

# "I AM A RED-SKIN": The Adoption of a Native American Expression (1769–1826)

*Redskin* 'Indian, Native American' has been a contentious word in recent years. In 1999 the United States Trademark Trial and Appeal Board ordered the cancellation of the trademarks of the Washington Redskins football team after finding that the use of the word *redskin* was "scandalous" and "may ... disparage" Native Americans or "bring them into contempt, or disrepute." Judge Colleen Kollar-Kotelly of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia reversed this decision on 30 September 2003, granting summary judgment for Pro-Football, Inc., against Cheyenne-Creek Indian activist Suzan Shown Harjo and others. The court found that "the

Ives Goddard is Senior Linguist in the Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. His research has focused on the Algonquian languages, especially Munsee, Unami, Massachusetts, and Meskwaki. Since 1990 he has been conducting fieldwork among the Meskwaki in Tama County, IA, as part of a project to edit and translate the native-written Meskwaki manuscripts collected for the Bureau of American Ethnology by Truman Michelson in 1911 and the years following. He is the editor of *Languages*, vol. 17 of the *Handbook of North American Indians* (1996), and the compiler of the wall map *Native Languages and Language Families of North America* (1999). Author's address: Smithsonian Institution, MRC 100, P.O. Box 37012, Washington, DC 20013-7012. U.S.A. E-mail: goddardi@si.edu

The author is indebted for various assistance to James Axtell, Richard W. Bailey, Randy Blomquist, Steve Brisson, Laura Buszard-Welcher, Elizabeth Chenault, Constantin Chmielnicky, David Costa, Raymond J. DeMallie, Michael Dickey, Maggie Dittmore, Nancy Flood, Wayne Franklin, Dee Grimsrud, Geoffrey A. Kimball, John E. Koontz, John Ludwickson, Michael McCafferty, Jack B. Martin, Marianne Mithun, Dennis Northcott, Jan Oberla, Douglas R. Parks, Andrew Pierce, Robert L. Rankin, Jim Rementer, Stephen Rhind-Tutt, Donald A. Ringe, David S. Rood, Jurga Saltanaviciute, Elizabeth G. Shapiro, Jean Daniel Stanley, Lucy Thomason, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, John VanDereedt, Robert Vézina, Herman J. Viola, and Neal Woodman.

TTAB's finding of disparagement is not supported by substantial evidence" and that "the doctrine of laches precludes consideration of the case."<sup>1</sup> One need not accept Harjo's unfounded claim that the word *redskin* "had its origins in the practice of presenting bloody red skins and scalps as proof of Indian kill for bounty payments"<sup>2</sup> to accept that many find the word objectionable in current use. But the actual origin of the word is entirely benign and reflects more positive aspects of relations between Indians and whites. It emerged at a specific time in history among a small group of men linked by joint activities that provided the context that brought it forth. Before its documented history can be traced, however, the false history given for it in standard reference books must be expunged.

<sup>1</sup> Pro-Football, Inc., Plaintiff, v. Suzan Shown Harjo, 284 F. Supp. 2d 96 (2003), pp. 4, 83 (= United States District Court for the District of Columbia, Memorandum Opinion (September 30, 2003), Civil Action No. 99-1385 (CKK)). Posted at [www.dcd.courts.gov/99-1385a.pdf](http://www.dcd.courts.gov/99-1385a.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> "Some facts on squaw and similar words," posted by Suzan Harjo (15 August 2003) at [poynteronline.org](http://poynteronline.org) under "Article Feedback." Harjo made the same assertions in an interview on the Oprah Winfrey Show in 1992; the program, called *Racism in 1992: Native Americans*, was no. 8 in a series on racism. (I am grateful to Jim Rementer for a transcription of her remarks, made from a video.) Two years later a *Washington Post* reporter, after interviewing Harjo, led a lengthy article with this claim, stating that it was true "according to the custodians of Native American history" ("Bury My Heart at RFK," *Washington Post*, 6 November 1994, pp. F1, F4–F5). The claim also appears in Harjo's published account of the trademark case (Harjo 2001: 190); it was not, however, part of the submission to the trademark board, and no supporting evidence for it has ever been cited. For the aboriginal roots of scalping and other trophy taking, the role of scalp bounties in promoting the practice, and the rise of the modern myth that Europeans introduced it, see Axtell and Sturtevant (1980).

