

Colonization in Early America

Review Number:

760

Publish date:

Monday, 1 June, 2009

Author:

Peter Silver

ISBN:

9780393062489

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£17.99

Pages:

352pp.

Publisher:

W. W. Norton

Place of Publication:

London

Author:

Cynthia J. van Zandt

ISBN:

9780195181241

Date of Publication:

2008

Price:

£28.99

Pages:

264pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Author:

Patrick Griffin

ISBN:

9780809024919

Date of Publication:

2007

Price:

£12.99

Pages:

384pp.

Publisher:

Hill and Wang

Place of Publication:

New York, NY

Reviewer:

Katrina Gulliver

These books present reassessments of the colonizer/colonized relationship and how individuals and groups negotiated their space in conflict, spanning the period from earlier colonization to the brink of the American Revolution.

Van Zandt points out that from initial efforts at colonization, some alliances and accommodations between groups were essential, but that these were complicated by suspicions (on the part of Europeans), that Native Americans could be acting in league with rival European groups. Early encounters were fraught with cultural misinterpretations, and attempting to establish legitimacy on both sides.

From first contact, abduction of Native Americans seemed the best way to gain local knowledge, and possibly the services of a translator or intermediary. This assumption was somewhat flawed, as Van Zandt points out: 'although kidnapping could indeed bring them some information and provide a degree of leverage – they did after all have a hostage – it did not lead to grateful natives, lasting friendships, or real alliances' (p.53). Van Zandt details the ways in which simply abducting an Indian, much like naturalists captured examples of exotic fauna, was not always helpful. Those who were kidnapped generally resented the situation, and some were able to turn things to their advantage. One Algonquian man, Epinow, was captured from Martha's Vineyard and taken to England. Pressed for information about his land, he told of great gold mines in Cape Cod. Of course, there were no such things, but he managed to get a ride home, at which point he escaped his captors. Despite the problems, much of the knowledge of Native Americans and their languages in the early days of European arrival built on that gained from kidnapped Indians.

Nonetheless, many Indians regarded language as protected cultural knowledge and refused to teach outsiders, or refused to teach them beyond a basic pidgin sufficient for trade. Various Native American groups had their own methods for relating to, and forming alliances with, outsiders. This was often through symbolic kinship relationships, the meanings of which remained opaque to many Europeans, who understood not what they were being offered, or the meanings of the connections formed.

The notion of kinship and connection is dealt with in great detail, particularly that between John Smith and Pocahontas (a fictive, or symbolic kinship), and her real kinship bond through marriage to John Rolfe. These bonds meant very different things in English and Powhatan cultures, leading to misunderstandings and conflicting expectations of obligation.

Van Zandt also details people like Isaac Allerton, Mayflower colonist and intermediary between the Dutch and the English. These cultural go-betweens were multilingual and in some cases culturally liminal. But they, and the role that they played, were left behind in the 18th century as cultural groups became more defined, and the strength in numbers of European settlers meant that there was less need for negotiation with neighbouring groups. Van Zandt uses such examples to highlight the fact that this was not just a world of European/Native negotiation, that there were cultural boundaries on all sides, between European groups and between Native American groups, and that intermediaries were often crossing multiple boundaries in negotiating relationships.

This is a slender book (fewer than 200 pages, excluding references), with rather small print – a larger typeface would have been a favour to the reader. Nonetheless, it serves as an excellent background to the other two volumes, which trace how in the following century attitudes to Native peoples hardened (as European settlements became stronger), leading to the development of essentialised racial views of White/Indian.

The key phrase in *American Leviathan* is 'stadial lenses', a perception of Native Americans that put them in

a scheme of progression, a chain of being somewhere below Europeans, but a chain in which positions were not fixed, and groups could be elevated through civilization. This was counterpointed by the notion that Europeans, left too long in Indian company, would regress to the native condition. This element could have been drawn on more in this work, in relation to the responses to the frontier violence. The perception among urbanites of settlers as roughneck peasants not far from the savage life themselves is an important element in how their actions were perceived from the seats of power.⁽¹⁾ [4] As they moved further from the civilizing influences of towns and established settlements into the unknown wilderness, they would descend further into savage behaviour.

