

HILARY E. WYSS, *English Letters and Indian Literacies: Reading, Writing, and New England Missionary Schools, 1750-1830* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2012), 264 pp.

In recent years there has been a noteworthy increase in studies of Native America.¹ Like Drew Lopenzina's *Red Ink: Native Americans Picking up the Pen in the Colonial Period*, and Birgit Brander Rasmussen's *Queequeg's Cofin: Indigenous Literacies and the Making of Early American Literature*, which were both published in the same year as Hilary Wyss's study, *English Letters and Indian Literacies* provides a rich contribution to the complex field of literacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Based on a vast corpus of published and unpublished texts, including memoirs, tracts, and personal letters, Wyss's analysis substantially re-reads the relationship between agency and literacy in the context of missionary cultures of education and reveals that the Native-authored texts emerging from this environment can be understood "as fields of conflict and contestation rather than the result of the imposition of something foreign, something European on an indigenous population unfamiliar with its value" (6). Using Laurel Ulrich's metaphor of weaving alternative structures of identity (represented by dark and light threads) into a larger fabric, Wyss highlights the spaces of overlap, in which "a third color" becomes visible (5). In the same way, Native Americans not only used the literacy skills imposed on them by the colonizers to reproduce or critique the ideological systems (of political, social, and religious order) in which that literacy education was embedded, but many of their documents also reveal highly complex sites of encounter, alliance, community, and resistance within a "shared culture" (210)—beyond any simple dichotomies of 'colonizer' and 'colonized.'

"The presence of Native American voices in the literatures of settler-colonial America,"

¹ See, for example, Maureen Konkle's *Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827-1863* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004), Lisa Brooks' *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (2008), and Kathryn Gray's own *John Eliot and the Praying Indians of Massachusetts Bay* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell UP, 2013).

Kathryn Gray writes,² "can be difficult to detect and, at times, difficult to decipher" (307). Wyss takes on this challenge through extensive archival work and excellent in-depth analyses, in which she carefully reads texts (both by leading authorities of charity schools, such as Eleazar Wheelock, and by their students, including the well-known Mohegan educator Samson Occom as much as the much lesser known Cherokee convert David Brown) in detail, often between the lines and against the grain. In order to structure an argument that transcends the geographical, historical, and cultural boundaries of New England, Wyss distinguishes between what she terms "Readerly and Writerly Indians": whereas the "Readerly Indian" denotes the "missionary desire for a docile, passive Indian figure" who simply used literacy as "a skill set that did not require self-expression," the figure of the "Writerly Indian" uses literacy for his or her own purposes and thus "emerges as not only a speaker and actor fluent in the cultures and conventions of colonial society but also one fully committed to Native community as an ongoing political and cultural concern" (6). In performances of "rhetorical sovereignty" (a concept Wyss borrows from Scott Lyons), these traces of "writerly" engagements with English literacy yield remarkable examples of political resistance and cultural diplomacy, often creating new spaces of agency that go far beyond the non-Native missionaries' intent. Yet, as Wyss's readings demonstrate, these two types are not always easily distinguishable, and even though the extant texts yield only fragmentary impressions of life at missionary boarding schools, they often allow for alternative understandings of both the historical record and its underlying concepts of literacy.

The book is organized into six chapters, aptly beginning with a conceptual and historical introduction that provides a survey of missionary education practices in New England. From the earliest seventeenth-century attempts (by John Eliot and Daniel Gookin) at institutionalizing a Christian education via John Sergeant's Indian boarding school at Stockbridge in the 1740s and Eleazar Wheelock's Indian Charity School in the 1750s and 1760s, to the Brainerd School in Tennessee

² *The Routledge Companion to Native American Literature*, ed. Deborah Madsen (New York: Routledge, 2016).

