

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America. By Henry F. Dobyns.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/35w2f1ns>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 9(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Snipp, C. Matthew

**Publication Date**

1985-03-01

**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/>

to take its place as a true work of art? It may be true that Seaweed laid out almost everything with a compass or a straight edge, it is still the gut feelings which he brought to his art that made it so acceptable to his own people and still excites us today.

Despite the above reservation, *Smoky-Top: The Art and Times of Willie Seaweed*, is a good descriptive catalogue with many photographs and a valuable contribution to our understanding of nineteenth and twentieth century Kwakwaka'wakw art.

Martine Reid

University of British Columbia

**Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America.** By Henry F. Dobyns. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press (in cooperation with the Newberry Library Center for the History of the American Indian), 1983. 369 pp. \$29.95 Cloth. \$14.95 Paper.

Throughout most of this century, anthropologists have kept an abiding interest in the size of the pre-Columbian Indian population. In 1910, James Mooney published the first authoritative estimate in a brief article appearing in a Bureau of Ethnology Bulletin. Mooney reckoned that the North American Indian population numbered about 1,150,000 during the 16th century. After Mooney's death in 1921, a colleague at the Smithsonian reviewed Mooney's unpublished notes and discovered that he had completed population estimates for all major North American tribal groups. John Swanton published these estimates in 1928 (*Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collection*, 80:1-40) and they stood unchallenged until 1939 (*University of California Publications*, 38:1-242) when Alfred Kroeber revised them slightly to obtain a lower figure of 1,000,880. Although other estimates were published, the Mooney-Kroeber estimate of the 16th century Indian population dominated the literature for decades and still appears in print.

Henry Dobyns successfully challenged the Mooney-Kroeber estimate in 1966, and fired a controversy that continues to be debated. In an article published in *Current Anthropology* (395-416), Dobyns criticized the Mooney-Kroeber estimates for being overly conservative. Applying recently developed techniques to historic and archaeological data, Dobyns estimates that 9.8 million per-

sons lived in North America circa 1492. Since its publication, Dobyns' work has attracted a flurry of critical reaction. Among others, Harold Driver (*Indians of North America*, 1969:64), Russell Thornton and Joan Marsh-Thornton (*American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 1981 55:47-53), and Thornton ("As Snow Before the Summer Sun," 1985), fault Dobyns' work with methodological shortcomings which result in extraordinarily high estimates. With these controversies in the background, Dobyns readily admits in the introduction of his new book, *Their Number Become Thinned* (p. 4) that his newest contribution is likely to generate further debates.

*Their Number Become Thinned* is almost certain to fulfill Dobyns' prophecy. His most recent work can be seen, in part, as a response to earlier criticism that he overestimated the North American pre-Columbian population. This book consists of seven essays, in which a vast array of detailed data are presented about the epidemiology, subsistence patterns, and demography of American Indians shortly before and after the arrival of Columbus. With these data, Dobyns develops several intriguing themes about the historical demography of American Indians, the epidemiological impact of European contacts, and the effects of depopulation on the culture and social organization of the native population.

In the first and second essays, Dobyns assembles data on epidemic histories to show the deadly effects of European borne diseases such as smallpox, diphtheria, and cholera. Among the many diseases brought to the New World, smallpox was the most lethal. The first major pandemic of this disease lasted from 1520 to 1524, spreading from Chile through the area that is now the United States. Dobyns argues that during these four years, smallpox killed millions and perhaps no more than a quarter of the original population survived. Assuming that large populations sustain complex social structures while small populations do not, Dobyns argues that in the wake of massive population losses, native cultures and social organization were profoundly disrupted; as native societies adapted by forming simpler communities and more nomadic lifestyles.

In the remaining essays, Dobyns focuses on the native population of what is now Florida as a case study of pre and post contact population dynamics, especially among the Timucuan speaking people. The data presented in these essays run the

gamut from food sources, to population estimates, to epidemic histories; including such arcane details as "Sea Turtle Landings in Florida" which Dobyns suggests was a possible source of protein in native diets. Laden with this information, Dobyns uses it to defend his estimate that nearly 700,000 Timucuans inhabited the Florida area in the early 1500s, as part of the 18 million he believes inhabited pre-Columbian North America. As one of the highest population estimates yet published, Dobyns' 18 million figure is almost certain to be controversial.

In his concluding essay, Dobyns examines the likely impact of depopulation on the culture and social organization of North American Indians. Sketching the aftermath of depopulation, he argues that as disease decimated their numbers, once stationary populations responded by migrating to environments with richer resources, for which there was no longer fierce competition. Scattered survivors of epidemics joined other settlements, or helped form new villages. This process, settlement amalgamation, diminished tribal/ethnic distinctions from earlier times, diluted linguistic diversity, and produced new cultural practices. Smaller, more isolated settlement patterns resulted in simpler native societies with less specialized economies.

This work raises a number of startling implications. If Dobyns' suppositions are correct, his estimates testify to a demographic catastrophe of historically tragic proportions. In less than 400 years, American Indians declined by millions and reached the edge of extinction by 1890, numbering 228,000 (Thornton and Marsh-Thornton, 1981). Dobyns aims his most trenchant criticisms at the ethnographic literature which presumably documents traditional cultural practices handed down from antiquity and pre-dating contact with Europeans. He discounts this literature because, in his view, the social and cultural transformations wrought by massive population losses extinguished truly traditional, pre-Columbian cultures within a few decades, long before the arrival of ethnographers such as Paul Radin. In Dobyns' words, this brand of "anthropological literature . . . may be termed 'divorced from reality' . . . ethnographies written in the ethnographic present are like paintings of extinct birds based on hearsay and the artist's imagination. The methods and techniques traditionally employed by ethnographers are not capable of recovering from a small handful of survivors an accurate portrait of societies that have not functioned for decades—and in

many instances centuries—before the arrival of an ethnographer” (p. 26). Dobyns’ ideas about the impact of depopulation imply a sweeping rejection of an expansive and long standing tradition in anthropology.

There are, however, a number of reasons why Dobyns’ claims will not be readily accepted. To obtain his population estimates, Dobyns’ is forced to make many assumptions, several of which are questionable. First, Dobyns claims that prior to the arrival of Europeans, “Native Americans lived in a relatively disease free environment” which allowed them to prosper “in almost a paradise of well-being” (pp. 34–35). Given the relative absence of disease, Dobyns next assumes that native populations procreated to the limits of their environment. That is, native populations were as large as there were food and water to sustain them.

Both of these assumptions are criticized for the credibility of Dobyns’ reasoning and both are vulnerable to contradiction by empirical evidence. Although unafflicted by European pathogens such as smallpox, there is ample evidence challenging the assertion that New World peoples lived in a virtual “paradise.” In a recent study, Thornton (1985) reviews this evidence and notes that the life spans of pre-Columbian populations ranged between 20 and 40 years, and that these populations suffered dental disease, parasites, bacterial infections, and numerous other afflictions. Thornton (1985) also criticizes Dobyns’ second assumption that populations increase to the level of resources available to sustain them. This patently Malthusian assumption is relevant to plant and animal populations but applied to humans, it disregards behavior such as marriage customs, fertility controls, and warfare which impose limits on population sizes below extant environmental resource levels.

In view of these claims and counter-claims, the debate between Dobyns and his critics is certain to continue well into the future. For this reason, persons interested in American Indian historical demography should familiarize themselves with this book. Except for the discussions of food resources (which I found dry and painfully detailed), this book is highly readable and thought provoking. I strongly recommend it as an important contribution to a fascinating subject.

*C. Matthew Snipp*  
University of Maryland, College Park