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## Review of *Professional Indian: The American Odyssey of Eleazar Williams* by Michael Leroy Oberg

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*Professional Indian: The American Odyssey of Eleazer Williams.* By Michael Leroy Oberg. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 280. Cloth, \$39.95.)

*Reviewed by Edward E. Andrews*

What are the odds that a Mohawk named Eleazer Williams, reared in the borderlands of post-Revolutionary New York, was actually the surviving

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1. See Robert Allen Warrior, "Eulogy on William Apess: Speculations on his New York Death," *Studies in American Indian Literature* 16, no. 2 (2004), 1-13.

son of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette? Although it was exceedingly unlikely, some folks in nineteenth-century America thought it not only a possibility but a verifiable certainty. Michael Oberg's enthralling new book, *Professional Indian*, starts off with a chance encounter between Williams and John Holloway Hanson, a minister who eagerly recorded Williams' fantastical claim of French royal pedigree and published the sensational story in 1854. Oberg is not interested in proving whether or not Williams was in fact the lost "Dauphin" of France, although he does assert that the tale was "fabricated entirely out of whole cloth" (163). Instead, he zeroes in on Williams' dramatic life story because it represents a mesmerizing but ultimately depressing account of an Indian trying constantly to refashion his identity in the early republic.

*Professional Indian*, like most biographies, is organized chronologically, tracing Williams' likely birth in Kahnawake, his family's connection with the Williams family that had been captured during the famous 1704 Deerfield Raid, and his education at the hands of New England Calvinists and his evolution into an Episcopalian evangelist. (He found Episcopalianism to be a moderate alternative to the excessive rituals of his Catholic forebears and the severe austerity of Calvinism.) Oberg deftly shows how Williams developed into a kind of performer, a man who desperately aspired to be whatever his patrons and supporters wanted. He was a missionary who left a record of both evangelical successes and religious divisions in his wake. He was a broker who ardently believed that the best way for New York's Indians to deal with land-hungry whites was to move to Wisconsin, but he was also a trickster who occasionally benefited from these deals. Williams was a father, but an absentee one, a representative of his indigenous communities, but rarely a legitimate or authorized one, and a self-proclaimed prince, but not a real one. Oberg's superbly researched biography—drawing from a range of archival materials from multiple states as well as a variety of other printed sources—traces this man's tumultuous turns of fortune until his death in 1858. It is an incredibly rich, detailed account. In fact, perhaps Oberg's greatest strength is his ability to trace the excruciatingly intricate mechanics of Indian dispossession. As Oberg tells, it, Indian dispossession was not just a product of persistent pressure from land-hungry white settlers, but rather involved a complex matrix of motivations and interests from acquisitive businesses like the Ogden Land Company, a multitude of indigenous political and religious leaders, missionary officials, state politicians, federal representatives, native landholders, and a host of other

peoples, groups, and institutions. In fact, Oberg's microhistorical approach offers one of the more perceptive treatments of indigenous dispossession in the early republic that we currently have.

And yet, there are some minor but ultimately forgivable shortcomings in the book, some of which are editorial and some substantive. The word "dauphin," which Williams claimed to be, is sometimes capitalized, sometimes not (see pages 48–49). The "T" in Buffalo Creek Treaty is often capitalized, often not (see pages 146–47). On page 198 Williams is simply written as "William." *The Lost Prince*, Hanson's hagiographic biography that operates as Oberg's foil throughout the monograph, is not mentioned by name until the latter half of the book, not counting illustration credits. A more thorough explanatory discussion of the account's publication history at the beginning of the work might have helped contextualize it, as well as how Oberg positions himself against it, a bit more carefully.

Additionally, Oberg might have done more with the fact that Williams and the young nation were born in the same year (Williams in 1788, the same year that the Constitution was ratified) and grew up at the same time. Much of this is implicit, of course, and there are times when Oberg brings the two together quite compellingly, like during his excellent discussion of a Fourth of July sermon that Williams gave in front of white garrison members, Wisconsin Indians, and indigenous New York emigrants. In fact, Oberg is at his best when connecting Williams' experiences with wider developments in the young country's history, such as the development of new transportation systems, the importance of patronage networks, the advent of racial science, and the controversial debate over Cherokee removal. He might have done more, though, to tie together more explicitly the themes of a man making a place for himself when the country was trying to do the same. For example, Oberg brilliantly casts Eleazer Williams as a kind of theatrical figure, a man who performed for his audiences and knew exactly what kind of an Indian they wanted to see. It's a fascinating point, but Oberg might have talked a bit more about *actual* Indian performances, as in other public speeches or even theatrical performances *about* Indians, à la Jill Lepore's excellent discussion of the play *Metamora* from *The Name of War*.

Nevertheless, *Professional Indian* is still a must-read. It is clearly written, well-organized, and exhaustively researched. It's obvious that Oberg knows a good deal more about Williams than his hagiographers. He has left his readers—unlike Hanson's—with a clearer picture of the lengths

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that this man went to in order to refashion himself during the most pivotal years of this country's history.

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