## Samuel Smith's Letter

Dictionaries give the first occurrences of the expression *redskin* as being in a letter of reminiscences written by Samuel Smith of Hadley, Massachusetts, on 1 January 1699 (Mathews 1951: 1368; OED). This has "ye Red Skin Men" in one place and three occurrences of "ye Red Skins." Two of these are in the following passage, where Smith writes of his father that

"he did helpe to rear bothe our owne House & ye Firste Meetinge House of Weathersfield, ... Ye firste Meetinge House was solid mayde to withstande ye wicked onslaughts of ye Red Skins. Its Foundations was laide in ye feare of ye Lord, but its Walls was truly laide in ye feare of ye Indians, for many & grate was ye Terrors of em. ... I do not myself remember any of ye Attacks mayde by large bodeys of Indians whilst we did remayne in Weathersfield, but did ofttimes hear of em. Several Families wch did live back a ways from ye River was either Murderdt or Captivated in my Boyhood & we all did live in constant feare of ye like. My Father ever declardt there would not be so much to feare iff ye Red Skins was treated with suche mixture of Justice & Authority as they cld understand, but iff he was living now he must see that wee can do naught but *fight* em & that right heavily" (Smith 1900: 49–50).

There are obvious problems with this source, however. For one thing, the original letter has never been found. It is quoted from a book published in 1900 with the title *Colonial Days & Ways as Gathered From Family Papers* (Smith 1900).<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> The copyright suggests that one or more chapters may have originally appeared in the *New York Evening Post*. It was reprinted in 1901. An early manuscript outline has the title "Colonial Family Life from Family Papers" with an earlier "Colonial Home Life Pictures" crossed out. (Ledger of submitted articles and accounts p. 128, unnumbered box, Helen Everson Smith papers, New-York Historical Society.)

author of this, Helen Evertson Smith, describes the letter as known from a copy made by Samuel Smith's great-great-granddaughter Juliana Smith in a diary she kept from 1779–1781 that was among a trove of documents preserved in the ancestral family house in Sharon, Connecticut. The stone Georgian house that the Smith family called "Weatherstone" is real, but according to Elizabeth G. Shapiro, the Director of the Sharon Historical Society, none of the documents referred to in Helen Evertson Smith's book, including Juliana Smith's diary, have ever been located (pers. comm., 6 October 2004; 10 November 2004; 28 January 2005).

There is, however, a document that sheds light on the published letter among Helen Evertson Smith's papers in the New-York Historical Society. In this collection there are two notebooks labeled "Colonial" and "Colonial and other Material," which contain excerpts from various sources. And in one of these is the following passage in Helen Evertson Smith's hand:<sup>4</sup>

"Samuel Smith (first) in a letter written soon after the great Indian attack upon Hadley, Mass., in 1676, at which time he was then living, says that am'g his first recollections were "[[of]] the Indian Alarms in Wethersfield, Ct., where the foundations of my father's meeting house were laid in the fear of the Lord, & its walls were reared in the terror of the Indians. I do not remember any attacks made by large parties there, but several families, which lived back a ways from the River were either murdered or captivated during my boyhood, and we all lived in constant fear of the like. My father ever declared there would not be so much to fear if the Indians were treated with such [[a]] mixture of [[firmness &]] [[Justice & Authority]] as they could comprehend, but if he was living now he must think that we can do naught, but fight them & that right heavily." Copied by Julian Smith in their family news paper the "Clio" in 1781.<sup>5</sup>

