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Article in *British Journal of Canadian Studies* · March 2014

DOI: 10.3828/bjcs.2014.4

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Huron Carol: a Canadian cultural chameleon

The Huron Carol was written in the Wendat or Huron language in the early 1640s by Jesuit Father Jean de Brébeuf. It tells the story of the birth of Jesus. Over time it became a part of the religious culture of the Wendat people. The interpretation of the Huron Carol became less true to the language and culture of the people from the translations first of Father Etienne Thomas de Villeneuve Girault in the late eighteenth century and Huron Paul Tsa8enhohi Picard during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Early in the twentieth century Jesse Middleton created a version of the song that made it popular throughout North America, but was not in any way a translation of the original Wendat version. The process of the song's acculturation to mainstream culture turned around by the latter half of that century, with the song being recorded repeatedly in the original Wendat, and with versions being created in other Aboriginal languages.

Keywords: Wendat, Huron, Jesuits, Father Jean de Brébeuf, Huron Carol

Introduction

The Huron Carol is the product of both European and Aboriginal cultures. Originally written sometime in the early 1640s, most likely by the French Jesuit Father Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649), the product of his years living with the Wendat (Huron) people whose country lay by the shores of Lake Huron, the song entailed an equal pairing of European and Aboriginal cultures. The tune is French, 'Une Jeune Pucelle' ('A Young Maid'), a sixteenth-century European folk song with many variations sung in France, Germany and Italy. The tune may have been chosen because of its tonal similarities to the songs of the Huron or Wendat people (the latter being the people's name for themselves). The original Wendat words represent a culture-crossing collaboration between Brébeuf and early Wendat Christians, applying concepts traditional in the culture to ideas and stories that were new to the people.

Since the seventeenth century, the song has taken on different meanings, shifting with the cultural currents of the time. The words used to sing the song have changed over time to reflect more one cultural contributor than the other. Over the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries, the Huron Carol developed more European characteristics, first French, then English, the latter drawing on Algonquian terms of reference rather than the Iroquoian ones found in the Wendat language.¹ The well-known English words, the author of which was possibly ‘inspired’ by some of the ideas contained in the French translation, or at least by the idea of the telling of the Christmas story, but containing very different and somewhat romanticised Aboriginal content, were first published in 1927. In this version are the words ‘Gitchi Manitou’ (‘Great Spirit’) borrowed from the Ojibwe language. There are no Huron words except for the occasionally used title ‘Jesus Ahatonnia’, ‘Jesus, he is born’. It is not the first time that a non-Aboriginal writer mixed Iroquoian (the language family to which Wendat belongs) and Algonquian (the language family to which Ojibwe belongs) words. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s epic poem of 1855, *The Song of Hiawatha*, had a Mohawk (one of the Six Nations of the Iroquois) heroic figure appearing in a story filled with Ojibwe words.

However, in line with the recent revival of the Wendat language² and the growing respect for Aboriginal cultures in mainstream North American culture, the Wendat heritage of the song is returning.

Further, the impact and influence of Canada’s first Christmas carol are growing. Once rarely sung and hardly known outside of just one community, Lorette, or Wendake (‘at the Wendat’), the Huron reserve on the outskirts of the city of Quebec, the song is now sung by people of many cultures, the most often recorded and performed of Christmas songs written in Canada.

Song traditions of the Huron

It is important to recognise that the Wendat people who first sang the Huron Carol were a musically rich people, living lives filled with song. Jesuit Father François Joseph Le Mercier wrote in 1639 of the success Jesuit missionaries were having attracting the Huron to their religious services. He attributed this success largely to the similarity of newly translated and composed Jesuit songs and prayers to their counterparts in Huron culture:

the curiosity to see our images and to hear our songs attract these peoples to our cabin on Sundays and Feast days, where we appear in our surplices to offer public prayers ... Our Superior begins with a Prayer in their language, which he pronounces in the tone generally used in the Councils ... [W]e afterwards sing the Apostle's creed in the native rhymes. [... After the catechism t]here follows some Church Hymn, and then all is ended with a prayer, intoned to some tune resembling their own songs, of which they are very fond. (JR15: 121–3)

One major reason, then, why Jesuits such as Father Jean de Brébeuf decided on using music as a strategy in teaching Christianity to the Huron was because the Huron had a rich tradition of song. This richness can be seen in the extensive vocabulary in the Wendat language that pertains to song. The following are eight Wendat words or roots that will demonstrate some of that:

