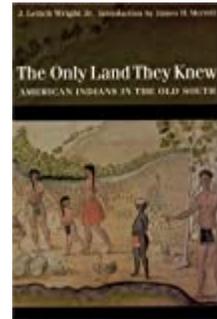




**J. Leitch Jr., Wright.** *The Only Land They Knew: American Indians in the Old South.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999. xvii + 372 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8032-9805-7.



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## The Origins of New Indian History in the South

Over the past two decades, ethnic group interaction in the colonial Southeast has been the focus of extensive scholarly investigation. A number of historians have reassessed the region and its significance by employing anthropological, demographic, ecological, and historical evidence previously ignored in many earlier studies. Scholars such as Daniel Usner, Patricia Galloway, M. Thomas Hatley, and Theda Perdue, to name but a few, deserve praise for their accomplishments in redefining interaction between African, European, and Native Americans in this setting.

Yet a decade before most of these individuals began publishing their findings, J. Leitch Wright, Jr. established the theoretical model upon which recent scholarship is based. Since its initial publication in 1981, few works have provided a better application of New Indian History methodologies in a comprehensive evaluation of the South and its peoples than Wright's most daring undertaking, *The Only Land They Knew*.

In his Introduction to this newly reprinted work, noted historian James Merrell claimed that since the book's original publication, no scholar has "attempted

the sort of synthesis Wright accomplished." (p. xi). This is not surprising considering the ambitious scope of Wright's endeavor: summarize the evolution of human interaction in a 400,000 square mile region during the three hundred year period before U.S. independence. Even more daunting, attempt such a study using methodologies and materials which most historians at that time had little familiarity with or training in how to use. In this sense, however, *The Only Land They Knew* presents a case study in the evolution of "frontier" historians during the last quarter-century.

Wright's earlier research had concentrated primarily on Spanish, French, and English interaction in the Southeast, specifically in terms of imperial rivalries, mercantilist competition, and global warfare. But in light of cross-disciplinary paradigms and social trends emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, the author, like many of his contemporaries, realized the necessity of broadening his focus. Studying all major population groups in the region provided a fuller historical picture since "Indians, Europeans, and Africans lived in the South, interacting with one another and altering the culture of each," (p. xv).

To gain a better understanding of this interaction, traditional sources had to be supplemented. Like most historians of the genre today, Wright began to consult “archaeology, linguistics, ethnography, anthropology, oral history, demography, and geography” (p. xv). In the end, this approach succeeded in providing a revealing overview that closely corresponded to the author’s goals.

The textbook structure of the work, along with Wright’s folksy, narrative style combine to enliven the content and appeal to the expert and novice audience alike. Chapter One delves into the pre-contact cultures, lifestyles, population divisions, and subsistence patterns, of “Southern Indians,” concluding with a broad comparison of the original Southerners and natives in other regions of North America. Generally absent in similar studies, Wright next analyzes the impact of Spanish exploration, missionization, and colonization efforts on the indigenous peoples long before English settlers arrived in North America.

More conventional, the next two chapters deal with English settlement along the shores of present-day Virginia. European-Indian contact in the early Carolinas, another area deserving greater treatment, makes up the content of the following section. Digressing from the regional framework, Wright then devotes a chapter to the impact of slavery on natives in the South, paying special attention to how each European power approached the practice and influenced its transformation over the decades. The author next revisits the topics of native demography, subsistence and day-to-day interaction and how they changed after a century of European expansion in North America. Insightful chapters on English attempts to convert the Indians in the South to Christianity and the settlement of Georgia and its impact follow respectively. The author concludes with sections devoted to the influence of colonization on both Indians and Europeans and the, at that time, little studied genre of African American relationships with Native Americans.

