

The remarkable Dr. O: Canada's first aboriginal doctor was a flamboyant entrepreneur who challenged the destiny society set for him

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DESERONTO - Next to an old stone chapel, near where Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory nudges against this sleepy town on the Bay of Quinte, two gnarled maples rise higher than the church's Gothic steeple. The trees are planted so close together that, in the summer, their crowns form one vast, emerald canopy.

They were just saplings when a notable interment took place in the modest family plot over which they stand sentry. So were the rest of the trees now shading the cemetery that slopes down from Christ Church, the 163-year-old Royal Chapel of the Mohawks, symbol of an ancient bond between Mohawks and the British crown.

For those who attended that burial a century ago, the small trees wouldn't have compromised what must have been a panoramic view down to the bay and across to Foresters' Island, then crowded with architectural whimsies of recent vintage. A stately home stood midway between a grand amusement-park pavilion and a massive brick "castle," half a football field long and five storeys tall, with crenelated embattlements and sweeping veranda.

In March of 1907, the link between the florid, portly Mohawk being lowered into sacred ground, and the overweening collection of buildings on this tiny island in rural Ontario, would have been common knowledge. A few days before the funeral, front-page newspaper stories in Toronto had been full of the remarkable history they shared.

These days, a visitor to Deseronto would have to go to the lakeside Centennial Park to catch a glimpse of Foresters' Island, a thickly wooded plot that shows no sign of its former eccentricity. Outside the Royal Chapel of the Mohawks, the story that captivated newspaper readers in the spring of 1907 has been distilled into an inadequate nugget of prose, inscribed on an Ontario heritage plaque beside the grave site:

ORONHYATEKHA 1841-1907

The renowned Mohawk chief, orator and physician is buried in this churchyard. Born on the Grand River Reservation, he attended the Universities of Toronto and Oxford. At the age of twenty he was selected by the Six Nations to present official greetings to the visiting Prince of Wales. In 1871, he was a member of Canada's first Wimbledon rifle team, and in 1874 became President of the Grand Council of Canadian Chiefs. Oronhyatekha was largely responsible for the successful organization of the Independent Order of Foresters.

Intriguing? Certainly. But nowhere near as intriguing as its subject, a full-blooded aboriginal who, by dint of enormous charm and force of will -- and with the intervention of an itinerant purveyor of 19th-century quackery -- avoided the life of menial labour to which smug missionaries had consigned him and became not only Canada's first aboriginal doctor, but a flamboyant entrepreneur. The international organization he helmed would erect the tallest building in the British Empire as its Toronto headquarters only 14 years after Oronhyatekha had saved it from oblivion. Today, his life-size bronze statue still adorns the lobby of the Independent Order of Foresters' executive offices.

Oronhyatekha, "Dr. O" as he was affectionately called, managed it all without sacrificing his aboriginal identity, choosing to go by his Mohawk name, and insisting that nothing but Mohawk be spoken in his sprawling Tyendinaga retreat, The Pines. With wit and bluster, he deflected a challenge to his membership in the Independent Order of Foresters, a fraternal benefits society that admitted only able-bodied white males when he joined in 1878. The IOF's constitution was intended to exclude races inferior to the white race, he was once told. Oronhyatekha allowed as how his IOF sponsors apparently "recognized that I belonged to a race which is superior to the white."

THERE'S A BILLBOARD in front of Christ Church which lists major contributors in a campaign to raise funds for extensive renovations to the Royal Chapel, home to such gifts to the Mohawks as a coat of arms from George V, a Bible from Queen Victoria, and a triptych in the Mohawk language from George III. The latter is mounted below a stained-glass memorial window donated by Oronhyatekha. Among the campaign sponsors is an unfamiliar name, the New England Company.

Today, the New England Company is a British registered charity that grants almost \$300,000 a year to projects furthering the work of the Anglican Church in Canadian aboriginal communities. But when Oronhyatekha was born on the Six Nations reserve near Brantford, Ont., in 1841, it wielded a greater, and often less salutary, influence on native affairs.

Formed in 1649 to spread the gospel in the colony of New England, it refocused its missionary work on Canadian natives after the American War of Independence. The New England Company not only ran the schools in Six Nations in the 19th century, but effectively decided who among the native children should be educated and how.

In Oronhyatekha's time, the mission was in the hands of Rev. Abraham Nelles, who determined that the 10-year-old Mohawk, baptized Peter Martin, should be trained as a shoemaker. A few other students were given grants to pursue advanced education off the reserve, but Oronhyatekha, self-possessed and less pliable, was to be apprenticed to a trade.

Were it not for a visit to the school a few years later by an itinerant phrenologist, a practitioner of the pseudo-science of reading character in the contours of one's cranium, Oronhyatekha's story might have been far different. As it was, the phrenologist palpitated his skull and pronounced him "educable," according to extensive research by Keith Jamieson, curator of a 2002 exhibit on Oronhyatekha mounted by Brantford's Woodland Cultural Centre and the Royal Ontario Museum.

On the strength of this recommendation, Oronhyatekha was shipped to the Wesleyan Academy in Massachusetts for two years; by 16, he had returned to Six Nations as a teacher. Two years later, he was given another grant to continue his education at Kenyon College in Ohio, with an eye to becoming a missionary. But Rev. Nelles had his doubts about Oronhyatekha's piety and purpose, according to correspondence held at Oxford University, and the young Mohawk had to return to the reserve as a teacher.

