

Reinterpreting New England Indians and the Colonial Experience. Edited by COLIN G. CALLOWAY and NEAL SALISBURY. Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 2003. Distributed by the University of Virginia Press. 368 pages. \$39.50 (cloth).

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At some point in the relatively recent past, a group of scholars gathered together at Old Sturbridge Village, a simulacrum of a New England village sitting on the ancestral lands of the Nipmucs. Like too many of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century meetings between natives and newcomers in this territory, the precise date of this modern encounter was apparently not worth recording; fortunately, many of the words delivered that day have now appeared in published form in this volume edited by Colin G. Calloway and Neal Salisbury. According to the foreword, written by John W. Tyler, the editor of publications for the Colonial Society of Massachusetts and one of the primary organizers, the meeting was notable for, among other things, the fact that “well over 50 percent of registrants were Indians, a first for an academic conference of this sort” (11). Tyler, who confessed to having suffered from “a bad case of liberal guilt” (9), noted that it was “hard to put into words what made the conference so special” (11). He listed a number of possibilities, including “the large number of native faces,” the “warm sunshine at the cusp of early spring in Massachusetts,” and the efforts of the program committee, which had ensured “a variety of voices among the presenters”(11). To judge from Tyler’s tone, everyone involved was aware of the politics of such a gathering, particularly because the Colonial Society of Massachusetts was popularly considered “an organization (until recent decades) so brahminical its blood ran blue”(9).

It is not self-evident that such a gathering would produce important scholarship. As Calloway and Salisbury note, there has often been tension between academically trained historians, on the one hand, and native historians, on the other. “As a result of this mutual mistrust,” they write, “native and non-native scholars have been telling histories of New England Indians that for the most part run parallel to one another, with no intersection” (15). To redress the problem, the conference organizers, who included native and non-native scholars, laid out an agenda. They would try “to do what the best scholarship in recent years has done: combine scholarly research and inquiry with native testimony and insight” and “strive for dialogue rather than definitive delivery” (16). They proceeded under the cloud of a real modern-day issue: the efforts of the Nipmucs to achieve federal recognition and the benefits that come from such a status. Though the editors had hoped that the chapters could contribute “to what might be termed the ‘decolonization’ of New England Indian history” (22), the politics of the federal recognition process suggest the limits of even the best scholarship to undermine almost four centuries of European conquest.

Still, the range of this volume’s contents suggests the state of the field. In a witty and insightful analysis, Virginia DeJohn Anderson uses fragmentary documentary evidence to show how a group of Norwottucks made sense of a dead cow found in a creek as well as of the other livestock that had arrived with the newcomers. She shows how native peoples’ response to domesticated animals reflected their response to colonization more generally. The Norwottucks and other natives came to terms with European animals through reasoning “by analogy from the creatures they already knew” (26), a process that (though she does not note it) mirrored sixteenth-century Europeans’ efforts to make sense of the creatures (and everything else) they encountered in the western hemisphere. Anderson’s discussion is infused by her sound grasp of regional mentalities, including the recognition that these native peoples “drew no sharp division between natural and supernatural phenomena” (28): their comprehension of newly introduced animals would differ markedly from English and Anglo-American views of livestock as living property. Her discussion also reflects an understanding of modern-day Cree attitudes toward animals, an approach employed

by Calvin Luther Martin.¹ Like Martin, Anderson demonstrates the value of employing culturally relevant oral testimony to find meaning in colonial-era documents.

