



In the 19th century, he was a prominent MD and CEO who held sway with cabinet ministers and belonged to secret societies.

He was a Mohawk who never lost sight of his identity.

Before my interview with Eva Maracle, what I knew of Dr. Oronhyatekha, the successful Mohawk doctor and insurance man who moved as easily in Victorian society as in Native circles, was at best from second hand sources. It had been gleaned from photographs, newspaper clippings, and Oronhyatekha's book entitled History of the Independent Order of Foresters, a somewhat tedious account of the fraternal life insurance company's struggles and phenomenal rise to international success under his direction.

What intrigued me most was the book's account of an exchange that had occurred a few years after Oronhyatekha joined the IOF. Membership in the order was restricted to white males and as a Mohawk, Oronhyatekha was ineligible. Yet, in 1878, he was granted admission through "special dispensation". Still, some detractors sought to have him expelled, pointing out a meeting of the membership that the IOF constitution's intent was "to exclude applicants who belonged to a race which was considered inferior to the white race". Without missing a beat, Oronhyatekha quipped to the assembly that his admission was legalized because "they recognized the fact that I belonged to a race which is superior to the white". The next year, in 1881, he was elected as the organization's CEO, or supreme chief ranger, a position he would hold until his death in 1907.

But more than his indomitable spirit intrigued me. The wealth of documents Oronhyatekha left behind, and the Oronhyatekha Historical Collection of artifacts, which he had amassed in his lifetime and is now housed at the Royal Ontario Museum, gave me enough of a glimpse of the doctor to want to learn more. I got the chance when Tom Hill, director of the Woodland Cultural Centre Museum in Brantford, Ontario, where I am curator, told me of a plan to collaborate with the ROM on an exhibition about the doctor. The idea started to take shape when I chanced to meet curator Trudy Nicks while at the ROM on other business, and we swapped Dr. "O" stories. "Mohawk Ideals, Victorian Values: Oronhyatekha, M.D.," is scheduled to open at the WCC July 29, 2001 and travels to the ROM in 2002.

I first heard about Eva Maracle while researching the exhibition at a series of community sessions planned by the WCC. Band members were invited to share their recollections, personal possessions, and stories that had a connection to Oronhyatekha. The doctor and his wife, Ellen Hill, who belonged to a prominent Mohawk family, had several children, but only two survived to adulthood and no direct descendants remain today to tell Oronhyatekha's story. The meetings took place at Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario where many of the doctor's extended family still live, and at Tyendinaga Mohawk Reserve near Belleville, Ontario, where he moved in 1864 following his marriage.

The diminutive Mrs. Maracle, a spry, vibrant Mohawk woman, 104 years young when I spoke with her in 1998, grew up on Oronhyatekha's estate. Eva was 13 years old when Oronhyatekha died in 1907, and she recalled with an enviable clarity life at the Pines, Dr. Oronhyatekha's home at Tyendinaga, where her father was a caretaker of the estate and

farm. She and her childhood friends would go to the homestead to see Oronhyatekha's exotic live animal collection.

Eva told me how awed she felt to the big man who divided his time between the Pines and a place called Forester's Island - the site of his other home, The Castle, where he spent most of his time, and a turreted orphanage that Dr. Oronhyatekha had founded. She remembered how he'd swept into The Pines like a whirlwind, generating activity. Though he often hosted influential guests from around the world at The Castle - like the Earl of Aberdeen - the only language he permitted at The Pines was Mohawk.

Though I had acquaintances at Tyendinaga before the community sessions took place, my own roots are at Six Nations. Travelling and visiting between the two communities is frequent, but residency at one reserve does not guarantee unfettered access to the other. After the first meeting at Tyendinaga, Mrs. Ella Claus approached me. It turned out that she knew my parents quite well. This was excellent luck because family connections are one of the best ways to qualify your acceptance into a Native community. Once this connection was confirmed, the ice was broken and I was able to move about Tyendinaga with much greater ease.

The meetings, which at times broke into lively sessions of reminiscing, immeasurably furthered my understanding of the life and times of Oronhyatekha. Both communities claimed ownership of the man and set about proving the connections. Genealogical evidence was quickly tabled. But disdain and suspicion of the showy self-promoter-accusations about his character and his actions- also surfaced. There was a sense that he was "arrogant and pushy" and a distrust of his affiliation with many secret societies, including the Good Templars, a sect of the Masons. But more significantly, some felt that he was to blame for losses of land at Tyendinaga. Some believed that in a private meetings he was known to hold with cabinet ministers at the IOF headquarters, he had somehow negatively influenced policy at Indian Affairs.

Born at Six Nations on August 10, 1841, Oronhyatekha was baptized Peter Martin, the eighth in a family of nine children. From early on he preferred his Mohawk name - which translates as "Burning Sky." He was heard on occasion to remark, "There are thousands of Peter Martins, but there is only one Oronhyatekha."

