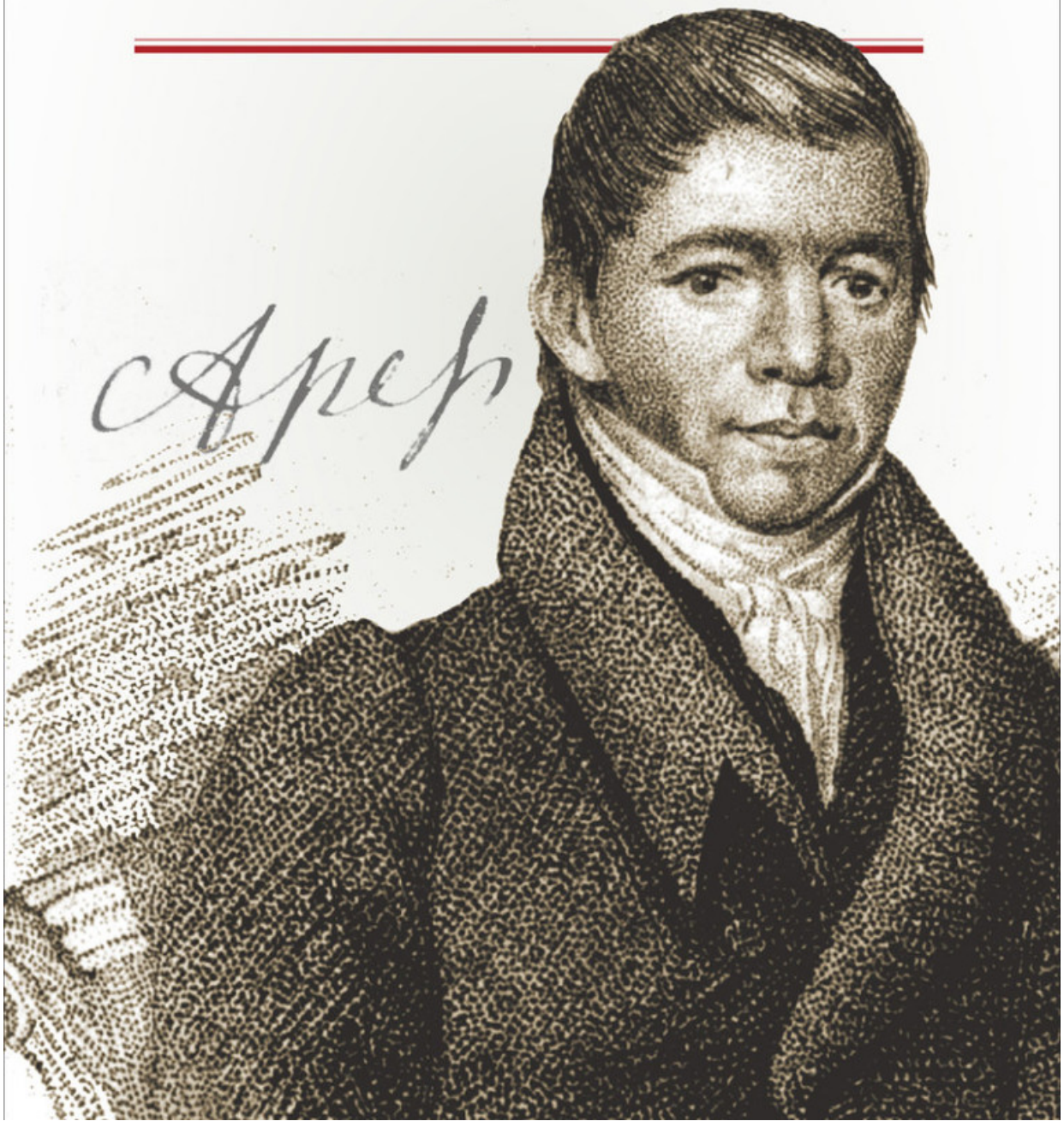
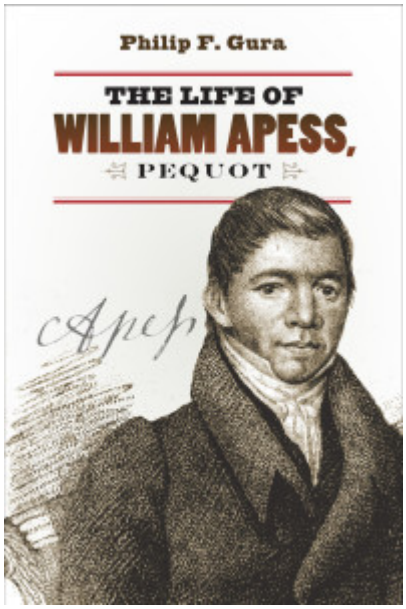
Introducing the Life of an Early Native Writer to a Wider Audience