Other contributors also recognize the utility of taking an interdisciplinary approach. Anne Marie Plane's fascinating chapter on how Martha's Vineyard missionary Experience Mayhew came to understand the dreams of a Wampanoag woman named Abigail Kesohtaut in the early eighteenth century draws directly on Freud and an understanding of psychoanalysis shaped, as she writes, at least in part by those associated with the Stoller Foundation for Research in Psychoanalysis and Culture. Despite the difficulties of using dream testimony printed in English in Mayhew's 1727 collection of native biographies entitled *Indian Converts*, Plane senses an opportunity for exploring the interior experience of colonialism. The existing testimony is a "highly compromised piece of historical evidence" (89), yet "dreaming and dream sharing may have provided important avenues of release for aggressive resistance to English colonization" (95). In dreamland peoples undergoing the dislocating effects of being conquered and occupied may find solace and value. As Plane puts it, "dreams could have enabled Wampanoags to explore, both internally and in conversation with colonizers like Mayhew, an assertion of native presence and native self-worth despite Christian teachings and English dominance" (95). Some theoretical positions are more fruitfully applied to the documentary record than others. Joshua David Bellin's chapter on "Translation and Interculturalism in the John Eliot Tracts" makes for difficult reading. Bellin is inspired by literary scholars such as Eric Cheyfitz, David Murray, and Stephen Greenblatt, with mixed results. Curiously, he pays no attention to Eliot's most important work of translation: his Massachusetts-language edition of the Bible published in 1663. The scale of this effort alone makes it worthy of some attention.

Many of the contributors here expand scholars' understanding of crucial questions relating to the region's past. Both Margaret Ellen Newell's chapter on the evolution of slavery from the era of Metacom's War to about 1720 and a collaborative effort by Ruth Wallis Herndon and Ella Wilcox Sekatau on the pernicious practice of forcing native children into apprenticeship examine vital labor issues previously marginalized in New England economic history. Newell's research shows that even occupants of a place that lacked obvious need for bound labor nonetheless supported "the construction of racialized codes that put New England on common ground with the plantation societies of the south and the Caribbean" (129). Though it is true that the slavery of Native Americans never quite resembled that of transported Africans and their African American progeny, courts managed to create types of servitude that were seemingly as inescapable as chattel slavery. Whereas New England legislators were deeply ambivalent about enslaving the natives in the region, they were far less reluctant to sell captured natives into slavery elsewhere or to import enslaved natives from other places. The courts proved especially adept at what Newell calls "judicial enslavement" (108); at times, for example, authorities elided differences between natives and African Americans, which facilitated the move toward native slavery. When Massachusetts legislators in the early eighteenth century "shifted the tax status of both Indian and black servants and slaves from that of persons subject to the regular poll tax—a category that included white servants—to that of personal property" it meant that these people were from that point forward "literally to be 'Rated with horses and Hogs'" (127).

Herndon and Sekatau show that this marginalization of New England's native peoples extended to indigenous children through a system of "pauper apprenticeship" (138). Those who promoted the binding of children claimed that placing them with colonial families would be a way to civilize them. Careful analysis of approximately twelve hundred records and Narragansett oral history reveals that this colonialist program was just another way to supply bound labor to colonists.

¹ Calvin Luther Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade* (Berkeley, Calif., 1978).

Though legislators intended, as those in Rhode Island put it in 1730, to protect natives from “evil-minded persons” (141) who tried to manipulate them into poverty and force them to sign away their children, they could not prevent abuses, including masters who refused to teach native children how to read or train them in skills that the system promised.

Some of the chapters in this volume, notably those of Anderson and Plane, open or expand on new areas of inquiry; others, like the studies on bound labor, take familiar topics in new and unexpected directions. Yet not everything in this volume redefines its subject in such ways. The last half of the volume includes five chapters that deal with more historiographically traditional subjects: politics, religion, and material culture. But here, too, the contributors made conscientious efforts to tell stories in new ways. Trudie Lamb Richmond and Amy E. Den Ouden use gender as an analytical category in their assessment of native women in southern New England. Though the chapter is so long that it will try the patience of many readers, there is much of value that will upend easy predictions. Richmond teases out “the ways in which notions of gender—and native women’s resistance to colonial domination—shaped the lives and historical possibilities of indigenous peoples in colonial southern New England” (176–77); Den Ouden then furnishes a case study showing the central role of women’s participation in the Mohegan struggle to preserve their lands in the first decades of the eighteenth century. Daniel R. Mandell’s much more tightly focused chapter on the Mashpee reveals an otherwise obscure history of resistance to colonial rule, a spirit of defiance and search for autonomy that long predated the fundamental works of nineteenth-century memoirist William Apess. From Mandell and Richmond and Ouden, then, the political history of southern New England includes the struggles of women and men to retain their cultures and communities.

