

Review: New Narratives of the Conquest of the Ohio Country

Reviewed Work(s): *The Victory with No Name: The Native American Defeat of the First American Army* by Colin G. Calloway; *William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest* by William Heath; *Gathering Together: The Shawnee People through Diaspora and Nationhood, 1600–1870* by Sami Lakomäki

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Review Essay

New Narratives of the Conquest of the Ohio Country

KARIM M. TIRO

The Victory with No Name: The Native American Defeat of the First American Army. By Colin G. Calloway. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 214 + ix. Cloth, \$24.95.)

William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest. By William Heath. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015. Pp. 500 + xviii. Cloth, \$34.95.)

Gathering Together: The Shawnee People through Diaspora and Nationhood, 1600–1870. By Sami Lakomäki. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014. Pp. 334 + viii. Cloth, \$40.00.)

In his 2008 *American Historical Review* essay on the trans-Appalachian frontier, François Furstenberg referred to the War of 1812 as “the last battle of the Long War for the West.”¹ The expansionist dimensions of the Seven Years’ War have long been acknowledged, but those of the Revolution and the War of 1812 have traditionally been ignored in favor of a narrower preoccupation with Anglo–American relations. However, the work of “East-facing” historians like Daniel Richter and “West-facing” ones like Woody Holton and Patrick Griffin have made it very clear just how urgently many elite and plebeian Americans wished to

1. François Furstenberg, “The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History,” *American Historical Review* 113 (June 2008), 647–77, at 674.

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seize the lands beyond the mountains.² Britain's hesitation in gratifying them, not to mention its insistence that they defray some of the costs of this expansion, made for serious trouble in the 1760s and 1770s. The American Revolution did not really end in the Old Northwest until 1795, and conflict flared anew in 1810–13.

As our awareness of the significance of the Ohio Valley to both the Revolution and the War of 1812 grows, its indigenous inhabitants are coming into sharper focus. The three books under review make different kinds of contributions to this re-envisioning. Colin Calloway and William Heath offer new narratives of key decades from a Euroamerican perspective, while Sami Lakomäki provides an anthropological history of Shawnee politics over the course of centuries. Colin Calloway's *The Victory with No Name* is a short book on a specific topic: the November 1791 battle that pitted warriors from a coalition of Indian nations against the U.S. Army. Taking Arthur St. Clair's forces by surprise, the Natives inflicted over one thousand casualties and forced the U.S. to retreat. Calloway regrets the "national amnesia about St. Clair's defeat" (ix), and offers this book as a corrective. As the title suggests, he proposes that we remember this battle not primarily as a U.S. defeat but rather as the most significant military victory the Indians ever won. It was a feat they accomplished through superior scouting and mental preparation of their fighters, as well as the tactics of surprise and early neutralization of the enemy's officers. As a result of the victory, the Natives became emboldened in their defense of their lands, if less unified in their diplomatic strategy. Meanwhile, the Washington administration became steeped in scandal. In the face of a Congressional investigation, the president invoked executive privilege for the first time.

Strangely enough, Calloway gets through the entire book without offering a new name for "St. Clair's defeat." ("Battle on the Wabash" seems serviceable to this reviewer.) This points to the fact that, although Calloway intended to move our attention away from St. Clair, he only budges it so far. The book is, in fact, mostly about the political, diplomatic, and military shortcomings of the fledgling United States. As Calloway explains it, the conflict arose from the combination of the new

2. Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); Woody Holton, *Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, & the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia* (Chapel

nation's desperation to fill its empty coffers and the ambitions of a clutch of northeastern land speculators. The sale and settlement of the Northwest Territory served the interests of both. However, their shared conception of the trans-Appalachian West as a conquered land was little more than wishful thinking—and it certainly wasn't shared by the region's Native inhabitants. The United States laid claim to the Ohio country on the basis of Britain's transfer of sovereignty at the Treaty of Paris, but the Indians considered Britain's concession of lands it did not control to be specious. Most importantly, enforcement of the conquest doctrine required military strength the United States did not yet possess.

Arthur St. Clair, an esteemed officer from both the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution, was made the governor of the Northwest Territory and given responsibility for both diplomacy and war in the region. Calloway suggests that, credentials aside, St. Clair was not up to the task: He was mentally inflexible and gout-ridden. St. Clair could not bring himself to respect the Indians, and his treaties and military confrontations with them only generated more Native scorn, culminating in the Battle on the Wabash.

