

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

American Indians in U.S. History. By Roger L. Nichols.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1xt8b8rb>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 28(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Forbes, Jack D.

Publication Date

2004-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Reviews

American Indians in U.S. History. By Roger L. Nichols. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. 242 pages. \$17.95 paper.

Roger L. Nichols has attempted what many might regard as an impossible task: that of writing a “brief” history of American Indians that stretches from their origins to the present day. Professor Nichols, a distinguished member of the University of Arizona history department, hesitated to undertake the task, given the stricture of charting such a history in the confines of a single volume. In the end, however, he accepted the challenge.

The resulting text should prove popular, especially for single-semester lower-division courses. Nichols, who has a strong background in the field, having completed a comparative study of US and Canadian policies toward aboriginal Americans, has chosen to see Indian history in three general stages: (1) a period of local independence, characterized by relations with other indigenous groups, followed by white intrusion and the taking of Native land and resources; (2) a stage of reservation dwelling; and (3) the stage that begins when Natives started moving from reservations into the larger mix of contemporary society.

In fact, Nichols opens with a chapter examining the precontact Indian world and then focuses the balance of his text on the post-1500 era, with five of the seven remaining chapters dealing with the period since American independence. Nichols follows the habit of most twentieth-century US historians in referring to the autochthonous peoples of the American hemisphere as “Indians” thousands of years before Columbus had christened them as such (a name that the Spaniards also applied to all persons found from India across the Pacific to America). He similarly refers to the seventeenth-century Anglo-European colonial newcomers as “Americans” in contrast to “the Indians.” Such language might seem archaic in view of the presence of millions of genuine Indians from India in the United States and Canada today and also in view of the general claim of Latin Americans to be Americans, both because they live in America and because of their part or whole Native ancestry. Archaeologists and some anthropologists have extended the term *American* back in time to refer to Ancient Americans, even as geologists refer to our continent as America in remote periods of geologic time.

One might think that the descendants of Ancient Americans would be more American than seventeenth-century English colonists. Would it startle college undergraduates to be told that America already held Americans in 1607? This might seem a pedantic point, but in view of the care with which Israeli officials long refused to refer to the native Palestinians as Palestinians, calling them Arabs instead, we must suspect that the denial of the name of the land may be an important element in the denial of rights of sovereignty to indigenous Americans. At least this topic might be explored in such a text, since Native Americans were commonly referred to as Americans by many European writers for centuries.

Nichols begins chapter 1 with a discussion of the controversial “Kennewick Man” issue. He asserts that the man’s physical features do not suggest a connection with early Natives but rather show similarities with present-day Europeans or Pacific Islanders. In a similar vein Nichols suggests that Spirit Cave Man of Nevada, dated to about the same time, does not resemble modern Indians. He goes on to claim that the early skulls he discusses have a greater resemblance to Ainu, Polynesians, or Europeans than to modern-day Native Americans.

He further claims that many modern-day Indians have been angered by the suggestion that their ancestors were preceded by others. Such language takes the popular media’s sensational titles (such as “Americans before the Indians”) seriously and presents a clear threat to the standard view of America’s past.

It is unfortunate that Professor Nichols devotes a great deal of his space in chapter 1 to highly politicized archaeological positions and therefore must correspondingly reduce his coverage of thousands of years of American progress in agriculture, medicine, astronomy, urban development, architecture, marine navigation, and many other topics. Be that as it may, one cannot resist pointing out that very early in the Kennewick controversy Vine Deloria Jr. and I, separately, pointed out how Kennewick greatly resembled the photographs and portraits of numerous Native Americans, including specifically a prominent Nez Perce leader from the same region. The reconstruction of Spirit Cave Man resembles an incredibly large number of Indians I have known, and, I understand, his DNA resembles that of central California tribes specifically.

The author has been misled, I fear, by a calculated partisan campaign by a small group of archaeologists. He should have been alerted by the fact that these partisans keep referring to Ainu, Pacific Islanders, Europeans, and even southeast Asians when these peoples do not resemble each other or even possess unity within and among themselves. And, of course, to compare a nine-thousand-year-old American with Polynesians, other islanders, or Ainu who may not have been in the Pacific or Japan at that time should have suggested a hint of chicanery.