Wright is especially adept at promoting new approaches to understanding intercultural exchange. By pointing out that “Ponce de Leon, Florida’s discoverer, was almost as much a West Indian as an Iberian,” and emphasizing the influences of Caribbean settlement on other early colonizers, the author makes a valid case for reevaluating exploration of the South (p. 32). Rather than originating from a purely Spanish background, many sixteenth century imperialists approached the New World from a vastly different European-Caribbean perspective. Regardless of their nominal designation, these initial im-

migrants, as well as growing numbers from England, Scotland, and Ireland, helped transform native lifestyles to a remarkable extent, long before the existence of “The Thirteen Colonies”. By the time eighteenth-century settlers arrived in North America, the natives they encountered had already experienced European influences for decades, a fact often obscured in earlier studies. As Wright points out, though eighteenth-century colonists remarked on the exotic nature of the Indians’ attire, body tattooing, and facial decorations, “in all probability the paint [used by Indians] had not come from local berries and nuts but had been shipped from London” (p. 219). The exotic savagery that the settlers perceived actually emanated from both native and European sources.

More indicative of later historiographical trends are Wright’s observations on native modes of adaptation to European expansion. The author offers a brief, but illuminating, discussion on the emergence of “tributary” Indians living among the early English outposts in Virginia (pp.92-93). Though Wright credits these bi-cultural natives with less autonomy than later historians, he does point out the important role of such individuals in overall interaction between Europeans and Indians, a role more carefully explored in Merrell’s works regarding the Catawbas. Wright’s examination of slavery and Indians provides an interesting perspective on contemporary understandings of the institution in North America. Claiming that both natives and Africans experienced the process of enslavement by Europeans in similar manners, he concludes at one point that among other commonalities, “[t]heir Middle Passage differed only in that their ships sailed in opposite directions...” (p. 130). While such a statement should ignite much debate among scholars, the author’s overall contention, that it is impossible to understand “much of the history of the Southern Indians since the first discovery, without considering Indian slavery,” remains unassailable (p. 125).

Equally thought provoking is Wright’s general assessment of “Southern Indian” societies in the years just before Removal. Despite their worsening relationships with Europeans, he asserted that overall, the native populations “had achieved a measure of stability” (p. 280). Unlike in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries, when “pandemics had disrupted village life, warriors had been turned into commercial hunters and slave catchers (or their victims), and hostilities were common with both white settlers and aboriginal neighbors,” native peoples in the South after the American Revolution “were far more settled than in earlier times” (p. 281). Though many may doubt the validity of such a conclu-

sion, Wright's perspective deserves consideration. Implied is the idea that scholars should not always view native perspectives during the colonial period as dependent on relationships with colonists, or even on the presence of European Americans. Evaluations of trends and events affecting Indian cultures must not obscure the often unrelated evolution of native viewpoints and societal foci. Just as colonists did not consider the role of Indians in all aspects of colonial society, natives often viewed their culture through viewpoints absent of outside cultural influences.

Wright omits much detail and only briefly covers certain aspects of Southern society during the colonial period, an unfortunate necessity in these types of general examinations. Nevertheless, certain omissions raise questions. Though the author correctly emphasizes the important role of slavery in native cultures, he provides no information on the practice among the Indians prior to European arrival. The logic and meaning of slavery to indigenous peoples is ignored, leaving the reader with the erroneous impression that natives understood enslavement in much the same way as Europeans. Also surprising, considering Wright's regional specialty, is the relatively brief consideration of the Floridas, especially during the eighteenth century. Possessing a much smaller European population than the Atlantic colonies, the Floridas offer a unique window into ethnic interac-

tion in an environment dominated by no single group. The author analyzes the region during the early exploration period, but only emphasizes Spanish-Indian relationships, largely disregarding the added dynamic of English and French competition in the region. On that note, the French presence in the South is barely examined at all, again misleading readers' understanding of European colonization in the South. Failing to document French settlement in the lower Mississippi River valley and gulf coast hinterlands distorts the motivations of all peoples in the region in terms of intercultural trade, diplomacy, and warfare.

Any minor complaints are far overshadowed by the impressive presentation of the subject matter and Wright's overall legacy. His approach to the region and its peoples, in both this work and others, has influenced numerous scholars and students. Important for the information provided in its pages, this study is a valuable historical document in itself. Future historiographers will no doubt refer to *The Only Land They Knew* when marking the dividing line between Turnerian and New Indian approaches to the South.

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