Wendat Word	English Translation
Karih8ak8an	lit. to seize or grab a matter, fig. to lift up one's voice or begin a song (Steckley 2007b: 132–3 and 233, and Potier 1920: 272, translation mine)
'rend'	song, dance, prayer, spell (noun root; see Steckley 2007a: 214–21)
Chrendaienh8i	lit. Do you know this 'rend'? Fig. Do you have knowledge of this song, dance? (HF65: 43)
'atsi'	to sing for a social purpose (verb root; Steckley 2007b: 71)
Ta,iasen	sing for me (as spoken by a sick person; see Steckley 2007a: 187)
'nnonh8arori'	lit. to disturb or move the brain (noun root plus verb root; see Steckley 2007a: 191–4); fig. to sing one's death song ³
'a8ist'	to imitate someone's song (Steckley 2007b: 69)
Hetsa8ist	Sing his song
'atonront'	to sing a war song (Steckley 2007b: 57)
Atonront a,ochien	lit. to sing, they (indefinite) hold a ceremony, fig. ceremony of singing (Steckley 2010a: 147)
'atonrichent'	lit. to cause one's breath to fall (noun root plus verb root), fig. to respond with a 'hen' 'hen' to someone singing (FHO; Steckley 2007b: 268 and 302)
'end8tsihat'	to sing to pass the time (Potier 1920: 377 and Steckley 2007b: 274)

In their missions around the world, the Jesuits were quick to use the culture of the people they were trying to convert, a strategy they used often to good effect in far-flung locations such as Japan, China and India in

the seventeenth century. Employing the rich song traditions of the Wendat people would be an obvious choice as a tool for Jesuit missionising.

Father Jean de Brébeuf

The oral tradition of the Huron has long told that the Huron Carol was composed by Father Jean de Brébeuf, probably in 1643, when he had temporarily left the people for medical and possibly social reasons (i.e., some Wendat had been threatening him) in 1641, to return in 1644. This association makes sense, as Brébeuf was the first of the Jesuits (named *hatitsihenstaatsi* ‘they are called charcoal’, by the Huron)⁴ to become fluent in their language. They called him *Hechon*, largely an attempt to pronounce his first name. As there was no ‘z’ (the sound of ‘je’ in French) in the Wendat language, they replaced that sound with a near equivalent, ‘š’ represented with the ‘ch’ (as in Chicago) in French. To this ‘he’ was added, which would indicate a masculine singular pronominal prefix.⁵ While his name did not originally have a translation or ‘meaning’ as such, it developed the connotative meaning of an outsider who masters the language and uses that knowledge to try to help the people. When Brébeuf died, he was succeeded by Father Pierre Joseph-Marie Chaumonot and Father Daniel Richer in bearing that proud name. **I bear it now.**

Brébeuf arrived in New France in 1625, 32 years old, and yet only three years a fully fledged priest of the Jesuit order. His missionary work with the Huron started in 1626 when he went to live with them for two years. He may have learned something of the language courtesy of the Recollects, who had spent short periods of time with the Huron, although there are no clear signs that he did. Foremost among the Recollect linguists was Brother Gabriel Sagard, who stayed in Huronia from 1623 to 1624, and who composed from his own work and the unreferenced efforts of others a French–Huron dictionary (see Steckley 2010b).

Early on, Brébeuf threw his considerable energy and intellect into working with the Huron language. By some time shortly after 1628, he had composed a catechism. It was a translation of Father Diego Ledesma’s influential ‘*Doctrina christiana*’, which by the end of the sixteenth century had already been translated from Latin into such languages as Spanish, Polish and Lithuanian. Brébeuf’s translation was an impressive 15-page effort, and presents a good example of how and what Brébeuf was thinking. You see his initial caution about the social impact of his use of the language

in such features as using *Atonesta* meaning ‘one gives recognition, thanks by such a means’ for Eucharist (Steckley 1978: 113), in a likely effort to avoid being perceived as promoting cannibalism through reference to literally eating ‘the body of Christ’.

You also see the noun bias of a European language speaker in his creation of more than 30 new Huron nouns to express Christian concepts in this catechism. Almost all of them were ungrammatical in Huron, doing cognitive and structural violence to the rules and verb dominance of the language. Eventually, he and those Jesuit missionary linguists who would follow him would learn that the Huron language was much more verb-based than were European languages, and would express most of those same concepts with well-formed Huron verbs. The Huron Carol demonstrates more sophisticated comprehension of the language than did the earlier ‘written’ catechism. Verbs carried most of the message. His Huron appears fluent.

The Jesuit mission was interrupted after Brébeuf’s stay by the short-lived English takeover of the St Lawrence River by the Kirke brothers. After the French won it back, the Jesuits came back to stay in 1634, with a clear sense of what their mission was to be in this part of the ‘New World’.

