

# Contact and Dispossession

*By Juliette Tran*

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**Interactions between Native Americans and Europeans in the Great Lakes Region have been the subject of groundbreaking works in American history. But there was more to the story than previously thought, as D. Nichols underlines Lakes Indians' effective forms of resistance and strategies of survival**

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About: David Andrew Nichols, *Peoples of the Inland Sea: Native Americans and Newcomers in the Great Lakes Region, 1600–1870*, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2018.

Stretching from the outflow of Lake Ontario into the Saint Lawrence River in the East to present-day Minnesota in the American Midwest, the Great Lakes region has a long history of human occupation. These resource-rich “inland seas” and their surrounding shorelands and woodlands attracted Paleo-Indians, Pre-Columbian Indians, and European newcomers from the seventeenth-century onward. The history of contact between Europeans and Lakes Indians has produced landmarks in American historiography, from Francis Parkman’s *Conspiracy of Pontiac* in the middle of the nineteenth century to Richard White’s groundbreaking *Middle Ground* in 1991.<sup>1</sup> The author of two books about Indian-white relations on the American frontier—*Red Gentlemen and White Savages* (2008) and *Engines of Diplomacy* (2016)—, Andrew David Nichols has drawn on recent historiography to write a new, synthetic history of the Great Lakes region in the contact era (1600-1870). Intended as a synthesis

1 Richard WHITE, *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge, RU, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

of contemporary studies for the classroom, *Peoples of the Inland Sea* nonetheless challenges several conventional ideas about Native American history. Emphasis is placed on the Lakes Indians' use of interethnicity, various strategies of autonomy, and lasting presence in the Lakes throughout the period.

In Nichols's history of the Great Lakes region, Richard White's metaphorical "middle ground" is replaced by a much more "native ground," a term borrowed from historian Kathleen DuVal.<sup>2</sup> Joining other contemporary historians, Nichols argues that when dealing with white newcomers, Lakes Indians long retained the upper hand, and that the balance of power tipped only after 1795 (p. 7-8). Throughout the period, Indians of the Great Lakes adopted economic and military strategies of survival and cultural strategies of "survivance" (p. 3).<sup>3</sup> These strategies allowed them to impede or delay white dominance and to maintain their native identities.

Two hundred pages long, divided into ten chapters, Nichols's book stands at the crossroads of ethnohistory and contact history, borderland history and the history of the United States. Illustrated by two maps (p. 38 and p. 127), its geographical scope covers the entire Lakes region from the upper Lakes country—the borderland between the United States and Canada—to the southern Lakes country—the Ohio River valley—and from the eastern reaches of historical Iroquoia to present-day Wisconsin in the West.

- 2 Before American ethnohistory developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Indian-white relations were understood through the lens of conquest, an antagonistic process leading either to acculturation or annihilation. Richard White's 1991 book offered an original, alternative model: Indians and French newcomers in the Lakes region had created a complex social environment in which they could coexist—a lost world White called the "Middle Ground." Historians have since challenged White's metaphor: rather than meeting Europeans halfway, Native Americans appear to have dictated to them the terms of diplomacy, commerce, warfare and intermarriage. Native communities are now considered as central to the colonial experience, sometimes as "masters" of alien empires or even as empires themselves. Kathleen DUVAL, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. Pekka HÄMÄLÄINEN, *The Comanche Empire*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008. Michael McDONNELL, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2015.
- 3 Nichols borrows the term survivance from Ojibwa historian G. Vizenor. Gerald VIZENOR, *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2009.

## Native Communities and European Disruptions

The beginning of the book draws on the recent findings of archaeologists and ethnohistorians to bring forth the vanished world of pre-contact Lakes Indians, a network of communities and confederacies bound together by millenia of trade, warfare, intermarriage, and common cultural traits. Living off farming, hunting and trading, between 125.000 and 170.000 Indians lived in the region at the beginning of the seventeenth century (p. 5 and p. 37). In Nichols' terms, "a mosaic of Indian nations adorned the Great Lakes country in the era of European colonization" (p. 24). More than a dozen nations lived around the Lakes and their tributaries, down the Saint Lawrence, Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. They spoke languages from three distinct linguistic families and belonged to large confederacies—the Anishinaabeg, Iroquois, Illiniwek and Sioux—whose influences ramified deep into the continent.

Disruption first came with the French in the form of disease, trade, and religion. Demographic loss, new commercial rivalries, and disrupted social bonds led to unprecedentedly bloody wars between Lakes Indians. Understanding that their world was fast altering, some of them contracted a productive alliance with the French—the starting point of Richard White's *Middle Ground*. Nichols considers that the French and Indian alliance was much to the advantage of the latter. The French called the Lakes region "New France," but it remained *de facto* Indian country. On this native ground, French traders married Indian women, and French officials and priests called themselves "fathers" to Indians. In doing so, they became caught in a rigid system of obligations. France spent a substantial amount of money on gifts to create and sustain the alliance, and the bonds the French established with the Anishinaabeg and Illiniwek forced them to participate in their allies' inter-ethnic wars (Chapter 3 p. 40-56).



