

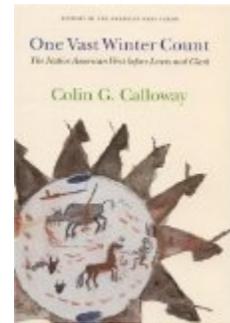
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Colin G. Calloway. *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003. xvii + 631 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1530-6.

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## The Competing Histories of One Vast Winter Count

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Reading Colin Calloway's magisterial *One Vast Winter Count* is an experience of intriguing disorientation. Purportedly a history of the Native American West before Lewis and Clark, the book immediately explodes out of the conventional boundaries of its topic. A historian who has made his reputation with a string of celebrated studies on Indian-Euroamerican relations in eastern North America, Calloway sees the West less as a fixed place than as a web of historical processes, connections, and continuities. Indeed, the West of this book is rather peculiar in shape: judging from the time devoted to each region in the narrative, the core of Calloway's West extends from Sinaloa to St. Lawrence and from the Pacific Northwest to the Southeast.

Calloway also stretches the West's temporal dimensions. The most exciting and significant things in Calloway's West happen roughly between 500 BC and 1500 AD, and the pre-contact Native history is elevated from a mere prelude to its rightful place as the main story of the American West. When moving into the post-contact period, Calloway identifies the eighteenth, not the nineteenth, century as the formative one.

While jolting our beliefs of the West's boundaries, Calloway also challenges the conventional ways of telling the West's stories. This is open-ended history of the early American West in which two interpretations—Native and non-Native—exist side by side, competing

with one another, occasionally overlapping but ultimately remaining worlds apart. "Struggles for the West were—and still are—not just about who should own and occupy the land but also about what the land should mean, the kind of lives that should be lived there, and, ultimately, the kind of stories it would hold," he writes (p. 13). Calloway balances between indigenous and Euroamerican perceptions and purposes, compelling readers to continuously shift their point of view. Wisely, Calloway does not attempt to solve the conflict between the competing stories himself; he leaves the task for the reader.

*One Vast Winter Count* arrives when New Western and New Indian histories are about twenty years old and well established. Inevitably, therefore, this book will be read as a synthesis of these two bustling, often polemical, and now mature fields. So, in *One Vast Winter Count*, the frontier is back, although Calloway does not dwell on defining it—refreshingly, he lets the elusive concept define itself through the story. He also emphasizes conflict over cooperation and coexistence as the main theme of Western history. He traces places and periods of Native-Euroamerican accommodation, but the bulk of the narrative makes it clear that the relations remained rooted in conflict. As portrayed by Calloway, the West is a violent place, less a middle than a contested ground. Its story is more about division and misunderstandings than syncretism and shared meanings.

In sync with what is perhaps the guiding theme of New Western History, Calloway situates the human drama in the context of a fragile, demanding, and wildly changing natural environment. From corn farming to horse herding and bison hunting to beaver trapping, human endeavors emerge as exercises in precarious balancing between success and failure, abundance and hunger, boom and bust.

Calloway also emphasizes indigenous agency, again through a carefully balanced narrative rather than explicit argumentation. At first glance, Calloway's writing appears traditional, as it recounts the fates and follies of many famous Euroamericans in the West. But the impression is misleading. Coronado, La Salle, Iberville, Braddock, and others figure prominently in the story, but their achievements dissipate time and again into the stronger currents of indigenous initiatives. The technique is clever, allowing Calloway to bring familiar events and people into the story while concurrently—and almost unnoticeably—challenging the central importance of those episodes and individuals. All these themes, so central to current historical sensibilities, are covered with a subtle narrative that shies away from explicitly taking sides, making *One Vast Winter Count* brim with textbook potential.

The book is divided into eight chapters that chart its vast topic with broad yet incisive strokes. From a sweeping analysis of the emergence and movements of first cultures in North America, Calloway zeroes in on Spanish colonialism and its expansion into the Southwest. The story then jumps to North America's east coast to trace the expansion of France's colonial presence along the great waterways. Keeping his eye on the heated centers of action, Calloway increasingly focuses on the mid-continent between the Saskatchewan River and Rio Grande and the Rockies and the Mississippi valley, where Spanish and French colonial ambitions collided with the powerful equestrian societies and dynamic farming confederacies. Indeed, in Calloway's treatment, all roads seem to lead—or end—on the Great Plains. Spanish colonialism collapsed there in the face of Comanche and Osage power; France's commercial and colonial schemes spread there with vigor, only to lose momentum across the vast expanses; and indigenous groups from the Rocky Mountains, Canadian interior, and trans-Appalachian West used the region variously as a refuge from bloody colonial and intertribal wars in the East, a resource base for fur production, or a place for cultural reinvention.

The pace of the story is tremendous, but the book frequently slows down to flesh out key turning points and processes: the Seven Years' War receives extensive coverage, the course and consequences of the great smallpox pandemic of 1779-84 are reconstructed with meticulous detail, and the introduction of corn farming and horses each get a chapter. The panoramic approach that moves between Spanish, French, and several Native perspectives leads to occasional repetition. For example, the Jumanos and Caddos who lived in the midst of converging spheres among Plains nomads, Spanish colonies, and the French frontier are covered several times. On the whole, however, the result is illuminating. Calloway finds surprising parallels and compelling contrasts among northern New Spain, the Great Lakes region, the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, and the Great Plains, providing a comprehensive and genuinely comparative synthesis of Indian-European relations across North America.

Underneath the lucid prose is a complex and rich structure. Calloway writes total history, combining multiple approaches—political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological—into a single, fluid narrative thread. He synthesizes a tremendous amount of secondary literature, enriching the story with thoughtful use of primary sources, and layering the analysis with quantities of archaeological, anthropological, and ecological data. But the book's real strength is its unwavering loyalty to oral history and the interpretations of indigenous peoples of their own history. Native tribal historians, writers, and elders not only inform the narrative, they often determine its very shape and sound.

The book also moves constantly among local, regional, and global levels, and Calloway places almost every event and process into its larger context. The relentless contextualization has a double effect. It appears at first to diminish the significance of such seemingly singular turning points as the Pueblo Revolt, but the end result is a textured interpretation of America's past. Indeed, although *One Vast Winter Count* focuses on the center of North America, it becomes a trans-Atlantic interpretation of the history of American West. The book also transcends the artificial division between the trans-Appalachian and trans-Mississippi Wests, identifying the Mississippi valley less as a dividing line than as a crucial link in a connected, continental Native history.

Because of its ambitious scope, the book cannot escape some structural problems. The Lewis and Clark expedition was a major event, ushering in the United States to the trans-Mississippi West, but its true signif-

icance would not become evident until later in the nineteenth century. Many of the historical processes that Calloway so painstakingly describes continued largely uninterrupted for decades after the famous pair had made to the Pacific shore and back. By concluding the book in 1804, therefore, Calloway is forced into several somewhat artificial endings. For example, the story ends on the Great Plains on a bleak note—disease epidemics were striking with increasing rapidity and the bison herds had begun to decline by 1800—and yet these problems would not have a major effect on the Native power on the western Plains until the mid-nineteenth century. *One Vast*

*Winter Count* includes the Pacific Northwest, but only near the very end when the action is already winding down, thus (like many other overviews of the American West) unintentionally reducing the region's dynamic history to an afterthought.

As a whole, however, *One Vast Winter Count* is a masterful synthesis of two growing fields. It is a balanced and insightful work that captures New Western and New Indian Histories at their full complexity and vigor. Through its daring indifference toward conventional scholarly boundaries, it also charts the future of the history of these two fields.

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