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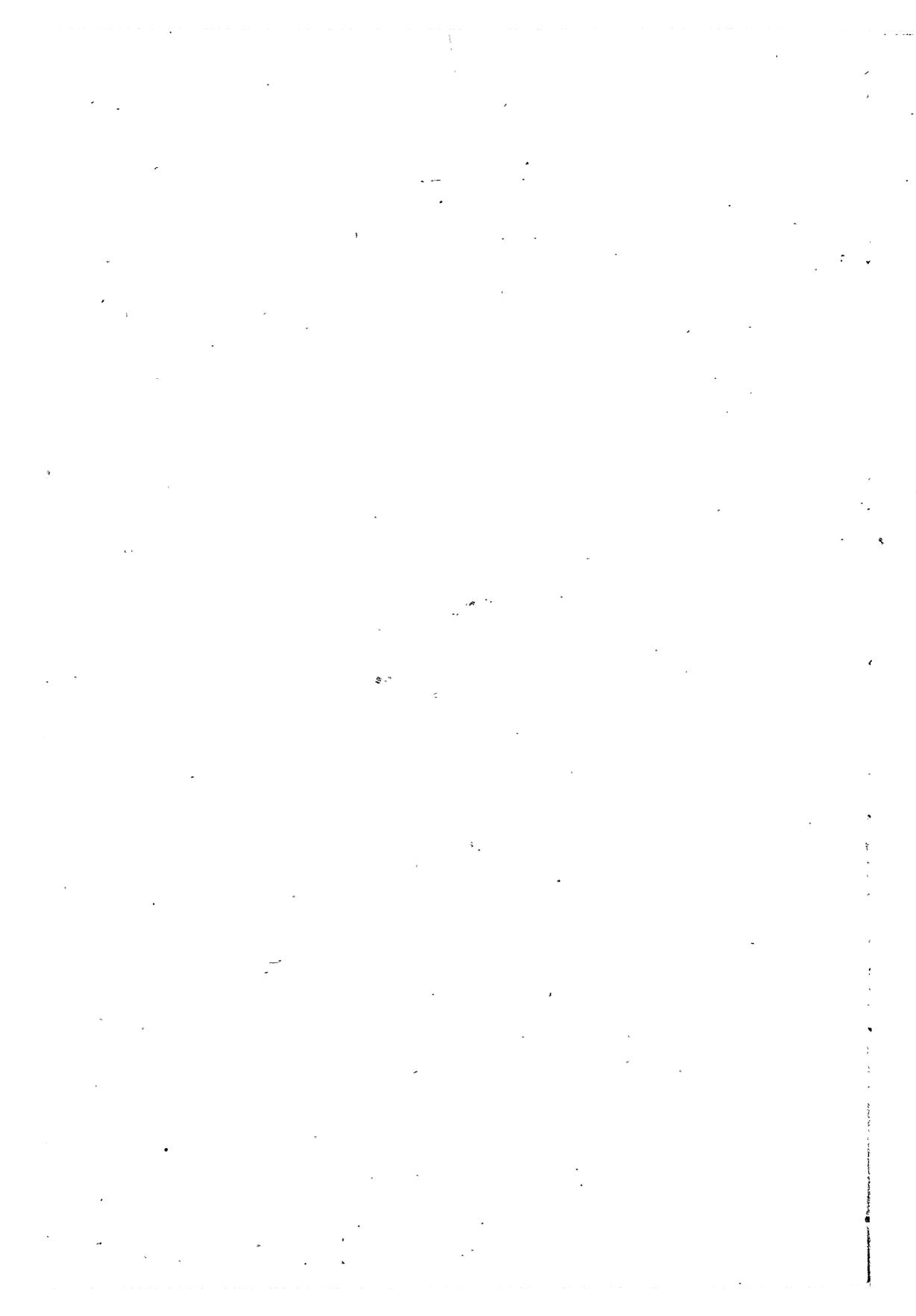
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THE THUNDER-BIRD AMONGST THE ALGONKINS

BY

A. F. CHAMBERLAIN.

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THE THUNDER-BIRD AMONGST THE ALGONKINS.

BY A. F. CHAMBERLAIN.

