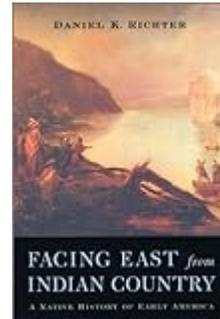




Daniel K. Richter. *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. x + 317 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00638-6.



Reviewed by Greg O'Brien (Department of History, University of Southern Mississippi)

Published on H-AmIndian (September, 2002)

Re-Imagining the History of Early America

Re-Imagining the History of Early America

For years, ethnohistorians have insisted that American history cannot be understood thoroughly without including Indian people as legitimate historical actors. In a 1987 counterfactual essay, James Axtell provocatively admonished fellow early American historians for not realizing the consequential impacts of European-Indian interaction in the course of American history.[1] He noted the dismal coverage of Indians in American history textbooks and declared, as Bernard De Voto did before him, that Indians were “one of the principal determinants of historical events.” In the 1990s, scholars began to answer Axtell’s call for the inclusion of American Indians in all studies of early America. Colin Calloway produced one of the more compelling of these new surveys of early American history in his 1997 book *New Worlds for All*. Arguing that “things could not have been the way they were without the interaction of Indian and European peoples in America,” Calloway sought to remove Indians from “some kind of exotic subcategory in American history” and “instead to integrate them as essential participants in the making of American history and the

shaping of American societies.”[2]

Despite the work of Axtell, Calloway, and many other students of Native America, scholars of colonial, revolutionary, and early republic American history have persisted in denying the formative role played by Indian people. Intrigued by this lack of attention, Richard White theorized that there are two principal reasons why historians continue to ignore both Native people and the work of ethnohistorians: one is the influence of the popular belief that Indians “are people who either have no significant history or exist outside history,” and the second cause stems from the belief by most historians that American Indian history “does not matter much to our understanding of the modern world.”[3] Even as the fields of ethnohistory and American Indian studies grow, with sophisticated and ground-breaking works produced every year, there is still a great need to demonstrate in a survey format just how important the history of Native America is to our understanding of general American history.[4] Into that void steps Daniel Richter, Director of the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania.

Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country*, as its title suggests, turns the gaze of early American history around and forces the reader to consider "stories of North America during the period of European colonization rather than of the European colonization of North America" (p. 9). Well known to ethnohistorians and early Americanists for his important study of the Iroquois, *Ordeal of the Longhouse*, Richter has now written what might prove to be the definitive work in the scholarly attempt to reintegrate Indians into the history of North America. This reviewer cannot imagine any historian or student dismissing the formative role of Native people in the history of colonial and early America after reading this book and absorbing its many lessons. For this reason, among others, *Facing East* will enjoy a long shelf-life as one of the best introductions into American Indian history before the Removal era of the early nineteenth century.

In six topical chapters, that nonetheless follow a general chronological outline from pre-contact times to the early nineteenth century, *Facing East* provides snapshots into American Indian lives, actions, and thoughts. Richter chose his vignettes carefully to reassess many of the major events and persons of early America. The view east begins at Cahokia, the metropolis located across the Mississippi River from present-day St. Louis that flourished around 1100 A.D, and Richter employs its story to remind "us that the great changes occurring in Native American life during the sixteenth century [and before] were not all, or even primarily, set in motion by Europeans" (p. 39). Richter sticks close to his documentary and secondary sources throughout the book, but he is willing to speculate about Indian perceptions of initial contacts with Europeans such as Hernando de Soto and Jacques Cartier. "Documentary evidence," he writes, "illuminates the European cast of characters, yet only imagination can put Indians in the foreground of these scenes" (p. 13).

Chapter two focuses on the impact of European material items on Indian people and follows closely James Merrell's paradigm of an "Indians' new world." [5] Within a generation or so of European contact, Richter explains, a "trio of economic, ecological, and epidemiological forces remade Indian country" into a world as new for them as that confronting Europeans and Africans. Numerous examples demonstrate that Indian people hunted more than ever to supply the fur trade, died by the thousands because of imported diseases, and altered their relationship with nature and the spiritual world in order to accommodate increasing materialism and new circum-

stances. Some Native societies virtually disappeared or so changed themselves as to become nearly unrecognizable to their ancestors. In general, this interpretation that Indians radically altered their culture is undeniable. Yet, given all that undeniable cultural change, Indian people, even those east of the Mississippi River, have retained language and many other features of traditional society to this day. Not all disappeared as completely as Merrell's Catawbas, and their story of survival and cultural persistence is left largely unexplained within the "Indians' new world" model.

Sensing the potential pitfalls of an analysis based solely on studying the "abstract forces" at work within Native communities after contact, Richter uses his third chapter to explore the lives of particular Indian people and the variety of their responses to the European presence. He examines the lives of familiar seventeenth-century personages such as the Powhatan woman Pocahontas, the Catholic Mohawk woman Kateri Tekawitha, and the Wampanoag man Metacom (King Philip). Richter eagerly debunks the myths surrounding these three individuals and urges the reader to consider their perspectives in dealing with Europeans. Their stories do not demonstrate the inevitability of conflict between Indians and Europeans, insists Richter, as they "sought cooperation rather than conflict, coexistence on shared regional patches of ground rather than arm's-length contact across distant frontiers" (pp. 108-09). This biographical approach is refreshing to see in a scholarly work and helps to put a face on the conditions and choices explained elsewhere in the book.

