

A Critique of Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country:
A Native History of Early America*

In *Facing East from Indian Country*, Dan Richter wants to turn our typical perspective on the European-Indian encounter on its head, so that North America becomes the "Old World" and European traders, missionaries, and colonists become the inscrutable "others" whose behavior, culture, and beliefs Indians must try to explain. In many respects, this approach to early America may already be familiar to readers of Richter's previous book, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, which viewed the European invasion of northeastern America from the perspective of the Iroquois peoples of modern New York. *Facing East* extends the chronology and geographic breadth of that earlier work, describing the European-Indian encounter in North America east of the Mississippi (including Spanish Florida and French Canada) from the early sixteenth century well into the nineteenth.

Writing such a synthesis can be very difficult. It requires command of the literature, an ability of generalize with confidence, and a knack for being descriptive without being shallow. Richter possesses all of these attributes, as well as a willingness to depart from the conventional wisdom of his peers when appropriate and a deft hand when it comes to the nicely-turned phrase. This book is peppered with quips and allusions that bring larger points home in a way that delights the attentive reader. I will note only one here to illustrate my point: in alluding to early European forays into North America's interior, Richter calls the ill-fated expeditions of de Soto and Cartier "vast inland shipwrecks" (36) that left a treasure of valuable foreign artifacts strewn in their wake. This striking image of the flotsam and jetsam of failed European ventures becoming a source of wealth and prestige for Indians illustrates Richter's larger point about the value Indians attached to European goods with remarkable clarity and economy. It is a model of prose style to which all of us should aspire.

However, what I admire most about Richter's synthesis is his ability to keep human actors at the forefront of his story and to convey to the reader a sense of the logic behind the choices they made. And lest this critique become a tribute, I will frame the rest of my remarks according to how well I think the book fulfills the task that Richter sets out for it in the opening pages: to reconstruct what the Indians were thinking when they dealt with Europeans.

Richter is most successful in this regard in the first four chapters, which cover the period from 1500 to 1700. Through well-chosen vignettes and

imaginative use of sources, he allows us to see European traders, missionaries, and colonists through Indian eyes, and this new perspective challenges some of our most cherished frameworks for talking about these encounters. When we think about the European-Indian encounter from a perspective that faces west, across the Atlantic to America, we tend to draw distinctions based upon the national origins of the colonizers. Francis Parkman's famous dictum that "Spanish civilization crushed the Indian; English civilization scorned and neglected him; French civilization embraced and cherished him" still holds considerable sway over the textbook treatment of the colonial era, and modern scholars continue to make comparative judgments about the relative merits and failings of each European power's approach to Indian relations.

Facing east from Indian country, such distinctions seem small potatoes indeed. Richter's chapter on sixteenth-century encounters is a case in point. From the Indians' perspective, DeSoto's *entrada* in southeastern America and Cartier's voyages in the St. Lawrence River unfolded in similar pattern, despite the distinctions we are accustomed to drawing between the Spanish and French. In both cases, Europeans showed up with all sorts of exotic goods that testified to their spiritual power and material wealth. Yet, they exhibited an ignorance of proper diplomatic etiquette which might have been forgiven by their Native hosts if it had not been for the outright disdain Europeans showed for Indian values of reciprocity and mutuality. The Europeans' bad manners and hubris turned them into unwelcome guests whose presence could not be maintained without substantial reinforcements from home. From the perspective of Indian country, dividing Europeans into categories of nationality or religion seems to matter very little when compared to their universal unwillingness to negotiate in good faith.

In Chapter 3, which deals with Indian reactions to European colonial populations in the seventeenth century, Richter again puts the vignette to good use, this time to illuminate the process of cultural assimilation and religious conversion from a Native perspective. In retelling the stories of Pocahontas and Mohawk convert Kateri Tekakwitha, Richter challenges the usefulness of our traditional frameworks for studying the European-Indian encounter. Historians usually tell the story of these two Native women in entirely different contexts: Pocahontas is as much a part of the colonial mythology of the United States as the Pilgrims; she is the prototype of every "good Indian" who ever intervened to preserve Protestant Anglo settlers from "bad Indians." Kateri Tekakwitha, on the other hand, belongs to the mythology of Catholic

North America, a saintly figure among Indian converts that testifies to the righteousness of French missionaries and martyrs.

Richter's version of the lives of these two women reverses those roles and strips them of their nationalist overtones. His Pocahontas is no longer the spunky savior of Jamestown, but an embittered pawn stuck between Powhatan's confederacy and the Virginia Company: a dutiful daughter, she has agreed to marry John Rolfe to cement an alliance between her father's people and the English, but as her brief interview with Captain John Smith in London in 1616 testifies, she knows this marriage to be an empty gesture, because the English will fail to fulfill the obligations it bestows upon them, just as they have done in the past. Tekakwitha, on the other hand, emerges from Richter's analysis as someone quite different from the devout, dutiful (and some might say, crackpot) mystic she is commonly portrayed to be. She and the other Mohawk converts who follow their Jesuit mentors to Canada shaped their own destinies by seizing the opportunity to cultivate new social bonds and spiritual resources in a world turned upside down by disease and warfare.

