

## REVIEW ESSAY

### *Matters of Perspective: Interpreting the Revolutionary Frontier*

*Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America.*  
By PETER SILVER. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 352 pp. Figures, charts, appendix, notes, index. \$29.95.)

*American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier.* By PATRICK GRIFFIN. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007. 384 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, index. \$30.)

*Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution.* By TERRY BOUTON. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. x, 332 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.95.)

OVER THE COURSE OF THE PAST FOUR DECADES the traditional narrative of early America has undergone a significant reinterpretation. In particular, social historians cast new light on the lives and cultures of the poor, of women, of slaves, and of the indentured—people and groups often overlooked by earlier historians. Moreover, while historians once tended to focus on the eastern regions of North America, some began to reexamine the early American frontier, and for them Native Americans became a particularly fruitful subject for reinvestigation. These scholars developed interdisciplinary methodologies to understand how native peoples shaped early American history. Academics called this approach ethnohistory, and the phrase “facing east” became a catchphrase to describe the exploration of white-Indian relations from native as well as immigrant perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA, 2001). The reinterpretation began with Francis Jennings's *The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest* (New York, 1976), which challenged the

The three books under review—Peter Silver’s *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America*; Patrick Griffin’s *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier*, and Terry Bouton’s *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution*—mark a departure from this approach to studying the frontier. All three explore the experiences of those living west of Philadelphia during the colonial and revolutionary eras, and all are influenced by the work of social historians. But they place less emphasis on Indian agency and the importance of intercultural relations than those historians who “face east.” These studies, in other words, are histories that face west—some of them unabashedly so. Read together, they remind us how westward-facing histories of the frontier can enlighten our understanding of colonial societies; they also reveal an early America very different from the one that those who “face east” describe. Indeed, it appears that a historiographic debate may be brewing.

Peter Silver’s Bancroft Prize-winning *Our Savage Neighbors* turns the concept of “facing east” on its head. As with other works so distinguished, Silver’s book is beautifully written, meticulously researched, and profound. Rather than view early America from an Indian perspective, Silver deploys the methods of social, political, and, especially, cultural history to understand how Indians influenced the psyches of westward-facing settlers. Silver argues that fears of Indians and their modes of warfare served as the basis around which a previously fractious white society cohered in the mid-eighteenth century. An “overpowering fear” of Indian war developed during the Seven Years’ War, the first time large numbers of

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traditional narrative of expansion, turning a civilizing mission into one of exploitation and greed. Jennings and other historians deployed interdisciplinary ethnohistorical methods to unearth the histories, customs, and cultures of native peoples. For examples of these types of works, see James H. Merrell, *The Indians’ New World: Catawbas and Their Neighbors from European Contact through the Era of Removal* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1989); and Daniel K. Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992). For two recent examples, see Greg O’Brien, *Choctaws in a Revolutionary Age, 1750–1830* (Lincoln, NE, 2002); and Amy C. Schutt, *Peoples of the River Valleys: The Odyssey of the Delaware Indians* (Philadelphia, 2007). With this better understanding of native people, historians recast the frontier as a zone of “kinetic interactions among many peoples, which created new cultural matrices distinctively American.” Fredrika J. Teute and Andrew R. L. Cayton, eds., *Contact Points: American Frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750–1830* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998), 2. Other works that emphasize the importance of intercultural relations are Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991); Colin G. Calloway, *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans, and the Remaking of Early America* (Baltimore, 1997); James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999); and Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700–1763* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003).