Philip F. Gura

THE LIFE OF WILLIAM APESS, PEQUOT



Historians have successfully cultivated a knack that literary scholars by and large have not: disseminating their scholarly discoveries to the general reading public through books marketed by major publishing houses. Though the literature of early America reveals countless riveting and moving narratives that resonate with current events and concerns, practitioners of literary history in the academy have mostly remained content to build their careers writing for narrower scholarly audiences. Not so Philip F. Gura. The William S. Newman Distinguished Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gura has devoted his writing energies in recent years to telling the stories of American literature to the reading public outside of academe, as in the National Book Award-nominated *American Transcendentalism: A History* (2007) and *Truth's Ragged Edge: The Rise of the American Novel* (2014). Reviewers in the popular press have praised the newness of his vision of American literary culture, though to academics that vision seems perhaps not so new and is the result of several decades of hard work and revisionary thinking carried out by many, many scholars.



Philip F. Gura, *The Life of William Apess, Pequot*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 216 pp., $26.

Gura's own claim to originality in his most recent book, *The Life of William Apess, Pequot*, is modest. He acknowledges the work of scholars in the last several decades who have "exhaustively studied" Apess's body of writing, yet he also distinguishes himself from them: "they have too often aimed such works at scholarly communities rather than at the larger public, which needs a straightforward account of Apess's life and times" (xvi). With this goal, Gura in some sense resembles his subject, who throughout his career directed his startlingly "straightforward" message defending the rights of people of color and indicting racism to "the larger public" through sermons, lectures, and

publications. Apess represents to Gura “an extraordinary man” who “deserves a larger audience” today (xvi), a hearing Gura seeks to grant him through this book.

The life and career that Gura’s biography chronicles are indeed extraordinary, on many levels. The discovery that an American Indian man who possessed only rudimentary levels of formal education and experienced economic instability and racial prejudice throughout his life published a significant body of work, perhaps the largest published oeuvre produced by a Native person in the nineteenth century, was enough to galvanize the study of early Native writers in the early 1990s, when Barry O’Connell published the first complete edition of Apess’s writings, *On Our Own Ground: The Complete Writings of William Apess*. Like many others, I found the spur to new directions in my own fledgling research as I pored over O’Connell’s provocative introduction and read the powerful words of a seemingly fearless Native Methodist preacher echoing across centuries. In the more than twenty years since I first encountered William Apess, I have taught his writings in many university and graduate-level courses, introducing his impassioned critique and rhetorical prowess to student readers.

But until Gura’s publication of *The Life of William Apess, Pequot*, there was no full-length study of Apess’s life. In *Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827-1863,* Maureen Konkle brilliantly filled in some of the gaps that existed in our knowledge of his biography following O’Connell’s work, but other questions persisted. Among them, importantly, was an understanding of how and why, precisely, Apess moved from a focus on Native rights to a full-blown critique of the way people of color had their potential to contribute as full citizens of the United States stymied by its white citizens’ racial prejudice. By reading Apess’s career and writings through the framework offered by the abolition movement, Gura contributes something genuinely new to our understanding of Apess.

Apess’s early life is recounted in his *Son of the Forest*, which has the distinction of being the first full-length autobiography written by a Native person in the United States. In telling this part of Apess’s life, Gura hews quite closely to the record Apess provided. Born in 1798 in Colrain, Massachusetts, Apess’s infancy and early childhood were marked by abandonment and abuse. Soon deserted by his parents, he lived with his grandparents until physical abuse—especially one beating by his grandmother that Apess describes in painful detail—placed him under the care of the town’s overseers of the poor. Indentured to a local white family who agreed to provide food and shelter in exchange for his labor, he experienced a degree of stability and received six years of primary education. During this period he received his first exposure to Christianity and began the spiritual seeking that would characterize his life. Raised by whites, he felt alienated from his Native identity and community. Soon his rebellious behavior, which included an alcohol addiction with which he would struggle until his death, led to a rupture with his master and the sale of his indenture to a series of others. In his early

teens, Apess ran away, making his way through New England by foot and eventually enlisting in the U.S. Army as a drummer and later serving as a soldier on the Canadian front in the War of 1812. Disillusioned by his war experiences, he deserted, returned to Massachusetts, and there reconnected with his family and Native communities living in the region.