He was trained as a cobbler in the Mohawk Institute, a residential school for Native children at Six Nations. It was there that he first encountered the Reverend Nelles who ran the school and served as the Church of England's agent. The Reverend's recommendation was sought by the Iroquois Confederacy Council when deciding which students should be financially supported while away from the community. The privilege was granted to only 12 children in each generation. Oronhyatekha was denied this support - and expressed his ire of Nelles in a later autobiographical sketch.

But when Oronhyatekha was 14, an American phrenologist travelling through the reserve probed the boy's cranium and proclaimed him educable. Oronhyatekha's family was reluctant to send him to college. Higher study was a perilous undertaking for any Native person in Canada at the time. Those who attained a level higher than that offered by the residential schools without the authorization of the New England Company (the Church of England's representative in Canada) were stripped of their status and nationhood and "awarded" full Canadian citizenship. They were no longer permitted to live on the reserve.

But Oronhyatekha was determined to accompany the phrenologist. He managed to convince Nelles and his family to let him go and ended up at Wesleyan Academy in

Wilbraham, Massachusetts. He took a program of missionary studies, which he graduated from two years later. Oronhyatekha was compelled to return home between semesters, as were other Native students attending colleges in the United States at the time, because lengthy absences from the reserve were also grounds for loss of status. After graduating from Wesleyan, he went on to further religious studies at Kenyon College, in Ohio. To raise the needed funds for his continued education, the ever-resourceful Oronhyatekha became a fairly stage actor and promoter. His roommate at Kenyon, A.B. Rockwell, mentions Oronhyatekha in his autobiography, noting that although Oronhyatekha rarely studied, he had a photographic memory and made excellent grades. He completed the four year program in three years.

Soon after completing college Oronhyatekha was offered the opportunity to attend Oxford University, but completed only one semester there. He had left the Six Nations reserve early in 1862 without Reverend Nelles's permission and was forced to return, but he did not go back to Six Nations. He began teaching at Tyendinaga. He continued his education at the University of Toronto and in 1866 was awarded a medical degree.

The doctor enjoyed a phenomenal degree of success by any standard. He was one of the first of Native ancestry to graduate as a medical doctor, he was named a justice of the peace, he was appointed consulting physician at Tyendinaga by Sir John A. McDonald, and he became chairman of the Grand Indian Council of Ontario and Quebec - just a few excerpts from the list of accomplishments, awards, and citations that actually prompted a notation about him in a Ripley's Believe It or Not newspaper column in the late 1960's. What was perhaps most remarkable about the man was not that he achieved success in the Victorian world but that he did so with his Mohawk heritage intact.

For Native people in North America, the 19th century was a time in which maintaining their conventional social, political, and religious forms and structures was a difficult if not an impossible struggle. The institutions and governments of the Victorian era saw First Nations peoples as an impediment to the prosperity of a fledgling Canada. The "Noble Red Man" was part of the past, and Darwinian theories of natural selection and extinction were thought to apply to First Nations people. By the mid-1800s, the pressures of racially inspired policies and practises were taking their toll, not least upon the Iroquois Confederacy's Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Oneida and Tuscarora Nations.

In response, the Mohawk people adopted a highly nationalistic stance centred on their language, weaving the social, political, and religious structures of the Victorian world into the fabric of their own language and cultural practices in a bid to maintain their sovereignty. Already in the late 1700s, the Bible had been translated into Mohawk, and now societies and associations affiliated with benevolence and fraternalism took hold and prospered within Native communities.

In 1870, Tyendinaga became the first Native community in Canada to elect their political leadership.

By the end of the 19th century, Mohawk nationalism had engendered many individual successes, Oronhyatekha among them. He was able to use his humanitarian ideals as a buttress against the intolerance that marked the Victorian era, and even to use Victorian institutions as the vehicle with which to promote those ideals.

Oronhyatekha's original plan had been to become a missionary teacher, a career he was still considering when he returned to the reserve in 1860, after graduating from Kenyon College. While teaching at Six Nations later that same year, at the age of 19, he was invited to present a welcoming address to the visiting Prince of Wales, late King Edward

VII. Oronhyatekha gave an eloquent speech in both Mohawk and English, and at six-foot-three he cut an impressive figure in his full Mohawk outfit. Sir Henry Wentworth Acland, then the regius professor of medicine at Oxford University, and young prince's physician, was also an aspiring artist and invited Oronhyatekha to pose for his sketches. Acland inquired whether Oronhyatekha was a chief, and if so, whether the position was elected or hereditary. With his unerring knack for sensing an opportunity, Oronhyatekha replied "Sometimes one, sometime both, sometimes neither." In truth, he was neither, but Acland was charmed and became a mentor and fast friend. Their relationship would last the rest of their lives.

It was after this meeting that Oronhyatekha determined to become a doctor himself. He practised medicine both on the reserve and in Ontario's Victorian society for more than a decade. But before long, he became more interested in this societies and abandoned his medical practice.

When Oronhyatekha joined the IOF in 1878, the order was promoting itself under the banner of "Liberty, Benevolence and Concord." It was a struggling group beset by factionalism and facing steep debts. Armed with a solid academic background, and with the flair and confidence of a showman, Oronhyatekha was ready to make his mark as supreme chief ranger.

