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Review of Grumet's "The Munsee Indians: A History"

Paul Otto

George Fox University, potto@georgefox.edu

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ROBERT S. GRUMET. *The Munsee Indians: A History*. Foreword by DANIEL K. RICHTER. (The Civilization of the American Indian Series, number 262.) Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. 2009. Pp. xxxi, 446. \$45.00.

The sale of Manhattan Island and the Walking Purchase are well known, but the Native people involved in these infamous land deals—the Munsees—remain relatively obscure. These Algonquian speakers who lived in the lower Hudson and upper Delaware valleys experienced succeeding waves of Dutch and English traders, settlers, soldiers, and colonial administrators and eventually gave up what has become some of the most prominent real estate in the United States. Anthropologist Robert S. Grumet, building on decades of painstaking research, does much to draw the Munsees from their obscurity and to establish their place in the historical record. While the volume leaves room for further research and analysis, it is unlikely that another book will soon supplant Grumet's coverage.

Grumet's work joins the modern historical literature on the Munsees first established by Allen W. Trelease (*Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century* [1960; reprint 2009]) and later joined by my

own work (*The Dutch-Munsee Encounter in America: The Struggle for Sovereignty in the Hudson Valley* [2006]), both of which examine the Munsee experience in the Dutch period. Grumet's book not only covers the whole era of contact in the Munsees' ancestral homelands, 1524–1766, but pays particular attention to the frequently overlooked late seventeenth century. His methodology also contributes something new. Grumet has created what he calls the "Munsee File"—a cross-referenced collection of nearly every document including a named Munsee individual or a transaction involving traditional Munsee territory. Gleaned from these thousands of documents are over 10,000 Munsee names (many of them referring to the same persons) from which he distilled a list of 210 prominent individuals. This research has allowed him to draw important conclusions about Munsee leadership; lineages and family relationships; land ownership, control, and loss; and population changes.

Grumet argues that the Munsees were an "enduring people," that their identity "as a unique people and culture developed, persisted, waned, and recovered as the specifics of their lives—their tools, clothing, languages (both Indians and European), locations, religious beliefs, national allegiances, memories, even their names for themselves—changed." Furthermore, they "were not hopelessly outmatched by all-powerful Dutch and English hegemonists who could take their lands whenever they wanted" (p. 12). Indeed, Grumet clearly demonstrates through detailed analysis and excellent maps (which appear frequently in the text) that Munsee people did not quickly or naïvely sell their lands. He explains how and why land sales took place, and while he has not convincingly shown that "alert Munsee leaders . . . could exploit" opportunities created by conflicting Dutch and English colonies and priorities, it is nevertheless clear that Munsee people carefully made strategic decisions when selling their land. As Europeans acquired and settled upon Munsee lands, the Native people resisted wholesale alienation of their lands and asserted their rights to continue to live upon, utilize, and travel through ancestral territories. Grumet also clarifies the Munsees' matrilineal social organization, evolving and shifting leadership, and involvement with other native peoples and the major events of their days, creatively using his sources to highlight the ongoing and active role that the Munsees played in early American history.

Those looking for a thorough history of the Munsees in this era will be disappointed however. Part of that disappointment stems from the amount of space dedicated to events happening around the Munsees. Good historical context is important for establishing the extent to which the Munsees navigated the shifting sands of an early American frontier. But Grumet spends too much time describing what was happening among the Iroquois or explaining political shifts in England and the resulting administrative changes in New York. What could be summarized in a paragraph or two is covered by several paragraphs, leaving less space for a

discussion of the Munsees. Ironically, the very people Grumet intends to reveal are often overshadowed in his account by discussions of the Munsees' neighbors, antagonists, and others. Furthermore, much of the attention paid to the Munsees is limited to population changes and land sales. For all of the promise of Grumet's methodology, it has the effect of narrowing his focus to the exclusion of more substantial discussions of cultural change, individual Munsee agency, and so forth. To be sure, there are important moments when Grumet discusses the Munsees' rationale for selling land, cultural developments during contact with the Dutch, and encounters with Christianity, but these come too seldom to tell us all we would like to understand about the Munsees.

In the end, however, it is clear that Grumet knows more about the Munsees in the colonial period than any other scholar. Anyone wanting to understand the Munsees must avail themselves of this resource.

PAUL OTTO

George Fox University