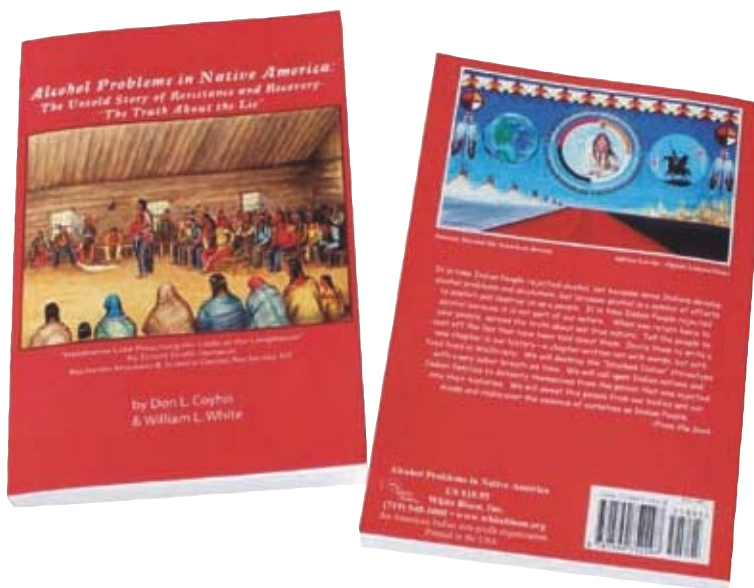


Alcohol Problems in Native America

*The Untold Story of Resistance and Recovery
The Truth About the Lie*

by Don L. Coyhis and William L. White

Reviewed by Richard Simonelli



If Native communities struggled with the effects of alcohol from 1492 onward, they didn't take it lying down. Alcohol Problems in Native America details a brave tradition of Native resistance to alcohol since first contact.

Native North America was powerless to resist the alcohol they encountered at the time of European contact. Like moths to a flame, Indians succumbed to alcohol out of some cultural or racial vulnerability. Everybody knows that's true, right? Wrong!

Here is a book that looks at American Indian and Alaska Native history with a new lens. What really happened as Native people encountered European alcohol? Were they instantly devastated as the popular stereotype suggests?

Are Native Americans racially sensitive and biologically prone to alcoholism more than other peoples, as so many believe? Is the only help for Indians and alcoholism to be found outside of Native communities? This book demonstrates that the answer is *No!* on all accounts.

These and other “firewater myths” are carefully exposed and debunked by meticulous references to contemporary scientific studies. Statements of fact are all carefully backed up. In fact, of the book’s 258 pages, some 33 pages are citations to the scientific, historic and journalistic record about Indians and alcohol. Regarding some of the firewater myths, *Alcohol Problems in Native America* states,

“There has yet to be definitive evidence that Native Peoples physically respond to alcohol differently than other races or possess a unique biological vulnerability to alcoholism. ...No gene has been identified that makes Native Americans more susceptible to alcoholism than other races. Differences of alcohol metabolism and genetic vulnerability to alcoholism are traits of individuals and families, not traits of racial and ethnic groups. There are as many differences in vulnerability to alcohol problems (and the choice to drink or not drink, the frequency and intensity of drinking, choices of alcoholic beverages, the locations of drinking, the purposes for drinking, and the effects of drinking) within and across Native tribes as between Native people as a whole and other racial/cultural groups.”

Alcohol as a Weapon

Why have Native American communities struggled so greatly with the effects of alcohol since European contact? The answer is suggested throughout the entire book, but stated clearly and boldly in the groundbreaking, closing chapter 15 entitled, “Addiction, Recovery, and the Processes of Colonization and Decolonization.” It concludes that suppression, oppression and colonization of Native people by a radically different cultural group, and that group’s deliberate use of alcohol as a weapon of colonization, is an underlying cause of indigent alcohol problems in North America.

Alcohol Problems in Native America contends, through a careful historical argument, that both Europeans and Americans intentionally and consciously used alcohol as a weapon of oppression to assist in the colonization and subjugation of Native

peoples. It should be seen in the same category as a knife, a gun, a cannon, a broken treaty or smallpox-infested blankets. This is new thinking when compared to the field of mainstream alcohol recovery, which looks at addiction as a personal disease defined by the medical model. Some of the mainstream attitudes toward alcohol recovery may not be effective for Indian people because historical trauma and the loss of a beloved culture is an underlying cause outside the experience of the dominant society. Chapter 15 states, “Medical models that posit the source and solution of alcohol problems within the individual may be unsuitable for the resolution of Native alcohol problems. In this cultural context, the individual and the community are inseparable.”

