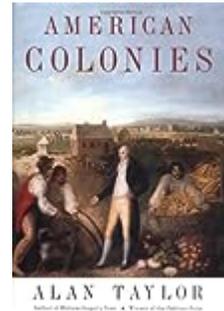




Alan Taylor. *American Colonies: The Settling of North America.* New York and London: Viking, 2001. xvii + 526 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-14-200210-0; \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-87282-4.



Reviewed by Nancy L. Hagedorn (Department of History, SUNY Fredonia)

Published on H-Atlantic (November, 2003)

North American Cultures, Colonies, and Colonialism in an Atlantic Context

North American Cultures, Colonies, and Colonialism in an Atlantic Context

Traditionally, the history of colonial America has been told as the story of the thirteen mainland British colonies that became the United States of America—at least for most American historians. This Anglo-centric approach, colored and shaped both consciously and unconsciously by the known outcome of the story following the American Revolution, has in turn given rise to a variety of further distortions and misconstructions over the past two centuries: first, “legitimate” areas for study by colonial historians, until recently, have been narrowly defined geographically to include primarily the eastern seaboard of North America between Maine and Florida, based on the anachronistic application of later national boundaries. In other words, “colonial” history has been deemed relevant to the extent that it anticipates or seems to explain what is recognizable as the later United States. Second, and following from the first tendency, many groups and areas have been given extremely short shrift. This neglect applies not only to the original indigenous inhabitants of the Americas, but also to Africans and

to other Europeans involved in the colonial enterprise (namely the Spanish, French, Dutch, and Swedes) in the region of eastern North America east of the Appalachians, not to mention in the West Indies, Canada, the Southwest, and Latin America. Third, this blinkered vision of early America has given rise to a favorite theme in these traditional histories—“American exceptionalism.” Consideration of colonial America in this Anglo-centric vacuum has led many historians, not to mention the general public, to assume that the British colonial experience was unique and that this simplified story is quintessentially *the* colonial American story.

Happily, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Alan Taylor offers a newer, more comprehensive, and nuanced story in *American Colonies*, the first volume of the new five-volume *Penguin History of the United States*. Drawing on and masterfully synthesizing the best new scholarship by historians, ethnohistorians, environmental historians, and anthropologists during the past twenty years, Taylor offers an impressive and broad-ranging revision of the history of early America. Employing three especially useful lines of recent inquiry—an Atlantic per-

spective, environmental history, and the ethnohistory of colonial and native peoples—Taylor replaces the old simplistic narrative of American exceptionalism with one of complexity, competition, and comparison. In fact, Taylor’s retelling of North America’s history no longer consists of a single story of Anglo-American development, but instead offers a collection of independent yet intertwined stories, all of them placed squarely in the context of the revolutionary and unparalleled intersection of the cultures, peoples, flora, and fauna of Africa, Europe, and the Americas from the late fifteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. The title itself, *American Colonies* instead of *Colonial America*, hints at this plurality.

The fundamental starting point for Taylor is the great variety of cultures involved in the colonial enterprise: “to divide the peoples in three, into the racial and cultural categories of European, African, and Indian, only begins to reveal the human diversity of the colonial encounter” (p. xi), particularly since the three clusters encompass a wide array of ethnicities and cultures. According to Taylor, all were “in flux when they encountered one another in the colonies; in the process of those encounters they defined an array of new identities as Americans” (p. xii), reshaping and redefining both the new world and the old for everyone. “In such exchanges and composites, we find the true measure of American distinctiveness, the true foundation for the diverse America of our time” (p. xii). Taylor’s sensitivity to cultural diversity and his broad Atlantic context allow him to give a much clearer picture of the culture of Native Americans and Africans, and of their regional variety, than ever before. His concern with culture also gives him the ability to explain European-Indian, African-European, and even Indian-Indian interactions and reactions much better than any of his predecessors. Africans and Native Americans are no longer separate chapters or sidebars of American history, but become ever-present, vital actors and catalysts in the colonization story.

Taylor’s emphasis on cultural interaction and an Atlantic context as well as his resistance to reading the history of the United States back in time and geography also lead him to expand greatly the geographic and temporal boundaries of colonial America. Mexico, the West Indies, and French Canada, not to mention the borderlands of the Southwest and the Russian Northwest, all receive due attention. The internal cultures, societies, and economies of all of these regions are considered in some detail “lest they again appear only in wars, reduced to bellicose foils to British protagonists” (p. xv). Likewise, his narrative begins with the arrival of the first “colonists,” the Paleo-

Indians, and continues well beyond the normal end of traditional colonial America (the American Revolution) to include Captain Cook’s Pacific voyages and colonialism in California, Alaska, and even Hawaii during the early-nineteenth century. As Taylor notes, his “open-ended” boundaries result from his understanding that “process, as much as place, defines the subject” of colonial America (p. xvi). This understanding is key to Taylor’s underlying theme that American distinctiveness lies not in any inherent uniqueness of the British colonial experience of creating new societies, but in the unprecedented mixing of radically different peoples, microbes, plants, and animals and in the intersection of such a variety of different colonial stories and their eventual convergence into a single national story. Taylor’s narrative of “nation-building” is one rife with the complexities of race, ethnicity, and religion and highlights not just the triumphs of colonial peoples, but also the stressful process of identity formation through encounters with confusing and often misunderstood others in the New World environment. As a result, Taylor provides the long-absent and much-needed international and comparative perspective necessary “to see the distinctive nature of British colonial society that made a colonial revolution for independence and republicanism possible first on the Atlantic seaboard” (p. xv).

Taylor organizes his story first chronologically and then regionally, beginning with a section entitled “Encounters,” moving on to consider “Colonies,” and finally concluding with “Empires.” In each, he considers the primary narratives of the period, moving from region to region and culture to culture, always mindful, however, to point out intersections, interactions, common themes, and contrasting circumstances and outcomes along the way. In this sense the stories are not always completely integrated, but their presentation in parallel and Taylor’s deft pen allow the reader to make those connections for him/herself quite naturally and clearly. Despite the fact that the work is intended as an overview and is largely a synthesis of recent scholarship, Taylor manages to include a vivid array of new or little-known quotations and details to flesh out his story and provide new perspectives and insights. In fact, this richness of primary material leads to the one significant weakness of the book: it does not contain any footnotes or endnotes. Instead, the publisher apparently decided to limit such references to chapter bibliographies, which, while helpful in providing direction toward additional reading and sources, will undoubtedly frustrate the student or specialist who wants to track down more information about those tantalizing

glimpses of the underlying evidence.

In the final analysis, Alan Taylor's *American Colonies* is nothing short of a brilliant synthesis of recent scholarship on early America. Given its convincing underlying thesis and broad comparative perspective, however, it is also much more than that. Taylor's complex vision of

early America forces readers to rethink everything they think they know about colonialism and colonial America. As a result, it should quickly find its way into college classrooms and onto library shelves. It will undoubtedly become a classic in colonial history and should certainly be required reading for anyone interested in the history of North America and its origins.

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

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

Citation: Nancy L. Hagedorn. Review of Taylor, Alan, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8414>

Copyright © 2003 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.