One of the main tasks that they set themselves was to become fluent in the Wendat language. Their position as humble students of the language was early laid out by Brébeuf in this instruction to those who would join him in the mission:

The Huron language will be your Saint Thomas and your Aristotle; and clever man as you are, and speaking glibly among learned and capable persons, you must make up your mind to be for a long time mute among the Barbarians. You will have accomplished much, if, at the end of a considerable time, you begin to stammer a little. (JR10: 91)

His humility here does a disservice to his gifts with the language.

Father Jean de Brébeuf was not the only Jesuit in the Huron mission that worked with songs. Father Antoine Daniel (1601–48) was gifted in that area, as he was gifted linguistically. After coming to live with the Huron in 1634, he learned the Wendat language quickly, and may have written the words to Wendat versions of the Pater and the Credo. He may have provided some assistance to his colleague in the writing of the words of the song.

When Brébeuf first wrote the Huron Carol, he reached deep into the language and culture of the Huron people to express the Christmas story,

speaking of 'a,oki'⁶ 'they (indefinite) are spirits' rather than angels, the three hatirih8annens⁷ 'they (masculine) are of great authority' or 'great men' involved 'greasing or oiling the scalp' of the baby Jesus (probably with sunflower oil) many times, in other words greeting him with great reverence and respect. He spoke of Jesus as having 'pity' or compassion, something the Huron people asked for from a spirit. Brébeuf remarked on this in the Jesuit Relation of 1636:

They throw some Tobacco into the fire; and if it is, for example, to the Sky that they address themselves, they say, *Aronhiaté onné aonstaniwas taitenr*, 'O Sky, here is what I offer thee in sacrifice; have pity on me, assist me.' (JR10: 159)

Brébeuf's Wendat teachers

It was not just the language that would be the Saint Thomas and Aristotle for the Jesuits learning Wendat, and that would guide Brébeuf in his writing of the Huron Carol. They had a number of Wendat teachers that provided invaluable instruction in the language, including the use of the Wendat language to express European Christian ideas. Brébeuf was not the only cultural border crosser in this regard. We have the names and stories of two of the most important of these. One was a young man named Amantacha or Louis Ste. Foy.⁸ He had been taken by the Jesuits to France in 1626, and he stayed there until his return home in 1628. Brébeuf visited Amantacha in the latter's home village twice during 1635, and Amantacha lived with the Jesuits at the Huron village of Ihonatiria for part of the winter of 1635–6. Brébeuf acknowledged his assistance in the following two quotations:

in our Catechizing and teaching of the Savages, he served as Interpreter, and has translated several things into the Huron language for us, wherein we admired the facility with which he understood our language, and comprehended and explained the most difficult mysteries. (JR10: 33)

I took pleasure in hearing Louys explain our Mysteries to his relatives; he did it with grace, and showed that he had understood them and made them his own. Ah! How I wish I could speak Huron as well as he does, for indeed in comparison with him I only stutter; and yet the way of saying a thing gives it an entirely different meaning. (JR10: 55)

Probably also of great assistance to Brébeuf in his work was the older Joseph Chihoatenhwa ('He is brought from afar': 1602–39). Father Joseph Le Mercier commented on the nature of Chihoatenhwa's assistance in the Wendat language training of Jesuits in 1639, the year of the Christian Wendat's death:

When we asked him for the initial or final forms of words, which are sometimes inaudible, he would pronounce them very distinct for us. This helped us significantly, along with God's help, to learn the conjugations. He even dictated several excellent talks to us on our holy mysteries, in an extremely logical sequence and so distinctly that we did not miss a single word. (JR15: 113)

We can see something of how Chihoatenhwa was able to marry his language with the concepts of the missionaries in an extended (more than 900 English words in translation) Christian prayer he composed in Huron that was published in 1641 (JR21: 251–65). It was the first document published in the Wendat language that did not contain multiple errors. Certainly it was the first to include the complex relationships of subjects and objects involved in the pronominal prefixes that are mandatory in Huron verbs, possibly the most complicated aspect of the Wendat grammar with which Brébeuf, Le Mercier and their colleagues had difficulties. The following two quotations are short excerpts from my English translation of Chihoatenhwa's prayer. They show something of how he wedded the ideas of French Christian and Huron traditional culture:

And if my soul wishes to become rich, I will think that he does not think of God. I will greatly fear this and take care as to how I live. For it is easy for one who is rich to be one who offends, as, unknown to him, he is accompanied by a bad spirit. (Steckley 1992: 16)

It is like it is with those who go to trade. They suffer, those who go to trade. It is of little significance, however, that one expresses satisfaction when returning home and thinks: 'We are now returning home and are at the end of our suffering. For it is only when one is at the point of dying that one should think: 'Now I will be at the end of my suffering.' (p. 17)

The eloquence of Chihoatenhwa, plus his capacity to build conceptual bridges from Huronia to Europe, make highly likely his role as collaborator in the composition of the carol.

