



Wayne E. Lee, ed. *Empires and Indigenes: Intercultural Alliance, Imperial Expansion, and Warfare in the Early Modern World*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. 320 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-5308-8; \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-5311-8.

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## Indigenes Affecting Empires

This volume offers a fertile array of essays exploring the mechanisms and implications of imperial projections of power in the early modern world. Six of the nine contributions relate directly to the Atlantic context, but each in its own way will benefit all historians of early modernity. Atlantic specialists will gain crucial comparative insight into two key phenomena of relevance to their interests, one relatively predictable, the other much less so. First, the significance of “ocean lift capacity,” or the ability to move troops and weapons safely within and between colonies and the metropole, for projecting power abroad receives careful examination in essays by Wayne Lee on North America, Douglas Peers on British India, and Marjoleine Kars on Dutch Berbice (p. 94). Second, and of concern to all authors in the volume, is the degree to which the historical trajectories of overseas empires depended on local indigenous contexts. No recent study does more than this important collection to reexamine the multifaceted inputs of indigenous populations as military allies, trading partners, opponents, and collaborators into the more familiar story of early modern Atlantic/global expansion.

Lee opens the volume with an introductory essay that gently takes aim at the Jared Diamond school of inevitable European conquests abroad by addressing the peculiarities and historiographical foibles attending its most frequent example: the so-called Spanish conquest of the Americas. Arguing that local peoples “proved to be essential determinants of imperial success or failure” around the world during an era in which organic energy (winds, tides, falling water, draft animals, sunlight, and derivatives of agricultural and pastoral products) governed human actions, Lee points out the extensive reliance on indigenous allies by Spanish conquistadors (p. 1). He encourages readers to reject assertions of the paradigmatic nature of the “Spanish story”

of small numbers of Europeans achieving seemingly fantastic conquests of much larger Native populations and making off with a vast amount of mineral wealth in the process (p. 3). Instead, Lee proposes a radical alternative understanding, contending that the Spanish New World Empire, as well as the trading-post networks of other early modern European oceanic empires, may be better understood as “merely a punctuated series of strategic locations from which influence inland was carried by indigenous hands” (p. 8). For Lee, understanding the problems faced by progenitors of empire in unfamiliar spaces, such as controlling territory (or claims to it), adjusting to local military conditions, and accommodating indigenous allies politically, constitutes a more valid approach to Atlantic history than proceeding “backward” with explanations grounded in known outcomes, as a later essay puts it (p. 92). Factoring in the question of change over time, Lee wants historians to be more attentive to thinking about *how long such circumstances obtained* in particular colonial contexts. In this deceptively simple proposal, we find a significant methodological technique for complicating and challenging simplistic, triumphalist narratives of the eventual domination of the Atlantic World by peoples of European descent.

In addition to Lee’s introductory essay, Peers’s compelling study of the question of indigenous aid to imperial expansion in British India should be required reading for all scholars of the early modern world. In concise yet detailed prose, Peers offers a splendid primer on the reading of imperial sources, unpacking several of the key strategies sustaining uncomplicated narratives of European success over indigenous populations—how *did* European authors occasionally fool themselves into particular, convenient beliefs about indigenous populations? In answering that question, Peers finds that dissenting voices to the standard, predictable narratives of

inevitable European victories over Native populations are most often found among the writings of individuals closest to the action. Offering the hardest-hitting criticism of the Eurocentrism underlying arguments about the military revolution of the early modern period, Peers makes clear, with his demonstration of how “empire” worked in colonial India, that cross-cultural comparisons based on technology or institutions are not nearly as neutral as often believed.

Peers’s conclusions about the extent of indigenous agency vis-à-vis that of would-be imperialists are not universally echoed by other contributors to the volume. Jenny Pulsipher’s solid examination of indigenous alliances in colonial eastern North America explores an unfamiliar case study (that of the Wabanakis of modern Maine and Nova Scotia) and demonstrates that the failure of Europeans to conform to Native diplomatic expectations could undermine a delicate balance of cross-cultural relations when two different European colonial entities were vying for the affiliation of a particular group. However, Pulsipher reaches a somewhat more familiar conclusion at the end of her essay, dating the beginning of the end of indigenous agency in the Northeast to the departure of the French as potential allies for Native people to 1763. Lee’s fascinating and largely convincing exploration of the question of whether or not Native Americans experienced a military revolution akin to that ostensibly experienced in early modern Europe, as a result of European-introduced military technology, represents one of the most sophisticated assessments to date of the incorporation of firearms in indigenous North Americans’ military cultures. The degree of confidence Lee assigns to the combination of *trace italienne* fortifications and cannon, backed by transatlantic support as an “ultimate guarantee of [settler] security and persistence in North America” seems unassailable in retrospect, but might diminish somewhat the capacity Native people possessed to ignore or evade such installations, even after 1763 (p. 61). Additionally, Lee’s claims about the negative impact of European artillery on nucleated, wooden-palisaded Native settlements overlook some of the military advantages conferred by a dispersed settlement pattern that eighteenth-century colonial authorities remarked on with some frequency. Lee ultimately concludes that postcolonial demographic history (indigenous decline and settler expansion) proved more decisive than any military revolution experienced by North America’s Native peoples. Mark Meuwese’s important challenge to Neil Whitehead’s classic 1990 study of “ethnic soldiering” contends that the political

autonomy of the Tupis of modern northeastern Brazil *increased* as military allies of the Dutch, but ultimately rendered them vulnerable to Portuguese retribution after the Dutch abandoned Brazil (p. 215). Meuwese’s observation that “European colonizers could always withdraw from overseas adventures,” with comparably fewer consequences than those indigenous peoples “caught up in” confronting Europeans, meshes well with Lee’s earlier point about the role of desperation in the now-atypical Spanish context (pp. 215, 5). But his interpretive stance might unintentionally inhibit examination of the viability of flight or spatial reorganization strategies employed by indigenous peoples in other contexts. Finally, Kars’s argument for the “ethnic shouldering” of imperial burdens by allied Amerindians in the suppression of a prolonged slave rebellion in Dutch colonial Berbice goes the furthest of any of the contributions toward explaining the logic of why indigenous peoples allied with colonizers (p. 208). Kars demonstrates the significance of Amerindians’ concerns in this context about maintaining access to Dutch-supplied firearms, as well as their opposition to the development of “maroon” communities of escaped slaves in contexts of scarce natural and demographic resources (particularly the unwelcome competition such communities presented for indigenous women in the wake of post-contact population decline).

Essays by David Jones on Muscovite “nation-building” on the Pontic Steppe prior to 1800; Virginia Aksan on the role of foreign-born, captive Janissaries in the projection of Ottoman power; and John Thornton on the debatable notion of a Portuguese conquest of Angola round out the volume and provide fruitful points of comparison for those better versed in the western theaters of the Atlantic World (p. 119). Detailed and helpful orienting maps enhance each essay and add to its user-friendliness. In the final analysis, Lee’s edited collection represents a critical and provocative intervention in early modern historiography and is deserving of a wide readership, not only for specialists of that era, but also for those concerned with current military and strategic contexts. As Lee pointedly notes, twenty-first-century Western military commanders, even if not engaged in overt empire building, increasingly find themselves in situations where they must engage local indigenous hierarchies and networks in strategic locations with security calculations in mind. If the histories in this volume tell us anything, successful negotiation of these conditions will depend on meeting the expectations of the indigenous peoples on the ground.

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