The Indian-British common ground proved more fragile and short-lived than the Indian-French alliance. It was severely shattered by the events of the French and Indian War (1754-1763)<sup>4</sup> and the racialization of borderland conflict. In settler communities, anti-Indian sentiment was rooted in literacy and fueled by the press, as what Peter Silver called the “anti-Indian sublime” became a popular literary genre (p. 67).<sup>5</sup> In Indian communities, nativist prophets invited their brethren to reject all European newcomers and customs as poisonous. Nativism originated in Delaware villages, but as war revived interethnicity, Delaware nativists soon struck chords with

<sup>4</sup> Starting in the southern Lakes country in 1754, the French and Indian War was both the prequel to, and the American theater of a global conflict known as the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) which opposed the Anglo-Prussian coalition and the French-Spanish-Austrian coalition.

<sup>5</sup> Peter SILVER, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America*, New York, Norton, 2008.

other Lakes Indians. The scope of the insurgency called Pontiac's War (1763-1765)<sup>6</sup> can only be understood by looking at its various indigenous sources: there were common grievances against Britain's colonial policy and nostalgia for the French era; nativist messages spread through the entire Lakes country; and interethnic bonds were reactivated and strengthened. Although this pan-Indian insurgency was remembered as a native defeat, Nichols considers it as the apex of native power in the Lakes country. The level of coordination and striking power that Indian warriors demonstrated in their attacks made it clear that in 1763, Natives had remained the dominant power in the region (p. 76).

## The Revolution in Indian Country

Nichols has summarized valuable works such as Richard Calloway's Indian history of the American Revolution to give an overview of the Revolutionary era in the Lakes country.<sup>7</sup> At the outbreak of the war for American independence, Lakes Indians tried to remain neutral, but Anglo-American settlers had been crossing lines into Indian country since the 1760s. Aided by the Cherokees, the Shawnees were the first to rebel against white intruders in Transappalachian country and by the end of 1776, the Ohio valley again turned into a war zone. Many communities found that their interests now lay with the British empire rather than with the self-declared "United States." In the late 1770s, the United States launched major campaigns in the southern and eastern Lakes regions: the Continental armies wrought havoc in the Ohio valley and Iroquoia, applying tactics of total war typical of modern European states and drawing on their "long tradition of counterinsurgency" (p. 100). However disruptive, the Revolutionary War did not affect the Lakes country equally. It had repercussions in the northern country, but did not shatter the lives of the Dakotas and Ojibwas (p. 106). On several occasions, Nichols calls attention to different scales of historical time and to the cultural continuities in the lives of Lakes Indians. In the

<sup>6</sup> The outcome of the Seven Years' War—Britain's 1763 victory—meant British dominance in formerly French-ruled territories. The mixture of arrogance and incompetence displayed by British colonial officials in the Lakes region proved disastrous. They alienated the Lakes Indians by putting an end to gift-giving and restricting access to firearms and liquor. Native discontent turned into open insurgency. Warriors from around the Lakes rallied behind charismatic war-captains—including Odawa war-captain Pontiac—and attacked British outposts.

<sup>7</sup> Colin G. CALLOWAY, *The American Revolution in Indian Country*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

upper Lakes especially, Indian economy long followed traditional patterns (p. 129 and p. 134).

Although Britain was defeated, its Indian allies did not consider themselves vanquished. Like the British in 1763, the Americans in 1783 presumptuously treated the Indians as subdued nations. At the various peace negotiations, they made “extravagant demands for land” and equally “extravagant claims of authority” (p. 126) which alienated the southern Lakes Indians. Federal ordinances created an American territory north and west of the Ohio, but the Ohio was the *de facto* boundary of American power. In the Ohio valley, the war had created a political vacuum. In 1786, leaders from several Lakes nations reactivated their diplomatic networks and created a confederacy of “United Indian Nations” (p. 113). For another decade, warfare resumed on the borderlands of the American empire, until the Indian confederates were defeated at Fallen Timbers. The outcome of the Northwest Indian War (1785-1795) was a pivotal moment for Lakes Indians: it marked the end of their regional dominance.

## **Dispossession, Surviving and Resistance in the Lakes**

In the temporarily pacified Lakes country, the US government created the Northwest Territory and experimented with Indian policy. In the 1800s, the War Department expanded the “Indian factory”<sup>8</sup> system; US officials secured land cessions in exchange for goods and annuity payments; and policy makers designed a “civilization program” to turn Native Americans into farmers on smaller territories (p. 132 and p. 140-141). While some Lakes Indians accepted negotiation and accommodation, others upbraided accommodationist leaders and rejected American attempts at turning them into dependents. Once again, the native insurgents’ cultural and military resistance relied on interethnicity: the Shawnee prophet Tenskwatawa appealed to hundreds of young Anishinaabeg, and his brother Tecumseh led another pan-Indian confederacy into another war against white newcomers in the Lakes country (1812-1814).

