

# From Matthew Dennis, *Cultivating a Landscape of Peace* (1995)

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Excerpts from [Chapter 5](#): Commerce, Kinship, and the Transaction of Peace

In the fur trade, two complex industries met, one European and one Native American; the pelts that arrived at Fort Orange represented the highly processed result of an involved production phase. The Dutch displayed little interest in attempting a vertical integration of the industry that would give them control of the earlier stages of production. They remained traders and merchants, content to distribute these partially processed goods to markets in Europe. Major fur dealers and smaller, part-time traders demonstrated little inclination to follow Indians into the forests and compete with native producers. Instead they opted to remain in or near their towns and allow the furs to come to them. The Dutch preference for this form of commerce kept them out of Iroquoia, but it bound them inextricably to the Iroquois.

For the Dutch, the fur trade and Indian relations became virtually synonymous. New Netherlanders craved furs, and they tolerated and welcomed the Iroquois and other Indian peoples among them chiefly because they were the source of that valuable commodity. The exchange between Dutch and the Iroquois across the cultural frontier stood at the center of Dutch economic life....

[Dutch traders] viewed their relationship with Indians narrowly, demonstrating more concern for the personal encounters than for the greater political relationship between their two nations. Only when forced... did they adopt a wider view...

Competition was fierce, as a Jesuit visitor, Father Isaac Jogues, noticed in 1643: "Trade is free to all; this gives the Indians all things cheap, each of the Hollanders outbidding his neighbor, and being satisfied provided he can gain some little profit." ....

If the Dutch at these commercial outposts lived to trade, and if Indian affairs for the Dutch were a function of commercial interests, the Five Nations nonetheless demanded that their commercial relationship with the people of New Netherland become something more. The Iroquois saw their commerce with the Dutch as but one aspect of a more complex friendship. Despite their efforts to maintain a social and cultural distance from the Iroquois, the Dutch at Fort Orange and Rensselaerswyck by necessity entered into a political and social alliance based on reciprocity, mutual obligation, and some aspects of kinship, which the Five Nations demanded. The Dutch often failed to grasp the Iroquois meaning of the relationship, and what they did understand they did not always like. The Five Nations were often unsatisfied with the Dutch performance in the relationship, and they attempted continually to apprise the Dutch of their obligations and to demand that they satisfy them. Together, the Iroquois and the Dutch made the imperfect and often misunderstood alliance work....

The Dutch... demonstrated little desire to inject Dutch culture or religion into Indian lives. Missionary efforts... were haphazard and carried out with little zeal. The Iroquois seemed to appreciate this disinterested approach, in stark contrast to the meddling and proselytizing of the French Jesuits....

In spite of Dutch efforts to maintain a business relationship with the Iroquois, they found that they had become "old friends" and, eventually, "brothers" to the Iroquois. When the need arose to negotiate with their Iroquois trading partners, the Dutch were forced to endure... "the usual ceremonies." Although we cannot determine with absolute certainty what such ceremonies comprised, it is likely that the Dutch participated with the Five Nations in a form of the traditional Condolence. When the Iroquois began any important meeting of kinspeople, especially the annual league council at Onondaga, they condoled with each other for those who had died since the last convocation, recited and re-enacted their history, and celebrated their union. The Five Nations expected that the Dutch as their brothers would participate in such a ritual.

They patiently educated their European allies and kinsmen in their obligations and in proper etiquette, complaining at times about Dutch failure to act appropriately and generously when they met to renew their bonds, to confer, or to trade. In 1655, the Mohawks complained to the magistrates and burghers

that “we [the Dutch] did not entertain them in such a manner as they entertained us when visiting their land.” ...

The court minutes of Fort Orange reported another lesson in manners and obligations in 1659. An Iroquois embassy instructed that whenever an Iroquois “dies and one of the Dutch is his partner, he ought to give to the relatives of the deceased one or two suits of cloth.” The meaning and significance of this request is clear only if we place it in the context of the Iroquois Condolence, recalling that such presents functioned to bind together the actors as kinspeople in a display of mutual concern during moments of crisis precipitated by death... The failure to furnish gifts of condolence was not merely unfeeling and rude but uncivil and hostile, and the absence of presents to support the words exchanged in negotiations deprived them of their credibility and import. The Dutch misunderstood such gifts, seeing their function more in material than symbolic terms. They carefully recorded the value of each present as it was offered, hoping that someday they might receive a return on their investment, and grumbling perhaps about the hidden expenses of commerce with the Indians. Dutch negotiators accepted and provided gifts, and took part in traditional Iroquois social and political ritual, not out of any particular cultural sensitivity or appreciation but simply out of necessity, as the cost of doing business....

Repeatedly the Dutch failed in their attempts to confine their relationship with the Iroquois to simple commerce. When they tried to treat the Five Nations as merely trading partners, letting the principles of supply and demand dictate the nature of their commerce, the Iroquois responded by imposing their own principles of kinship, hospitality, and reciprocity. In September 1659, for example, the Mohawks complained, “The Dutch, indeed, say we are brothers and are joined together with chains, but that lasts only as long as we have beavers. After that we are no longer thought of, but much will depend on it [the alliance] when we shall need each other.” ....

In a similar spirit, the Senecas informed the Dutch in 1660 that narrow economic concerns, such as a low exchange rate of beaver pelts, should not prevent the Iroquois from obtaining the supplies they needed, especially in their times of peril... “We only make a little request of you and yet in asking this it is as if we ran against a stone.” They told the Dutch, “We are now engaged in a great war... and we can get no powder or lead unless we have beavers and a good soldier out to have powder and lead for nothing.” ...

New Netherlanders were hardly prepared to abandon their economic beliefs, or to alter radically their economic practice. Yet in 1644 they attempted to act more hospitably, and in 1660 they worked to... mitigate the difficulties inherent in their pricing system. After both negotiations, they provided the Iroquois delegates with substantial gifts of powder. Once again, the Dutch used gifts to respond to Iroquois concerns, but they offered them on Dutch terms, not as normal, legitimate components of business, but merely as indulgences, as exceptional grants or rebates to maintain the channels of commerce. But neither the Dutch nor the Five nations were dominant enough to dictate fully the terms of the discourse along the Dutch-Iroquois cultural frontier.

Fundamental conflicts in definition and expectation riddled the ambiguous relationship between New Netherland and the Five Nations. Each side conceived of the alliance in terms of its own world view and historical experience... Each bowed to the other without ever fully confronting the lack of mutual understanding and cultural appreciation. The motives they ascribed to each other and the kinship terms that they tacitly accepted allowed the two peoples to delude themselves that they understood each other. Yet, strangely, the Iroquois-Dutch relationship worked...

### **QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:**

1. How did the Dutch and the Iroquois differ in their views of their trading relationship? What factors contributed to these differences?
2. What was the purpose of a "condolence ceremony" and why did the Dutch participate in these ceremonies?
3. “Yet, strangely, the Iroquois-Dutch relationship worked.” Why does Dennis come to this conclusion in spite of the numerous difficulties in the relationship?