Resistance

If Native communities struggled with the effects of alcohol from 1492 onward, they didn’t take it lying down. *Alcohol Problems in Native America* details a brave tradition of Native resistance to alcohol since first contact. The book’s essential message is that resistance to and recovery from, alcohol problems and alcoholism, is a living reality in Native American communities today, and has been for more than 250 years. The book is generously illustrated with photographs and other images to bring a visual component to the scholarly and passionate argument that sets the record straight. In the chapter on firewater myths, there is a title page reproduced from a pamphlet published in London in 1754. This pamphlet presented a talk by a member of the Creek Nation who spoke out against the use of alcohol in those early times. Other chapters contain similar historical images describing how Native leaders spoke to their people against the use of alcohol.

Alcohol Problems in Native America reveals movements throughout Native history working towards resistance and recovery from Indian alcohol problems. These include the Delaware Prophets, the Indian Christian Preachers, the Handsome Lake Movement, Indian Temperance Societies, the Indian Shaker Church, the Native

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American (Peyote) Church, the Ghost Dance, the “Indianization” of Alcoholics Anonymous, the Indian sobriety movement, the rise of community recovery movements, and especially, the modern Wellbriety Movement, which is thriving in Native America today.

Native alcohol resisters and healing visionaries from the early 1700s onward walk through this book in testimony to the fact that there were always leaders and grassroots people who took a stand against the effects of alcohol as a weapon of oppression and a cause of historical trauma. Some of these names include Wyoming Woman, Papoonan, Wangomen, Neolin, Scattameck, Samson Occom, William Apess, Handsome Lake, Tenskwatawa, Tecumseh, Kennekuk, Blackhoof, George Copway, John Slocum, Wovoka, and Quannah Parker. Some names will be familiar from the usual rendering of Indian history, but others only emerge when the historical lens is focused on Native resistance to alcohol.

Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh were Shawnee brothers and leaders who sought to take their people out of harm’s way at a time of intense American expansion in the late 1700s. They are well known in ordinary Indian history but emerge in their not-so-widely-known role as alcohol resistance and recovery advocates in the book. Tenskwatawa also stands with Handsome Lake and others in the tradition of the *wounded healer* described in these pages.

Healing

Native American Elders say that the alcohol problem among Indian people worsened immediately after World War II, intensified by government relocation and termination policies of the early 1950s. But in response, the modern sobriety movement was born around that time, evolving into the Wellbriety Movement as a branch that took shape in the late 1980s and early 1990s. *Wellbriety* means to be both sober and well. It adds a cultural component and return to the principles, laws and values of indigenous societies. It emphasizes and supports the hard individual work necessary for addictions recovery. It pioneered the creation of the grassroots-based, fire-starter circles throughout American Indian and Alaska Native communities to bring healing methods to the people within a cultural context.

Alcohol Problems in Native America offers two chapters on the modern Wellbriety Movement, describing its roots, its vision,

and the many programs and wellness tools and techniques used by participants. For example, the effective and well-known 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, through which so many Indian people have recovered, are made more culturally accessible by the *Medicine Wheel and the 12 Steps* program of the Wellbriety Movement. Many Native Americans have worked their own Medicine Wheel and the 12-steps recovery programs through a video taped version presented separately for men and women. They also used the culture-specific book entitled, *The Red Road to Wellbriety: In the Native American Way*, which some call a cultural version of the mainstream Alcoholics Anonymous material.

Alcohol Problems in Native America may also offer a few ideas about a new direction for research in the national addictions recovery community. If social oppression and cultural colonization are an underlying cause of addictions in the Native American community, might it not be true elsewhere? Is it possible that some of the wider society’s addictions problems could be a result of self-oppression and self-colonization in terms yet to be discussed or defined? By exploring this hypothesis, a new avenue of healing for the national addictions epidemic may open up.

“We’re eagles, we’re not chickens...” proclaims a teaching story about two eagles who didn’t realize their true identities, told in the opening pages of the book. It says, “The stereotype of the drunken Indian is the image of the chicken that has been forced upon us. The eagle is the symbol of our sobriety and strength as a people. It is time we declared clearly and boldly: We are not chickens; we are eagles! We must teach our children that they are not destined to be chickens, they are destined to be eagles! Our new history begins today!”

This is a book that has something to offer Native American studies and history programs from secondary education onward, as well as something for Native American leadership, the addictions recovery community and those working with Native Americans in any capacity. ❖

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