Nichols neglects many sites found in North and South America with very ancient dates, presumably because they are not accepted by the dominant archaeological opinion. He does, however, make a brief reference to the opinions of Deloria on this subject. Missing is any discussion of the maritime-oriented Red Earth cultures of the Labrador to Maine region, which

produced by seventy-five hundred years ago the first toggle-headed harpoon known in the world and whose members pursued swordfish and other marine resources at sea. An archaeological film suggests that these Americans might have even spread ideas to Europe, but Nichols is silent on such topics.

We do, however, learn of the charge made by a group of archaeologists that some presumed ancestors of the Pueblo people were cannibals. The truth is that isolated cases of cannibalism have been practiced by large numbers of people, including the ill-fated Donner Party of California. Does this entitle one to discuss cannibalism as a part of white American culture? Moreover, the feces with traces of human chemical matter, which Nichols sees as indisputable evidence of cannibalism, could have been left by animals, and the many human bones with marks on them could have been produced by the ceremonial removal of flesh practiced by American groups from the Southeast to Chile. The flesh was scraped off so that the bones could be ceremonially wrapped back in their own dried skin or in some type of bundle or container.

Nichols is able to provide a generally accurate summary of pre-1500 American cultural evolution except that his task is a bit like trying to relate a history of the Industrial Revolution while ignoring Europe. That is, attempting to confine Native history to the borders of the present-day United States artificially eliminates so much that originates in Canada, Meso-America, and even South America. In discussing the earth mounds of Poverty Point, Louisiana, Nichols does mention possible Olmec influences, but, in fact, the Louisiana mounds at Watson Brake are actually older than any mounds thus far dated in Veracruz. Moreover, they form part of a common American cultural development that seems to link Louisiana with coastal Peru, as well as with Mexico.

Nichols also seems unaware of linguistic evidence, developed by Professor Johanna Nichol of Berkeley, that indicates that all American language families, except for Inuit-Aleut, seem to have evolved south of the Pleistocene glaciation across North America, probably in Meso or South America. Other links with areas to the south of the present United States are also not explored, including the early maps that indicate that the homeland of the Aztecs was located in the Utah-New Mexico-Arizona region.

The period of European contact with aboriginal Americans is covered quite extensively, especially from a political-institutional perspective. Indeed, it is often rather surprising how much detail the author has been able to include in some two hundred pages. For example, his discussion of the activism of the 1960s includes references to the NIYC, Clyde Warrior, Alcatraz, Richard Oakes, and the American Indian Chicago Conference. Later there are references to Dennis Banks, Russell Means, the Bellecourt brothers, and Leonard Peltier. On the other hand, the early traditionalist-nationalist movement of LONAI (League of North American Indians), Mad Bear Anderson, the St. Lawrence Seaway battles, the Schoharie Creek occupation, and the Iroquois' confrontations at Akwesasne and Cornwall Island are neglected.

Nichols seems to have sacrificed discussion of indigenous intellectuals (such as Rea Medicine, Devon Mihesuah, Bob Thomas, Al Ortiz), poets and writers (such as Joy Harjo, D'Arcy McNickle, Simon Ortiz, Paula Gunn Allen,

Leslie Silko, N. Scott Momaday), philosophers and theorists (such as Arthur S. Parker, Laura Cornelius Kellogg), advocates (such as Sarah Winnemucca, Francis La Flesche, Janet McCloud), musicians (such as Buffy Saint Marie, Floyd Westerman), older religious and traditionalist leaders (such as Black Elk, Chitto Harjo, Redbird Smith), and Native publications (such as *Wicazo Sa Review*, *Akwesasne Notes*, *American Indian Quarterly*, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*).

Coverage of the US war with Mexico is virtually absent along with the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which, in literal language, guaranteed the land rights and religious freedom of all Indians (as former citizens of Mexico), from California through New Mexico. Similarly, the Treaty of Mesilla, with the same provisions, brought most Tohono O'odham and Chiricahua Apache territory into the United States, but that treaty is not discussed. Greater discussion of the Southwest would have allowed Professor Nichols to explore more fully the manner in which some ex-Mexican citizens were judged to be "Indians" and thereby forced into wardship, while others, of similar indigenous ancestry, were left "unsupervised" with citizenship rights ultimately respected.

