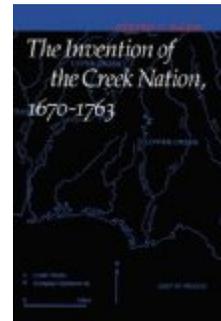


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Steven C. Hahn. *The Invention of the Creek Nation, 1670-1763*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. xii + 340 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-2414-8.

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Mapping a New Nation

In their short story, “On Exactitude in Science,” Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares recounted how the cartographers of a forgotten empire had, in their quest for precision, compiled a map of the empire as large as the empire itself. Later generations failed to appreciate the immense document and abandoned it to the elements so that only scattered fragments could be found in distant deserts, providing shelter for wild animals and beggars. If such a map ever existed for the lives of Creeks between 1670 and 1763, it has long since been lost. Lucky for us that Steven Hahn has worked as diligently as he has to assemble many of the pieces that remain. His thorough reconstruction of Creek history during what he calls the “Imperial Era” shows how Creeks shaped the rivalries among the Spanish, French, and British contenders for the region. Non-specialists will be daunted by the abundant detail, but Hahn is providing crucial information about one of the region’s most influential and least understood colonial peoples.

This is a work that seeks to explain Creek political organization and policy. Hahn is writing what he calls “an ethnopolitical history” (p. 4), a study that combines the political historian’s interest in particular events and political motivation with the ethnohistorian’s attention to the cultural norms that influence political actors, and he brings this perspective to bear on the Creeks who appear in English, Spanish, and, to a lesser extent, French colonial documents. As Hahn charts his way through these documents, readers should plan on covering a lot of new ground.

He begins by describing how the descendants of the centralized chiefdoms were forced by European diseases and trade to abandon powerful leaders for the “balance and harmony of the group” (p. 20). This effort to cultivate collective balance helped a number of still powerful communities in western Georgia and central Alabama develop new alliances with the English of South Carolina in the late 1600s, and Carolina’s new allies profited from their friendship by raiding Spanish missions to the south, destroying communities and taking thousands of slaves for sale in Charles Town. The new economic relationship certainly tied Creek and Carolinian societies closer together by the early 1700s, but I am not as certain as Hahn that these Indian allies became “dependent” on English traders. Some Indians did find themselves trapped in debt, and many feared that English traders would liquidate these debts by enslaving their former partners. Nonetheless, I do not think that this cycle of debt was a product of dependence, and I am more persuaded by William Ramsey’s recent argument that the rising tensions prior to the Yamasee War of 1715-18 were less about dependency and debt than diplomacy.[1]

Despite such a disagreement regarding the war’s causes, both Ramsey and Hahn agree that the regional devastations of the Yamasee War mask complex local dynamics and profound diplomatic developments. Hahn demonstrates the importance of focusing on the local and diplomatic for Creek history in particular and Southeastern history more generally. By building alliances with all three powers, Creeks hoped to continue trading with the British while using the French and Spanish to blunt

any potential British ambitions for Creek land. Brims, the principal chief of Coweta, used his regional prestige and broad kin ties to coordinate what Hahn calls the “Coweta Resolution” of March 1718. With this new policy, Creek leaders from the Chattahoochee and lower Tallapoosa Valleys articulated a new policy of neutrality with all three colonial powers.

Despite his influence in crafting the new policy, Brims could not enforce it. During the following decade, he confronted a series of challenges to his influence as leaders from a variety of nearby towns proved far more willing than he to court close ties with individual colonies. After Creeks ceded parts of the coast to the new colony of Georgia in 1733, Creeks not only had to balance the requests for assistance from a new ally and neighbor, but they also faced new disputes over land. A number of historians have recounted the disagreements of the 1740s and 1750s as a more personal struggle between the Creek woman Coosaponakeesa (also known as Mary Bosomworth) and Georgia’s Trustees, but Hahn examines the ways that Creek leaders like Coosaponakeesa’s brother Malatchi forged a legalistic entity known as the Creek Nation. As self-proclaimed head of this nation, Malatchi asserted title to the debated lands, even as he also asserted the existence of a new people to defend those claims. Hahn’s focus on Malatchi offers a rare biography of an eighteenth-century Creek leader, one that highlights the unstable foundations of personal influence and a nascent national identity.