Richter's use of personal vignettes to reconstruct the Indian's perspective also works well in Chapter 4, in his analysis of Indian conversion narratives from seventeenth-century New England. His source is at once familiar and apparently limited: the spiritual narratives of 15 "praying Indians" recorded by the Puritan missionaries who converted them. As Richter notes, such narratives at first glance "strike us as hardly 'Indian' at all" because they conform so closely in language and format to the standard Puritan conversion narrative. Yet, through textual analysis, Richter uncovers important characteristics that set the spirituality of praying Indians apart from their European contemporaries. Whereas standard Puritan conversion narratives focused on the First TABLE of the Ten Commandments—the believer's sins against God and his or her own soul, the Indian converts' narratives emphasized the Second TABLE: sins committed against others by action and word. The praying Indians of seventeenth-century New England practiced a Christianity that retained their Native culture's emphasis on what Richter calls "the maintenance of respectful reciprocity in a complicated world of human and other-than-human persons." (128) As with his analysis of Kateri Tekakwitha, Richter's treatment of the praying Indians allows the reader to appreciate the calculus of choice that these Indians faced as they struggled to right a world thrown out of balance by the Europeans' arrival. This is the considerable achievement of this book.

It is interesting to note that this recovery of Indian agency seems most complete and convincing when Richter deals with issues of religious conversion. I find the vignettes on Kateri Tekakwitha and the praying Indians the most well-rounded and convincing in the book. Richter does address other aspects of the European-Indian encounter, particularly diplomacy and warfare, with similar vignettes arranged around Metacom, Pontiac, and the Mohawks, but I still find the ones that deal with Christian converts the most satisfying. Why is that? First, it testifies to Richter's creative and analytical strength as a historian, to tease out so much of psychological dimensions of conversion from the Indians' perspective. Second, I suspect that Richter's success here has something to do with the nature of the sources themselves: missionaries, more so than traders or colonial officials, wanted to fathom the interior Indian, to gain a window into his or her soul, as much as to regulate his or her outward behavior. In trying to see the world through Indian eyes, Richter has taken Willie Sutton's advice on robbing banks and applied it doing history: he's gone to the converts because that's where the sources are.

My appreciation for what Richter accomplishes in the first four chapters of this book helps explain why I am less satisfied with the last two, which deal with the period between 1700 and 1815. In dealing with the eighteenth century, Richter emphasizes the social construction of race on both sides of the European-Indian encounter and the failure of mutual accommodation that results from it. He makes the parallels between the increasingly segregated nature of European-Indian relations in the late colonial period and our modern world explicit when he invokes the phrase "ethnic cleansing" to describe what went on along the trans-Appalachian frontier between 1754 and 1815. Pennsylvania looms large in this part of the book, as it recapitulates the familiar, depressing litany of atrocities Indians and Europeans visited upon each other in places like Conestoga, the Wyoming Valley, and Gnadenhütten. But what I found missing here was the same sense of human agency that Richter placed at the center of the book's earlier chapters. The Indians in those chapters made intelligent choices based upon changing circumstances; by comparison, the Indians in the eighteenth century seem more blindly reactive, forced into untenable positions by a rising tide of colonial hostility, imperial land hunger, and dependency on the fur trade.

Of course, their range of choices was much more limited in the eighteenth century than the seventeenth: there were many more colonists to deal with, options for diplomatic and military alliances with other colonial powers were more limited, and European goods had long since passed from being exotic

novelties to everyday necessities. Nevertheless, I wanted to see that constriction illustrated in some well-chosen vignettes. Pontiac, Neolin, and the Paxton Boys stand at the center of the story Richter tells about the eighteenth century. How would that story differ if he had focused on Teedyuscung, Shickellamy, Andrew Montour, Conrad Weiser, or Israel Pemberton?

Perhaps the story would have been much the same. Still, I think the figures I just mentioned faced a problem much like the one that confronted Tekakwitha and the Indian converts in New England: how to make the best of a bad situation. Like their seventeenth-century forbearers, many of these figures assumed roles as mediators between Native and European worlds, experiencing geographic and psychological dislocation as a result. Recovering the process by which they made their choices might not alter significantly the story Richter tells in the last two chapters of his book, but it might help us appreciate more fully its human contours.

My point boils down to this: having now faced east, my vista on the eighteenth century does not look much different than the one I had from the vantage facing west. Whereas this book has enriched my understanding of how Indians reacted to the European invasion of America in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its version of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries seems familiar territory. Richter's description of Pocahontas's resignation to her fate in 1616, of her "profound sadness—if not embittered disillusionment" (77) seems a fitting epitaph for the entire European-Indian encounter by the end of this book.

The question (or questions) that I am left with after reading this fine, imaginative work are: How does facing east alter our narrative of eighteenth-century encounters? Is the importance of individual Indian agency in the European-Indian encounter a casualty of the wars that so permanently alienated Whites and Indians between 1754 and 1815? At some point in that era, did the range of choice for Indians between resistance and accommodation constrict so narrowly that in fact, the choice no longer mattered, and the fate of the Indian was preordained? These are important questions to answer if historians want to emulate Dan Richter's example and "face east" as they reconstruct European-Indian relations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Does vantage point still matter after 1750, or is the story pretty much the same regardless of the direction you take from your compass?

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