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CHARLES A. COOKE, MOHAWK SCHOLAR

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To the short list of native Iroquois scholars—J. N. B. Hewitt and A. C. Parker—must now be added the name of Charles A. Cooke, eighty-two years of age, who has completed his life-long search for Iroquoian proper names and their authentic interpretations. His manuscript contains more than 6,000 names taken down in missionary spelling, and includes phonetic renderings by the author of this short biography, and tape recordings made in duplicate by the collector himself, at the National Museum of Canada. In the light of this monumental accomplishment, the personality and career of Charles Cooke as a scholar deserves consideration here.

At the end of February 1893, his father, Angus Cooke, took him as his interpreter to Ottawa, where he had some business to transact with the Department of Indian Affairs. He, the father, had become an "old-time" missionary on the Gibson Reserve at Muskoka; he had built a church and was considered the chief. While in Ottawa, father and son called on Col. O'Brien, friend of theirs and federal member of Parliament for their district. The Colonel was so impressed with young Charles, whose native name is *Thawwensere*, that he coaxed him to stay in the capital city and take up a clerical position at the Indian Affairs. This meant a change of plans, for the young man was bound for Montreal where he intended to begin his studies in medicine at McGill. Still undecided, he resolved to probe his opportunities there, in the Records Branch, where under the direction of a chief, Samuel Stuart, he had to classify documents both old and current. He also acted as translator and interpreter for the Iroquois dialects, whenever deputations or visitors called upon the Department. Soon his interest in the meaning of words and significance of personal names awakened, and such words and names often puzzled him. Out of curiosity and genuine incentive he began in a haphazard way to collect materials, asking for more names, their meaning, and the tribes and clans to which the names belonged. He had already started casually at first, off and on, to witness the snow-ball-like accumula-

tion within his personal files of names and various items. Most of all the old traditional names drew his attention, among them the fifty titles of the founders of the League of the Five Nations, and he never ceased to seek them out. In 1930, after exhausting live sources, he paid a visit to Caughnawaga, where he was impressed by the old Jesuit records of baptism, marriage, and burial, from the earliest days of the Jesuit mission. By then the contents of the annual reports (mostly from 1911 to 1918) of the Anthropological Division of the National Museum of Canada were familiar to him, and he had studied the eight hundred Huron-Wyandot names recorded at first hand by me, with whom he had become acquainted years before, through his chief, Dr. Duncan C. Scott. There he was amazed at the close similarity between this other Iroquoian dialect and the Mohawk, and the personal names in both dialects.

Letters of enquiry about the Indians often received from abroad were referred to him for an answer, and this led to research in printed and oral sources. To his regret he found out that the Indians themselves, instead of being interested in their own language and names, would give him scant encouragement. Suspicious, they did not respond whole-heartedly to his questions. But, as if to compensate, he received inspiring cooperation from the Catholic missionaries at St. Regis, Oka, and Caughnawaga, especially from Fathers Nadeau and Laurent in the latter two missions, where he examined the records in the Archives, and from the Rev. Olivier Maurault in Montreal (now Rector of the University of Montreal). Pursuing his studies after he had retired from the Civil Service, he spent a month, early in the last war, at Caughnawaga and Montreal, and consulted, in Montreal, Father Desjardins, archivist at the Jesuit college of St. Mary's, and E.-Z. Massicotte, archivist of the Court Archives of Montreal. At various times he also met F. W. Waugh, of the National Museum, and collected from him Iroquois names of plants; and Dr. Robert Bell, the geologist who gathered Indian legends. To Dr. Bell he furnished translations of Iroquois texts and brought

in legends written at his request by Louis Thompson, an Abenakis-Iroquois of the neighborhood. From 1935 to 1939 he met J. N. B. Hewitt four times at the Smithsonian Institution, after some correspondence with him, and then discussed various Iroquois names reproduced in the *Handbook of American Indians*, especially those of the culture hero Deganawida. While they agreed in the interpretation of some names—Hewitt spoke Seneca and knew a little Mohawk—they differed in others, for instance, in Brant's name: Thayendanegean. It was only a few years ago that he became acquainted with Dr. William N. Fenton, of the Smithsonian, who introduced him to Dr. William E. Lingelbach, Librarian of the American Philosophical Society. From that moment on, he was determined to put the last touches upon his huge manuscript of Iroquoian names. Indeed, the first copy of this unique document, along with phonetic spelling and tape recordings, has now been acquired by the Society for its preservation in public archives.

Upon meeting Charles A. Cooke, a white-haired resident of Ottawa in the midst of his family comprising his wife of English birth, and three married children and nine grandchildren, one might not suspect at first that this urbane gentleman with a deep voice once was a little Mohawk boy unable to speak English, on an Indian reservation in a northern woodland. For his backgrounds have undergone a drastic evolution, while he was garnering rich experience from the duality of his life and culture.

Born at Oka on the twenty-second of March 1870, in a frame-house which still stands, he first knew his father, Angus Cooke, under his Mohawk name—*Adonhgmundagwen* (He-has-left-the-Point-of-land). But his father, who could not speak English or French, belonged to no clan as is true of all full-blooded Iroquois, because his own mother, at St. Regis, was French, and clanship descends through the mother. Angus' father was named Bearfoot, of the Grand River Reserve. Charles' own mother, whose family name was Katrine (*Thiweza*, in Mohawk),¹ belonged to the Bear clan, so she conferred upon her son by his very birth the kinship of the Bear. Her father was Louis Katrine, and mother, Felicide Tarbell, of St. Regis.² Her grandfather, Peter Tarbell, had been a captive from New England who, with

the Williams and others who were part American and Indian, had established the colony of St. Regis, away from Caughnawaga to which they first had belonged.