The first published reference to the Huron Carol

The main reference we have to the story of the interaction between Jesuits and the Wendat is the collection of annual reports from New France back to France known as the Jesuit Relations. The Wendat mission was often discussed in the 1630s and 1640s as it represented the main ‘success story’ of the black-robed missionaries. However, references to the Wendat people became relatively sparse after their dispersal from their southern Ontario homeland midway through the seventeenth century. Therefore the written record is very weak in helping to uncover the history of the Huron Carol during this time. Rarely told is the sad story of the first published reference to the Huron Carol. This is probably because this reference is recorded as a translation of the title of the Carol: Jesus Ahatonnia (‘Jesus, he is newly made, just born’). The story was recorded in 1689 by Father Le Mercier. It refers to ‘the holy death of a Huron girl named Therese’ (JR52: 239), who died on Christmas day, 1688. According to Father Le Mercier,

During her illness, she often asked her mother, ‘When it is that JESUS will be born?’ At length being told, on Christmas eve, that he would be born that night, she began to sing, ‘Jesus is going to be born’ – which is an air sung by the Hurons on Christmas Festivals. (JR52: 237)

The song had become a Huron tradition.

Changing the French ‘translation’ of the Huron Carol: Father Girault records the Huron Carol

The version of the Huron Carol that survived was written down, words and melody, by Father Etienne Thomas de Villeneuve Girault (1718–94), the last Jesuit missionary to the Huron of Lorette or Wendake. He wrote it in the orthographic style of the time, using an ‘l’ to represent a ‘y’ sound. The earlier Jesuits had used a backwards comma (see n. 2). You can see from what is recorded below that there are occasional mistakes in how the Huron Carol was written, ones that show a lack of understanding by the recorder of where one word ends and the next begins. In my presentation of the translation, I have converted the writing to the orthographic form that Brébeuf and his colleagues would have used in the seventeenth century.

The Huron Carol as recorded by Father Girault

Estennialon de tson8e Ies8s ahatonnia (Girault's version)


estenniaon de tson8e Ies8s ahatonnia
 (Earlier orthography and word division)

have courage who you are human Jesus he is made, born
 (my translation)


Have courage, you who are humans. Jesus, he is born.

Onna8ate8a d'oki n'on8andask8aentak
 Onn' a8ate8a d' oki n' on,8andask8aentak
 behold it has fled the it is a spirit who it had us as prisoner,
 domestic animal

Behold, the spirit who had us as prisoners, domestic animals, has fled.


Ennonchien sk8atrihotat n'on8andilonrachatha
 Ennonchien [e]sk8atrihotat n' on,8andi,onrachatha
 do not! you will listen to it who it corrupts our minds 

Do not listen to it, as it corrupts our minds, the spirit of our thoughts.


Aloki onkinnhache eronhialeronnon
 Aoki onkinnhache eronhia,eronnon
 They (ind)⁹ are spirits they (ind) are coming with a message for us
 they (ind) are sky people 

They are spirits, coming with a message for us, the sky people.


Ah-yoh-kee on-kee-nha-sheh eh-ron-hyah-yeh-ron-non
 Iontonk ontatiande ndio sen tsatonnharonnion
 Iontonk ontatiande ndio sen

They (ind) say they (ind) are coming to talk come on! let it be 
tsatonnharonnion

be on top of life, rejoice many times
They are coming to say, 'Be on top of life, rejoice!'


8aonna8ak8eton ndio sen tsatonnharonnion
 8arie onn' a8ak8eton ndio sen tsatonnharonnion
 Marie behold she has just given birth come on! let it be rejoice 

'Mary has just given birth, come one, rejoice'.


Achink ontahonrask8a d'hatirih8annens
 Achink ontahonrask8a d' hatirih8annens¹⁰
 three they (m)¹¹ have left for a place who
 they (m) are developed matters, Elder 

‘Three have left for such a place; they are Elders’.


Tichion halonniondetha onh8a aharen

tichion sa,onniondeθa onh8a achia ahare 
 star he leads them (ind) there right now he appeared over the horizon
A star that has just risen, appeared over the horizon leads them there.


Ondaie te hahahak8a tichion halonniondetha

Ondaie te hahahak8a tichion sa,onniondeθ 
 he he will seize the path, lead the way star he leads them (m) there
He will seize the path, lead the way, a star that leads them there.


Tho ichien stahation tethotondi Ies8s

to ichien st' ahationt eθotondi Ies8 
 there as they (m) arrived there there where he was born Jesus
As they arrived there, where he was born, Jesus.