Pennsylvanians were exposed to the “terroristic” (41) mode of Indian warfare that “depended on the multiplication of panic” (42). This fear was not limited to the frontier, however, as reports of Indian hostilities in popular presses created something Silver calls the “anti-Indian sublime.” By employing this rhetoric, an ethnically and religiously diverse Euro-American colonial society found a means to unite as “a suffering, victimized community” (74). At first, the fear of Indian attacks fostered a sense of anger directed at those—particularly the French and Quakers—perceived to be giving Indians succor. Eventually, the sublime produced a racialized view of natives, one that defined Indians as “more animal than human.” This belief became “truly widespread after the Revolution” (133). For Silver, the first true sign of a racialized perception of Indians came in 1782 when a Pennsylvania militia exterminated a group of peaceful Moravian Indians at Gnadenhütten in what is today Ohio. According to Silver, the men at Gnadenhütten “were acting on a powerful postwar distaste for Indians as Indians, a feeling that in this instance was by itself so clearly pivotal and indiscriminate as to be worth labeling racist” (273). Silver also argues that, paradoxically, in the backlash to this heinous act “one can start to see clearly the roots of something beautiful growing out of something ugly” (301), as white Pennsylvanians began to construct “one of history’s most self-consciously tolerant societies” (xxiii). In the postrevolutionary world, when war had pushed Indians far from the mid-Atlantic countryside, the rhetorical vestiges of the “anti-Indian sublime” “tilted public life toward the celebration of a suffering people, creating a new politics that was harsh and ruthless, if recognizably democratic” (301). In other words, the rhetoric of a distressed public created a political culture in which parties vied for the votes of those who perceived themselves as oppressed and in this competition often clashed over what and who were the cause of the perceived oppression.

In this way, Silver makes Indians central to understanding the development of early America, its political culture, and its national consciousness. Silver also challenges the prevalent idea of the frontier as consisting of zones of potentially beneficial cultural contact and exchange and sees it instead as an area defined by fear, uncertainty, and strife. Silver’s analysis of the social and cultural reverberations of the Seven Years’ War on Pennsylvania and the new nation will likely fast become a standard in the field.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In some ways, Silver’s work, facing west as it does, serves as an important complement to another Bancroft Award-winning book, James H. Merrell’s *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the*

Like Silver, Patrick Griffin, in *American Leviathan*, treats the frontier as an area that divided cultures. Griffin criticizes those historians “who reluctantly clung to frontier [but] insisted that we view it from the perspective of Indians by facing east from it, not west at it” (8). Griffin’s goal is to resurrect the world of Tom Quick, a mysterious figure who reportedly vowed to kill one hundred Indians before he died; he passed away around 1795 with only ninety-nine under his belt. This perspective, he argues, will provide new insight into the creation of the American nation-state, an entity he terms the “American Leviathan.” His goal is not to validate the views of those who, in the nineteenth century, built a monument to Quick’s legacy, however, but to understand Quick’s world, or that of a frontier settler facing west. Griffin’s frontier is not, as in previous westward-facing accounts, a place where the beneficent hand of civilization tamed savagery. Rather, it is one of violence, hatred, and greed. With this definition established, he addresses how Euro-American racism and imperialism intersected to create both the American nation and the myth of American exceptionalism.

Griffin argues that westward-facing colonists in the British Empire had a far different understanding of Native Americans than most citizens in the early national period. Griffin believes that in the colonial period many Britons on both sides of the Atlantic took a stadial view of native peoples. This theory, developed during the Scottish Enlightenment, stipulated that cultures deemed “savage” could be “civilized” (a concept that Griffin demonstrates meant “anglicized”) with time and effort. Like Silver, Griffin believes that the Gnadenhütten massacre was the expression of the emergent racist paradigm that operated in the new nation. Contrasting it with past incidences of white violence against Indians, he argues that this massacre showed that “settlers now conceived Indians as innately inhuman, irredeemable, unable to move up the stadial ladder” (171).

Griffin’s second argument is that in the aftermath of the Seven Years’ War, the Pennsylvania frontier turned into a Hobbesian state of nature in which violence dominated. Griffin casts the creation of the American nation as a “social contract” between policy-setting elites and settlers.

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*Pennsylvania Frontier*. In this work, Merrell highlights the importance of cultural go-betweens, people who were able to operate in both Indian and European cultures and who helped smooth the rough edges that divided the two. But in Merrell’s work, there is an overriding sense that such efforts were futile, that stark divisions between the two cultures were insurmountable. Silver’s argument suggests that Indian modes of warfare were essential to dividing the two cultures and dooming any hope of peaceful relations.