It is evident that this passage allegedly from a Samuel Smith letter of 1676 is an earlier version of the section of his purported letter of 1699 that is quoted in extenso above. For example, there are two places in the handwritten passage where Helen Evertson Smith changed wording that is inside her quotation marks to the wording that appears in her book. What was first written as

his first recollections were "of  
was changed to  
am(on)g his first recollections were  
"the

in the book, and "firmness & justice" became "Justice & Authority". The notebook entry appears to be a sort of dress rehearsal, an earlier attempt at fabricating a letter from the Colonial Period, complete with a somewhat different family source. And most significantly in the present context, what is in the published letter as "iff ye Red Skins was treated" is in Helen Evertson Smith's notebook as "if the Indians were treated."<sup>6</sup>

The excerpt in Helen Evertson Smith's notebook contains no non-standard spellings and only mild attempts at archaic vocabulary and diction, but the published letter has been relentlessly antiqued. Many words are printed with the addition of a word-final silent -e, but the frequency and distribution of this feature are inconsistent with late seventeenth-century usage.<sup>7</sup> In the book, "ye" has been substituted everywhere the notebook has *the*, and the non-emphatic auxiliary verb *did* is used with unidiomatic frequency, as in the two places where "did live" has replaced *lived*.<sup>8</sup> The words Helen Evertson Smith had entered in her notebook as *murdered* and *declared* she had her publisher print as "murderdt" and "declardt," spellings that, like her word "onsaults" (for *onslaughts*), appear to be unknown outside her book.

There are other anachronistic or unidiomatic usages in the published Smith letter outside the section that

was rewritten from what is in the notebook. For example, there is a reference to "Catamounts," a word not otherwise known to have been applied to the North American mountain lion before 1794, though later used by both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes (OED). The letter has "till they got Married," but the expression *to get married* was not used in the seventeenth century, and *get* with any passive participle is rare before the nineteenth century (OED: *get*, v., 34b).<sup>9</sup> The expanded description of the meeting house in the book records that it "was solid mayde"; this adverbial and preverbal use of *solid* is not found in the seventeenth century, but the expression in the letter has close parallels in poems by Alfred Tennyson: "But like a statue solid-set" (*In Memoriam A. H. H.*, 1850); "Enoch stronger-made Was master" (*Enoch Arden*, 1864). The word *boyhood* is not found by the OED before about 1745 and did not at first have the meaning it has in the phrase "during my boyhood" that appears in the letter ("the period of one's life when one is, or especially was, a boy").

Helen Evertson Smith's other literary work and the times in which she wrote provide context for her evident fabrication of the Samuel Smith letter. She also used the hoary literary device of the found letter in an apparently unpublished story that is headed: "A forgotten National Crime[: ] Bombardment of Copenhagen in 1807. Told in letters from an English lady married to a member of the Royal Council of Denmark, to her father a member of the British House of Commons[.] Edited by Helen Evertson Smith". On the outside of the folded typescript is written: "This account is based on a few fragments of letters & the narrative many times heard in my childhood, from the lips of the old lady whom I have called Mrs. Castenskjöld, & carefully verified by comparison with the best printed authorities. H.E.S."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> In printing this excerpt and another one below two editorial conventions have been used to indicate changes made in the manuscript in the writer's hand: underlining marks additions, and double brackets ([[...]]) are added to enclose deletions. Parentheses mark the expansion of an abbreviation.

<sup>5</sup> Notebook "Colonial and Other Material" p. 20, in box "Scrap books, note books, & misc.," Helen Evertson Smith papers, New-York Historical Society. The passage ends at the end of a page, with no punctuation.

<sup>6</sup> The passages with the other occurrences of "Red Skin(s)" in the published letter have no counterparts in the notebook.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful for the observations of Richard W. Bailey on this and other aspects of the language of the published letter (pers. comm., 3 January 2005).