Apess's developing religious identity centered the next years of his life, leading him to baptism, exhortation, and eventually ministry in the Methodist church. Along with marriage and establishment of a family, this period also saw his initial forays as an author and increasing investment in issues related to Native rights and racial discrimination. Apess published his autobiography in 1829 and revised and reprinted it in 1831; a sermon entitled *The Increase in the Kingdom of Christ* in 1831; and *Experiences of the Five Christian Indians; or, a Looking-Glass for the White Man* in 1833. He gained public recognition and stature for his important role in what came to be called the "Mashpee Revolt" on Cape Cod in 1833-34. That controversy would land him in jail, place him in front of the Massachusetts legislature, and lead to his coverage in various newspapers. He detailed his role in this crisis in *Indian Nullification of the Unconstitutional Laws of Massachusetts* (1835) and ended his publishing career with *Eulogy on King Philip* (1836). Throughout this time he also presented public lectures and traveled up and down the eastern seaboard as a circuit preacher and bookseller. At some point in the 1830s, he remarried (the fate of his first wife is unknown) and moved to New York City, where he battled alcoholism and debt, and eventually died of what was diagnosed as "apoplexy" in 1839 at the age of forty-one.

Readers of Apess's writings know these facts about his life, and Konkle had earlier uncovered the circumstances of his death. Gura delineates instead the various contexts that shaped Apess's life and are thus vital to understanding the experiences he recounts. These contexts include: soldiers' conditions in battles with the British in the War of 1812, splits within American Methodism, descriptions of the venues where Apess lectured, and exhibitions of western indigenous people in the cities where Apess resided, for example. Gura also includes some remarkable archival finds, such as an inventory of Apess's possessions and library in 1836.

But perhaps the most important contribution Gura makes in this book is how he recounts the ways Apess's career intersected with abolitionist reform efforts. One striking facet of Apess's writings is the connection of his arguments defending Native rights with the broader struggle for rights of African Americans taking place in the cities where he lectured and lived. Gura interprets Apess's life through the abolition movement to understand some of the most radical elements of Apess's message. This choice is a somewhat surprising one. It may have been expected that Gura would situate Apess, his life, and his writings in relation to Native and indigenous studies, a dynamic field that has revealed many insights into how Native people in New England negotiated a precarious existence in the early nineteenth century. But relatively little of this exciting work made its way into the book. Gura

provides instead a rather conventional telling of Native history, missing opportunities to investigate the presence and experiences of Native communities and people in New England at this time or Apess's connections to other Native intellectuals or reformers. While he notes, for example, Apess's frequent references to Cherokees' struggles to maintain their homeland in the face of Andrew Jackson's Indian removal policies and even describes Apess's appearance on the same speaking stage with Cherokee editor and political figure Elias Boudinot, Gura doesn't investigate in detail the resemblances or differences between the Cherokees' and the Mashpees' situations, how Boudinot's rhetoric may have overlapped with Apess's, or in what ways the publication of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, the first American Indian newspaper (edited by Boudinot), may have shaped the publication and reception of Apess's own writings.

The story Gura does tell, and tells very well, is of the abolitionist work of reformers in Providence, Rhode Island, Boston, and New York City and how they were or may have been connected to Apess. Gura conjectures that living in Providence may have introduced Apess to a "growing consciousness among people of color of the injustice" of racial discrimination and an ecumenical Christianity modeled by the African Union Church there (37). He concludes that Apess must have been aware of the "debates over colonization and abolition" that characterized Boston in the 1830s, given voice by David Walker and Maria W. Stewart in publications contemporaneous with Apess's own. Gura speculates that Apess's network of personal relations during his last years in New York City may have provided him entry into the reform community there. From this provocative angle, Gura helps readers understand the intersections of forms of racial prejudice, discrimination, and oppression in early America and demonstrates how looking for connections between various reform movements, rather than examining them as distinct entities, can reveal surprising convergences. In this Gura has something to teach the scholarly community as well as the general reading public he explicitly addresses in this book.

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