His accomplishments impressed the Six Nations Council. In 1860, the 19-year-old was chosen to deliver the council's official address to the Prince of Wales during a royal visit. Oronhyatekha, already quite a showman, pulled off the performance of his life. It won some kind words from the Prince Edward Albert and his medical attendant, Henry Acland, Regius professor of medicine at Oxford.

From that casual conversation, Oronhyatekha inferred an open invitation to study at Oxford, which he pursued aggressively in correspondence with the doctor. Within two years, with Dr. Acland's help, Oronhyatekha did indeed go to Oxford. Though his term of study there may have been as short as two semesters, he would make much of his Oxford education the rest of his life.

Perhaps this brief sojourn in hallowed academic halls influenced the University of Toronto's decision to admit him to medical school in 1864, a year after his marriage to Tyendinaga Mohawk Ellen Hill. By 1867 he was practising medicine near Tyendinaga.

He advertised himself as an Oxford-trained physician and traded on his connection with Henry Acland, according to Gayle Comeau-Vasilopoulos, writing in the Dictionary of Canadian Biography. But his efforts were often met with prejudice, according to Mr. Jamieson's research; people presumed he was either incompetent or steeped in mystical native healing practices.

His fortunes in the next few years were varied. His renown grew in various ways -- he was appointed founding secretary of the Hastings County Medical Association, won nine medals representing Canada at the inaugural Wimbledon Cup shooting match in Ohio, and was appointed consulting physician for the Tyendinaga reserve -- but his income did not match his lifestyle. He was bankrupt by 1874, according to Comeau-Vasilopoulos, and he resigned his appointment in Tyendinaga to start afresh in London, Ont.

ON THE 22nd FLOOR of the Foresters building in suburban Toronto, Oronhyatekha still presides. Predominates may be a better word.

In one corner of the lobby of the organization's executive suite, he stands, hand in his coat, a mass of wavy hair on his big, square head. This is the life-size bronze that **Dr. O** commissioned in 1899 from Walter Seymour Allward, a sculptor who would later become famous for his massive stone memorial at Vimy Ridge.

Opposite the statue is an enormous oil painting which shows Oronhyatekha presiding nobly over a meeting of the IOF board, while at the other end of the same wall, adjacent to a larger-than-life marble bust of Oronhyatekha, is a towering oil portrait of the IOF's former Supreme Chief Ranger, in IOF regalia.

To say Dr. O is honoured by the Foresters would be an understatement. "He went out and put this organization on the map," says Kate Rounthwaite, the IOF's general counsel and executive secretary. "This guy was just a larger-than-life character who was a businessman and had a vision -- a very powerful vision -- of the IOF taking over the world."

To most observers, and certainly to insurance regulators, the Toronto-based Independent Order of Foresters is a \$6-billion insurance company with clients around the world. But it is still, at its heart, the fraternal benefits society that Dr. O joined in London in 1878. The doctor was an inveterate joiner, it seems, and had already become a member of the Masons, the Good Templars and the Orange Order, perhaps seeking social acceptance that could profit his practice. But it was his membership in the IOF, a then U.S.-based group offering insurance-like benefits to its members, that would prove most fateful.

The same year he joined the organization, its secretary absconded with company funds, says Ms. Rounthwaite. But rather than let the Ontario chapter founder with the rest of the IOF, Oronhyatekha seized control, and over two years of tortuous legal "skulduggery," reincorporated the IOF as a Toronto-based society and proceeded to make it a phenomenal success, she says.

Advocating the membership of women as good insurance risks and taking the IOF's concept of fraternalism to Europe and Asia, he set the organization on a path that would see its membership rise to 1.5 million by 1917. He oversaw the design and construction of the new IOF Temple at Richmond and Bay streets, a 12-storey "skyscraper" that was the talk of the nation.

Flush with success, Dr. O. built a lavish new residence, the "Wigwam," on what came to be known as Foresters' Island at Tyendinaga -- and then just kept building. The result was Foresters' Island Park, a pier, pavilion, dining hall and landscaped gardens for the use of IOF

members, and the "Castle," a large, well-appointed orphanage for the bereaved children of IOF families from around the world.

Meanwhile, like many Victorian gentlemen, he began collecting: items from Great Lakes natives history, curios from aboriginal cultures around the world, and more than 1,000 natural history specimens. The collection, originally on display at the IOF Temple and now in the hands of the Royal Ontario Museum, is an example of how natives adopted strategies of survival in a society that was bent on their assimilation, says Trudy Nicks, the ROM's curator of ethnology.

"It's as if it were a primary historical document that actually gives the natives' side of the story," she says.

Far from being assimilated, Oronhyatekha gained respect and renown because he stubbornly maintained his aboriginal identity. The extent of his renown was evident at his death in 1907. Some 10,000 mourners paid their respects when he lay in state at Massey Hall, a custom usually reserved for heads of state.

Mr. Jamieson has written that Oronhyatekha was "a showy self-promoter," a trait that hurt his reputation among some Mohawks in his lifetime and later. There was, no doubt, an element of self-interest in his celebration of his native heritage, but it does not diminish the accomplishment of the Mohawk boy who challenged the destiny that society had set for him.

IMAGES



Courtesy of Foresters

'Dr. O' was an entrepreneur and proud Mohawk.



Tony Atherton, The Ottawa Citizen

An Ontario heritage plaque on the grounds of the Royal Chapel of the Mohawks at the Tyendingaga Indian Reserve honours Oronhyatekha. This month marks the 100th anniversary of the Mohawk doctor's death.



Courtesy of Foresters and Woodland Cultural Centre

Dr. Oronhyatekha built 'The Castle' on Foresters Island to care for orphaned children of Independent Order of Foresters families.