The interesting article of Rev. Myron Eels in Vol. ii, pp. 329-336, has suggested a brief discussion of the same subject with regard to the tribes of Algonkian stock amongst which the belief in the thunder-bird appears to be very wide-spread. It is found with the Crees of the Canadian Northwest and amongst some of the tribes of Micmac lineage dwelling near the coast of the Atlantic, on the shores of Hudson's Bay, and in the States on the southern banks of Lake Superior. The investigation of this peculiar belief must therefore cover the whole Algonkian region.

The Crees believe that certain divine birds cause the lightning by the flashings of their eyes, and with their wings make the noise of thunder. The thunderbolts are the "invisible and flaming arrows shot by these birds." Hind² speaks of the Plain Indians of the Northwest as "anxious and timid during the roll of thunder, invoking the Great Bird by whose flapping wings they suppose it to be produced, or crouching from the blink of his all-penetrating eye, which they allege is the lightning's flash." Cognate is the belief of the Blackfeet that winds are caused by the flapping of the wings of a great bird in the mountains.³

Among the Algonkian tribes of the Lake Superior region the same, or similar, beliefs are current. Rev. John McLean⁴ informs us that the Pottowattamies look on one of the high mountain peaks at Thunder Bay as the abode of the thunder, and that at one time a nest containing the young thunder-birds was there discovered by them.

From Rev. E. F. Wilson⁵ we learn that the Ottawas believed the thunder was "a great bird which flapped its wings on high over the

¹ Lacombe, *Dict. de la Langue des Cris* (1874), pp. 575, 262. The thunder-bird is called *piyēsī-i. e.*, "bird"—identical with Ojebway *binēsī*, Mississagua *pinēsī*, Illinois *pinēusen*, Ottawa *pināsī*, evidently a common Algonkian word for "bird."

² *Narrative of Canad. Explor. Exped. of 1857, etc.* (1860), ii, p. 144.

³ McLean. *The Indians, their Manners and Customs* (1889), p. 38.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 182.

⁵ *Our Forest Children*. N. S. No. 1 (July, 1889), p. 5.

earth to guard its inhabitants and to prevent those evil monsters hidden in the bowels of the earth from coming forth to injure them."

