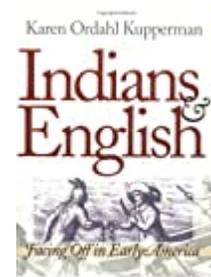




Karen Ordahl Kupperman. *Indians & English: Facing Off in Early America.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000. xi + 297 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-8282-3.



Reviewed by Michael J. Mullin (Department of History, Augustana College, South Dakota)

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Re-Thinking the Indian in Early English Colonization Literature, or Tacitus meets the Native American

Re-Thinking the Indian in Early English Colonization Literature, or Tacitus meets the Native American

Though his name appears nowhere in the extensive and impressive bibliography accompanying *Indians and English*, this book owes an intellectual debt to Robert Darnton. In his book concerning the book trade of pre-Revolutionary France, Darnton argued that French readers placed the meaning of what they read into pre-existing cultural contexts. Kupperman argues that English writers on colonization did the same thing. They conveyed the indigenous world of North America at the time of settlement along pre-existing European political, cultural, and intellectual lines. When it came to the Indians, writers attempted to place them in “familiar schemes of how human society is supposed to function” (p. 1). By examining the evolutionary nature of this early literature, Kupperman seeks to recover “the uncertainty and fear in which all sides lived” (p. x) during the early colonial period. This is important because Kupperman sees both Indians and English as redefining themselves in relationship to the other. By the end of this study, the reader has a wider context for interpreting the opening

decades of English colonization efforts.

Her book is not “about *the* Indians and *the* English” (p. 1), but on how individuals responded to the presence of the other. Therefore, she focuses attention on specific people. While the famous—John Smith, Roger Williams, Pocahontas, Powhatan, and Squanto—find their way into the book, so too do lesser known and equally important persons such as Thomas Harriot, Gabriel Archer, Manteo, and Hobbomock. By focusing on individuals, not historical development, Kupperman uncovers certain universals in the literature. She finds the earliest writings—whether they be books, pamphlets, official correspondence, or letters—showed the Indians as both fully human and the key to English economic success in North America. The former was important because of English concerns about culture and environment. The Indians’ presence, and the descriptions about their life-styles, the role of kings, and noted class distinctions, told readers that civilization was possible in North America. The economic argument was important because of the colonies’ tenuous foothold in North America. The Indians’ presence, and the colonists’ dependence on Indian foodstuffs,

suggested economic prosperity was possible in this new environment. At the same time, the Indians' numbers, their organizational strength, and military prowess, reminded English investors at home, why profits were not yet realized. At its core, the literature created during this period used the Indian to call attention to the colonial enterprise, and to maintain interest in colonization.

Throughout her analysis, the author differentiates between the writings of first hand eye-witnesses to Indian culture and the arm chair writer of colonization. There are good scholarly reasons for doing so. Nevertheless, the reader has no idea if writers such as John Smith, Roger Williams, and Thomas Harriot, were more widely read than men like Richard Hakulyt or Samuel Purchas, men who acted as promoters of colonization, and had a very different purpose in their presentation of the Indians. Who, in the end, had more importance to the English in persuading the seventeenth century reader what Indian culture was really like?

While forced to rely on English sources, Kupperman does not ignore the Indian side of the early colonial divide. She reminds the reader that native Americans did many of the same things the English did when it came to judging the other. Uttamatomakkin, who accompanied Pocahontas to England, interpreted King James I's actions in relation to what he had observed in earlier interethnic exchanges between Powhatan and John Smith. Indian polities attempted to integrate, interpret, and interact with the English in a culturally specific manner. Using a technique ethnohistorians call "upstreaming," Kupperman uses indigenous oral traditions, recent ethnohistorical developments/interpretations, and tribal histories to enter the seventeenth century world of America's first inhabitants.

In making her arguments, Kupperman chides ethnohistorians for their failure to incorporate the new social history of England into their analyzes. This is most evident in her use of new scholarship regarding Tacitus, and his impact on seventeenth century English thought. The Roman author allowed English readers to not only articulate their fears about contemporary changes in England, but gave English audiences a mirror upon which

they could evaluate the peoples living in North America. Tacitus allowed English society to place the colonial enterprise and the Indians encountered in that process within a larger framework. In using Tacitus to discuss the Chesapeake region, Kupperman brings in the recent work of scholars such as Frederic Gleach, Helen Rountree, and Steven Potter. The result is a new understanding not of the Indians, but of colonization's effects on seventeenth century England and how these Englishmen saw the Indians they encountered.

This book's strength lays in its ability to place the literature of the period within a larger context. Many readers already know how New England's Indian allies were appalled by the tactics of John Underhill and his forces at Mystic during the Pequot War of 1636-37. Yet, Kupperman shows how Underhill's actions fit a larger military picture. By 1649, Irish cities such as Drogheda suffered a similar fate. English readers of Underhill's exploit would undoubtedly be aware of mainland European cities which had suffered a similar fate during the Thirty Years War. The result, therefore, is not a new understanding of what happened at Mystic, but a broader context for interpreting the event. This enlarged context is most obvious in her chapter "Incorporating the Other" where she seamlessly blends the unique experiences of Squanto, Hobbomock, and Pochohantas into a universal experience for seventeenth century Indian-English interaction.

Kupperman's book has something for every reader. Specialists will like the enlarged context she provides, while the lay reader will learn how ethnohistory allows for a more complete picture of the early colonial enterprise. She does an excellent job of bringing together the most recent studies of the period and using them to re-read the primary materials. This a book worth reading.

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