



Some Wabanaki Songs: Aboriginal American Poetry

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Excerpt:

Section II, 188*7. [1] Trans. Roy. Soc. Canada.

I.—Some Wabanaki Songs.


By John Reade.

(Presented May 25, 1887.)

Of the great families or groups of Canadian aborigines—the Hyberborean, the Athabaskan, the Columbian, the Dacotan, the Huron-Iroquois, and the Algonquin—the last named has the vastest range, and, in one respect at least, the greatest historical importance. Extending from Labrador to South Carolina, from Newfoundland to the Rocky Mountains, and comprising some forty dialects or varieties of allied speech, it presented to the first comers along the whole Atlantic coast those earliest specimens of the red man which have become typical in modern history and romance. To the Algonquin stock belonged, with one remarkable exception, all the Indians of Acadia, of Canada, of New England, of Pennsylvania, of Virginia, of the Carolines, with which the Europeans who touched the shores of North America came in contact. It included tribes as far apart as the Bethucks and the Blackfeet, the Crees and the Micmacs, the Mississaugas and the Delawares. The term Algonquin, as the name of a language which, in spite of manifold variations of form, was intelligible over so great an area, was at first applied to the dialect of the Indians of Lake Nipissing, who have long vanished, by gradual absorption or decay, as a separate tribe. The name survives, however, and the language is still spoken from the shores of the Atlantic far into the heart of the continent. A word which, in some shape, is common to all the dialects of that language is *wab*, signifying "white" or "bright." In Ojibway, *waban* is "the twilight of the morning," and by a natural extension of meaning, "the east." From it the eastern Algonquins assumed the name of Wabanaki, which, in its modified form, Abenaki, some of them still bear.

"I call the tribe of which the Passamaquoddies are a division Wabanaki," writes Mrs. W. Wallace Brown, "though the name is not accepted by all ethnologists, most of them preferring the term Abenaki. My reasons for my choice are (1) that the Passamaquoddies thus distinctly pronounce their tribal name (Wabanaki); (2) that etymology confirms the meaning which they assign to it—the word 'waba' signifying 'light,' and the words 'wabaso' (white), 'wabaock' (white cloth), 'waba-ban' (the ruler of the northern lights), and 'waba-eh' (a mythical white bird, to which is ascribed the origin of 'wabap' or white wampum) being all derived from it." On the same question, Mr. Leland says: "Among the six chief divisions of the red Indians of North America, the most widely extended is the Algonquin . . . Belonging to this division are the Micmacs of Nova Scotia, and the Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes of Maine, who, with the St. Francis Indians of Canada and some smaller clans, call themselves the Wabanaki, a word derived from a root signifying white or light, intimating that they live nearest to the rising sun or the east. In fact, the French-speaking St. Francis family, who are known par excellence as 'the

Sec. i, 1887. 1.

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Sandy Reid:

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