Only with the acceptance of the “American Leviathan” did “westerners” begin “constructing the outward signs of society” (252). It was, as Griffin casts it, a corrupt bargain, one that rested on both settlers’ racist beliefs and desire for protection from Indians and their own economic exploitation by elite men who dominated government and land speculation. It was in an attempt to smooth over this tension, Griffin maintains, that the state took an active role in obscuring the nature of the settlement by creating the myth of American exceptionalism. He uses a monument to George Rogers Clark built in Charlottesville to demonstrate how the continued public commemoration of expansion as civilizing ignores the “essentialist hate and unfettered popular sovereignty” (276) that defined expansion, revolution, and the frontier.

Terry Bouton’s work, *Taming Democracy: “The People,” the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution*, examines the same area and time period as Griffin and Silver, and Bouton, too, seeks to understand the settlers’ political and social lives. But unlike Griffin and Silver, he focuses heavily on conflicts within white society, primarily between westerners and easterners, and largely ignores the role Indians played in shaping Euro-American perspectives.

Bouton’s general argument is not new, although the story he tells certainly is. Like many great Progressive historians of Pennsylvania history, such as Charles Lincoln, Theodore Thayer, and Robert Brunhouse, Bouton views the Revolution and politics in largely economic terms and treats the frontier as an area of strident egalitarianism bubbling with democratic principles. As Bouton rightly notes, however, “most studies . . . tend to examine only part of the Revolution (usually the years leading up to 1776, or the war, or the postwar period)” (5). He hopes to bridge this chronological divide and, in so doing, recast the narrative of the revolutionary era.<sup>3</sup>

Bouton contends that colonial Pennsylvanian society largely cohered around a shared set of revolutionary principles forged in opposition to unpopular British imperial policies. For Bouton, the 1776 Pennsylvania Constitution, a document remarkable for its radicalism, was the expres-

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Lincoln, *The Revolutionary Movement in Pennsylvania, 1760–1776* (Philadelphia, 1901); Theodore Thayer, *Pennsylvania Politics and the Growth of Democracy, 1740–1776* (Harrisburg, PA, 1953); and Robert L. Brunhouse, *The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776–1790* (1942; repr., Harrisburg, PA, 1971). For more on Lincoln, see Robert Gough, “Charles H. Lincoln, Carl Becker, and the Origins of the Dual-Revolution Thesis,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 38 (1981): 97–109.

sion of democratic and egalitarian beliefs that united both the governing elite and “the people.” That unity was short-lived: Bouton argues that after 1776 the gentry curtailed the democracy that it had once supported, even as settlers continued to believe in the principles of the 1776 constitution and resisted laws—most of which they viewed as attacks on their property—with which they were becoming disaffected. Indeed, Bouton demonstrates that the inhabitants of many western (and some eastern) counties mobilized in similar—although relatively unconnected—ways to oppose new state and national policies with which they disagreed. For example, they used local courts to defend “property and popular notions of a just society” (146). Yet, Bouton concludes that while this mobilization was widespread, it was also disjointed; this disorganization meant “ordinary folk” did not have “the political power needed to counter a government they all believed was putting their vision of the Revolution beyond reach” (256).

Each of these three works provides important new interpretations of the history of western Pennsylvania during the colonial and early republican periods. Terry Bouton has uncovered a strand of political thought in Pennsylvania, especially in its western areas, in which property rights, economic freedom, and democratic principles were exceptionally interwoven and powerful. Patrick Griffin also has shown how important and underappreciated analysis of the state and its creation is for early America, particularly for frontier regions. Peter Silver explains that early American culture cannot be understood without appreciating the long-lasting influence that the devastation caused by the Seven Years’ War had on a Euro-American society. The anti-Indian sublime will likely become an important—and debated—concept in early American studies. Finally, all three bridge the colonial and early republican eras and emphasize how treating the revolutionary era as continuous has great explanatory power. Rather than seeing the Revolution as a sharp break in Pennsylvania history, as historians often have, all three show how social, political, and cultural processes begun in the 1760s shaped the early nation.