Calloway catalogs St. Clair's shortcomings, but he places them in a much larger context. He details problems with recruiting an effective force. He also shines a light on the corrupt and inefficient private contracting system that supplied the army. As a result, soldiers lacked adequate rations, weapons, and protection against the elements. Calloway argues that St. Clair should not have undertaken his march in 1791 at all, but neither Secretary of War Henry Knox nor President Washington gave him the leeway to reconsider. For Calloway, ultimate responsibility for the debacle that followed rested at the top of the chain of command. George Washington was chastened, but redeemed himself in the eyes of the citizenry by indulging General Anthony Wayne with more resources and more patience, which yielded a more favorable outcome at Fallen Timbers. St. Clair was never able to erase the stain of the defeat from his record. At the time of his death in 1818, he was still struggling to do so—and simply to be reimbursed for some expenses he had personally borne in the campaign.

Despite drifting from its apparent purpose, *The Victory with No Name*

Hill, NC, 1999); Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York, 2007).

has much to offer to undergraduate students and a general audience. Its fast-paced narrative will satisfy many readers' thirst for military history. Moreover, it highlights the central importance of land issues and Native peoples to the political life of the new nation very well. *The Victory with No Name* offers a concise and effective riposte to the many biographers of Washington and other Founders who continue to ignore Indian affairs.

William Wells and the Struggle for the Old Northwest is more firmly grounded in the Ohio Valley, but William Heath shares Calloway's interest in government policymakers and military and civilian officialdom. Wells was an interpreter and Indian agent of some notoriety. Born into a family of modest means that moved to Kentucky during the Revolution, he acquired his linguistic skills after his capture by Miamis and Delawares in the spring of 1784 at the age of thirteen. Over the next six years, he became a competent Miami hunter, warrior, husband, and father. Despite having visited his birth family in Kentucky in 1789, Wells's identification with the Miamis was such that he led a squadron of Indian marksmen in the Battle on the Wabash.

The following year, however, he switched sides. This allowed him to attain a short-term goal: the release of his captive Miami relatives from imprisonment by the U.S. However, Wells's change in allegiance was decisive; in the years that followed he rendered Wayne many important services as a guide, spy, and strategist. Heath reasons that Wells had enjoyed the freedom that characterized life as a young Native male, but saw diminishing returns in the future. Wells's subsequent behavior reflected a particular interest in accumulating personal property, which would have been at odds with the more egalitarian Indian ethos. Heath also suggests that, as a Kentuckian, Wells understood not just the demographic strength of Euroamerican immigrants to the Ohio Valley but also their vicious implacability. This is a useful supplement to Calloway's account, whose focus on northeastern land speculators and politicians left Kentucky largely out of the picture.

In the years that followed Wayne's victory, Wells managed to alienate nearly everyone while reputedly amassing a small fortune. He ingratiated himself with Indiana territorial governor William Henry Harrison by helping the latter assert flimsy land claims against the Indians—transactions that Wells would later repudiate. Wells and his Miami father-in-law Little Turtle saw opportunity for themselves in the government's commitment to a program to teach Indians farming, but were so

resentful at being bypassed in favor of Quakers that they fatally undermined the Quaker missions. Finally, Wells's management of large quantities of Indian goods was marked by significant accounting irregularities, a fact that Heath attributes largely (but not entirely) to Wells's limited schooling. Nevertheless, embittered officials and Natives repeatedly returned to Wells because they felt they could not do without his linguistic skills, personal connections, and political counsel. In many cases, they later cursed themselves for having ignored their better judgment.

William Wells is a hefty biography of the life-and-times variety. The book's length—four hundred pages excluding the notes and bibliography—is somewhat surprising since, as Heath puts it, Wells was a “man of action.” That meant his documentary legacy was rather slim. As a result, Heath goes rather heavy on Wells's “times.” He becomes a military historian, dissecting campaigns or engagements in which Wells was only tangentially involved. He also becomes a presidential historian with a taste for psychological explanation. For better or for worse, he does not attempt forays of similar depth into Miami history beyond a discussion of Wells's adoption. That chapter offers an Ohio Valley version of James Axtell's classic essay “The White Indians of Colonial America.”³ Heath alludes to Wells's political tag-team with Little Turtle and his Miami faction but does not explain the political culture of the Miamis. Heath also repeats some questionable information regarding Wells's Indian names. When I finished the book, I was mostly struck by how few kind words were apparently uttered about William Wells, either during his life or after his death, by either whites or Natives. There are some new insights to be gleaned about military and diplomatic events, such as the engagements of Josiah Harmar with the Indian confederates in 1790, and the machinations of British Indian agent Alexander McKee in scuttling the peace negotiations of 1793. However, most of the book's content will be generally familiar to readers of this journal who already know of Wells.

