

## Microhistory, Macrohistory, and the Wisdom of Willie Sutton

To paraphrase my colleague Jane Merritt, I have one general rule in conference participation: before I comment on a session, I try to read the papers. That's a rule perhaps I should have broken in October 2002. Had I not read the comments of Merritt and Timothy Shannon in advance of our PHA session in Millersville, I would have been far more appropriately embarrassed by the praise they heaped upon *Facing East*. On the other hand, had I not previously read Shannon's paper, I would have been unable to properly ponder his comparison of me to Willie Sutton.

Not quite knowing where to find source material on Sutton's life and wisdom (much less on his role as an historiographer), I did what any lazy student would do: I sat down at my computer and typed "Willie Sutton" into *Google*. The first result that turned up was—where else?—the web site of the American Bankers Association. There one can read a brief article entitled "The Bank Robber, THE QUOTE, and the Final Irony." The author points out that "THE QUOTE has been used in articles and speeches about bond issues, religious matters, Medicaid fraud, alcohol on campus, mutual-fund investment strategies, and even, in a surprisingly small number of cases, bank robberies." And now, at last, the list has been lengthened to include the writing of history. Unfortunately, the "Final Irony" referred to in the article's title is that Sutton never actually said those famous words about banks being where the money was—or so he himself confessed in an autobiography (appropriately) ghost-written for him in 1976. Illusions thus dashed, I wondered if there were any documented Willie Sutton quotes that *could* be useful to historians. Several promising candidates presented themselves, including perhaps my favorite: "Doc Tate was right. The acetylene torch was not the answer." Slightly less colorful, but more appropriate for our purposes, is Sutton's observation that "You can't rob a bank on charm and personality."<sup>8</sup>

Merritt and Shannon both find the greatest charm of *Facing East* in its first four chapters, where personality finds freest rein, and they are comparatively less satisfied with chapters 5 and 6, to a large degree because those two chapters de-emphasize personal stories. I plead guilty to the charge of inconsistently focusing on the personal. Yet if, as Sutton insisted, "You can't rob a bank on charm and personality," I would argue that you also can't write history by focusing on personalities alone. You also—and especially in an era when we hear so much about the virtues of "microhistory"—need to look at

larger structural forces, high politics, and old-fashioned macrohistory issues of war and diplomacy.<sup>9</sup>

Now of course I'm not accusing either Merritt or Shannon of saying that personalities are invariably more important or more interesting than broader structural forces. Nor do I take any exception to their insistence that, as Merritt puts it, "probing inquiry through biography" might "give us a more intimate understanding of the personal ambivalence that accompanied the emergence of racial divisiveness in the 1760s." I couldn't agree more. And I would also say that James H. Merrell has already emphasized the role of personalities far better than I could ever do in his *Into the American Woods*. Moreover, Shannon's and Merritt's own work on Native Americans and Middle colonists demonstrates that they are no slouches in this area either.<sup>10</sup>

Yet the real reason personalities disappear in chapters five and six of *Facing East* is not that it has already been done. As Merritt politely points out, that something has already been done didn't stop me elsewhere. Instead, the Suttonesque turn of *Facing East* has to do with my main aims for the book in the first place. I was initially far less interested in *what* we could learn by trying to "face east" on the colonial North American past than in *how* we might go about doing that sort of thing: how we could conceive of American stories rooted in this continent's on-going past rather than in the past of Europe, how we might deal with the seemingly intractable problems in the source material, how we might go about trying to write eastward facing stories even if we could conceive of them. So, instead of the single coherent story implied by the subtitle, *A Native History of Early America*, I initially imagined a linked series of essays that would cumulatively move chronologically through time, but would each individually and self-consciously take up a different *way* of "facing east." As I revised I came to realize that I did have something resembling a larger overarching story in mind—or at least some unifying themes—and the six independent essays became a little more like a unified whole. But nonetheless, I adhered to my original intent to use each chapter to explore distinct modes of research, of interpretation of sources, of conceptualization, and especially of framing historical narratives. Each chapter "faces east" in a different way, and if personalities drop out of some of the chapters, that is by design. Personal stories are not what those chapters are about.

The prologue introduces the metaphor of facing east; the epilogue explores the efforts of an early nineteenth-century author who embraced a Native American identity to actually write an eastward facing history. In between are



six variations on the theme. Chapter 1 faces east using historical imagination; chapter 2, a materialist perspective; chapter 3, biography; chapter 4, close literary reading; chapters 5 and 6, . . . Chapters 5 and 6? Here, Merritt and Shannon have caught me out. These chapters are not nearly so self-conscious in their methodology and, especially, their exploration of particular kinds of source materials as are the first four. They read much more like straightforward narratives of events than do their predecessors. Still, I think, each does face east in a distinctive way. Chapter 5 situates Indians in the increasingly ubiquitous historiographical paradigm of the Atlantic World.<sup>11</sup> Eighteenth-century Native Americans, I argue, were caught up in the same forces of globalization, the same Atlantic economy, the same increasingly unified imperial world as were Euro-Americans—and that some Native peoples may in fact have carved out a place every bit as effectively and perhaps with more autonomy for themselves than did their Euro-American counterparts. Against this backdrop of uneasily shared experience, chapter 6 finds its way of facing east by focusing upon the events of a single year, 1763. It then tries to sketch some ways in which patterns set by Pontiac and the Paxton Boys came to dominate the political and cultural movements that came to be known as the American Revolution, and that continued to play themselves out through the era of Jacksonian Removal.