<sup>8</sup> English and French words cited in italics are in the present standard orthographies. Double quotes are used for direct quotations, including citations of specific non-standard forms in the sources; single quotes mark glosses and longer translations of cited materials. The spellings *redskin* and *white-skin* are those of the OED lemmata.

<sup>9</sup> Richard W. Bailey (pers. comm., 3 January 2005); Bailey observes that the only seventeenth-century use of *get* with a passive participle in the OED (in the expression *got acquainted with*) is arguably not really a passive.

<sup>10</sup> Box "Miscellaneous Mss.," Helen Evertson Smith papers, New-York Historical Society. In the title, the word *National* was added later.

Presumably historians will want to re-evaluate the assumed authenticity of the excerpts from Juliana Smith's manuscript newspaper that have made their way into the biography of Noah Webster (Warfel 1966: 41–43). Another publication in

Although the Samuel Smith letter has many features inconsistent with its purported date of 1699, it is very much at home among the sort of writings that were popular as part of the Colonial Revival at the time of its publication in 1900. This cultural movement, which came into full force with the national centennial celebrations, influenced architecture, furniture, decorative arts, and popular history with a nostalgia for Colonial times, which were viewed as a Golden Age for household arts and domestic life. And in fact, other writers with these interests are known to have created fictional diaries and memoirs as a way of vividly evoking the Colonial Period, in some cases innocently and in some cases not (Norton 1998).<sup>11</sup>

### Red and White As Racial Terms

The only one of the linguistic oddities in Samuel Smith's letter that has made it into the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the expression "Red Skins" (and attributive "Red Skin"), but in 1699, when the letter was purportedly written, American Indians had, in fact, not yet been racially characterized as *red*. In two lengthy studies of the use of color terminology for races in America, the historians Alden T. Vaughan (1982) and Nancy Shoemaker (1997) have not found any use of the adjective *red* to distinguish American Indians as a separate race before the 1720s.<sup>12</sup> Vaughan (1982: 948) singled

the same genre is the account by Smith (1894) of a debate between Alexander Hamilton and William Livingston ("Edited from Unpublished Papers of the Late Governor John Cotton Smith, of Connecticut)."

<sup>11</sup> A second purported excerpt from Juliana Smith's diary in Smith (1900), a description of a family dinner on Thanksgiving Day, 1779 (Smith 1900: 291–297, esp. 291), also shows evidence of being a later fabrication. The Harvard University social historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has stated that it is obvious from the anachronistic language and descriptions in this account that "it is a 19th century fiction ... a colonial revival invention" (pers. comm., 6 October 2004; quoted with permission).

<sup>12</sup> Shoemaker (1997: 633) cites a rare early use of "red" to refer to the skin of Indians in André Pénigault's narrative of Mobile during the years 1699–1721. Pénigault reports that in 1700 Pierre Le Moine d'Iberville, when he first visited the Bayogoula village on the Mississippi, had rejected the chief's offer of women for his men "by showing his hand to them [and] mak[ing] them understand that

out the apparent first use of *redskin* in the 1699 Smith letter as "an isolated example" from such an early date, and he concluded from this that "its authenticity is slightly suspect" and astutely suggested that "it may reflect a later editorial hand." With the discovery that the purported 1699 letter has not merely purged from editorial intervention but was the fictional creation of a late nineteenth-century writer, the fact that the myriad of references to Indians in English documents of the Colonial Period never use the term *redskin* makes sense, which would not be the case if *redskin* really had been already in use by the end of the seventeenth century.

