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REVIEWS

Aristocratic Encounters: European Travelers and North American Indians. By Harry Liebersohn. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 192 pages. $54.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Aristocratic Encounters, according to its jacket copy, "Relates how an aristocratic discourse on American Indians took shape in French and German writing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Titled and educated French and German visitors to North America, with the background of the French Revolution in mind, developed a new belief in their affinity with the warrior elites of Indian societies, whom they viewed as fellow aristocrats." Further, the jacket announces that this book "Opens up a Romantic vision of aristocrats from two worlds struggling to defend their code of valor and honor in an age of democratic politics."

Categorizing "aristocracy" and "democracy" separately can be tricky. Aristocracy and democracy are not mutually exclusive, as Harry Liebersohn observes when he notes the "consolidation of noble and nonnoble elites [in France] leading up to [the revolution of] 1789" (p. 17). While Alexis de Tocqueville was undeniably an aristocrat, he is quoted most often on the character of democracy. Thomas Jefferson, likewise, was another denizen of the upper class who is best remembered for his contributions to the theory and practice of representative government.

Europeans (and European-Americans) saw many things when they looked at Native Americans and their societies. Liebersohn posits a case for one rather specialized form of intellectual discourse in France and Germany in which Europeans generally instructed and amused each other with their own, often erroneous, assumptions about American Indians. The book's jacket copy, for example, assumes that "Indian societies" (taken generically) had "warrior elites." That is a questionable assumption given the general absence of European-style class distinctions in most (but not all) Native American cultures. While warriors could earn a sense of esteem among their peers, they usually had no command-and-control role as was typical of European military elites.

Liebersohn also considers the French novelist Chateaubriand, notably the role of American Indians in his novellas *Atala* and *Rene*. Voltaire, Raynal, Rousseau, Crevecoeur, and others are also examined by Liebersohn, along

with a number of German writers of travel narratives, including the aristocrat Maximilian, Prince of Wied, and Karl Bodmer, the renowned artist.

Liebersohn brings Alexis de Tocqueville into his ambit as the author of *Democracy in America* in which he characterises American Indians (again, generically) as thinking that "hunting and war are the only cares worthy of a man" (p. 1). Liebersohn quotes Tocqueville as having written, "'The Indian in the miserable depths of his forests cherishes the same ideas and opinions as the medieval noble in his castle, and needs only to become a conqueror to complete the resemblance. How odd it is that the ancient prejudices of Europe should reappear, not among the European population along the coast, but in the forests of the New World'" (p. 1). When he restricts himself to reporting the scene before him (see his description of the 1830s removals, for example) Tocqueville is a reliable source. His own generalizations about what Native Americans were thinking, however, are riddled with Eurocentric assumptions, as the above example illustrates.

Liebersohn does a good job as a journeyman historian of providing the reader with incisive descriptions of assumptions from other times and places without subscribing to them. In so doing, Liebersohn asks some crucial questions of aristocratic European visitors to America during the period he examines: "How and what do they 'see'? Travelers' perceptions can never be neutral; they are formed by their home culture" (p. 7).

Aristocratic Encounters is wonderfully written and, surprisingly, is often as much about democracy as aristocracy. It often describes the nuances of Europeans elites' reactions on visiting America to "a world without seat assignments or servants" (p. 70). Lieberman illustrates the role of Iroquoian democracy in the French Revolution by quoting Jacques Grasset de Saint-Sauveur's 1784 work, in French, on costumes from around the world. The book included a chapter on the Iroquois that discoursed not only on costume, but also on government. "The form of their government has a simplicity and at the same time a wisdom that our profound legislators have not yet been able to achieve in their sophisticated codes. . . . Is it necessary then to go to the Iroquois to find a model of legislation?" (p. 13) In this context, Liebersohn sagely notes that, "Whether Europeans discovered Iroquois to be aristocratic or democratic depended on the observer's perspective" (p. 20).

Tocqueville, according to Liebersohn, "asks France to turn to America for political lessons. Without expecting slavish imitation, he seeks to show how spirituality and freedom can flourish on democratic grounds" (p. 97). Tocqueville, according to Liebersohn, alternates "between confidence and alarm" as he "contemplates the fate of freedom in the modern era" (p. 98). Liebersohn very deftly describes the dynamic tension in the thoughts of Tocqueville, who admired freedom in theory but often recoiled from the practical implications of class equity: "He could admire its energy but be put off by its rudeness, praise the American work ethic but recoil from the national obsession with money, and admire the courage of the pioneers but dislike their humorlessness" (p. 96).

Bear in mind that this is not reality as most Native Americans experienced it, any more than *The Last of the Mohicans* is credible Native American history. Fantasy, indeed, often sells better than facts. Sometimes even elite observers had trouble

telling the difference. Liebersohn notes (on page 75) that James Fenimore Cooper's book was wildly popular in France, where it was translated the same year (1826) that it saw print in America. Cooper soon became a celebrity in France.

Also bear in mind that Liebersohn surveys only a portion of European reactions to images of Native America. Other European authors, left unexamined by Liebersohn, used their images of "the Indian" with some rather distinctly anti-aristocratic ends in mind. Frederich Engels, for example, found the Iroquois (as he knew them through the writings of L. H. Morgan) to be exemplars of a classless, democratic, and communistic society. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson fashioned distinctly democratic tendencies into their images of American Indians. What Liebersohn does, however, he does very well.

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Captured in the Middle: Tradition and Experience in Contemporary Native American Writing. By Sidner Larson. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. 183 pages. $27.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

In *Captured in the Middle*, Sidner Larson insists that it is imagination and not argument that will rescue American Indian studies and modern lives. Forged from his own Gros Ventre heritage and a biculturalism that he finds "twice as rewarding," Larson's is a capacious, comparatist, and ameliorative imagination (p. 4). His project—which is at once a scholarly search for broadly shared truths and "a straining after self-knowledge" (p. 3)—is as gracious and conciliatory as it is realistic. Larson steadfastly seeks connections and movements away from disabling divisiveness, both between Native American and mainstream societies, and amongst Native Americans themselves. In his attempt to provide "a means by which similarities among people can be emphasized, rather than the usual tendency to reinforce difference" (p. 103), Larson calls upon Western and American Indian thinkers and concepts alike to buttress his critical project, whether it's the southwestern Pueblo peoples' strategy for dealing with evil or John Keats' "negative capability."

The book's most important observations and prescriptions relate to what the author calls "post-apocalypse theory." American Indians, Larson argues, have already experienced the worst event that can befall a people, a condition that consequently—and crucially—requires not only honestly acknowledging the scope of what has occurred, but "the absolute necessity of balancing the past and the present with the future" (p. 134). Tied to the need for temporal unification, a notion to which the book returns frequently, are appeals for new elaborations of the "politics of memory," and interventions in today's "authenticity debates," which continue to show discouraging stamina. Larson sharply indicts the legal constructs whereby the US government has sought to define Indians, but also points toward the damaging "internal boundaries" created by American Indians themselves, and sees both processes as having