This work is fundamentally about that delicate balance between personal and collective identities and interests, but Hahn is also addressing two questions that have long divided students of colonial Creek society and history. The first is the nature and origins of Creek “neutrality” in their relations with their three European colonial neighbors. Historians have long been divided over whether this refusal to favor any empire was the product of a conscious policy or the accidental result of irreconcilable factional disagreements. Hahn’s history of the “Coweta Resolution” makes an excellent case for the former camp. He addresses the second question regarding the relevance of a Creek “confederacy” less directly. Rather than confront the historiographic thicket regarding how disparate and often fiercely independent towns managed to respond collectively to colonial challenges, Hahn instead examines how leaders like Brims and Malatchi invented a “nation,” a unitary entity that could respond collectively to Europeans’ imperial agendas, especially regarding land.

But in this synthesis of Creek history, of faction and unity, of the personal and the collective, persistent fissures remain. As he assembles this new map, his efforts to link the particular and the general are often persuasive and always diligent, but some of this new cartography does not seem to fit the terrain. The Coweta Resolution owes much of its analytic power, for instance, to a careful focus on the actions of Coweta, one of the best-documented Creek towns during the imperial era, but the town’s political and documentary prominence should not obscure the fact that only a few towns outside of Coweta’s river valley participated in the 1718 meeting. To what extent did other towns acknowledge this policy, and how much did the Coweta meeting inspire their thinking?

Hahn himself has more recently acknowledged the dangers of his “Coweta-centrism,” even as he has also defended the importance of the Coweta Resolution that ended the Yamasee War.[2] I think he has good reason to do both. He has shown effectively how Creeks used the Yamasee War to develop a new collective effort to balance European powers, and this collective effort did foster a new unity among disparate towns. I doubt, however, that it was an idea articulated by one individual or crafted at one meeting. Indeed, Creeks shared with many eighteenth-century Indians a desire to balance competing imperial interests.[3] Hahn has pointed out some important ways to understand the impact of the Yamasee War and one resolution of 1718, but the connections among the war, that resolution, and wider developments are not clear.

My second criticism is perhaps more a reflection of my interests than Hahn’s, but I think his focus on Creek leaders and diplomacy occasions a persistent problem. The “Creek Nation” is a political invention that postdates 1730, but “Creeks” inhabit the book as early as 1705, when a number of southeastern leaders sign “the first Anglo-Creek treaty” (p. 65). Hahn sees this brief act of unity as part of a larger process of coalescence, but this process remains largely tacit throughout the book. He is clearest about it in his closing chapter, which he devotes to the cultural connections that he believes explain “the ‘indigenous origins’ of Creek nationhood” (p. 232). But these come late in the story, more a consequence than a cause of the process he has described. Hahn’s ethno-political focus allows him to chart new territory in this work, but the traditional ethnohistorian in me often wondered how the cultural fit with the political.

But I did not write this book, and I am grateful that

Hahn has. It is thanks to his work that we can now understand more clearly how political interests and not just cultural congruencies made the Creeks. And he has shown us more than this. Hahn is charting much forgotten terrain in this impressive history, terrain that is crucial to historians' broader understanding of the Southeast before 1800. As with any map, the work has holes, but as with any good map, it offers abundant points of departure for filling them in.

Notes

[1]. William L. Ramsey, " 'Something Cloudy in Their

Looks': The Origins of the Yamasee War Reconsidered," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (2003): 44-75.

[2]. Steven Hahn, Roundtable presentation, "Becoming a Nation in Our America: New Directions in Early Creek Indian Historiography," Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., April 21, 2006.

[3]. Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 164-170.

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