

With Tribal Rites, TV

By OLIVER LA FARGE

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APOLOGIES TO THE IROQUOIS.
By Edmund Wilson. With a Study of the Mohawks in High Steel. By Joseph Mitchell. Illustrated. 310 pp. New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy. \$4.95.

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THIS unusual book takes the reader into a world as exotic as, say, Morocco, a world that exists, almost entirely unknown, at New York's back door. The principal part of it is written by Edmund Wilson and has the fine quality of writing we expect from that seasoned author.

Like most Americans, including most of the residents of New York State, Mr. Wilson, before undertaking this study, hardly knew that the Iroquois existed, and, as is common, he thought that Mohawks and Mohicans were the same. The curious business of some Mohawks who had squatted on land along Schoharie Creek in east-central New York led him to visit them in search of a story. Many a reporter would have stopped with that, but this one has high curiosity and sensitive perception. He saw that

Mr. La Farge has studied the American Indian as ethnologist and author. Among his many books are, "A Pause in the Desert," "Laughing Boy," and "The Changing Indian."

right there, in his home state, was something strange, intriguing, ancient, and unknown except to a few specialists.

His story goes on to tell how he discovered that some 10,000 Iroquois remain south of the Canadian border and about as many just north of it, few of pure Indian descent, yet Indian in mind, custom and action. He found them still organized into six tribes—the Senecas, Onondagas, Oneidas, Cayugas, Mohawks and Tuscaroras—united in the confederacy of the Longhouse that Deganawida Hiawatha founded and a considerable part of them are still actively practicing their ancient religion.

In the book are some quite beautiful descriptions of Iroquois ceremonies, in the course of which the author mentions the remarkable interweavings of tempo and mood in the Indian music. There is a somewhat similar effect in the text itself. As the reader follows the writer in his exploration of the Iroquois world, he has the sense of being transported in time, far from his familiar world. At the same time, things modern in time and place keep intruding, sometimes with the foreboding effect of symphonic motifs.

We see how a man who keeps and "feeds" sacred masks with



Iroquois dancing masks made of cornhusks.

From "Apologies to the Iroquois."

ritual owns TV, a big car, a refrigerator, and may have been one of those who, believing at one time that white men had tapped his telephone, defeated the supposed tappers by speaking over it in Iroquois. We learn how, with stubbornness and a singleness and purity of purpose that are rare in this world, seven hundred Tuscaroras stood up to Robert Moses and his supposedly all-powerful Power Authority when it proposed to flood the heart of their reservation. The U. S. Supreme Court, however, has recently sided with Mr. Moses.

In that incident, the ancient and the modern are beautifully intertwined. There is the deep, Indian feeling of the sacredness of the land, contempt of money and the rallying of the other

tribes of the League to support the beleaguered one. But the rallying was done largely by telephone, and crucial factors in the battle were effective publicity and the services of competent attorneys. The chapter on this subject contains, incidentally, the most devastating description of Mr. Moses' *modus operandi* this reviewer has ever read.

THIS is no casual bit of reportage. The author has read the essential parts of the considerable anthropological literature on the Iroquois and been advised and guided by the outstanding present authority on the subject, William N. Fenton. The book is strictly popular, but it has ethnological depth. Mr. Wilson also has come to understand fully what very few

non-Indians seem able to realize, the intense desire of most American Indians to remain Indians, to keep their identity.

Mr. Wilson's story is preceded by an excellent, short article on the Mohawk structural steelworkers by Joseph Mitchell. This was originally printed in *The New Yorker*, as was much of Mr. Wilson's material, and being republished here without change has that almost monotonous smoothness one finds in so much New Yorker material.

This review will misfire entirely if it gives the impression that "Apologies to the Iroquois" will appeal principally to people who are interested in Indians. This is a work to be read for sheer pleasure, for the sake of a fascinating true story delightfully told.