

REVIEW AND RESPONSE

*D*aniel Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. x, 317, illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$26.00 cloth.

Jane Merritt, Timothy Shannon, and Daniel Richter presented earlier drafts of the following essays at the Annual Meeting of the Pennsylvania Historical Association at Millersville University, in October 2002.

In Facing East, We Find Ourselves

I have one general rule: before seeing a movie, avoid the reviews. It's not as easy as it sounds. We are perpetually surrounded by media that informs us what should be considered an "instant classic," a "mega-blockbuster," or even an "over-budgeted flop." We rarely get a chance to form our own opinion on the narrative, images, and meaning of a film. These are provided for us. That said, I must confess that when I picked up a copy of Daniel

Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country*, I was unexpectedly drawn to the dust jacket and the copious blurbs from a *WHO'S WHO* of early American history. Gary Nash warns that the book will "bend the minds of undergraduates and the public." Phil Deloria insists that it's "a book not to be missed." James Merrell asserts that Richter's "thought-provoking work" "spins us around." Alan Taylor sees "keen insight" and "a sparkling wit" at work, and Neal Salisbury insists that the "book's deceptively simple prose" in fact illuminates the very complex "perspectives and experiences" of native peoples. Perhaps I should have stuck with my original rule, since my comments may seem to be similarly tribute filled rather than a critique of Richter's work. However, the Pennsylvania Historical Association panel discussion about the book last October has generated several interesting questions about the current state of Native American history and its vital role in understanding early America that may temper my praise.

Since the late 1980s, when James Merrell's book *The Indian's New World* came out, quickly followed by Richard White's *The Middle Ground*, and Richter's first book, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, academic scholars have been reconfiguring the "master narrative" to include Native Americans, not as bit players, but as central agents in the unfolding tale of North America.¹ Throughout the 1990s, younger scholars like me were inspired by these works, and sought out new arenas to explore the impact of cultural encounters on both native communities and the emergence of an American colonial world. We have looked at New England Indian towns, marriage, religion, and political patterns before and after English colonization;² we have passed through the mid-Atlantic crossroads at Moravian mission communities and found elusive empires at work in the Ohio Valley;³ we have explored economic patterns and gender among the Creeks and Cherokees;⁴ we have even trekked to the Southwest borderlands.⁵ Everywhere we found "middle grounds"—places and times where terms like "invasion" and "conquest" were less than clear-cut; where encounters were messy, not easily categorized; where Indians and their progeny were active agents in constructing the American past and present. Indeed, by the turn of the millennium I figured that we had all "been there" and "done that" when it came to Native American history. It was time to move on, to find new avenues for cultural inquiry.

Thus, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Daniel Richter has reopened the debate about the Native American past in imaginative ways. *Facing East* goes beyond simply being an Indian-focused history to explore historical processes as well. It not only shifts perspectives to "develop eastward-facing stories," (9) putting Indians in the foreground, but also questions how we create narratives about Indians and the possible meaning that Indians intended for those narratives. *Facing East* does not just juxtapose St. Louis and Chahokia, telling us how one became dominant and overshadowed the greatness of the other, but explores how the two worlds intermingled, merged, spoke to each other, learned from each other, and still influence each other today.

We might, at first, be disappointed that Richter deals with a lot of familiar themes and material, although he admits that he did not intend to present new research, but wanted to look at old stories from a new perspective. In the first chapter, "Imagining a Distant New World," we confront the well-known sixteenth-century world of conflict and distrust. Indians and Europeans met each other in the Americas with awe, curiosity, suspicion, and sometimes violence. Here, Richter shines a spot light on Hernando de Soto and the Spaniards bullying their way through the Southeast from 1539 to the early 1540s and makes clear that Indians had their own ways of responding to the strange rumors of De Soto's passage, his appearance and persistent demands. They creatively diverted the Spanish, sending them to distant golden villages or to pester their neighbors instead.

Another familiar story that Richter explores is the social, economic, and ecological impact of "Confronting a Material World." Refining the arguments of Merrell, Bill Cronon, and Alfred Crosby, among others, Richter highlights the ways that Indians became discriminating consumers in a new market economy. They adapted European goods and technologies to their own needs. They were not noble savages living in a Garden of Eden, instead, they too wanted to make their lives more comfortable and work easier with an iron awl, copper kettle, or gun and powder. Yet neither were Indians capitalists in the making, they used "technological innovations that were rooted in Native traditions" (49), whether reshaping copper kettles and coins into decorative and spiritual objects, or using new weapons to their advantage over traditional native enemies. Still, the change these goods wrought was immense. Young hunters displaced old chiefs as community leaders and overhunting not only depleted the beaver population, it literally changed the flow of rivers and the meaning of land and resources in the native lexicon.

These familiar themes aside, Richter manages to turn old narratives on their head in the third chapter, "Living With Europeans," which is particularly strong. He intertwines our own memory—how we remember and mythologize the native past—with speculation on how natives understood their own lives and history. Throughout the book, Richter deftly uses a storyteller's eye, with rich detail of place, people, and event. But here, he digs deeply into the lives of three individuals—Pocahontas, Kateri Tekakwitha, and Metacom—to dissect how Indians interpreted encounters with Europeans. Deliberately drawing on scant and perhaps questionable evidence, he conjectures about the personal motives of these individual Indians. Whereas we, over the past 300 years, have constructed complex myths about Indians in order to explain something about ourselves, Richter attempts to strip away those layers of myth to retrieve underlying native motives.