FIG. 1. Charles A. Cooke.

Charles' father, Angus, was also of mixed descent. His mother (Charles' paternal grandmother) belonged to the Raymond family, French Canadians, of Hudson opposite Oka. She had been given, with her sister, to an Indian family to be brought up, and they had married within the tribe.

At five and six years of age, Charles began to attend the Methodist mission school at Oka. But a schooling there was primitive and casual. The teachers often changed, and the boy for his age had too many responsibilities besides going to school. His father, who had bought a farm behind Oka, was forced by the depression to work in the lumber camps, and to leave the care of the homestead in the winter mostly to Charles who was his eldest in a family of seven: the others were Thomy, Nancy, Joseph, Mary, Elizabeth, and Rina. In the fall of 1881 the farm house was sold and the Cooke family moved out to Muskoka, in the heart of the Northern forest. A log house was built of timbers cut and erected by their own hands. The

¹ Born at Oka in 1841, she died in 1927.

² She died in 1885.

following year, when Charles was twelve, a school was opened in another log house, where about twenty children gathered. It is there that he first attempted to learn English—Mohawk only being spoken at home. The first teacher, Donald Carmichael, grew interested in the boy and taught him the rudiments. Those were pioneering days. The trails through the woods to the school had to be blazed, and church services on Sundays were held in various log-houses by visiting missionaries. Angus Cooke, Charles' father, was engaged by the Methodist Missionary Society to preach regularly, as he could read the Indian Bible, having learned by himself. He was then a lumber jobber in a territory under license by a lumber concern. Instead of hiring men to cut logs, the Company sublet lots of three hundred acres to jobbers who cut the logs and hauled them to the streams for floating. The outlet was the Georgian Bay.

Angus Cooke, in his zeal for the welfare of his compatriots thought that his son Charles should enjoy the benefits of school education and of learning English. So he sent him to the Mount Elgin School, a resident school under the Methodist missions, at Munsie, Ontario. But the boys there, from the Algonkin reserves in the vicinity, spoke a "pigeon" English, and as soon as they realized that Charles was a Mohawk—the only one of his kind there—they were roused by ancient tribal animosities, and they "ganged up on him" during the manual labor hour after school.

His Mohawk blood responded to the challenge and single-handed he defended himself well enough to set things aright, to win the respect and, eventually, the friendship of the others, irrespective of race. But after Charles had been there for two years his father realized that this school had failed in giving good training in English. So he sent him to the public school at Gravenhurst near home.

While still going to school, young Charles worked at the lumber. But, determined as he was to acquire an education, he managed to get through school in 1886, and, in 1888, to pass his junior matric at the Gravenhurst high school. Then the Methodist Missionary Society gave him a teaching post for a year at the Indian school on the Gibson Reserve, until he was seventeen or eighteen. After this he went to work, from April to November, for the Georgian Bay Lumber Company. His assiduity in every pursuit was exceptional: he never lost a day's pay. So satisfied with his record was the manager, that he engaged him as a clerk in the lumber camp. Eventually he gladly heard that his young employee wanted to go on with his studies.

For an encouragement he gave him a small bonus, "to get him started." So his protégé proceeded to the Gravenhurst High School, where he stayed a year. But earning a living soon forced him back to mill work, where, for a while, he became a scaler. Nothing daunted him in his progress, and he was about to go to the University when he entered upon his civil service career in Ottawa.

He was married twice; first, in 1896, to Edith Susan Day, born in London, England, who died in 1915. Of this marriage three children were born: Sidney, in 1904, still living, and chief-accountant of the Noranda Mine; Minola (Mrs. Steele), and Kathleen (Mrs. Bruce), both residing in Ottawa. His second marriage, in 1919, was to Minnie Florence Day, his deceased wife's sister.

Appointed recruiting officer, in 1916, for the Six Nations, and attached as lieutenant to the 114th Battalion, he soon rose to the rank of recruiting officer in the army for the Indians of all parts of Canada. In this capacity, he visited the Iroquois reserves of Ontario and Quebec, as well as those of the Algonkin (Ojibway) of Western Ontario. And this gave him fresh opportunities for research in Iroquoian names.

After his retirement from the civil service, in 1926, he found that time, for an active worker like himself, was weighing heavily on his hands. So he entered upon another career—from 1926 to 1934—that of a lecturer and recitalist, whose programs consisted of Indian lore and songs, of talks on Indian culture as a whole, of recitations of Pauline Johnson's poems, and of songs with piano accompaniments by Cadman and Lieurence. In his productions he used an Indian costume, sang Iroquois and Huron songs, and sketched out Indian dances. Pauline Johnson had blazed the trail along similar lines. As a wide public proved responsive, he toured more than once Canada or parts of Canada, and sections of the United States.

Upon reaching his eighties, in the summer of 1949, he joined the National Museum party of Marcel Rioux and the author of this short biography, in their survey of Iroquois linguistics and ethnology at Grand River, Ontario; and again, in 1951, to complete the grammatical study of Mohawk, Cayuga, Onondaga, and Tuscarora. And, in 1950, he assisted Allan Wargon, of the National Film Board of Canada, in making a film representing the life and religious activities of Handsome-Lake (Cayuga and Onondaga) group of the Five-Nations in Ontario.