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Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History Of Early America



Synopsis

In the beginning, North America was Indian country. But only in the beginning. After the opening act of the great national drama, Native Americans yielded to the westward rush of European settlers. Or so the story usually goes. Yet, for three centuries after Columbus, Native people controlled most of eastern North America and profoundly shaped its destiny. In *Facing East from Indian Country*, Daniel K. Richter keeps Native people center-stage throughout the story of the origins of the United States. Viewed from Indian country, the sixteenth century was an era in which Native people discovered Europeans and struggled to make sense of a new world. Well into the seventeenth century, the most profound challenges to Indian life came less from the arrival of a relative handful of European colonists than from the biological, economic, and environmental forces the newcomers unleashed. Drawing upon their own traditions, Indian communities reinvented themselves and carved out a place in a world dominated by transatlantic European empires. In 1776, however, when some of Britain's colonists rebelled against that imperial world, they overturned the system that had made Euro-American and Native coexistence possible. Eastern North America only ceased to be an Indian country because the revolutionaries denied the continent's first peoples a place in the nation they were creating. In rediscovering early America as Indian country, Richter employs the historian's craft to challenge cherished assumptions about times and places we thought we knew well, revealing Native American experiences at the core of the nation's birth and identity.

Book Information

Paperback: 336 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press; Revised ed. edition (April 30, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674011171

ISBN-13: 978-0674011175

Product Dimensions: 6.2 x 0.9 x 9.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (46 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #54,604 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #99 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Colonial Period](#) #103 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Social Sciences > Specific Demographics > Native American Studies](#) #113 in [Books > History > Americas > Native American](#)

Customer Reviews

Most historians have sufficient presence of mind to clear from their brains the Panglossian cant which insists we live in the best of all possible worlds. The best histories, of which Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* is most certainly one, are able to envision a historical narrative where paths not taken would lead to a counterfactual narrative to our own. To this end, Richter musters the sources traditional to any historian--varied secondary sources, the journals of participants of historical interactions between Natives and Europeans, literary sources by Natives and sundry oral sources likely to be their own. Utilizing a vast knowledge of the period between the first arrival of Europeans in the Americas through the period of "Jacksonian Democracy," Richter paints a lucid picture of European interaction with the tribes of North America, and how it altered the behavior of all parties involved. This narrative is neither a record of triumphant civilization moving west, nor is it an account of genocide moving ferociously from East--though Richter makes clear both of these fit, respectively, into American myth and American reality--he is much more concerned with how the cultures interacted with each other in creating the circumstances that Natives lived under and how they viewed their changing world. Richter's approach to understanding how the world did and would appear to Natives is grounded in the understanding that commerce, politics, environment, and ideologies will be discernibly altered by any new presence. Just as North America became a new market for European goods, so Europe allowed for the prospering of some tribes through a need for raw materials such as leather and beaver pelts.

Traditional histories of Native Americans have focused on the point of view, or history, of European Americans. But in 2001, historian Daniel Richter breaks this trend in his novel work - *Facing East From Indian Country*. The "eastward" approach incorporates the interpretations, or stories, of early Native Americans who observed the movements of Europeans from eastern America. His research is by no means exhaustive, but advances a fresh perspective of the scant pre-existing primary sources on early Native Americans. His sophisticated synthesis and analysis of the aforementioned sources, coupled with his incisive imagination shed light on a virtually untold Native American history. Richter chronologically organizes his work and concentrates heavily on early colonial times in his opening chapters, which appear to be his area of expertise. His passages of primary sources are often lengthy and precariously worded, but his strong narrative and eloquent articulation of Indian culture supersede these minor distractions. Revisiting the oft told stories of Pocahontas and Metacon, Richter articulately portrays these individuals as being champions of peaceful co-existence, and cooperation, in the New World. In addition to the previously noted amenable

traits, Native Americans also possessed sound diplomatic skills. For instance, Richter provides considerable detail about the sophisticated "treaty protocol" that early Americans utilized. Noting that this process "ideally consisted of nine stages," (135) Richter explicitly detailed the expectations of Iroquois during these meetings in the mid-eighteenth century and illuminated the European's poor cultural understanding of these protocols. These examples, and others, highlighted the European's ignorance of Indian culture.

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