



Honking Geese

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, before Europeans came to America, they thought geese more or less quacked like ducks. Various spellings were used. The *Dictionary* accepts Chaucer's word that the sound made by geese was "queeke."

When the Europeans got to America, however, they found out that the sound the Indians heard coming from geese was a "honk." Indeed, in some Indian languages one word for "goose" is "honck."

The Europeans themselves soon began to hear the "goose" sound as a "honk," and by 1854 Henry David Thoreau was writing that the geese on Walden Pond were honking.

Is there any historical record of Indians teaching the Europeans that geese honked instead of quacked? Of course not. And yet there is no other explanation for this development, and it is foolish to suggest the change was just a coincidence

"Honking geese" are but one simple and amusing example of a very complex and profound phenomenon that was part of the development of American culture. That phenomenon was the Indians teaching the Eu-

ropeans new ways of perceiving the world around them and of relating to the social, political and natural world in which they lived.

We often tend to assume that information only flowed one way, from the European teachers, missionaries and officials to the Indians. And, of course, since history was written by the teachers, missionaries and officials (not the Indians), that one-way flow information is the one documented in the historical record. As a result, we tend only to be only aware of or interested in how the Indians were changed by the Europeans. We tend to ignore or look in history for alternative explanations for cases in which the Europeans were apparently changed by the Indians.

And yet American culture of today has been profoundly shaped by American Indians. The government we have, the foods we eat, the way we perceive society, the way we use language, the music we enjoy and the very landscape on which we live have all been profoundly shaped by Indian culture.

Of that we can be certain, as certain as we are that geese honk.