

“With as Much Faith as Many Equally Absurd Doctrines Are Observed in Christendom”

Marybeth Eleanor Nevins

This study contrasts two early 19th century Algonquianists: Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Edwin James. Both were students, from 1811–1817, of natural philosophy professor Frederick Hall at Middlebury College. Each, separately, would go on to participate in expeditions West, establish residency in Sault Ste Marie, and write empirically informed accounts of the speakers of Algonquian languages that they encountered. One of them: Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, rose to prominence in his own time as the putative first scholar to make extensive documentation of folklore and mythic sagas for a Native American people, indeed of any indigenous people. His Ojibwe materials would be picked up by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and recast as a national epic in the *Song of Hiawatha*. The other, Edwin James, is receiving latter-day recognition as an environmental and social justice writer and a scholar and translator of Algonquian languages. An advocate of political reform, James’ writings about Algonquian leadership emphasize oratory and show them as reformers in their own societies, using language to engage in civic debate. Both Schoolcraft and James helped extend the colonial regime Westward; but there is a difference in the terms established by each for recognizing Native American languages and voices. Where Schoolcraft establishes Native American stories as a storehouse of ancient folklore, as raw material to be mined for a new national literature; James treated Algonquian legends and fables as contemporary equivalents to stories circulating among settlers, and Algonquian leadership as political citizens using eloquence to direct change in their own jurisdictions. He also established, through comparative philology in 1827, historical depth for Algonquian language communities and claims to place. Whereas Schoolcraft’s proto-linguistics casts Algonquian languages as antiquities to be documented as a national resource; James’ early linguistic studies presents speakers of Algonquian languages as comparable political citizens alongside their settler contemporaries.