

The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot: A Clan-Based Study by John Steckley

Gary Warrick

Volume 106, Number 2, Fall 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050701ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050701ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Warrick, G. (2014). Review of [*The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot: A Clan-Based Study* by John Steckley]. *Ontario History*, 106(2), 275–277.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1050701ar>

The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot *A Clan-Based Study*

By John Steckley

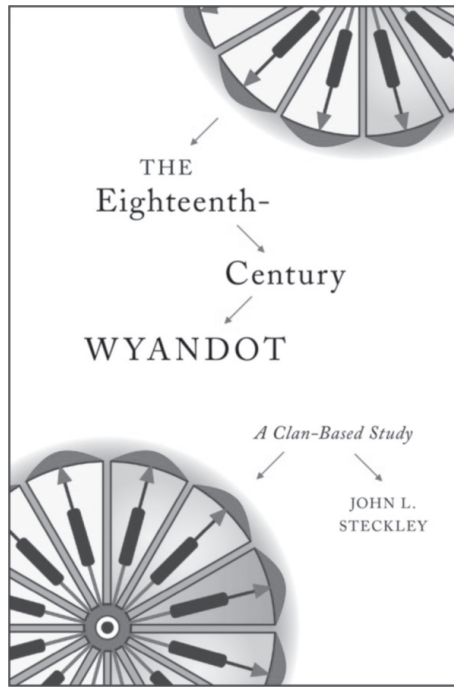
Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014. 305 pages. \$85.00 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-55458-956-2 (www.wlupress.wlu.ca).

Pierre Potier, a Jesuit priest, was a missionary to the Wyandot of the Detroit area from 1744-1781. In an effort to better administer to the Wyandot, Potier conducted two censuses of Wyandot villages, recording the inhabitants of every cabin and longhouse, amounting to over 500 people in two villages (Petit Village and Grand Village) and two outlying hamlets. In typical Jesuit fashion, Potier's record keeping was remarkably detailed. He noted the names of clan leaders, elders (both men and women), household demographics, marital and family relationships, and sometimes even the age of individuals. It is the most complete census of an Aboriginal community in Canada prior to the nineteenth century. The 1747 Wyandot census offers a unique snapshot of a Wyandot community and is the foundation of John Steckley's latest book. Steckley's unmatched expertise in Wendat language and history breathes life

into the 1747 census, producing a unique picture of the political lives of Wyandot men and women in eighteenth-century Ontario. *The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot: A Clan-Based Study* will have broad appeal not only to historians of colonial and Aboriginal North America, but also to anthropologists and archaeologists.

The thesis of Steckley's book is that clans, or related family groups tracing their origin to an ancient ancestor, "kept the Wyandot strong, which enabled them to survive a forced migration and a splitting up of the villages and tribes that made up the ancestors of the Wyandot" (p. 6). Furthermore, Steckley believes that clans "gave the Wyandot links with the ancestors and provided the foundations necessary for building their political structure to survive the uncertain winds of the future" (p.6). In short, according to Steckley, the only constant in Wyandot life, from the time of their dispersal in Ontario in 1650 until today, is their clan system. Clans are the glue that have held Wyandot society together and made them resilient to cen-

turies of forced migration and colonial interference. And Steckley offers compelling evidence that senior Wyandot women have been the key agents in maintaining clans and their crucially important socio-political functions.



The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot: A Clan-Based Study is organized into eight chapters and four appendices, with a set of endnotes that are mostly interpretations of translations of Wendat words and names in the eighteenth-century documents. In the "Preface", John Steckley summarizes his 40-year academic interest in Wyandot language, culture, and history and he declares that the book is the culmination of his life's work on the Wyandot. Chapter 1 introduces the 1747 Wyandot census as a "photograph in time" (p. 1) and offers a brief history of the Wyandot, listing the principal primary and secondary sources, from their Petun, Huron, and Neutral origins in the seventeenth-century to the contemporary communities in Kansas, Oklahoma, Michigan, and Quebec. Chapter 2 answers two questions: who are the Wyandot and what is the nature and purpose of Wyandot clans? Steckley defines the Wyandot as a creation of the tumultuous events of the seventeenth century, and sees them as comprised of Petun, Wendat (Huron), and Neutral.

In the eighteenth century, there were ten Wyandot clans, named after animals. In Wyandot society, clan name was inherited from one's mother, clan members had to marry outside of the clan, clan membership was extended to outsiders by adoption, clans were further organized into three phratries (sociopolitical groups composed of several clans), and each clan was led by elders who had unique and hereditary names. In Chapter 3, Steckley traces the lives of five prominent Wyandot clan leaders of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century as illustration of the autonomy of clans within the Wyandot nation. He presents convincing historical evidence for clan leaders acting independent of larger tribes or nations in dealing with

the French, on behalf of their clan brothers and sisters. For example, rivalries between clans are revealed in the political machinations of Sastaretsi (Deer clan leader) and Quarante Sols (Bear clan leader) regarding relocation of the Wyandot from Michilimackinac to Detroit in 1703 (pp. 68-72).

