

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Cultures in Contact: The European Impact on Native Cultural Institutions in Eastern North America, A.D. 1000-1800. Edited by William W. Fitzhugh.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3jk57280>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 10(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

White, Richard

Publication Date

1986

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/>

Cultures in Contact: The European Impact on Native Cultural Institutions in Eastern North America, A.D. 1000–1800. Edited by William W. Fitzhugh. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985. 318 pp. \$29.95 Cloth.

This collection of essays is the result of a series of papers sponsored by the Anthropological Society of Washington during 1981 and 1982. Prompted by recent advances in archaeological research on Inuit and Indian peoples in eastern North America between 1500 and 1750, it represents an attempt to explore the impact of European contact upon the native peoples of the East Coast of North America. According to William Fitzhugh, who both edited and contributed to this volume, these essays together comprise "a wide panorama of acculturation case studies" during the early contact period (2). Their aim is to find structural changes in the organization of Native American and Inuit groups and to relate these changes to various contact and acculturation phenomena.

Historical archaeology inspired this collection, but as Fitzhugh admits, the integration of historical archaeology and ethnohistory does not actually occur in all of the essays included in this book. The most successful attempts to combine recent advances in historical archaeology and the kind of cultural analysis practiced by ethnohistorians take place in the first two sections of *Cultures in Contact*. In three essays that cover the region from Newfoundland to Greenland, Fitzhugh, Susan Kaplan and Hans Gulløv analyze the impact of contact with the Norse, French, English, Basques, and Dutch on Inuit society. A second set of essays by Paul Robinson, Marc Kelley, and Patricia Rubertone, Peter Thomas, and William Engelbrecht explores the social and cultural ramifications of contact for New England and Iroquoia.

The three essays on the Arctic are superb introductions to a region and a time most ethnohistorians know little of, but, beyond this, they indicate both the limits and possibilities of integrating historical archaeology into ethnohistory. As impressive as they are, they remain much surer in their examinations of economic and material change than in their discussions of cultural change. In his own essay Fitzhugh admits that the Norse materials do not permit "any substantial understanding of the impact of these contacts on native cultures" (31). And in evaluating later contacts, he is forced to retreat into the kind of sub-

junctive constructions that usually herald the shakiest of hypothesis. He, for example, guesses at what qualities "would have been important personal characteristics" (37) for Inuit leaders and then tries to move from this to changes in leadership patterns. Cohen stays on more solid ground. She finds firm archaeological evidence of changes in Inuit settlement patterns in the seventeenth century, and makes an imaginative attempt to understand what changes in social organization and leadership patterns these may have reflected. Hans Gullov's article is perhaps the most successful of any in the book in integrating historical archaeology into ethnohistory. His examination of changes in Inuit society and exchange patterns in West Greenland following the introduction of commercial whaling is a superb piece of ethnohistory.

The essays on the Northeast also attempt to show how historical archaeology can illuminate ethnohistorical questions. They, however, concentrate on narrower time frames and on specific problems that are familiar to most ethnohistorians: the impact of disease, the retention of pre-Columbian cultural traits, and changes in social organization following European contact. These essays are worth reading not only for their specific methodologies, but also for their substantive contributions. William Engelbrecht's article on the Iroquois, for example, effectively uses ceramic analysis and changing settlement patterns to argue, by inference, for the prehistoric origins of the Iroquois confederacy. Similarly, the article by Robinson, Kelley, and Rubertone, is doubly notable. It represents research based on the excavation of a village cemetery done in consultation with modern Narragansetts (in and of itself a significant development), and it also provides evidence for the early and quite destructive impact of tuberculosis on these people.

The most wide-ranging and stimulating of the essays in this section is by Peter Thomas who is one of the best, if hardly one of the most prolific, of ethnohistorians writing today. Thomas' work underpinned a good deal of the analysis in William Cronon's excellent *Changes in the Land*, and the essay he contributes here once again manages to build upon careful work in specific village communities to detect patterns of cultural change which have far ranging implications. Thomas' emphasis on exchange between Europeans and New England Algonquians as a socio-cultural system, his stress on factionalism and fragmentation are

not new, but they are developed herein with attention to both ethnohistorical and archaeological detail and to larger issues that few other scholars match.

As this collection shifts south from New England, the influence of data derived from historical archaeology becomes less and less apparent in the analysis. The essays on the Powhatan confederacy, particularly the one by Frederick Fausz, are interesting analysis of contact, but they are based on well known and long familiar sources. Likewise, Katerine Deegan's comparison of Spanish contact in Florida and Hispanola is instructive, but there are few archaeological sources available to her.

Taken as a whole, these essays represent a promising and potentially fruitful collaborative trend that is long overdue. Historians and archaeologists have tended to appreciate each others work the way that Vandals appreciated Romans: they are happy to loot each other's research for whatever appears useful to them. This collection, like the excellent work currently being done in Great Lakes Archaeology, indicates that a more productive collaboration based on common questions may be possible.

But significant barriers remain in the path of such collaboration, and they tend to be most apparent in Fitzhugh's attempt, through his commentaries, to create an interpretative scheme for understanding contact in North America. The first barrier is the understandably materialist orientation of archaeology that few historians share. In seeking to find a framework for interpreting the varieties of Native American cultures and the disparities in their contact experience, for example, Fitzhugh turns to a rather crude environmentalism. More complex environments supposedly translate into higher levels of population and thus higher levels of cultural complexity. In fact environment does not translate easily into culture. Quite similar and even identical environments all over North America managed to contain cultures of varying complexity.

The second barrier is the concept of acculturation itself. As long as a study is confined to material artifact, the idea of acculturation can be handled with some precision. When two discrete social units come into contact, a scholar can examine how the technology or settlement patterns of one or both changed over time. But acculturation as an anthropological concept has fallen on hard times. Acculturation proposes to study how two socio-cultural systems thrown into close and relatively sudden contact

adjust. Unfortunately, because most studies took place in a colonial context, the real subject matter became how the subordinate group adjusted by adopting aspects of a dominant group's culture. Even when acculturationists did concentrate on bilateral change, they insisted on a recognition of European dominance in defining the context of change. Such insistence is understandable in a fully developed colonial situation, but in a contact situation, dominance has not necessarily been established. There is a chance for cultural interaction of a sort that goes beyond acculturation as it has usually been described in the anthropological literature. The critical issue here is not so much what immediately happens within the individual cultures in contact, but rather the ways in which people within both of them begin to construct from whatever cultural materials are at hand a new cultural world specifically designed to cover the exigencies of contact. In such a middle ground neither culture prevails. Signs of this process appear in Peter Thomas' essay and in a few of the others, but the idea of acculturation is too narrow and discredited to hold them.

Richard White
University of Utah

The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America. Edited by Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. 266 pp. \$22.50 Cloth.

In 1981 at the D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian housed in Chicago's Newberry Library a group of scholars from history and the social sciences met to share their research and contemplation about the Métis of North America. Editors Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer Brown selected nine papers, added one essay each (published earlier in AICRJ), collaborated on an introduction, invited a foreword and afterword, and added one additional previously published article to illuminate the ethnogenesis of the Métis, the mixed blood offspring of Native Americans and Euro-Americans who forged a social, cultural, and political awareness in Canada and the northern United States.

Peterson and Brown make a convincing case for the importance