

Niagara

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Advanced
4 min read

The cataract of Niagara (properly pronounced Nee-ah-gah-rah), or Oniahgarah, is as fatal as it is fascinating, beautiful, sublime, and the casualties occurring there justify the tradition that “the Thundering Water asks two victims every year.” It was reputed, before white men looked for the first time on these falls—and what thumping yarns they told about them!—that two lives were lost here annually, and this average has been kept up by men and women who fall into the flood through accident, recklessness or despair, while bloody battles have been fought on the shores, and vessels have been hurled over the brink, to be dashed to splinters on the rocks.

The sound of the cataract was declared to be the voice of a mighty spirit that dwelt in the waters, and in former centuries the Indians offered to it a yearly sacrifice. This sacrifice was a maiden of the tribe, who was sent over in a white canoe, decorated with fruit and flowers, and the girls contended for this honor, for the brides of Manitou were objects of a special grace in the happy hunting-grounds. The last recorded sacrifice was in 1679, when Lelawala, the daughter of chief Eagle Eye, was chosen, in spite of the urgings and protests of the chevalier La Salle, who had been trying to restrain the people from their idolatries by an exposition of the Christian dogma. To his protests he received the unexpected answer, “Your words witness against you. Christ, you say, set us an example. We will follow it. Why should one death be great, while our sacrifice is horrible?” So the tribe gathered at the bank to watch the sailing of the white canoe. The chief watched the embarkation with the stoicism usual to the Indian when he is observed by others, but when the little bark swung out into the

current his affection mastered him, and he leaped into his own canoe and tried to overtake his daughter. In a moment both were beyond the power of rescue. After their death they were changed into spirits of pure strength and goodness, and live in a crystal heaven so far beneath the fall that its roaring is a music to them: she, the maid of the mist; he, the ruler of the cataract. Another version of the legend makes a lover and his mistress the chief actors. Some years later a patriarch of the tribe and all his sons went over the fall when the white men had seized their lands, preferring death to flight or war.

In about the year 200 the Stone Giants waded across the river below the falls on their northward march. These beings were descended from an ancient family, and being separated from their stock in the year 150 by the breaking of a vine bridge across the Mississippi, they left that region. Indian Pass, in the Adirondacks, bore the names of Otneyarheh, Stony Giants; Ganosgwah, Giants Clothed in Stone; and Dayohjegago, Place Where the Storm Clouds Fight the Great Serpent. Giants and serpents were held to be harmful inventions of the Evil Spirit, and the Lightning god, catching up clouds as he stood on the crags, broke them open, tore their lightnings out and hurled them against the monsters. These cannibals had almost exterminated the Iroquois, for they were of immense size and had made themselves almost invincible by rolling daily in the sand until their flesh was like stone. The Holder of the Heavens, viewing their evil actions from on high, came down disguised as one of their number—he used often to meditate on Manitou Rock, at the Whirlpool—and leading them to a valley near Onondaga, on pretence of guiding them to a fairer country, he stood on a hill above them and hurled rocks upon their heads until all, save one, who fled into the north, were dead. Yet, in the fulness of time, new children of the Stone Giants (mail-clad Europeans?) entered the region again and were destroyed by the Great Spirit,—oddly enough where the famous fraud known as the Cardiff giant was alleged to have been found. The Onondagas believed this statue to be one of their ancient foes.

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