words is my greatest challenge and one that will require assistance from other scholars and contemporary Oneida speakers.

I am nearly done with the list of my editing "trials and tribulations," but I need to insert some words of caution for anyone working on Iroquoian material. Avoid becoming involved in tribal politics and factionalism. Find out which Native American individuals are receptive to non-native scholars and be aware of current Native American positions on their own history. Above all, maintain a neutral and disinterested position on the issues, especially those involving land, unless of course you want to earn your living by testifying for one side or the other in federal and state courts.

Let me end by saying that my "trials and tribulations" in editing these journals pale in comparison with those of Kirkland and the Indians he served. There was no other missionary or government official who lived as long among the Iroquois Indians during this time period or who left such a complete record as Kirkland, and I hope that my comprehensive edition will help make his journals a valuable resource for future readers.

¹³Fenton, *Great Law*, xviv.