In the decades following the collapse of Tecumseh’s confederacy, five groups of white newcomers brought irreversible change to the Lakes country: the treaty

<sup>8</sup> A publicly-funded trading post meant to secure the trade with Indians.

commissioners and soldiers sent by the federal government, the private traders, the missionaries, and the white settlers (p. 154). Change culminated with the implementation of the 1830 Removal Act and its repercussions in the Lakes.<sup>9</sup> Nichols agrees with historians of the Jacksonian era that Removal was a “mass ethnic-cleansing operation” which proved disastrous for the fifteen or twenty thousands of emigrants from the Lakes (p. 167-169). His expertise in the history of US Indian policy however casts an interesting light on the way Removal was put in motion. The treaties, he argues, demonstrated the limits of US power in the Lakes region: commissioners used negotiation, economic pressure, fraud, and a massive amount of public money in annuities because they were “unable to remove the Lakes Indians by force.” The weakness of the US government in the Midwest gave native leaders “room to maneuver, to delay, to seek more compensation for their peoples’ lands, or to look for white allies who would help them persuade the federal government to suspend its removal plans” (p. 168-169).

Like the imperial wars in their time, Removal did not affect the Lakes region equally. Nineteenth-century US imperialism and settler colonialism proved easier to resist in the northern than in the southern Lakes country. As their homelands slowly changed into a white man’s country, Lakes Indians continued to resist and negotiate change. *Peoples of the Inland Sea* has the merit of showing that native agency was manifold. The book closes on 1862, the year seven hundred Dakota insurgents took to the war path against white invaders before they were brutally repressed. 1862 was also the year the Homestead Act was passed, a law meant to help white settlers invade Indian country; a law which—the author points out the irony—allowed some western Lakes Indians to claim homesteads for themselves, and remain in their ancestral homeland (p. 201).

<sup>9</sup> Indian removal was a priority of the Democratic Party’s, especially in the Southeast because of higher population density, land pressure and anti-Indian sentiment. Passed by Congress in 1830, the Removal Act allowed newly elected President Andrew Jackson to remove all Southeastern Indians west of the Mississippi by force. Although the Act did not apply to the Northwest, removal became the new Indian policy and soon concerned all Native communities living east of the Mississippi, including the Lakes Indians.



## The Challenges of Indian History

While Nichols's book does not challenge conventional threshold dates, it has an original chronological scope. Indian histories usually consider Removal as a lamentable conclusion, the triumph of United States imperialist policy over all Native Americans east of the Mississippi. What Nichols demonstrates however, is that—contrary to what happened in the Southeast—Lakes Indians resisted removal pressure fairly well. By 1870, perhaps half of them had remained in—or come back to—their homeland in spite of the removal treaties, whether on American or Canadian soil (p. 190). Emphasizing Indian agency and adjustment, Nichols also points out that those who survived emigration west of the Mississippi built new homes for themselves, sometimes prosperous ones. Finally, it is worth mentioning that although taking a stance in defense of “a wronged people” (p. 203), Nichols rejects simple narratives and calls attention to understudied aspects of Native American history, such as Indian slavery, or white antiremoval activism.

Because they occupied a borderland between empires—France and Britain; Canada and the United States—Lakes Indians were long shadowy figures at the margins of other peoples' histories. They now take center stage in narratives of the contact era. One original argument of *Peoples of the Inland Sea* is that the long-hold resistance and survivance of Lakes Indians was made possible by their rich history of interethnicity. The family bonds, commercial routes, and diplomatic traditions they had developed before contact with Europeans account for the birth and spread of



nativism in that region, the foundation of powerful pan-Indian confederacies, and the interethnic characteristic of armed resistance to Removal.

North American Native voices were recorded and distorted by Euro-American observers. However, ethnohistorians have used archaeology, anthropology and linguistics to reread classic primary sources and offer alternative interpretations. Intended for students, Nichols's bibliography of primary sources (p. 235-239) is short and easily accessible, consisting of travel and captivity narratives, government documents, and various publications from State historical societies. The bibliography of secondary sources (p. 239-259) is much longer and remarkably refreshing in its attention to monographs and articles published in the last decade. Nichols's conclusions regarding the Lakes Indians come from his ability to bring together many micro-studies and cast them together in a long-term history of the Lakes region.

## Further reading

- Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Richard White, *The Middle Ground. Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- David Andrew Nichols, *Red Gentlemen and White Savages: Indians, Federalists, and the Search for Order on the American Frontier*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2008.
- - *Engines of Diplomacy: Indian Trading Factories and the Negotiation of American Empire*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2016.
- The collection *New Approaches to Midwestern Studies* at Ohio University Press:  
<https://www.ohioswallow.com/series/New+Approaches+to+Midwestern+Studies>
- David Andrew Nichols about Peoples of the Inland Sea:  
<https://anchor.fm/ohio-university-press-podcast/episodes/Interview-with-David-Andrew-Nichols--author-of-Peoples-of-the-Inland-Sea-e1p78d/a-a4amaa>

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