Ahoatatende tichion stanchitea8ennion

Ahoatatende tichion stan chi te [h]a8ennio 
 he was at the point of stopping star not far he did not pass it
The star was at the point of stopping, he was not far past it.


Ahalonatorenten iatonk atsion sken

A[s]aontorenten i[h]atonk atsion sken 
 he found someone for them (ind) he says 'come here' let it be
Having found someone for them, he says, ‘Come here’.


Onne ontahation chiahonaen Ies8s

Onne ontahation chiahonaen Ies8s 
 behold they (m) have arrived somewhere
 at the same time, they saw him Jesus
Behold, they have arrived there and have seen Jesus

Ahatichiennonniannon kahachia handialon


Ahatichiennonniannon kahachia handiaon 
 They (m) made, praised a name many times 'wow!' he is good in nature
They praised a name many times saying, ‘Hurray, he is good in nature’.

Te honannonrank8annion ihontok oerisen

Te honannonr[o]nk8annion ihontok oerise 
 They (m) oiled his scalp many times, greeted him with reverence
 they (m) say hurray


They greeted him with respect, greasing his scalp many times,
saying, ‘Hurray!’

Te ek8atatennonten ahek8achiendaen

Te [h]ek8atatennonten ahek8achiendaen 
we will give something to him we (in)¹² have placed his name,
honoured his name, him

‘We will give to him praise, honour for his name’.

Ti hek8annonronk8annion de son8entenrade.

Ti hek8annonronk8annion de son[]8entenra[n]d 
let us greet him with great respect who
he comes to be compassionate with us.

‘Let us show reverence for him, as he comes to be compassionate
with us’.

8toleti sk8annonh8e ichierhe akennonhonstha

8toeti sk8annonh8e ichierhe akennonhons0a

it is providential you love us you wish

I should make them (ind) part of my family 

It is providential that you love us, and think ‘I should make them
part of my family’.

It is not hard to see the compromise here between the two cultures. Both cultures speak. It is a song embedded in the first meeting of European and Aboriginal people.

Paul Tsa8enhohi Picard changes the lyrics

Paul Tsa8enhohi Picard (1845–1905) was one of the last people of Wendake to speak the Wendat language.¹³ He bore a great name of his people, a chief’s name for many generations. The Wendat word Tsa8enhohi refers to the osprey, a bird long revered by his people. Picard himself was a chief. The French version, presented below, first appearing in print in Ernest Myrand’s *Noëls anciens de la Nouvelle-France*, was published in 1899. It was the first song presented, and the only Aboriginal song contained, in the book.

It cannot strictly be called a translation, certainly not of the Wendat content represented in the Girault recording. He tells the gist of the story, sometimes translating, sometimes making it up according to what he probably learned and taught in church. When I first read it, I thought that

it was written by a French priest, and not a Wendat person. The translation into English presented here comes from Kathleen O'Donnell's study of the Huron Carol (O'Donnell 1969: 665–6). What I am laying out here is a comparison between my translation (presented in (a)), which represents an attempt to represent it with the syntax, and is as close as possible to the original Wendat meaning, and what Picard wrote in French (presented in (b)).

In his version of the Huron Carol Picard moved the content away from Wendat culture, making the song seem more mainstream Christian, and more mainstream Canadian: 'humans' is changed to 'men', 'spirits' is changed into 'angels', 'spirit' in the 'devil',¹⁴ the Holy Ghost is added to the story, as are saints. In the last named case there is no way that the verb root *nonhon* 'to be related' (Steckley 2007b: 201), presented in the last line of the song, can be translated as 'saint'. It is the substitution of a different idea. The idea of Christ adopting the Wendat, which was in the original, and which frequently appeared in the seventeenth-century literature, is discarded, and the non-translation of saints is substituted.

Comparing translations: Picard and Steckley

1.1

(a) Have courage, you who are humans. Jesus, he is born.

(my translation into English)

(b) Hommes, prenez courage, Jésus est né

(Picard's translation into French)

(c) Men, take courage, Jesus is born.

(O'Donnell translation from Picard)

1.2

(a) Behold, it has fled, the spirit who had us as prisoner

(b) Maintenant que le règne du diable est détruit,

(c) Now that the reign of the devil is destroyed.

1.3

(a) Do not listen to it, as it corrupts our minds, the spirit of our thoughts.

(b) N'écoutez plus ce qu'il dit à vos esprits,

(c) Do not listen any longer to what he says to your spirits

2.1

- (a) They are spirits, coming with a message for us, the sky people.
- (b) Ecoutes les anges du ciel.
- (c) Listen to the angels of heaven.