and the Cornwall Foreign Mission School in Connecticut in the nineteenth century, Wyss contextualizes these missionary ventures within larger educational practices and institutions, emphasizing the gendered logistics of instruction in New England towns in general, their conflation of religious education and literacy, and the erratic schooling in rural communities in the eighteenth century. Growing from this general matrix of educational practices, and firmly situated within “a more general expansion of educational opportunity throughout the eighteenth century” (17), missionary boarding schools for Native Americans did not materialize in a vacuum, and accordingly cannot be read in isolated contexts. However well-intended these experiments with assimilation may have been (and in spite of their occasional scandals of corruption), the diversity of outcomes already becomes apparent in this brief historical survey, which also mentions the Native-founded communities of Brothertown and New Stockbridge that served as responses to their failed predecessors.

In addition to this helpful historical roadmap, the introduction also points to alternative literacy systems in Indigenous communities, such as weaving, beading, tattooing, and painting, in order to establish a more inclusive framework for the “intersecting worlds of Native orality, writing, and print” (22). The book’s central part then investigates different boarding schools, highlighting specific experiences and their impact. Chapter one revolves around “narratives and counter-narratives” at Stockbridge and Moor’s Charity School, offering insight into the educational narratives of influential figures such as John Sergeant and Jonathan Edwards, and highlighting the conflict between Eleazar Wheelock and his student Samson Occom. Chapter two focuses on Joseph Johnson, a Mohegan student at Moor’s Charity School, who became a schoolteacher among the Oneidas in upstate New York and whose writing—as “one of the most extraordinary” textual archives of the eighteenth century (105)—reveals a deeply conflicted relationship between Johnson and Wheelock. In chapter three, Wyss turns to the missionary efforts of the Brainerd School in Tennessee, which was founded in 1817. Examining Cherokee students’ memoirs (such as the well-known 1825 *Memoir of Catharine Brown*) and letters, Wyss recovers from the archives remarkable narratives that not only undermine the missionary desire for passive, ‘readerly’ figures but

that also demonstrate “emphatically female” stances of rhetorical sovereignty (146) and even explicitly “articulate a commitment to Cherokee nationalisms” (147). While the Brainerd School was operated by New England missionaries who were sent to Cherokee territory, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) also relied on sending Cherokee students to New England. At the Cornwall Foreign Mission School in Connecticut, for example, Wyss finds “a different literacy history of the Cherokee people [...], one that is founded on people profoundly committed to Christianity as a means of developing political sovereignty” (189). Next to memoirs by Catharine Brown and John Arch, the rhetoric of David Brown (Catharine Brown’s brother) stands out as a remarkable example of “literacy as a Cherokee-centered practice” (189), as he eloquently challenges assumptions of white superiority while strategically promoting Cherokee nationalism: “clearly,” Wyss concludes her close reading of his texts, “what he has in mind is the ongoing political existence of the Cherokee Nation rather than the integration of individual Cherokees into the polity that is the United States of America” (177). The study’s conclusion then elaborates on the polysemy of the word “letters” (as referring to the letters of the alphabet as well as epistolary letters) in order to underline the variety of different literacies—including Sequoyah’s Cherokee syllabary as a strategic and very successful technology that “brushes aside the presumption of English superiority and establishes a structure of Cherokee difference” (198-99). Beyond mere skills of reading and writing, literacy also includes the production of letters which record, create, and strengthen networks among families and communities, and which effectively blend public and private spaces. “The pleasure,” she concludes, “that missionary audiences gained from their understandings of the art and artifacts of Native literacy were not always perfectly aligned with the motives or strategies Native peoples used to further their own ends. Yet there was enough overlap to make such systems work for everyone” (209-10).

Aside from occasional redundancies (through repetitions, in individual chapters, of backgrounds already laid out in the introduction), this book is a well-written and highly astute contribution to the growing field of Early Native American Studies. Wyss’s diligent recovery of sources and her careful readings

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of the complex situations surrounding Native students offer an insightful revision of previous concepts of Native literacy and education, and render this study a welcome addition to the fields of Indigenous Studies, American history, and American literary history.

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