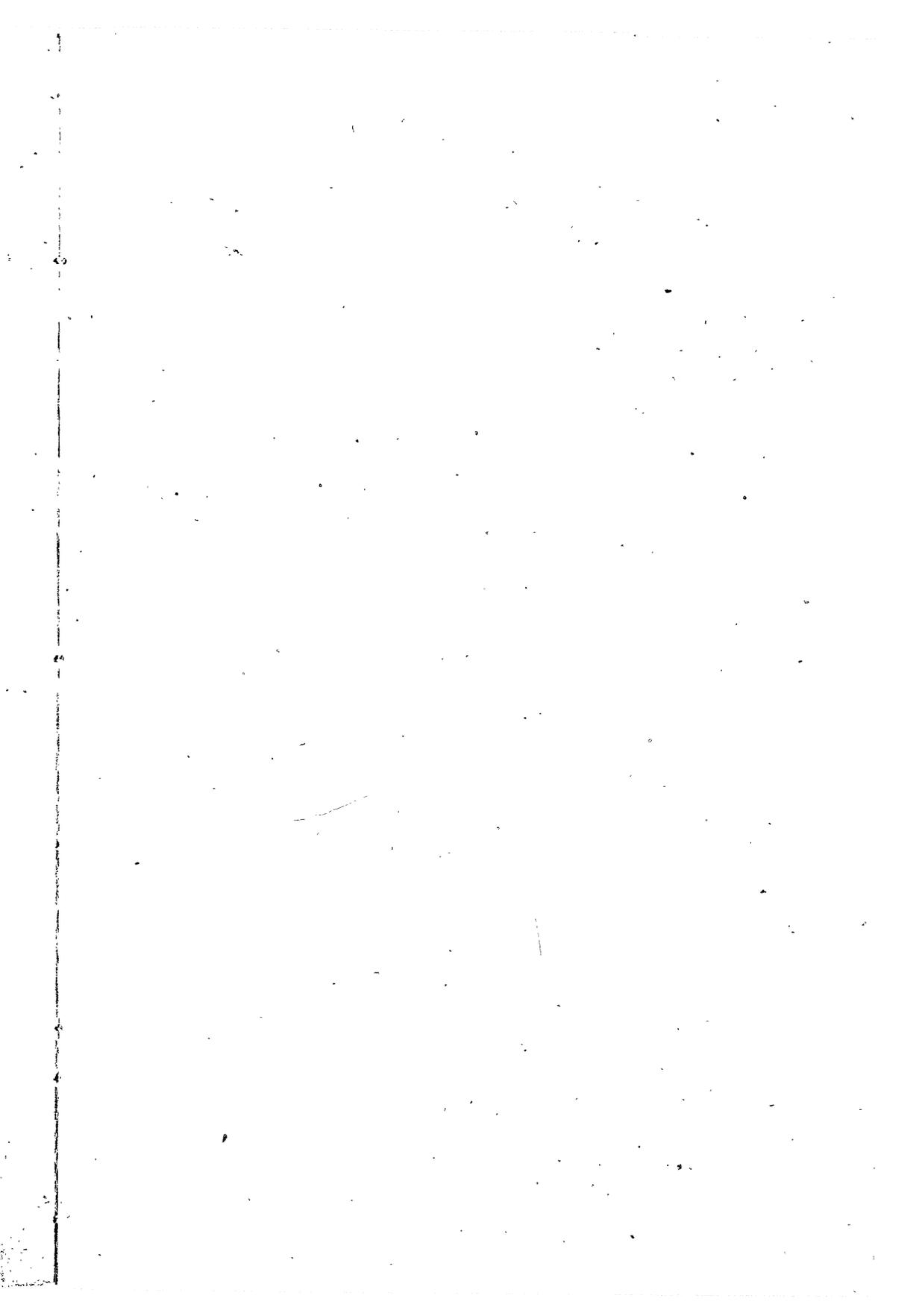
The existence of the thunder-bird tradition among the Ojebways of the northern shore of Lake Superior has been confirmed to the writer by information from Rev. Allen Salt, a Mississauga Indian, who has frequently visited that region. Regarding the Ojebways (Chippeways), Rev. Peter Jones¹ says "they consider the thunder to be a god in the shape of a great eagle that feeds upon serpents, which it takes from under the earth." Jones also relates (*Op. cit.*, p. 86) the story of an Indian who visited the nest of a thunder-bird on a high mountain. He saw bones of serpents scattered about, and noticed that "the bark of the young trees had been peeled off by the young thunders trying their arrows before going abroad to hunt serpents." At another time a party of Indians found a nest on the plains and put the young thunder-birds to death, after blinding them with their arrows (which, however, were shattered to pieces). All but one of the Indians were killed by the old birds on their return. The Ojebways believed that the home of the thunder-bird was on the top of a high mountain in the West, where it lays its eggs and hatches its young like an eagle. From time to time it sets forth into different parts of the earth to search for serpents, which form its food. When they saw a thunderbolt strike a tree these Indians believed that the thunder "had shot its fiery arrows at a serpent and caught it up in the twinkling of an eye." This belief is confirmed by the evidence of the early Jesuit missionary, Père Buteux², who relates it in very similar terms of the Algonkins of the north shore of the St. Lawrence in 1637. The thunder-bird is also known to the Ojebways of Red Lake, Minnesota, and figures in their pictographic records.³