2.2

- (a) They are coming to say, 'Come on, be on top of life, rejoice!'
- (b) Ne rejetez pas maintenant ce qu'ils vous ont dit.
- (c) Do not reject now what they have said to you.

2.3

- (a) 'Mary has just given birth, come on, rejoice.'
- (b) Marie a enfanté le Grand Esprit, comme ils vous l'ont dit.
- (c) Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit, as they said to you.

3.1

- (a) 'Three have left for such a place; they are men of great matter.'
- (b) Tres chefs se donnerent parole
- (c) Three kings [chiefs] took counsel

3.2

- (a) 'A star that has just appeared over the horizon¹⁵ leads them there.'
- (b) En voyant l'étoile du firmament,
- (c) On seeing the star in the firmament.

3.3

- (a) 'He will seize the path, a star that leads them there.'
- (b) Et ils convinrent de suivre l'étoile
- (c) And they agreed to follow the star.

4.1

- (a) As they arrived there, where he was born, Jesus.
- (b) Alors Jésus leur suggéra l'idée de venir le voir
- (c) Then Jesus suggested to them the idea of coming to see Him

4.2

- (a) The star was at the point of stopping, he was not far past it.
- (b) Et la pensée que l'étoile les conduirait vers Lui
- (c) And he thought that the star would guide them towards Him

4.3

- (a) Having found someone for them, he says, 'Come here.'
- (b) Et ils se dirent donc qu'ils iraient vers l'étoile.
- (c) And they said to themselves then that they would go towards the star.

5.1

- (a) Behold, they have arrived there and have seen Jesus
- (b) Ces chefs firent des offrandes. En voyant Jésus.
- (c) These Kings [chiefs] made offerings on seeing Jesus.

5.2

- (a) They praised a name many times saying, 'Hurray, he is good in nature.'
- (b) Ils furent heureux et Lui racontèrent de grandes choses,
- (c) They were happy, and told Him great things.

5.3

- (a) They greeted him with respect, oiling his scalp many times, saying, 'Hurray!'
- b) Ils le saluèrent et Lui parlèrent sincèrement.
- (c) They greeted Him and spoke sincerely to Him

6.1

- (a) 'We will give to him honour to his name.'
- (b) A present, venez tous le prier
- (c) Now come all and pray to Him

6.2

- (a) 'Let us oil his scalp many times, show reverence for him, as he comes to be compassionate¹⁶ with us.'
- (b) Adorez-le. Il a exaucé nos vœux
- (c) Adore¹⁷ Him. He has heard our prayers.

6.3

- (a) It is providential that you love us, and think 'I should make them part of my family.'
- (b) Écoutez-le. Il veut que vous soyez saints.
- (c) Listen to Him. He wishes you to be saints.

Jesse Edgar Middleton: the Huron Carol reinvented for the English

Jesse Edgar Middleton (1872–1960) was a Canadian poet, journalist, music critic, choir master and choir member whose father was a Methodist minister. He was born and raised in southern Ontario, and had no recorded direct contact with Aboriginal people. The closest Aboriginal people in his area of Ontario were the Mississauga, a branch of the Ojibwa or Anishinabe, and the Six Nations of the Iroquois. As a poet he wrote First World War- and British Empire-inspired works. He was of a generation of Canadian poets that included arguably one of the most oppressive

federal ministers of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott. He had a strong knowledge of the orthodox historiography of the time. This can be seen in the fact that he wrote about French contact with the Huron, and the expulsion of the latter from the centuries-old Ontario homeland in chapter 1, 'The French Occupation' of his *The Municipality of Toronto, A History, Volume 1* (Middleton 1923: 21–8). In 1926, he wrote the lyrics for the Huron Carol, publishing this as *The First Canadian Christmas Carol* in 1927. It was his second book on the theme of Canadian music, the first being *Sea Dogs and Men at Arms – A Canadian Book of Songs* (1918). He would publish five more books on his own, and one co-authored with his wife, Clara. However, none of those works would have anything like the impact of his book on the Huron Carol. While Middleton is often credited as 'translating' the Huron Carol into English (in his book the ambiguous phrase 'English interpretation by' is used), that is not the case. It would be more accurate to say that, having learned something of the theme and the content of the French translation, and having a romanticised sense of Aboriginal people typical of many non-Aboriginal Canadians of the time, Middleton composed new words in English for the Huron Carol. They are as follows:

Twas in the moon¹⁸ of winter time¹⁹
 When all the birds had fled,
 That mighty Gitchi Manitou
 Sent angel choirs instead;
 Before their light the stars grew dim
 And wandering hunters heard the hymn
Refrain
 Jesus your King is born,
 Jesus is born.
 In excelsis gloria!