While recounting the history of Native Americans being driven from the frontier of the Ohio valley in the 18th century, Griffin analyses the evolving attitudes towards them. Beginning and ending with notes on memorials, he shows how these views have changed even through the 20th century, in the cultural memory of the national foundations. The obelisk to Tom Quick the Indian Slayer of the 1700s – whose life and memorialisation have both been marginalized in the national narrative, is gone, while the monument to George Rogers Clark, which did not reflect vanquishment of a red enemy, still stands. This tension between which view of the frontier to memorialize – indeed, which view of the American Revolution (the urban constitution-writers, or the frontier settlers who shaped the nation even as they undermined the values of the Founders) – to retain, is part of the narrative that Griffin presents.

This is linked to the tension of the pre-revolutionary frontier, when settlers were moving beyond official jurisdiction presented administrators a stark choice: provide protection (which they had not the authority or the personnel to do), or offer absolution to settlers taking matters into their own violent hands. This became an element of contest between different schemes for settlement, and whose control these newly settled lands would fall under.

If Indians lived in the West unmolested, then they would have the time and space necessary to develop. But if whites crossed the line – as they were doing – time was no longer on the side of the Indians. In other words, if white and Indian worlds kept colliding, Indians would remain in a savage state and continue to kill, capture and torture whites (p.66).

In this view, it was the speed of European settlement that caused the problem, but attempts to curtail settlers' westward movements proved futile. From 1763, when few people lived beyond the line, to 1774, when 50,000 did, contact – and conflict – with Native Americans became more frequent. By 1780, British forces were using Indians to great effect, as participants in attacks on rebels, with the neat rhetorical trick of leaving accounts of battles with large numbers scalped, and very few taken prisoner, because the British 'could not restrain' the ferocity of their Indian allies.

Griffin argues that in the minds of European observers in the mid 18th century, Indians were 'redeemable' or improvable, given time, and the introduction to civilization and Christianity; they were not irredeemable savages. However, this attitude changed as a function of continuing frontier conflict: there was not enough time to wait for Indians to 'civilize' while European settlers were making further incursions into their territories, nor were these settlers much interested in making alliances or accommodations. The later view, of Indians as savage and less-than-human served a justificatory purpose.

Following the revolution, however, settlers had come to see Indians as 'essentially inferior' and 'unfit to live among whites' (p. 242). Of course it is unclear how many people actually adhered to either point of view, and the evidence shows even individuals having conflicting responses rather than clear ideologies.

While arguing that racism as we know it didn't exist in this period, Griffin at the same time provides evidence that for plenty of whites (although there are many layers of problematisation of this term too, it remains clear that however suspicious different groups of European settlers were of each other, they retained some level of fellow-feeling against the – perceived – looming threat of Indian violence), there was a 'shoot

first' mentality in encounters where the first – indeed only – sign of 'danger' was the Indians' dress and physical appearance.

Indeed, some of the accounts, of mob violence, and crazed – out of character – behaviour, for which the perpetrators later demonstrated remorse, gave some weight to the idea that the wilderness drove men insane. Apologists for the settlers argued that they were driven to it by Indian violence and depravity. The attacks on Moravian Indians show disbelief too in the civilisability of Indians, and it is difficult to see a great difference in the mindset of the perpetrators from those who committed lynchings or ethnic cleansing violence in the 20th century, whose 'racism' is not debated.

Both Silver and Griffin discuss one particular incident, the massacre at Gnadenhütten, Ohio, in March 1782. Here, a group of Delawares who had converted to Christianity were living in a Moravian community, a town of farmers just like other settlers. A group of men under David Williamson, an officer in the Pennsylvania militia, attacked the Delawares: as Griffin says, 'after all, they possessed goods, such as kettles and clothing, that only whites could use. They must have pilfered these on raids'. In an organized attack, the men gathered the Delawares from nearby small villages and assembled them in Gnadenhütten, the mission town. They were believed to have assisted a war party of Delawares who had attacked settlers near Fort Pitt. As pacifist Christians, the residents offered no resistance, and it seems first assumed they were simply to be captured and taken to Fort Pitt.