Pocahontas is no longer bride to John Rolfe, who easily negotiated an English/Christian world, nor even the more politically correct "Native American diplomat" for the Powhatan people. She, instead, becomes a dutiful daughter torn by family obligations, who, in the end, was betrayed by English captors. A more complex and less public person, Kateri Tekakwitha gives us a window into the native understanding of concepts like sin and monotheism. Orphaned by European-borne disease, she used the Catholic Church and her piety to create a new community and the social acceptance that she had lost with her native family. Finally, there is Metacom, also known as King Philip. Although seventeenth century Puritans in New England retold his story as the bloodthirsty son of Massasoit seeking vengeance, and the early nineteenth century revived him as a tragic hero, in reality, he too had to wrestle with a very personal response to English colonization. Richter reminds us that Metacom also had to ponder Protestant conversion and English economic dominance. Indeed, he hired John Sassomon to be a liaison to the English, to help him understand their market system and religion. From a well-off family, Metacom assumed that he would be an equal, a leader among men. But, like Pocahontas and Kateri Tekakwitha, his attempts to adapt were met with European inflexibility and a destructive war ensued.

After delving into the nuances of individual voices and personal motivation, Richter comes back to the broader impact of imperial and national policies on Indian groups. Although the political and economic structure of the British colonial Empire allowed Indians and whites to co-exist, on some level it also promoted conflict. By the eighteenth century, Native Americans were

learning the hard lesson of the limits of accommodation. Politically fractured and decentralized, economically dependent on a new "Empire of Goods," and struggling with the spiritual and social implications of an Indian Great Awakening, Native Americans faced a world of fragments. Many groups, like the Iroquois, attempted to remain neutral. But the imperial conflict that eventually emerged in the Seven Years' War was hardly a European conflict alone; it was an Indian war for land and political independence.

As many of us are coming to understand, 1763 looms large as one of the pivotal moments in eighteenth century Indian-white relations. Although the end of an international conflict over North America, 1763 clearly marks a shift in how Euro-Americans and Native Americans on the eastern seaboard defined themselves and each other as a people. Richter explores this shift by juxtaposing the Paxton Boys Massacre and Pontiac's Uprising. Even as the Paxton Boys helped to define and refine savage racial stereo-types of Indians (echoed a decade later in the Declaration of Independence), Native American leaders, such as Neolin and Pontiac (and Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh in the succeeding generations) were constructing a new Pan-Indian identity that aimed to renew an Indian-centered spiritual and social life. However, I question Richter's use of a more modern term, "ethnic cleansing," in describing these confrontations (190, 203–206). The phrase, as we have come to know it, implies widespread governmental or quasi-governmental policies of and participation in genocide, a term that I am still reluctant to apply generally to Indian-white relations except for very specific encounters, such as the violence perpetrated by gold miners on California Indians in the mid-nineteenth century.

One cannot deny that intense nationalistic and ethnocentric sentiment drove the Paxton Boys and Pontiac's followers in the eighteenth century, but more subtle forces were also at work. Indeed, Richter's close reading of native lives and texts would be constructive in the latter part of the book. Why not use the same kind of probing inquiry through biography to give us a more intimate understanding of the personal ambivalence that accompanied the emergence of racial divisiveness in the 1760s? The Paxton Boys actions certainly help to illustrate the white impulse to eradicate Indians from the frontier. And no one would refute that Andrew Jackson and others in government in the aftermath of the War of 1812 flaunted, even celebrated, their hatred of Indians. But what can we make of other, less remarkable, interactions between Indians and whites during this same time-period? Do we ignore, for instance, the cooperative space that typified Moravian

mission towns or the relationship between Ursuline nuns and Iroquois women in New France for the more sensational and bloody consequences of violent encounters?⁶

And what of Native American "racism"? Were the actions of Pontiac and Tecumseh actually parallel to those of white Americans? I am not convinced that the same kind of racism or definitions of race existed within Indian communities, even after the violence of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Many Indian leaders in the post-1763 world did call for political boundaries and some, such as Neolin and Tenskwatawa, did espouse doctrines of separate creation, but "Indian Identity" as we saw with Pocahontas and Metacom was still contended, often a mixture of accommodation and resistance. Even concepts of race and kinship in the native lexicon more often ignored skin color and biology. I want to hear some different stories here of eighteenth century Indian leaders (more like William Apess than Pontiac) who might help illustrate the syncretic and ambivalent native perspective of the late colonial period.

Perhaps this sounds like wishful thinking—that I want to elide or eliminate the violent confrontations between Indians and whites in the colonial period and focus on a kinder and gentler native history. The PHA panel discussion raised the question about whether Native American history, as we write it today, is too fatalistic, too focused on the tragic results of colonialism and dislocation. We see that tragedy play-out, in particular, at the end of James Merrell's recent book, *Into the American Woods*, with the suggestive death (suicide?) of Young Seneca George that reflected the supposed mutual incomprehensibility of Indians and whites in the eighteenth century.⁷ Although the tale of early native America ends with dispossession and the death of many, we do not have to write about Native Americans and their culture in elegiac terms. More important than disappearance are the ways that American Indians have survived, adapted, redefined themselves, and have claimed a small corner of a larger nation as their own. Mainstream America has even paid tribute to native persistence by absorbing (some might say bastardizing) Indian culture to define itself. Both gestures speak to the continued complexity and vitality of the Native American experience. As Daniel Richter demonstrates, we learn as much from the process as from the content.

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