

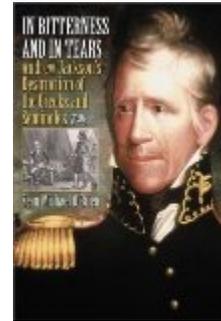
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sean Michael O'Brien. *In Bitterness and in Tears: Andrew Jackson's Destruction of the Creeks and Seminoles*. Westport: Praeger, 2003. x + 254 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97946-1.

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Andrew Jackson and the Indians: A Continuing Saga

Much has been written about Andrew Jackson's treatment of Native Americans who resided in the Southwest. There are at least a few items that historians know for certain: Jackson led a series of campaigns against the Creek Indians in 1813-14, and against the Seminoles in 1818. In all of these engagements, Jackson and his troops, though meeting a determined and tough foe, achieved victory and crushed their opponents. The Battle of Horseshoe Bend was, quite literally, a slaughter. At the Treaty of Fort Jackson in 1814, the iron general forced both enemy and allied Creeks to turn over vast amounts of land that fueled the future cotton kingdom. Andrew Jackson's victories signaled the end of the Native American way of life in this region. Few historians will argue over these points.

The disputed question is one of motivation. Was Jackson a malevolent Indian hater, a destroyer of Indian culture who was bent on extinguishing Native Americans from the earth? Was he a prototype Hitler engaged in his own American Holocaust? Was his dual intent to steal valuable lands so that whites could resettle them and grow rich? Essentially, did Jackson care for the Indians at all? Some historians say no to the latter, and yes to all of the previous questions.

The other side of the motivation debate insists that to understand Jackson, one must consider historical context. Some authors assert that Jackson did not start the generational conquest of Native Americans. Rather, like many westerners, he took part in what was an already

flourishing movement. He did not hate Indians, they argue, but he was certainly a racist of the time and considered Indians savages who both wasted useful land and threatened the security of white society. Jackson saddled his horse and brought war to the Creeks only after the massacre at Fort Mims and ultimately forced them from their lands to create a much-needed buffer zone between the Natives and the troublesome Spanish and English forces that fomented Indian uprisings. Jackson of course knew that removal of the Indians would enrich whites, but that was not his primary goal in going to war, these historians conclude.

The lines on these two points of view are well documented and rigidly drawn. They extend on one side from Michael Paul Rogin's often-quoted *Fathers & Children* (1975) to Jeanne and David Heidler's *Old Hickory's War* (1996), as well as the recently released *Passions of Andrew Jackson* (2003) by Andrew Burstein. On the other side comes the ubiquitous Robert Remini, *The Legacy of Andrew Jackson: Essays on Democracy, Indian Removal, and Slavery* (1988), and more recently Remini's *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (2001), as well as John Buchanan's *Jackson's Way: Andrew Jackson and the People of the Western Waters* (2001).

Entering this historiographical battleground is Sean Michael O'Brien's *In Bitterness and in Tears: Andrew Jackson's Destruction of the Creek and Seminoles*. Not to judge a book by its cover, but my first assumption from the title was that it would be another work on "Jackson as In-

dian hater.” Yet upon turning to the prologue, “A Most Bloody Butchery,” I was confronted with a detailed account of the Fort Mims Massacre and began to surmise that the book might be a pro-Jackson, do-not-forget-the-historical-context, account. To my surprise, O’Brien’s book is neither. *In Bitterness and in Tears* is really a narrative account of the Creek Wars and Seminole conflict. My impression after reading the prologue and finding no argument whatsoever was confusion. I wondered where O’Brien would ultimately enter the foray of historiographical debate. He does not. The work is based mainly on secondary sources and the first citation of a primary source does not occur until some fifty-five pages into the book. O’Brien does quote from some primary sources prior to this, but these are gleaned entirely from secondary sources. (O’Brien uses an MLA citation format.) The book is not all about Jackson, who is absent from the first sixty-two pages. Instead, O’Brien attempts to give a good overview of the many figures, both Indian and white, who were involved in the back-and-forth bloodshed that rampaged across the Southwest. In the process, Jackson is portrayed in a dual context: he is both the killer of savages (see the description of Horseshoe Bend, p. 150), and a compassionate, humane general who treated Indians well when moved by some particular act (p. 151). Thus there is much left for a reader to infer.

Some scholars may wonder about the value of such a book. We generally scoff at “mere” narrative histories, looking instead for original research, as well as arguments and theories that can add to our collective understanding of a subject. We especially expect these things from publishers such as Praeger Press (a division of Greenwood) that have a reputation for producing some good academic works. Yet O’Brien’s book does not fit into the above-perceived values. He is not an academic, but rather an independent author. His sources are standard, and most of the secondary ones have been published fairly recently, in the last twenty to thirty years

or so. Even though Praeger recently advertised the book in one of its catalogs by referring to “the seldom-recalled Creek War,” historians know that the war is often recalled. There is not a gap in our knowledge. O’Brien’s own bibliography bears this out. Thus, if all of this is true, why did Sean Michael O’Brien write this book? Again, what is its value?

Answering these questions is not simple because O’Brien does not give a reader much to go on. There is no statement of focus or purpose, which is not the normal academic model. My tentative assessment is that O’Brien was attempting to avoid argument for argument’s sake and provide a balanced, narrative account of both white and Indian actions. As stated previously, there is much left to infer from such an approach. Readers will have to determine for themselves whether Jackson was the monster or the hero portrayed by some historians. Yet such an exercise may in and of itself be enlightening. Imagine assigning this book as the first in an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course and letting the students debate the issue of culpability. Are whites or Native Americans more responsible for the outcome of the Creek War? I can already imagine the rising hackles among historians who read that question. It is an explosive topic, but one that could be well served by O’Brien’s work, which is written well and fairly presented. The more standard academic accounts of Jackson and Indian relations could be used to follow up O’Brien’s and thereby add historiography to the debate.

It is unclear whether O’Brien entertained such an exercise when producing this book, but it would be a valuable use. Additionally, those who are merely history buffs and not familiar with the Creek and Seminole story will find O’Brien’s account both interesting and shocking. The killing on both sides of the war was horrific, and O’Brien tells the story with graphic reality. One gets a good sense of intent, strategy, fear, heroism, hatred, begrudging respect, and outcome for all involved.

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