In chapter four Richter seeks out the "Native Voices" of early America by re-examining conversion narratives from New England and colonial-era diplomacy, especially as represented in the Albany meeting of 1679 between the Iroquois and British colonial leaders. These two types of sources provide direct documentation of what Indian people actually said and thought, albeit through layers of interpretation, in the colonial period. Here, too, Richter finds Indians asking their European counterparts to unite across the cultural barrier in the interest of mutually-beneficial collaboration. Richter maintains that "[r]ead carefully, the written records that these Europeans used to document their efforts can reveal Native people using the power of the spoken word to articulate a distinctive vision of cultural coexistence on Indian terms" (p. 150).

Chapter five examines the more-traditional focus of early American history on imperial clashes, war, trade,

and the origins of a racialized identity in the eighteenth century. Richter utilizes an analytical tool in this chapter based on seeing the eighteenth-century histories of Indians and Euro-Americans unfolding on a parallel track, rather than necessarily moving towards inevitable conflict or partnership. Both groups of people, despite their diversity, “moved along parallel paths in a single, ever more consolidated, transatlantic imperial world” (p. 151). Thus, even though Indians and Europeans both fought in imperial wars, engaged in international trade and became more consumer-oriented, produced as well as consumed goods for the market, and began seeing the world in a racialized “red” versus “white” manner, they did so in ways that made sense within their own particular cultures and not because one group exercised coercive power over the other. This balance between parallel paths broke down when France left the continent in 1763 and the imperial contest between that country and Britain ended. Both Indians and Anglo-Americans hardened their racial views of each other and sought to remove the other from their lives.

The last chapter contemplates this racial hardening and the growing inevitability of conflict between 1763 and 1830. Indian nativists like Neolin, and Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee Prophet, grew in influence and preached the separateness of red and white worlds, while American officials ruthlessly wiped out Native communities in the American Revolution and later conflicts, and sought ways to remove the Indian presence from their lives. Groups like Pennsylvania’s Paxton Boys encouraged the view in the 1760s that all Indians were the same and that whites must act in concert to destroy the Indian threat. They could count numerous ideological successors among later Americans all the way up to Andrew Jackson and Indian Removal. In summary, what had begun as an attempt by Indian people through the seventeenth century to integrate Europeans into their world, while confronting the myriad of changes caused by the European presence, transformed into a path of parallel existence around 1700, whereby cooperation was still possible but the goals of Indians and Europeans remained separate, and mutated into a world of “separate creations” and increasing violence bent on extermination of the other in the late eighteenth century.

Despite the eventual removal of most eastern Indians west of the Mississippi River, Indians remained in the east, and Richter uses an epilogue to tell the story of William Apess, an early nineteenth-century Methodist preacher and Pequot descendant from New England, to uncover the continuing Indian voice of eastern North

America. Apess reminded his readers and listeners of the heroic deeds of Metacom (King Philip) who sought, in Apess’s view, to save his people from extirpation in the 1670s, just as George Washington did with his people in the 1770s. Once again, an eastern Indian voice suggested that cooperation across the cultural and racial boundary was possible if both peoples confronted their equally violent history head on. Alas, Richter reminds us, white Americans refused Apess’s offer, and as they “wrote their nation’s past, their greatest erasure of all was of memories of Indians who neither uncompromisingly resisted like the King Philip of their imagination nor wholeheartedly assimilated like the Pocahontas of their fantasies” (p. 252).

Facing East is not an exhaustive study of Indian America. Indians living west of the Mississippi River receive little attention, and other Indian groups, especially those in the South, receive less attention than those in New England and New York. This uneven coverage leads to some dated conclusions such as Richter’s observation that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century descendants of the southeastern Mississippian chiefdoms did not have “anything like their hierarchical social systems and elaborate burial rituals” (p. 36). They did. Nevertheless, Richter’s endnotes display a mastery of the historical and anthropological literature about Indians and others in early eastern North America, though the inclusion of a bibliography would have aided in identifying the works consulted. The four maps and numerous illustrations add significantly to the work’s value as a reference. And, I must admit, my lecture notes in American Indian history will improve considerably after consulting this work. Read it and yours will too.

Notes

[1]. James Axtell, “Colonial America without the Indians: Counterfactual Reflections,” *Journal of American History* 73 (1987), pp. 981-96, quote on p. 981. See also Axtell’s essay “The Ethnohistory of Native America,” in Donald L. Fixico, ed., *Rethinking American Indian History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), pp. 11-27.

[2]. Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. xiv.

[3]. Richard White, “Using the Past: History and Native American Studies,” in Russell Thornton, ed., *Studying Native America: Problems and Prospects* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), pp. 217-43.

[4]. Among several important exceptions to the tendency to ignore Indians in early American history is Woody Holton's *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[5]. James Merrell, "The Indians' New World: The Catawba Experience," *William and Mary Quarterly* 41 (1984): pp. 537-565; and Merrell, *The Indians' New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian>

Citation: Greg O'Brien. Review of Richter, Daniel K., *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. September, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6757>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.