Within a lodge of broken bark
 The tender Babe was found
 A ragged robe of rabbit skin
 Enwrapped His beauty 'round;
 And as the hunter braves drew nigh
 The angel song rang loud and high.
 The earliest moon of winter time
 Is not so round and fair
 As was the ring of glory on
 The helpless infant there

The chiefs from far before Him knelt
With gifts of fox and beaver pelt

O children of the forest free
O sons of Manitou
The Holy Child of earth and heaven
Is born today for you
Come Kneel before the radiant Boy
Who brings you beauty, peace and joy

The Huron Carol today: re-indigenising

The popularity of the Huron Carol appears to be growing over the years. This popularity has shown up in a number of different media. In 1977, it was honoured with a Canadian stamp. By that time it had been incorporated into the hymn books of the Methodist, Anglican and United Church of Canada. In 1990, it was featured in a popular book, *The Huron Carol*, illustrated by Frances Tyrrell. Websites abound that carry the words in English, French, Spanish and even the artificially created language Esperanto.

What may be most significant is what can be called the re-indigenising of the Huron Carol. What I mean by this is that there has been in the last 30 years a growing body of people who want to sing and perform the Huron Carol in Wendat, with a sense that this would be the most authentic version, the most respectful one to the people.

There is no precise start date for this. My own work in this direction began in the same year as the stamp came out. I was working at the historic site of Sainte-Marie-among-the-Hurons. I had been working in the Wendat language at that point for a little over three years. I knew that Gitchi Manitou was not Wendat, and wondered what the original words meant. Translating it, I discovered the great gap that existed between the Middleton and the Brébeuf versions. In 1981, I received a request from the Toronto Consort²⁰ to present to them in a way they could sing, a Wendat version of the Huron Carol for their performance entitled 'A Renaissance Christmas'. I still have the programme in which the words were recorded.

Other requests followed. In 1993, Canadian singer-guitarist recording star Bruce Cockburn wanted to perform the song with its original Wendat words. He asked me to sing it for him, but I convinced him that my just saying the words would be much better. Both of us appeared on CBC's

The National news programme that year in a piece they did on the Carol. Following this I received requests for the original words from teachers who wanted their children to sing them and others who wanted to perform the song in the early way, requests coming during the mid-1990s from Kelowna and Coquitlam, in British Columbia, from Alaska, and even from Chennai, in India.

Other indigenised recordings followed. Toronto's Elmer Iseler Singers,²¹ who had recorded a version with Middleton's words in 1986, re-recorded the song in Wendat on their 1998 album, *Early Canadian Christmas Music*.

Another form of indigenising the song is to write the lyrics in another Aboriginal language. Plains Cree singer and teacher Dolores Sand has recorded the song in her language, and the Eskasoni Trio, Mi'kmaq performers, composed and recorded in 2001 a version in Mi'kmaw, a language that is unrelated to Wendat (<http://firstnationhelp.com/huron.html>). The Mi'kmaq, like the Huron, have a strong independent Catholic tradition that allows for the blending of the two traditions, Aboriginal and European.

Another Aboriginal expression of the Huron Carol has been the annual series of concerts known as the Huron Carole, headed up and organised by Métis singer and actor Tom Jackson (best known for his role in the drama *North of 60*). The express purpose of these concerts has been to raise funds for food banks across Canada. Jackson ran these for 17 years, suspended them for a few years in 2004 for smaller concerts, but brought the big project back in December 2012. The Huron Carole has been responsible for raising \$3.55 million in donations, plus a great deal of food.

Conclusion

The Huron Carol was composed on the theme of the Christmas story in the Wendat language in the early 1640s by a Jesuit missionary, Father Jean de Brébeuf. He used a tune familiar to him from a folk song popular in Europe when he was growing up in France. In terms of the Wendat words that Father Brébeuf used to tell the Christmas story he used the method known as *il modo soave* or 'the gentle way' by Italian Jesuit Father Alessandro Valignano, who spelled out what this meant in his instructions in 1579 to Jesuits working in the East Asian missions of China and Japan: 'Do not attempt in any way to persuade these people to change their customs, their habits, and their behavior, as long as they are not evidently contrary to

religion and morality' (in Seeman 2011: 44). This method, which became associated with the Jesuits generally, was used by Brébeuf in his telling the story using strongly Wendat imagery, not really introducing European concepts. That can be seen in the words that were recorded by the last Jesuit to do missionary work with the Huron of Wendake, Father Girault.