Yet, these books are not without their problems. Bouton’s dichotomy of “elite” and “the people” is as problematic as the tendency to divide otherwise connected eras arbitrarily. Political beliefs both now and then are not necessarily shaped solely, or even heavily, by personal economic interests. While Bouton’s dichotomy may limit his ability to tease out real nuances in the political culture, Griffin’s sole focus on native-white conflict weakens

his argument about the statelessness of Pennsylvania's frontier. Indeed, many works have demonstrated how legal institutions expanded in Pennsylvania and operated effectively for Euro-American settlers. Furthermore, Silver's *Our Savage Neighbors* rests on the idea that eastern and western settlers cohered as a polity and culture on a far different set of issues than those Bouton sees and during the very period in which Griffin argues that civil society was disintegrating.<sup>4</sup>

Silver's work explores a variety of ways in which Indian and white society became divided. But his heavy emphasis on warfare and the depiction of it in the press may limit his understanding of how the rhetoric of a long-suffering and victimized community developed and was sustained. As both Bouton and Griffin discuss, these western regions had a strong bias against the proprietary offices because of their land policies. The economic complaints highlighted by both Bouton and Griffin may have allowed the rhetoric of the "anti-Indian sublime," resting as it did on the idea of a suffering community, to evolve and resonate on different levels and in different ways in early America.

Bouton's depiction of political mobilization in the Pennsylvania countryside stands in stark contrast to the portrayals offered by Silver and Griffin. As both Griffin and Silver argue, Indians were prominent in colonial Pennsylvania's frontier regions in the 1760s and 1770s, and much postrevolutionary political thought in Pennsylvania was influenced by the absence of the Indian presence in the region. Had Bouton paid more attention to colonial-era native-white contact and violence he may have identified continuities into the early republic. For instance, one form of rural resistance in the early republic was the local jury system's "power of 'not guilty'" (154), which allowed popular beliefs to "[replace] elite notions of justice" (156). While Bouton finds this form of resistance inspiring, popular justice had a far darker history in the West (and would continue to have one until the twentieth century). As lieutenant governor of Pennsylvania John Penn lamented in 1766, "no jury in any of our frontier counties will ever condemn a man for killing an Indian."<sup>5</sup> As

<sup>4</sup> Works that explore the ordered expansion of Pennsylvania and its legal institutions are: Jack D. Marietta and G. S. Rowe, *Troubled Experiment: Crime and Justice in Pennsylvania, 1682–1800* (Philadelphia, 2006); James T. Lemon "Urbanization and the Development of Eighteenth-Century Southeastern Pennsylvania and Adjacent Delaware," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 24 (1967): 502–42; and James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (1972; Baltimore, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> John Penn to Thomas Penn, Sept. 12, 1766, Thomas Penn letterbooks, incoming correspondence, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



Silver points out, this type of popular justice in the colonial period was not unique to Pennsylvania. At about the same time Penn observed the shortcomings of popular justice on the Pennsylvania frontier, Francis Fauquier, governor of neighboring Virginia, similarly complained that "it is impossible to bring anybody to Justice for the Murder of an Indian, who takes shelter among our back Inhabitants. It is among those People, looked on as a meritorious action, and they are sure of being Protected" (154).

For Griffin, a more eastward-facing perspective might have changed how he cast the creation of the American state. Specifically, Indians themselves may have developed a stronger sense of identity in the early republic that worked in tandem with the forces Griffin discusses to help create a strong American state. A more coherent sense of Indian identity may have led to greater resistance, which dialectically fostered a stronger sense of American identity and a national state. Even putting aside how Indians themselves may have shaped the American state, Griffin's rapid and westward-rolling story also affects his analysis of white society, particularly with regard to how and under what terms Euro-Americans accepted the state. Griffin begins in 1760s Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and he ends in 1790s Kentucky. Because of this wide-ranging scope, he frequently moves too rapidly across space and time to analyze the creation of the state adequately. Did people in Lancaster develop the same social contract with the American nation as those farther west? In the end, the statelessness of the rolling frontier appears to be more a self-evident fact than an explanatory framework, and the acceptance of the state as Griffin describes it seems to be more convenient than compelling.