The need to reject older notions of growing native weakness in the face of colonization comes into focus in chapters on the shifting religious climate. Ever since English migrants arrived in New England and articulated their justification for seizing native lands, those who tried to spread Protestantism threatened to undermine indigenous communities. Yet, though it is true that New England’s landscape became increasingly Christianized, the effects were not what John Winthrop or William Bradford had anticipated. Using the letters of native converts, notably a Mohegan minister named Joseph Johnson who worked under the supervision of Eleazar Wheelock, Tammy Schneider shows how some natives appropriated Protestant ideas to carve their own religious identity: in Johnson’s case, by moving away from Calvinism and toward Arminianism. David J. Silverman shows how native churches became ever more crucial on Cape Cod and Martha’s Vineyard. “In contrast to current histories emphasizing the declension of Indian churches,” he writes, these edifices became more important in Wampanoag country, enhancing natives’ ability to maintain “a sense of local and tribal identity, despite living in a region increasingly dominated by whites” (266–67). These findings complement the work of Mandell and Richmond and Ouden in showing how Christianity became a tool for some indigenous peoples to preserve their communities and sense of communal identity. As Silverman puts it in a statement that could apply in other areas: “The Indians transformed the Church from a colonial imposition to a Wampanoag institution that served as a vigorous bulwark for Indian interests and culture” (285).

All these chapters, even those on bound labor, aim to show that natives retained a sense of agency in their lives. This will not come as a surprise to specialists in the history of indigenous peoples in the Americas, though the repeated use of linguistic analysis by many of the authors points toward a rich source for further research. Yet, though there is no doubt that these various New England peoples survived despite adverse circumstances, the insistence on agency without a competing narrative of decline can send a misleading message. Yes, native peoples survived colonization, and as Nan Wolverton shows in her fine chapter on basketmaking, many of them retained their traditional material cultures. But other than the sustained critique of colonization found in the chapters relating to bound labor, there is not much in this volume to remind readers of

the fundamental meaning of Anglo-American colonization: the staggering loss of population, at times in horrendous warfare, more often due to disease; and the corresponding decline in lands controlled by native peoples. Seventeenth-century Narragansett headman Miantonomo knew that the English had seized native lands, altered the landscape, and pushed indigenous peoples to the edge of survival. In an oft-quoted speech, he lamented that the newcomers, “with scythes cut down the grass, and with axes fell the trees; their cows and horses eat the grass, and their hogs spoil our clam banks, and we shall all be starved.”² There is little of his sense of despair in these chapters, nor does Miantonomo even appear in the index.

This criticism is not to suggest that the search for agency has become a kind of apologia for colonialism. None of the authors in this volume celebrates the English colonization of New England; all are critical of the newcomers for their arrogance. But if historians continue to find native agency and survival, they must also wrestle with a single fact mentioned by Calloway and Salisbury: the current president of the United States withdrew conditional federal recognition of the Nipmucs. What other population living within the boundaries of the United States is subject to such authority wielded by a single individual? Or, to put that another way, how can early American historians use the available documentary, oral, and material sources to decipher the complications of colonialism and explain a political system in which native cultures can survive despite having so little political power? The chapters in this volume start that inquiry by showing the adaptability of New England’s native peoples. For this reinterpretation to be meaningful, scholars also need to wrestle with the long-term legacy of depopulation and inequality.

² “Lieft Lion Gardener His Relation of the Pequot Warres,” *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3d ser., 3 (1833): 154.