Chapter 4 deals with the adoption of outsiders into Wyandot clans. For native Wyandot, clan membership was inherited through the maternal line. However, non-Wyandot people could become Wyandot by adoption into a clan (John Steckley is an adopted member of the Wyandot). Jesuit priests and French colonial leaders were commonly adopted, as were refugees and spouses from other Aboriginal nations. Steckley skillfully uses historical records of adoption of Jesuits and commandants of Fort Pontchartrain (Detroit) to interpret that the three Wyandot phratries were rank-ordered (i.e., Deer, Turtle, Wolf) in importance. In the case of the defeated Fox nation, refugees were adopted into various Wyandot clans in the 1740s, and baptized as Christians (pp. 98-101). Chapter 5 examines Christianity amongst the Wyandot. The level of participation of Wyandot clans in Christian rituals, namely baptism, marriage, and funerals, varied depending on their relationship with Jesuit priests, who commonly exercised their political power by befriending or shunning certain clan leaders.

Male political leadership of the Wyandot is the focus of Chapter 6. Men were appointed to be clan leaders and represented their clans at village councils. Clan leaders were selected at relatively young ages by elder women and filled overlapping political roles. For instance, the Deer clan leader Sastaretsi was the Grand Chief of the Wyandot, the leader of the Deer phratry, a household head, as well as a

member of the council of Elders. Political rivalries existed within and between clans and phratries, especially in dealings with Europeans. Also, there were peace chiefs and war chiefs for certain clans. Steckley offers a political organization chart for the Wyandot in 1747: grand chief (1), phratry chiefs (3), associate chiefs (6), clan leaders (8), and a council of elders (60 – 31 men and 29 women) (pp. 167-168). Chapter 7 provides a brilliant analysis of the role of women in Wyandot politics, providing brief biographical sketches of 34 named women of significance (pp. 186-200). While Steckley is reluctant to call female elders “clan matrons” or “clan mothers” (p. 201), essentially his description of their role and function in Wyandot household, political, and ritual life both recognizes and implies that women held the reins of power in eighteenth-century Wyandot communities.

Chapter 8 “A Summary” wraps up the book, utilizing both text and tables to impress on the reader the importance of clan organization to the eighteenth-century Wyandot. In Steckley’s view, the survival of the Wyandot to this day is a testament to the “flexibility and strength” of eighteenth-century clan-based leaders and their political strategies “to survive the dangerous times in which they lived” (p. 203). Four appendices follow the final chapter. Appendix A: “The Census” provides Steckley’s analysis of the historical census data and its inclusion is absolutely essential to a careful reading of the book. The other appendices offer Steckley’s translations of historical texts in the Wendat language, but they could have been omitted without any serious loss to the overall message of the book.

While the content and overall organization of the book are both generally excellent, there are some minor faults. First of

all, there are no maps or historical illustrations in the book. An overview map would have assisted the reader in tracking the Wyandot migrations and demonstrating the geographical distance between contemporary Wyandot communities. Similarly, illustrations or reproduced maps of eighteenth-century Detroit or the Wyandot village are noteworthy in their absence. In addition, tables and charts are sprinkled liberally throughout the various chapters, resulting in a disruption to the flow of the narrative of the text and adding to a sense of disorganization at times. Some of the charts should have been cut from the text and pasted into appendices (e.g., “Village Plan Chart” and “Basic Wendat Chronology” in Chapter 1; “Petit Village Housing Pattern” in Chapter 4; “Christian Marriage Records” and gift lists in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7).

In summary, as stated in the conclusions in the final chapter, Steckley’s real reason for writing the book “is to take away the anonymity and casual mention of people who matter in the history of the Wyandot and of the Great Lakes in the eighteenth century” (p. 213). Virtually every page of *The Eighteenth-Century Wyandot* contains the names, biographical sketches, and achievements of Wyandot people, rarely seen in Aboriginal history, particularly of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. This book deserves a prominent place on the bookshelf of any serious scholar of Aboriginal history and John Steckley deserves the highest praise for writing Wyandot history that rightly depicts Aboriginal people of the past as multidimensional and as influential figures in Ontario and Canadian history. I am certain that the Wyandot will be very pleased with this book.

Gary Warrick
Wilfrid Laurier University