During his tenure, Oronhyatekha led the struggling order to international success. He succeeded in extending the benefits of insurance to the average person at an affordable rate. Previously, insurance had been a privilege available primarily to the well-to-do. In 1891, he persuaded the organization to permit women to participate as full members, and later he extended benefits to the children of deceased members. (He also was possibly the first to require candidates to pass a medical examination to qualify for insurance.)

In his travels as supreme chief ranger, Dr. Oronhyatekha did as did all good Victorians - he collected. But he didn't restrict himself to acquiring the typical cabinet of curiosities. He amassed more than 800 artifacts and natural history specimens. The Oronhyatekha Historical Collection was heralded in *The Toronto Star* on September 10, 1902, as "The Beginning of a Very Valuable Museum, Founded by the Supreme Chief Ranger", when it opened in the Oronhyatekha Historical Rooms in The Temple, the world headquarters of the IOF located at Bay and Richmond streets in Toronto.

The collection was an appropriate reflection of Oronhyatekha himself. It proclaimed the prestige and status accorded a world traveller to places foreign, and was as random as it was eclectic, combining items for serious study in social and scientific fields - such as a Norwegian hand mangle accompanied by a discussion of artistic decoration of household implements - with others that were simply exotic or bizarre - including such "Curios From Foreign Parts" as boomerangs, Japanese shoes, and a platypus specimen.

The collection, whose classification in large measure is credited to George Mills McClurge who was hired for the purpose, offered an appreciation of ages-old relationships between peoples, specifically in North America.

There is little doubt that by juxtaposing the artifacts of his own life with those of Joseph Brant, Tecumseh, and many other celebrated First Nations leaders, Oronhyatekha was angling to ensure his own immortality. But the Oronhyatekha Historical Collection did something more important. A sense of sovereignty has long been part of Iroquoian history. It is the people's present and its future. As Trudy Nicks has pointed out, James Clifford surmised in his 1988 book, *The Predicament of Culture*, "resourceful Native Americans might soon appropriate the Western Museum." Oronhyatekha was already

working on that vision a century earlier. Committed to the ideals of his heritage, Oronhyatekha accepted the responsibility of defining his own identity.

At Christ's Church, Tyendinaga, where Oronhyatekha is buried, a historical plaque still stands in his memory. He is honoured in the "Canadian Indian Hall of Fame" collection housed at the Woodland Cultural Centre Museum. His son Acland died only a few months after his famous father, leaving only Oronhyatekha's daughter, Bena. When she died in 1939, furnishings and other possessions were sold through estate auction, including his traditional Mohawk outfit, which has since been located in the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County.

In 1911, the Oronhyatekha Historical Collection was donated by the IOF to the ROM, then part of the University of Toronto. Unfortunately, it was dispersed into departmental collections according to region or origin, which included the Mediterranean World, the Far East, Africa, Oceania, Europe, and the Americas, thus burying its most compelling aspect - what it tells us about the man who collected it.

Now, almost 100 years later, collaboration and cooperation between institutions is providing an opportunity to revisit a time and place that might otherwise have been lost. Thanks to the joint WCC/ROM project and some of Oronhyatekha's personal effects and furniture are turning up from basements and attics at Tyendinaga and Six Nations.

During my last visit to Tyendinaga, Ella Claus showed me a small collection of family snapshots and artifacts, including two watercolours of Oronhyatekha painted by her late husband Les Claus. The first of the doctor and his driver leaving The Pines, his magnificent home. The second was unique and most impressive; it was the place Eva Maracle had mentioned - Forester's Island. Originally known as Captain John's Island, the property had belonged to Ellen Hill's family. It is a small island in the Bay of Quinte across from what was then known as Mill Point, now called Deseronto. The painting shows an array of buildings of various architectural styles, appearing almost as a kind of Victorian theme park. While the buildings have long since disappeared, the painting seems to hint at a mythical quality to Oronhyatekha's life - castles floating in the mist in the shadowy dusk of late fall.

Dr "O"'s Imperial Connections

Of all of the ROM's holdings, the collection assembled by Dr. Oronhyatekha must rank among the most interesting. In his role as head, or supreme chief ranger, of the IOF, Dr. Oronhyatekha travelled extensively and amassed a large, eclectic collection of more than 800 artifacts and natural history specimens. A catalogue published in 1904 lists the wonders that awaited visitors to the Oronhyatekha Historical Rooms and Library. According to the catalogue, the collection was intended to encourage "education, increased interest in history, nature, and art, and beyond all, thought and reading in the Home". Of particular interest are the objects that record the historical relationships between the British Crown and the First Nations in the Great Lake region. In 1860, Oronhyatekha, on behalf of Six Nations, greeted the Prince of Wales, then on a North American tour. In his speech he reminded the royal visitor of the chain of friendship that had existed between the Iroquois and the Crown "for more than 200 years." The objects Oronhyatekha collected in later years, including a replica of the Coronation Chair at Westminster Abbey, reflect his life-long interest in royal connections. Many other objects like the ones above record important historical events in which Native people participated as allies of the British and as sovereign nations in their own right.

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