Red Brethren: The Brothertown and Stockbridge Indians and the Problem of Race in Early America

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Author: David Silverman
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David J. Silverman has written a very accessible and compelling book on a little-known subject which sheds much light on race issues in early America. Most readers will probably never have heard of the Brothertown and Stockbridge Indians, two communities which encompassed various Native American tribes and embraced Christianity in the 18th century. These New England Indians created the two communities with the idea of using Christianity and civilized reforms to adapt to, rather than passively (or violently) resist, white expansion.

In *Red Brethren*, Silverman looks at these communities and their stories and uses the Brothertown and Stockbridge examples to argue that Native Americans were not slow to engage with racial thought on their own terms. Indeed, he makes a strong argument, from this example, that indigenous people rallied together not only in the context of violent resistance but also in campaigns to adjust peacefully to white dominion. Of course, the tragedy of this example reveals how this strategy soon proved that the many concessions made by these Indian communities to white demands earned them no relief.

Silverman’s sources distinguish his narrative, which covers almost 250 years from the 1640s, and Roger William’s contacts with the Narragansetts, to the 1850s and Thomas Commuck’s narrative of betrayal, disappointment and fatalism about the role of race in America. He also follows his subjects spatially, moving westwards from greater Long Island Sound to western Massachusetts, central New York, and finally the Calumet County lakeshore of Wisconsin. He utilises to the full significant collections of sermons, journals, and let- ters, all of which were written by Native Americans. A series of vivid quotations from Indian sources
attest to Silverman’s serious research into sources that have been underutilised or entirely unused. These prove particularly useful in tracing Indian views on ‘other’ races including Afro-Americans and Euro-Americans.

The beginning of these communities is traced by Silverman to the life’s work of the 18th-century Connecticut-born Mohegan preacher Samson Occom. A convert of the ‘Great Awakening’, Occom proved to be an innovative evangelist and educator. He evangelized among Algonquin Indian tribes in New England and Long Island, arguing that conversion to Christianity, as well as adopting the English language and European-style agriculture, would open native communities to improvement and guarantee them greater liberties. Occom’s overall argument was that Indians could accept new practices and remain Indi-ans. This is superbly captured by his metaphor or parable of the oft-repaired knife which remained the same knife no matter how many new blades or handles it had.

In early successes in the second half of the 18th century Occom, with the assistance of some white missionaries, recruited converts from coastal villages into the nascent Brothertown and Stockbridge groups. Interestingly, as Silverman shows, these groups were made up of tribes which had often been rivals, but used religion and race as cohesive forces. In Silverman’s accurate phrase they ‘rallied around their shared faith to unite as Indians’ (p. 72). Unfortunately for the groups and in spite of their best efforts to create a new identity which combined being Indian and Christian they found that those who had urged conversion and pretended to be allies were at best untrustworthy friends. Prime among these was Occom’s own mentor and one of the villains of this book, Eleazar Wheelock, who perfected the art of speaking out of both sides of his mouth and treated the new communities as less-than-equal partners. Occom’s own story of disillusionment, growing bitterness against Wheelock and grinding poverty must have provided its own cautionary tale to those who followed him as Indian evangelists.

Matters worsened, as has been seen in many recent histories of race in early America, in the period during and after the American Revolution. The war itself saw the communities, particularly the Oneidas in New York State, almost destroyed by the policy of supporting the revolutionaries in a Tory stronghold. They were also in close proximity to the Iroquois who took the English side and laid waste to Oneida country. All of this was to be in vain as their situation worsened after the Peace of Paris in 1783. The victors proved ardent land grabbers and this land rush meant that for both the Stockbridge and Brothertown communities migration was the only option to maintain their unity and identity. And so the move westwards began, eventually to Wisconsin. Silverman is particularly good on this phase of the story as he details the cycles of optimism and disappointment as each removal provided a realisation that the rhetoric of discrimination and outright hatred was not only following them westward but growing stronger all the while. To American politicians and land speculators, the two communities did not escape the overwhelmingly negative stereo-types and inborn flaws of Indians. Indeed their applications for cit-izenship or their adoption of private landownership made them more untrustworthy in ‘official’ American eyes. More unexpected than these attitudes is the way in which the Christian Indian groups attracted accusations of racial betrayal and impunity from their native neighbours or Afro-Indian members of their community.

A key figure among the group of Indian Christian evangelists was Joseph Johnson, a member of a prominent Mohegan family. He went through Wheelock’s school, then travelled to Oneida at fifteen to serve as an assistant to David Fowler, a fellow Indian Christian. He had a crisis of faith and went to sea for several years, only to have a born-again experience and return to his former mission, this time among the Tunxis tribe in Farmington in 1772. Johnson’s career was very short due to his death from unknown causes in 1776 but he is an examplar, well-described by Silverman, of those who promoted Indian unity through a Christian faith. Like Occom he was an accomplished teacher, preacher judge and scribe for his community and the connection became even closer when he married Occom’s daughter, Tabitha, in 1772. Above all he promoted the idea of relocating New England Indians to Oneida, as a sort of promised land for these Christians. Johnson’s mission to Oneida country in 1773–4 to settle arrangements with the Iroquois for this migration was a triumph for the idea of ‘Christian Indian brethren’ being more important than ‘Christian brethren’ which had proved so disappointing in the coastal areas. Race was also an important marker as the land grant stipulated that no Indians who were descended from or inter-married with ‘Negroes or Mulattoes’
could settle on these lands. As Silverman says, ‘even in their new Israel, there were limits to the Indians’ Christian fellowship’ (p. 101).

Johnson’s death in 1776 weakened this ‘band of brothers’ who tried to promote Indian unity but the idea of being able to survive as Indians through adapting to the Christian ways continued, even under the discriminatory (or worse) policies of Andrew Jackson in the 1830s. By then the Brothertowns and Stockbridges were in Wisconsin and under pressure to make a fifth removal in only two generations. However, they divided into those who were ready to relocate to Kansas, though with no confidence that this would be a final move, and those who sought to stay in Wisconsin. It was in this context that the possibility of becoming citizens arose. As Silverman says, this was not a ‘triumphant capstone to their long history [of] Christian and civilized reforms, though they often appealed to that record, but an alternative to removal’ (p. 191). So began a lengthy process which again showed the grudging nature of American views on Indian civility: yes to citizenship but no to the qualification to vote in Wisconsin.

Silverman ends his study with Thomas Commuck’s memoir and John Quinney’s Fourth of July Address to the people of Reidsville, New York. The bitterness of both make one wonder how worthwhile the whole engagement with Christianity was for these Indian groups. However, this study breaks new ground in that its focus is not the well-covered areas such as post-contact Indian development or native conversion or migration. As this review has shown, these issues are certainly covered in great detail, offering new insights into the relationships between the native tribes and newcomers to America. But the emphasis of Red Brethren is on the story of how these Indian groups attempted to negotiate the changing definitions of race, and their role in creating and opposing these emerging definitions. This opens up a very different avenue of research into cultural encounters and how the terms of these can change over time. In summary this thoughtful book delivers on its promise to unravel a very human and tragic story of how race came to dominate early America.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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