



**George Edward Milne.** *Natchez Country: Indians, Colonists, and the Landscapes of Race in French Louisiana.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015. 313 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8203-4750-9.

**Reviewed by** F. Evan Nooe (University of North Carolina-Charlotte)

**Published on** H-Florida (March, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Jeanine A. Clark Bremer (Northern Illinois University)

The Natchez occupy a significant place, both chronologically and physically, for anyone trying to understand the changes taking place across the colonial South. Many look to the Natchez specifically in attempts to understand the Indigenous transformations occurring in the Lower Mississippi Valley and the early colonial South. Examining and understanding the Natchez potentially provides scholars a link in understanding the social and political organization of late-era pre-contact Mississippian civilizations in southeastern North America. The Natchez, or at least their ancestors, appear in the historical record as early as Spaniard Hernando de Soto's mid-sixteenth-century expedition. By the last quarter of the seventeenth century, French exploration and subsequent colonization of the Louisiana Colony resulted in sustained Natchez-French contact. In part, the allure of potentially bridging the historical gap between de Soto and La Salle, the French explorer, has attracted scholars to the Natchez. While scholarly interest has produced numerous essays, articles, and chapters, we have few dedicated monographs.

George Edward Milne's work is a welcome addition to the limited number of books on the Natchez. Upon first look, Milne's *Natchez Country* seems to tell an oft-repeated story in terms of colonial-era European-Indigenous interactions. The re-

lationship between the Natchez and French follows a familiar narrative seen across colonial North America that is frequently couched in a framework progressing through periods of contact, cooperation, dispossession, and destruction. Milne's work even builds to a desperate assault against a European fort in colonial Louisiana where the Natchez win a significant battle only to end up being hunted down and destroyed by uncompromising colonials and their Indigenous allies. By the early 1730s, the Natchez "ceased to function as an autonomous polity," Milne concludes (p. 204). As recognizable as this progression may appear, Milne's examination of the developments between the Natchez, French, and African slaves prove much more complex and valuable than just an account of a familiar colonial tale of contact and conquest.

At the forefront of his work is an examination of the development and utilization of the tri-racial system (white, black, and red) among the Natchez that eventually defined colonial North America. Milne cites the development of a "red" racial identity as a foundational transformation of the Natchez people that builds in the years leading up to the 1729 attack on the French outpost Fort Rosalie. He asserts that the Natchez implemented racial discourse after they observed it "worked well for 'white' Europeans ... as a tool to dominate 'black'

slaves, but also as a means to unify their heterogeneous population” (p. 2). Though Nancy Shoemaker’s 2004 *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* previously made similar assertions in broad strokes looking at Native peoples across the eighteenth century, Milne is able to provide a more nuanced and in-depth assessment of the context and circumstances that gave rise to a “red” identity among a specific Native group. Through his investigation into the challenges French colonialism presented the Natchez, Milne demonstrates how their identification of red was both a proactive means to stymie dissolution and a response to European ideas about racial categorization.

Milne shows the value of a red racial identity for Natchez leadership through the exploration of the internal tension and conflict taking place within Indigenous space. The Natchez had long accepted displaced refugee peoples into their “world of villages” (p. 8). Political leadership and religious authority offered influential pillars for keeping a heterogeneous population together, even when rival villages subverted the Great Sun’s authority. Religious sites such as earthen mounds, hereditary leadership, and class divisions worked to unify Natchez Country. As the first French adventurers and missionaries entered the Lower Mississippi Valley to stay, Natchez leadership viewed them as a vanguard of a desperate and needy people. Initially, the incorporation of French colonials into Natchez Country appeared “to blend into the Mississippian order of things” (p. 51).

As French colonial expansion challenged Natchez authority, the defining components of that authority, particularly Native religious sites, began to unravel. Milne highlights the transition to a racial identity as a response to the circumstances surrounding Natchez utilization and eventual loss of their homelands. Milne invokes a well-argued theoretical approach to understanding Native space or more specifically, the importance of “social space [as] a social product” (p. 5). Prior

to a racial identification, the Natchez mounds, plazas, and temples all reinforced the social and political structures that held the Natchez people together. Milne specifically borrows from Michel Foucault’s “heterotopias” to explain the link. These sites within Natchez Country were “privileged or sacred or forbidden places” that tied the Natchez people together and reinforced the spiritual bonds and authority of Natchez leaders (p. 133). As Natchez leaders lost control of these heterotopias due to French colonialism, they built upon a red identity to link the multiethnic and multilingual Natchez people. Forced to abandon their homeland and sacred spaces, a Natchez diaspora spread across southern North America and the Caribbean, held together through a common identity tied to race. As French aggression forced the Natchez to disperse, unitization of a red racial identity permeated other Indigenous groups. Milne specifically notes that by 1735 the Cherokee were using the racial categorization of red to differentiate themselves from white European colonists.

*Natchez Country* is certainly at the forefront of Natchez studies. Milne makes excellent use of his sources and goes to great lengths to incorporate French-language sources both from print and French archives. Milne’s dissection of competing interpretations in the French sources is particularly well thought out and provides extensive context for readers. Those who lack access to these sources or the ability to read French will especially appreciate his diligence in parsing out the contradictions, inconsistencies, and motivations behind French actions. Milne also makes a striking case against James F. Barnett’s prior assertion in *The Natchez Indians* (2007) that the Natchez of the early eighteenth century lacked a central authority. Milne presents a strong case for evaluating the Natchez as a complex chiefdom that was clearly hierarchical and hereditary. Milne’s work remains tightly focused on the Natchez during the first third of the eighteenth century; therefore, specialists in the realm of colonial-era Native peoples and

French colonial studies will find this work most interesting. Milne's broader incorporation of the development of racial categorization and the cultural significance of space has the potential to entice other academic readers.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

**Citation:** F. Evan Nooe. Review of Milne, George Edward, *Natchez Country: Indians, Colonists, and the Landscapes of Race in French Louisiana*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. March, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47003>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.