Sami Lakomäki might have made mention of Wells's unusual background: In Wells's two brief appearances in *Gathering Together*, Lakomäki treats him unproblematically as a Euroamerican observer of the Shawnees. This oversight is arguably excusable in light of the scope and

3. James Axtell, “The White Indians of Colonial America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (Jan. 1975), 55–88.

ambition of his work (and the fact that Wells's recorded observations were consistent with others'). *Gathering Together* seeks to make sense of three hundred years of Shawnee history from an anthropological perspective. Lakomäki's analysis, based on archival research rather than fieldwork, places great emphasis on the Shawnees' uncommon fivefold divisional structure. Archaeological and linguistic evidence suggests the divisions were rooted in Ohio Valley town identities formed in the Fort Ancient period (1000–1700 CE). Each division was responsible for performing specific ceremonial duties for its counterparts, which imparted it with a particular character. For example, the Mekoche division was traditionally entrusted with peacemaking. Over time, they would reinterpret this as a claim to primacy in diplomatic affairs and sometimes to outright leadership. While the causes for the creation of these divisions are uncertain, they afforded the Shawnees flexibility in the face of assaults by Iroquois and slave raiders and the subsequent challenge of European settlers. Shawnee communities reestablished themselves at great distances from one another, but the divisional structure sustained their constructive cooperation. Lakomäki's emphasis on this divisional structure helps us better understand how, as Stephen Warren and Laura Keenan Spero have also argued, the Shawnees functioned effectively as a diasporic people.⁴ Although dispersal had the potential to dissolve their bonds, it served instead as the basis of an extensive network that provided the Shawnees with strategic options in trade, diplomacy, and war. By the early eighteenth century, Shawnees conceptualized the area from Pennsylvania to Illinois to Alabama as a “kinscape” (33). Indigenous nationhood could exist, Lakomäki argues, in the absence of stable or exclusive territorial claims or shared political leadership.

According to Lakomäki, the mid eighteenth century saw many Shawnees return to Ohio and embrace the idea of a consolidated, unified nation. To that end, they defended Ohio quite fiercely from the Seven Years' War onward. However, Shawnee commitment to national consolidation was never universal, and unfavorable treaties, military reversals, and settler attacks eventually caused the diaspora to wax anew. Several

4. Laura Keenan Spero, “‘Stout, bold, cunning and the greatest travellers in America’: The Colonial Shawnee Diaspora,” PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2010; Stephen Warren, *The Worlds the Shawnees Made: Migration and Violence in Early America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), *idem.*, *The Shawnees and Their Neighbors, 1795–1870* (Urbana, IL, 2005).

contingents emigrated to Spanish territories on the other side of the Mississippi. Lakomäki presents Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh against the backdrop of Shawnee political history and finds that while they drew upon certain Shawnee and Woodland precedents, they were too aberrant to be embraced by most Shawnees.

Military defeat of the Natives in the War of 1812 and the territorial losses that followed forced greater centralization among the Shawnees. The federal government embraced any opportunity to promote centralized political authority among them, and some Shawnee communities and individuals proved compliant. However, this political consolidation was not welcomed by other Shawnees, and Lakomäki ably details their resistance. Shawnee communities were surrounded by white settlers and relocated to the West—and most were forced from one location to another once there. The rapidly and radically altered contexts in which the Shawnees found themselves placed their traditional politics under unprecedented strain. The creeping influence of private property and possessive individualism reordered power relations, while Christianity undermined the very beliefs that underpinned the divisional structure. But the erosion of traditional ideology did not end in its eradication. Traditional Shawnee values and dispositions permitted the nation's survival—in multiple political entities—into the twenty-first century.

Gathering Together makes a strong case for the continuing usefulness of the nation—very broadly conceived—as a unit of analysis in Native American history. However, wherever Shawnees went, they usually joined other peoples, such as Creeks, Cherokees, and Delawares. Lakomäki cites these “intimate alliances” as evidence of Shawnee resourcefulness, but leaves us to wonder how Shawnee identities coexisted with others, especially when this cohabitation extended over generations. *Gathering Together* should therefore be seen as a productive complement to inter-national Native histories, such as those by Gregory Dowd and Lisa Brooks.⁵ Lakomäki's central argument about dispersal and consolidation as alternating strains in Shawnee politics also invites further rumination and perhaps revision. His presentation of Shawnee political life has an idealized quality. Some of the political disputes and separations

5. Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore, 1991); Lisa Brooks, *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (Minneapolis, MN, 2008).

described here as salutary decentralization were doubtless experienced by the Shawnees as decisive and destructive schism.

Juxtaposing these three books highlights the perennial tensions between the study of events and the *longue durée*. Calloway and Heath capture the experience and motivation of important actors at a crucial moment in the history of the trans-Appalachian frontier. However, Lakomäki suggests that they were traveling important currents, and were parts of longer collective journeys, that remain all but invisible in histories of a decade or a generation. Lakomäki's longer view illuminates some of those continuities, but only at the risk of seriously distorting the experiences he seeks to explain. The lines separating detail from trivia and deep historical perspective from mere projection remain thin. We cannot resolve these issues, but these authors allow us at least to manage them. Calloway, Heath, and Lakomäki attend capably to their endeavors; it's up to us to alternate the timescales.

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