With due respect to Merritt, I do think “ethnic cleansing” is an appropriate, albeit provocative, term for the phenomenon that took shape in 1763. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides this definition:

The purging, by mass expulsion or killing, of one ethnic or religious group by another, especially from an area of former cohabitation . . . Originally used of (and afterwards most strongly associated with) the actions of the various nationalities in the Balkan wars of the 1990s. This and associated terms are often regarded as simple euphemisms.<sup>12</sup>

If “the purging, by mass expulsion or killing, of one ethnic or religious group by another . . . from an area of former cohabitation” is not what the Paxton Boys and those who agreed with Pontiac had in mind in 1763, I’m not sure what else it was. That neither Paxtonians nor Nativist Indians may have consistently held this opinion over time does not make the description less accurate for the overheated atmosphere of 1763. Nor does the fact that the Jackson Administration preferred to use “Removal” as its “simple euphemism” for what we could today call “ethnic cleansing” make that official U.S. government policy (however

controversial it may have been at the time) any less one focused on "purging, by mass expulsion . . . from an area of former cohabitation."

Yet both Merritt and Shannon raise issues that go beyond terminology or the relative virtues of micro-and macrohistory. As Shannon puts it, in chapters 5 and 6 of *Facing East*, "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." He then asks, "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?" Shannon raises here serious questions of human agency on the one hand perhaps, and of whether facing east really can make any difference in our understanding of the long eighteenth century. As he says, it "boils down to this: having now faced east . . . , the eighteenth century does not look much different than . . . from the vantage facing west."

Maybe so. We can't change the way things turned out by looking at them from a different perspective. There is certainly no charm, and perhaps little room for the influence of particular personalities, in the story I tell of the racialization of the early United States. But I like to think that I have still left some room for human agency even in my emphasis on broad impersonal structures of the eighteenth century. If, as I've tried to argue, even within the strictures of global imperial European dominance of the Atlantic world Native Americans of the eastern continental interior managed to carve out a reasonably secure place for themselves (and I do think it's a place they carved out painfully *for themselves*), then there is plenty of room for human agency. And if, after Pontiac's War, even at the height of British imperial pretensions in North America, at least some imperial officials haltingly, ham-fistedly, and indeed arrogantly envisioned a future empire in which Euro-Americans and Native Americans would continue to share the continent as they had for two generations before the Seven Years War, then the White Man's Country that the United States became was presumably not entirely pre-ordained either. It took a revolution to make that happen, and that is agency enough for me.

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## NOTES

1. James H. 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); Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Daniel Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: the Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
2. Daniel R. Mandell, *Behind the Frontier: Indians in Eighteenth Century Eastern Massachusetts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996); Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philips War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Knopf, 1998); Ann Marie Plane, *Colonial Intimacies: Indian Marriage in Early New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).
3. Eric Hinderaker, *Elusive Empires: Constructing Colonialism in the Ohio Valley, 1673–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700–1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).
4. Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
5. James Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).
6. Jane T. Merritt, "Cultural Encounters along a Gender Frontier: Mahican, Delaware, and German Women in Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* 67 (2000): 502–532; and Natalie Zemon Davis, "Iroquois Women, European Women," in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, 'Race,' and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London, 1994).
7. James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods*: 315.
8. Steve Cocheo, "The Bank Robber, THE QUOTE, and the Final Irony," *ABA Banking Journal On-Line* (March 1997), [http://www.banking.com/aba/profile\\_0397.htm](http://www.banking.com/aba/profile_0397.htm), accessed 16 October 2002. Two autobiographies appeared under Sutton's name: Quentin Reynolds, *I, Willie Sutton* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953); and Willie Sutton with Edward Linn, *Where the Money Was* (New York: Viking, 1976).
9. On microhistory, see Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *Journal of American History* 88 (2001): 129–144.
10. Merrell, *Into the American Woods*; Merrell, "'The Cast of His Countenance': Reading Andrew Montour," in Ronald Hoffman, Mechal Sobel, and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997): 13–39; Timothy Shannon, *Indians and Colonists at the Crossroads of Empire: The Albany Congress of 1754* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Shannon, "Dressing for Success on the Mohawk Frontier: Hendrick, William Johnson, and the Indian Fashion," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 53 (1996): 13–42; Jane T. Merritt, "Dreaming of the Savior's Blood: Moravians and the Indian Great Awakening in Pennsylvania," *ibid.*, 54 (1997): 723–746; Merritt, *At the Crossroads*.



11. For the most recent discussion of Atlantic World paradigms—and the observation that “We are all Atlanticists now—or so it would seem,” see David Armitage, “Three Concepts of Atlantic History,” in Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800* (London: Palgrave, 2002): 11–29 (quotation from p. 11).
12. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00309008>, accessed 16 October 2002.