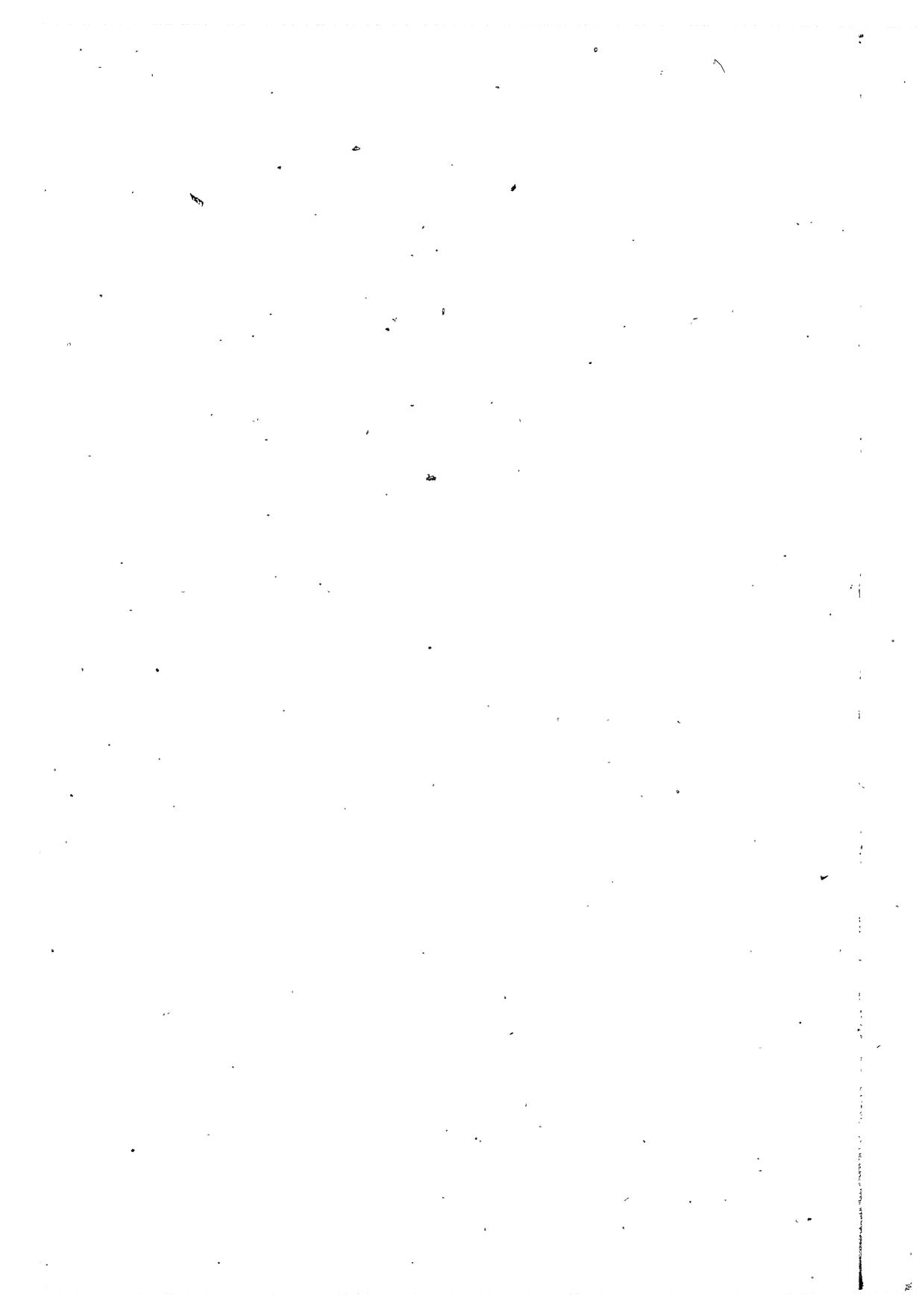
While on a visit to the Mississaugas of Scugog, Ontario, in August, 1888, the writer was told by an aged woman of that tribe the following as the ancient belief of her people: "The thunder was caused by the flapping of the wings of the great thunder-bird that lived up in the sky, and the lightning was caused by the flashings of its eyes." A great storm of thunder and lightning was explained thus: "The young birds up there in the sky, they are so glad, they fly all about and make a great deal of thunder and lightning; like all young people, they are very restless." Not far from the village

¹ *History of the Ojebway Indians* (1861), p. 85.

² *Relations des Jésuites, Année 1637*, p. 53. See also Brinton, *Myths of the New World* (1876), p. 118.

³ Dr. W. J. Hoffmann, *Amer. Anthropologist*, i, 225.





of Scugog is buried a Mississagua chief, who just before he died called out that "I die! the thunders are coming!"