Nichols's book is similarly very tentative about mentioning African American–Native American relations. His coverage of the Civil War fails to mention that large numbers of "black Indians," full-bloods and ex-slaves, were among those who retreated to Kansas from Oklahoma and that the topic of the "freedmen" has been a potent issue ever since. Similarly, the enslavement of indigenous Americans in the South prior to the 1840s is treated very minimally, and the absorption of large numbers of Native captives into the coastal African American population is ignored. A related issue is the presence of African ancestry among most contemporary East Coast tribes, a key problem in terms of federal recognition and white perceptions of who should have a casino!

Millions of Mexicans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and other Meso and South Americans of American Indian race or ancestry now outnumber federally recognized Indians by a ratio of perhaps as much as ten to one in the United States. Some of these people are organized as Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, Garifuna, and Taino people, and even Tucson has a strong Indian Chicano group. Surely these millions, and the surge of interest in identifying peoples as indigenous, deserve brief mention.

In dealing with Indians in US history one should keep in mind that US military and diplomatic policies have made the Maya of Guatemala, the Nawats of El Salvador, the Miskitos of Nicaragua, and the Mapuches of Chile part of US history. The persecution of the Mapuches under Pinochet and the slaughter of two hundred thousand or more American Indians in Central America in the 1980s and 1990s (along with the overthrow of a pro-Indian reform government in Guatemala under Eisenhower) demand mention.

Several of the maps in this work contain errors and should be redrawn in a second edition. Professor Nichols's text is, on the whole, sympathetic to Native people and exposes many of the wrongs perpetuated by the US government and white settlers. Its weaknesses stem largely from its brevity, its overdependence on the theories of a small group of archaeologists, and its failure to grasp the larger picture of the struggles of, and survival of,

indigenous Americans everywhere in the American hemisphere and the richness of modern Native intellectual and cultural life, a richness that crosses the US-Canadian and US-Mexican borders continuously.

Jack D. Forbes

Emeritus Professor, University of California, Davis

Blanket Weaving in the Southwest. By Joe Ben Wheat. Edited by Ann Lane Hedlund. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2003. 440 pages. \$75.00 cloth.

Blanket Weaving in the Southwest represents a lifetime of study by noted anthropologist Joe Ben Wheat. This is the first time Wheat's important scholarship on Southwest textiles has been presented in its totality. The manuscript was unfinished at the time of the author's death in 1997, but, fortunately, Wheat's former student Ann Lane Hedlund completed the work necessary to bring it to print. Hedlund has done a remarkable job. *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest* will serve as the authoritative source on southwestern textiles for many years to come. Profusely illustrated with high-quality color reproductions of a wide range of weavings, the volume also includes a wealth of diagrams and illustrations, making it useful not only to those who study weavings but also to those who produce them.

Wheat developed a system for analysis of southwestern textiles that is unsurpassed. Meticulous dye analyses and carefully recorded warp and weft counts form the core of the method he employed for constructing a chronology of the development of southwestern textile arts. Through close physical analysis and careful and relentless archival research, Wheat traces the development of the three major weaving traditions of the American Southwest (Navajo, Pueblo, and Spanish American). *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest* takes us through that process of analysis, providing the information Wheat gathered to construct his argument.

Establishing an accurate system of dating pieces such as Wheat developed allows us to situate artworks more fully within a matrix of social and cultural forces and demonstrates how such items of material culture can lead to a greater understanding of the complex web of influences that has shaped the historical development of the American Southwest and its Native and non-Native peoples. This understanding may, in turn, lead to greater insights into what is necessary to the perpetuation of important traditional practices. The weaving traditions of the Southwest are not simply arcane arts; they are vital contemporary practices that impact the lives of many people and work to perpetuate important cultural traditions necessary to the cohesion of still flourishing cultures. Study of the textile arts of these groups gives us a greater understanding of the complex transcultural context of their production and use. *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest* makes an enormous contribution to this understanding.

Hedlund's preface and introduction, as well as her footnotes and other editorial enhancements, do much to fill out the story Wheat constructed. She