All the Moravian Delawares were condemned to death in a 'trial' held by their attackers, they were then escorted into a cabin in pairs, to be bludgeoned to death. 96 people were killed and scalped. The few white men of the party who objected simply waited by the river. This slow, methodical eradication of the residents of two towns resonates differently from the mob violence of other attacks. Silver refers to the 'abbatoir-like procedure', and refers to this incident as pivotal, and undeniably 'racist'.

The attack had no official sanction, and both British and American authorities were shocked by it. One result was an increased ferocity of attacks on American forces by Delawares serving with the British. William Crawford's execution (in which he was tethered, tortured, and finally burned to death) was part of this wave of revenge.

In *Our Savage Neighbors*, Peter Silver takes up the issue of the 'anti-Indian sublime' as a cultural development, and presents a more theoretical approach to developing racial attitudes. An appendix looking at the use of the terms 'White People' and 'Indians' in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* shows a spike in the use of both in 1760. Silver also argues that 'racism' didn't exist prior to 19th-century racial scientific theories. 'Despite the use of words and phrases like "Indian" and "white people", modern racial thinking played no part in most groups' views of each other for nearly all of the period studied in this book' (p. xxi).

During the Great Awakening, various European settler groups – defined by religion as well as nationality – were reaffirming their faiths and cultural identity, in part to define themselves against their neighbours in the New World.

The Quakers' vivid new sense of themselves as a crusading people, shedding corruption to return to a radical past, was not a simple withdrawal from the world. In this first age of mass immigration, the rigor and novelty of the Quakers' self-transformations came from their fears of being smeared away or swallowed up by newer arrivals – of losing their hold, not only on the province's political life and with it on their security as dissenters, but on their specialness as a people (p.28).

Such renewal, in the case of the Quakers, even as they were proclaiming themselves against slavery, and for peaceful relations with Indians, was also acting against community impurity in the form of mixed marriages (those in which one partner was not Quaker), or marriages where the bride was pregnant. This vigilant social hygiene, declaring 50% of marriages irregular, meant that Quaker population growth ceased, and

demonstrates one of the more extreme reactions to the perceived contamination of living in a multi-faith environment. Native Americans had felt similar concerns. Proselytizing Moravians had contributed to a reactionary revitalization movement among Indians. From the 1740s, native reformers wanted to conform to 'purer, more traditional forms, working consciously against the European influences they saw rising among them' (p.15).

Abduction of whites, by Indians, was another major phenomenon of frontier conflict in the 18th century, and of the cultural uses of the conflict. This is dealt with briefly by Silver in a discussion of the plasticity of 'ethnicity', in that Indian and White were not necessarily innate characteristics in the minds of many: captives were presented as having lost their whiteness through long contact with Indians. However, I would have liked to see further discussion on the role of white captivity in shaping the responses to Indian violence, and shaping definitions of whiteness. It is worth noting when examining public opinion of the time that the accounts of Indian raids were often accompanied by accounts of whites being abducted, and that truces with Native American groups produced the return of captives sometimes after many years, and these living examples of the retention (or loss) of whiteness served as either affirming examples of European superiority or mortifying spectacles of degeneration.

This fear of cultural contamination meant that increased contact could produce less rather than more sympathy for other groups. In a tragic example of familiarity breeding contempt, a repeated element of the attacks on Indians by whites is that the victims were often known to their attackers, as neighbours or acquaintances, their familiarity with Europeans making them paradoxically more rather than less of a threat (as well as being pragmatic victims, in that they were more easily within striking distance).

Distance also led to cultural detachment, as settlers felt less connected to their compatriots in the cities, and those in the cities felt they had less and less in common with those who had moved out to the wilderness. An implicit understanding, or sympathy, was encouraged by the identity of whiteness being affirmed, a group kinship to hold against the Indian Other. This was important in the early days of the republic, to attempt to cement a cultural association of citizenship among disparate groups. Conflict with (and crucially, the memorialisation of conflict with) Native Americans helped to define a national character.

Notes

1. For more on this, see Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London, 1999), and for the impressions of Europeans held in Indian captivity, see June Namias, *White Captives : Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993).[Back to \(1\)](#) [5]

Other reviews:

[6]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/760a#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4371>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4372>

[3] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4373>

[4] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/gulliverk.html#f1>

[5] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/../../../../reviews/articles/gulliverk.html#t1>

[6] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>