Eighteenth-century records do, however, attest the emergence of the use of the color terms *red* and *white* by Native Americans as racial designations, and the adoption of these terms by Europeans in eastern North America. The first uses of the term *red* as a racial label that Shoemaker (1997: 627) found are from 1725. In that year a Taensa chief talking to a French Capuchin priest in Mobile recounted an origin story about a "white man," a "red man," and a "black man" (Rowland and Sanders 1927–1932, 2: 485–486), and a Chickasaw chief meeting with the English Commissioner for Indian Affairs at Savanna Town referred to "White people" and "red people" (George Chicken in Mereness 1916: 169). As Shoemaker (1997: 628) documents, this use of "red" was soon adopted in both French and English and was conventional by the 1750s. Although Europeans sometimes used such expressions among themselves, however, they remained aware of the fact that this was originally and particularly a Native American usage.<sup>13</sup>

their skin—red and tanned—should not come close to that of the French, which was white" (McWilliams 1953: 24). ("M. d'Iberville, en leur montrant sa main, leur fit comprendre que leur peau rouge et bazanée ne devoit point s'approcher de celle des François, qui estoit blanche." [Margry 1876–1886, 5: 394].) This is not evidence that the French used the adjective *rouge* 'red' in a racial sense in 1700, however, given that Iberville was using gestures supplemented by Mobilian Jargon, and that Pénigault's account, which has details inconsistent with Iberville's journal (McWilliams 1981: 119), was written up, at least in the form that survives, after its author had returned to France in 1721.

For *red* paint or Carl Linnaeus as assumed factors in describing Indians as *red*, see Vaughan (1982: 922, 945–946) and Shoemaker (1997: 625–626).

The French account from 1725 says explicitly of the Taensa that "they call themselves in their language 'Red Men'" (Rowland and Sanders 1927–1932, 2: 486).<sup>14</sup> Since the Taensa spoke the same language as the Natchez (Swanton 1911: 22), the Taensa expression was presumably the same as the Natchez designation (tvmh-hakup) 'Indian' (Ann Eliza Worcester Robertson in Brinton 1873: 488), which in phonemic transcription is *toM* 'man' (or in its earlier shape \**taM*) plus *haakup* 'red' (Geoffrey A. Kimball, pers. com., 17 November 2004).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the Chickasaws in 1725 were

<sup>13</sup> As an example Robert Vézina (pers. comm., 20 February 2005) cites Jean-Bernard Bossu (1768: 60), who quotes a Natchez elder as referring to "tous les hommes rouges," explaining that, "C'est ainsi que ces Sauvages s'appellent pour se distinguer des Européens qui sont blancs, & des Africains qui sont noirs." In the translation of Seymour Feiler (Bossu 1962: 39) this is "all the red men," with a note: "This is what the Indians call themselves to distinguish themselves from the Europeans who are white and the Africans who are black."

Shoemaker (1997: 632) suggests that the racial use of "red" and "white" might owe something to the use of these colors for opposing moieties among tribes in the Southeast, but there is no necessary connection. The same colors can stand for different things in different contexts. For example, both James Madison and Black Thunder, who used *red* and *white* as racial terms (see below), also used *red* (or *bloody*) and *white* to symbolize war and peace, clearly intending no linkage between the two idioms (Stagg et al. 2004: 175–177; Boilvin 1816).

<sup>14</sup> The document has been published only in English translation.

<sup>15</sup> The shallow-pointed brackets ((...)) enclose an exact transliteration of a pre-modern transcription. Italics is used for phonemic transcriptions, but for accessibility and typographical convenience these have been rewritten to use ordinary letters as much as possible. Technical phonetic symbols have been replaced as follows: double vowels (instead of vowel + raised dot) are written for long vowels (pronounced as in German or Finnish), and double consonants are written for long consonants (as in Italian); a superscript *ˆ* (rather than a Polish nasal hook) marks the preceding vowel as nasalized (as in French); *sh* and *ch* are unit phonemes pronounced as in English (except in Mohawk; see n. 34); *zh* has the sound of the *s* in English *pleasure*; *x* is a voiceless velar fricative (German *ch* or Spanish *j*); *gh* is a voiced velar fricative (like Modern Greek gamma); *M* is a voiceless *m* (an *m* whispered through the noise); and an apostrophe is used for glottal stop (the sound between the two syllables of the English exclamation *Uh-Oh!*).