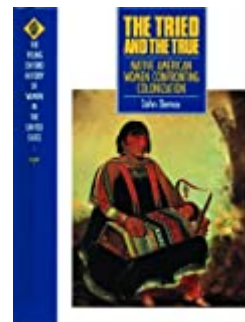


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Demos. *The Tried and the True: Native American Women Confronting Colonization.* New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1995. 112 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-512399-9; \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-508142-8.



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The Tried and the True

Designed to bring the enlightenment of the social history movement into the secondary school, the Young Oxford History of Women in the United States encompasses an eleven-volume series that chronicles the lives of American women from the colonial period through the present-day. The first volume in this series, John Demos's *The Tried and the True: Native American Women Confronting Colonization*, explores the historical lives of North America's first women, the Native Americans, as they experienced the shock and tribulation of colonization and conquest.

Demos constructs his analysis around four distinct Native American cultures: the Pueblos of the Southwest; the Iroquois of the New York-Pennsylvania woodlands; the multiple tribes of the Great Lakes region; and, the Cherokees of the Southeast. In each case, the particular tribe selected is used as a microcosm to illustrate the varied methods by which Native American women reacted and adapted to Euro-American colonization. Operating in a topically arranged, chronological framework, Demos organizes his narrative into a general progression which illustrates the methods by which Native Ameri-

can women dealt with the adversity of colonization from the early Spanish intrusion through the era of Cherokee removal in the 1830s. Through a concise, yet thorough, discussion of clan-relations, matrilineal delineation, marriage rituals and obligations, and the economic and spiritual roles played by Native American women in these societies, Demos illustrates his contention that there are "common threads that link the histories of Indian women everywhere (p.93)."

Nonetheless, the real strength of the work, consistent with the theme of the series, lies in the straightforward treatment Demos affords to the everyday lives of these Native American women. Both as producers and spiritual conduits, women played a key role in the everyday functionality of the Native American community. Of particular interest is Demos's illustration of the honored position women held within their communities as artists and the makers of crafts. Native American women contributed to their culture significantly as the producers of vital crafts, which served the existential welfare of the community in both spiritual and martial functions. In our modern society, where artistic expression is of-

ten afforded only minimal social respect, it is enlightening to realize that Native Americans held artistic talent in high regard. Of similar importance is Demos's presentation of the Native American view of women as respected members of society. Unlike their European counterparts, who viewed women as an inherently inferior gender, Native American communities offered their women a status of respect and social equality that was generally lacking from contemporary Euro-American society.

As history designed for secondary students, *The Tried and the True* is a superb synthesis of recent research regarding Native Americans. Demos's narrative style is engaging and insightful, benefiting from the lucid prose for which he has earned a just reputation. A wealth of maps, illustrations, and photographs further helps the work capture the essence of Native American women's lives through three centuries of colonization, while the brief bibliographical section steers interested readers to the leading works in the field.

On a more subjective level, however, the work suffers from a few minor oversights. Demos points out that the participation and importance of women as cultural producers declined with the advent of trade with the Euro-Americans. This is somewhat misleading, as it is important to remember that this slack in cultural production was minimal, and occurred primarily among eastern woodland tribes. A similar falloff did not manifest itself among the tribes residing west of the Mississippi. The women of the various Sioux nations, for example, continued to fill the role of cultural producers even after the period of reservation confinement, and this practice

continues to the present-day through the production of star-quilts and other ceremonial artifacts. [1]

Additionally, the lack of a representative of Plains Indian culture detracts from the book's value, even for secondary level readers. Editorial and spatial considerations notwithstanding, Demos should have endeavored to present a Plains component into his overall assessment of female culture in the Native American world. Without such a component, such as the Sioux or the Apache, the book remains both geographically and chronologically incomplete.

Overall, as an informative and instructional tool designed to direct secondary students to explore further dimensions of Native American culture, the book is essential. No high school or community library should be without a copy of *The Tried and the True*.

NOTES

[1]. For a more detailed assessment of the continuing role of Sioux women in cultural production, see: Mary Jane Schneider, "The Role of Sioux Women in the Production of Ceremonial Objects," in Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine, eds., *The Hidden Half: Studies of Plains Indian Women* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983).

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