For Silver, too, a more eastward-facing perspective might have changed his interpretation, though perhaps not his overall argument. To an extent, Silver treats the modes of Indian warfare in the colonial era as static, a culturally conditioned way of fighting that developed far differently than European modes and did not change significantly after contact. But Indians may have adapted their techniques to exploit cultural differences, and the modes of warfare that struck such fear in colonists may have exhibited a level of violence that reflected a new and perhaps race-based anger aimed at whites.

Indeed, this argument is the one made by historians who pay particular attention to changes that occurred within and between Indian and Euro-American society. Daniel Richter, in *Facing East from Indian*



*Country*, for instance, contends that Indians and Europeans on the Pennsylvania frontier began to conceive of both themselves and others in racial terms around 1763, when the Paxton Boys' Rebellion and nearly concomitant Pontiac's Rebellion "crystallized long-simmering hatreds into explicit new doctrines of racial unity and racial antagonism." This comparative approach to understanding race allows Richter to show that racial concepts of Indians and Europeans were created "in parallel ways" and that both "preached the novel idea that all Native people were 'Indians,' that all Euro-Americans were 'Whites,' and that all on one side must unite to destroy the other."<sup>6</sup>

Both Silver and Griffin explore the Paxton Boys' Rebellion at length. The Paxton Boys' Rebellion began in the winter of 1763, when a group of settlers near Lancaster, Pennsylvania, exterminated the Conestogas, an Indian group long allied with Pennsylvania and known for its pacifism. Part of this massacre happened in broad daylight, when a band of settlers broke into the Lancaster jail, where survivors of the initial slaughter had been placed for their protection. They did so, they said, because they believed one of the Conestogas was a murderer and that the Conestogas had aided warring Shawnees and Delawares. Within months, the rebellion transformed into a colonywide political movement in which apologists created a coalition that ousted Benjamin Franklin and longtime speaker of the house Joseph Galloway, both stalwarts of the Quaker Party, from the Pennsylvania Assembly.

Neither Silver nor Griffin considers this act or the mobilization that followed to be influenced by race, however. Griffin believes the murder can only be understood through the stadial theory. The frontier, he argues, condoned the murder because settlers "did not have the luxury of waiting for the civilizing mission to take hold" (49). Silver suggests that the murders evoked the Indian raids that struck fear in the countryside and were acts of reprisal rather than extermination. And while both Richter and Silver emphasize that many in white society did not embrace the Paxton actions, Richter argues that the Paxton Boys embody the

<sup>6</sup> Richter, *Facing East*, 206–8. Richter is not the only historian to argue that race was central to understanding the cultural dynamics at work on the Pennsylvania frontier at this time. See especially, Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads* and the articles in Daniel K. Richter and William A. Pencak, eds., *Friends and Enemies in Penn's Woods: Indians, Colonists, and the Racial Construction of Pennsylvania* (University Park, PA, 2004). One contributor to the latter collection, Krista Camenzind, explores the Paxton Boys in depth and finds that masculinity and patriarchy fueled Indian-white violence and formed the foundation for a racialized view of native peoples (201–20).

foundation for a new racial paradigm that will define the future, while Silver sees the later Gnadenhütten massacre as symbolic of a paradigmatic shift.

Thus, perhaps it is the question of race that best exposes how facing east or west can alter significantly the way one understands early America. This is not to say that facing east is either the correct or only way to analyze the early American frontier. Indeed, these three works show how important and relevant it is for historians to approach frontier regions with questions about the creation and role of race, class, and political agency on the edges of expanding Euro-American societies. These are issues that have been paramount in historical scholarship, but rarely have scholars focused on western areas. As historians continue to work toward creating a more complete narrative of early America, the difference between the works under review and those that “faced east” appears to be both complementary and incompatible. On the one hand, these new works have provided a far more nuanced view of Euro-American life on the frontiers. At the same time, this perspective challenges the notion that such settlers had constructed a racialized view of native peoples well before the American Revolution. Indeed, perhaps as historians subsequently revise the narrative of early America, they should work to integrate these different historical perspectives. Only then can they create a history in which frontier actors faced both west and east and in which the frontier may have existed as both a line of division and a porous boundary.

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