However, as the language became lost in Wendake during the nineteenth century, and as the culture came to have a lesser voice in expressing the ways of the people, one of their own, Paul Picard, a chief known by the great traditional Huron name Tsa8enhohi or osprey, moved the French words of the Huron Carol more in line with the thinking of the French neighbours of the single community nation at Wendake.

This Europeanisation of the Huron Carol was taken a huge step further when English Canadian songwriter Jesse Middleton in 1927 composed in his language new words for the Huron Carol, bearing words from the unrelated language of Ojibwe, and telling the story in ways that reflected romanticised mainstream Canadian concepts of the noble savage.

But by the 1970s, the cultural wheel was turning. The Huron Carol was becoming indigenised. A new translation in English direct from the Wendat words that Girault recorded was made. By the 1980s and 1990s people were recording and singing the song in Wendat. Aboriginal artists recomposed the words in Plains Cree and Mi'kmaq, and Métis Tom Jackson used the song and its name to raise funds for food banks.


Notes

- 1 Algonquian refers to a language family and culture widespread across North America. It includes the Ojibwe language from which the terms referred to were drawn. Iroquoian likewise refers to a language family and culture, this one shared with the Six Nations of the Iroquois, among other groups.
- 2 The Yawenda Project, involving partnership between Laval University, concerned linguists, the people of Wendake and their Wyandot cousins from Michigan, Kansas and Oklahoma, has developed teaching material for the local (Wendake) school, instructors capable of teaching the language and a will among the people to awaken their dormant language.
- 3 The contexts in which individuals would sing one's death song included facing death when captured or being situated in threatening circumstances such as a long trading voyage.
- 4 The commonly used 'Black Robes' was not a term used by the Wendat in naming the Jesuits.
- 5 Often with Wendat pronominal prefixes, the difference between masculine and

- feminine was the presence of an ‘h’ for the former as opposed to a ‘y’ like sound for the latter.
- 6 The ‘,’ here, an iota subscriptum, was used by the Jesuits to represent a ‘y’ like sound.
 - 7 The term was presented in one Wendat–French dictionary as follows: ‘,arih8annen ... etre un hom: d’affaire et de grande consideration, de grande autorite’ (to be a man of affairs, and of great consideration, or great authority) (Potier 1920: 254).
 - 8 I have speculated that Amantacha was a St Lawrence Iroquoian living with the Wendat (Steckley 2012[AQ1]). The main reason for my believing this comes from the fact that he has an ‘m’ in his name. The Wendat did not have that sound, but the St Lawrence Iroquoians did.
 - 9 This is a reference to the indefinite third-person plural, usually translated as ‘people’, ‘one’ or a genderless ‘they’.
 - 10 Potier 1920: 254: ‘,arih8annen ... etre un hom: d’affaire et de grande consideration , de grande autorite’. This isn’t the usual term for elder. In ‘L’adoration des Mages’, written in Wendat about the Christmas story, the term ‘hati,8annens’ ‘they (m) are elders’. The translation is mine, from Potier 1920: 464.
 - 11 The ‘m’ here stands for ‘masculine’ form of the third-person plural, as opposed to feminine and indefinite.
 - 12 The Wendat language distinguishes between the first-person inclusive (indicated with an ‘in’) which includes in the ‘we’ the listeners, and the first-person exclusive (indicated with an ‘ex’) which excludes the listeners, and hence is called the first-person exclusive.
 - 13 The Huron priest Abbé Prosper Vincent knew songs, but it is doubtful that he was a speaker at this time.
 - 14 The verb root ‘aki’ ‘to be a spirit’ (Steckley 2007b: 23) was often used in the Jesuit Christian Wendat literature to mean ‘angel’ or ‘devil’.
 - 15 They did not have a word for horizon, that is a noun depicting that concept. The verb root used here is ‘r’ ‘sun to rise’ (i.e., above the horizon; Steckley 2007b: 221).
 - 16 There is an expression ta,itenr ‘have pity, compassion on me’ that is used to address spirits.
 - 17 In French–Wendat dictionaries, ‘adorer’ is translated with the noun root *chien(d)* ‘name’ with the verb root *en* ‘to put, lie’, the combination used in the previous line. An example is the following: ‘Adorer ,achiendaen’ (FH1697: 7).
 - 18 In neither Wendat nor Ojibwe is there a ‘moon of wintertime’. Each moon is a month.
 - 19 This first line is often given as the name of the Huron Carol.
 - 20 On their website, the Toronto Consort, founded in 1972, present themselves as being ‘Canada’s leading chamber ensemble specializing in the music of the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and early Baroque’ (www.torontoconsort.org).
 - 21 The Elmer Iseler Singers are a 20-voice professional chamber choir founded in 1979 by Elmer Iseler.

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- JR – see Thwaites below.
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