Amongst the Mississaguas and Ojebways, Indians were very often named after the "thunders." At Scugog one of the sons of Nāwīgishkōkē (sun in the center of the sky) was named Head Thunder, while another Indian was called Osāwānimiki (Yellow Thunder). When the Rev. Peter Jones was named, the appellation conferred upon him was *Kākiwākōnāhi* (sacred waving-feathers), and his tutelary deity was the thunder. "He was given a war-club and a bunch of eagle-feathers, symbolical of the might and swiftness of the eagle-god of thunder."¹

Among the Passamaquoddy Indians the thunder-birds appear as men. Leland² has recorded a legend of this tribe of a man who was whirled up into the abode of the thunders and who told what he had there seen. The "thunders" were very like human beings, used bows and arrows, and had wings which could be removed or put on as occasion demanded. "The thunder is the sound of the wings of the men who fly above. The lightning we see is the fire and smoke of their pipes." These thunder-beings are always "trying to kill a big bird in the south." Here a recollection of the thunder-bird of other Algonkian people would seem to be present. Other "thunder stories" are given by Leland. According to another³ legend, the giant thunder-spirits, with eyebrows of stone and cheeks like rocks, dwell in Mount Katahdin. According to another Passamaquoddy legend,⁴ *Badawk*, the thunder, and *Psawk-tankapic*, the lightning, are brother and sister, whilst the distant rumbling before the thunder-crash is made by the child of *Badawk*, to whom his grandfather had fastened wings. This child was the offspring of *Badawk* and an Indian woman.

The Passamaquoddyes also believe that the wind is caused by the motions of the wings of "a great bird called by them *Wochowsen* or *Wuchowsen*, meaning Wind-Blow or the Wind-Blower, who lives far to the north and sits upon a great rock at the end of the sky."⁵ This resembles the belief of the Blackfeet, noticed above.

Leland thinks⁶ that this "Wind-Blower is, as he appears in the Passamaquoddy tale, far more like the same bird of the Norsemen

¹ Journ. of Amer. Folk-lore, i, 152.

² Leland. Algonquin Legends of New England (1885), pp. 263-266.

³ Op. cit., p. 261. ⁴ Op. cit., p. 267. ⁵ Op. cit., p. 111.

⁶ Op. cit., p. 113. A similar account of Passamaquoddy beliefs is given in Journ. of Amer. Folk-Lore, ii, 230.

than the grotesque thunder-bird of the Western tribes." He seems inclined to explain many of the incidents in the "thunder stories" from Eskimo and from Norse mythology.

It may be, however, that the "wind-blower" and the "thunder-giants" are simply the "wind-bird" and the "thunder-birds" of the Western Algonkian tribes modified to suit circumstance and locality.

This view seems to be confirmed by the statement of Dr. F. V. Hayden¹ respecting the Crees: "Indeed, these Indians do not seem to fear any natural phenomena except thunder, which is supposed to be the screaming and flapping of the wings of a large bird, which they represent on their lodges as a great eagle. Wind is supposed to be produced by its flying, and flashes of lightning are caused by the light of the sun reflected from its white and golden plumage, and when strokes of lightning are felt they are thunderstones cast down by this bird. All storms, tornadoes, etc., are caused by its wrath, and fair winds, calm and fine weather are regarded as tokens of its good humor." Here the wind-bird and the thunder-bird are regarded as one, and, as with the Ojebways, the bird takes on the form of an eagle in pictography, sculpture, and ornament. On the whole, the Algonkian beliefs respecting thunder seem more akin to those of the Siouan than of any other Indian peoples. With the Tetons the snake appears as the enemy of the thunder. Rev. J. Owen Dorsey² thus describes the Teton thunderers: "Some of these ancient people still dwell in the clouds. They have large, curved beaks, resembling bison humps; their voices are loud, they do not open their eyes wide except when they make lightning, and they have wings. They can kill various mysterious beings, as well as human beings. Their ancient foes were the giant rattlesnakes and the Un-kche-ghi-la or water monsters, whose bones are now found in the bluffs of Nebraska and Dakota." In the Omaha and Ponka myths thunder-men and thunder-birds appear, and the story of a visit to the nest of the thunder-bird is related.³

A close and detailed comparison of Siouan and Algonkian thunder stories and folk-lore would be of great interest and value, and might perhaps shed some light upon the relations of these two great peoples in the past.

¹ Transactions of Amer. Philos. Soc., vol. xii (N. S.), p. 245.

² Journal of Amer. Folk-Lore, ii, 135, 136. Compare the Onondaga tale of the serpent and the thunderers, *ib.*, i, 46.

³ Rev. J. Owen Dorsey, in Journ. of American Folk-Lore, i, 75-77.

