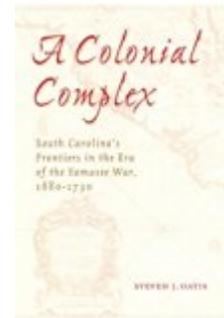




Steven J. Oatis. *A Colonial Complex: South Carolina's Frontiers in the Era of the Yamasee War, 1680-1730.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004. 399 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-3575-5.



Reviewed by Michelle LeMaster (Department of History, Lehigh University)

Published on H-SC (October, 2007)

Revisiting the Southern Frontier

In recent years, a number of scholars have begun to look at the much-neglected early years of English settlement in the Deep South. They have picked up where Verner Crane left off with his path-breaking *The Southern Frontier: 1670-1732* in 1929, analyzing many issues identified by Crane long ago but rarely addressed since. Alan Gally's *The Indian Slave Trade* (2002), Steven C. Hahn's *The Invention of the Creek Nation* (2004), and Eric Bowne's *The Westo Indians* (2005) have begun to fill in the large gaps in our knowledge of this critical and still under-studied period. Steven J. Oatis's *A Colonial Complex: South Carolina's Frontiers in the Era of the Yamasee War, 1680-1730* fits within this new flowering of scholarship on the region in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Oatis takes as his topic the so-called Yamasee War of 1715-1717, but this study is both more and less than this. The subtitle most accurately expresses the scope and intent of the book. Rather than focusing strictly on the Yamasee War, Oatis investigates South Carolina's Indian policy from the time the Yamasee first moved to the re-

gion in the aftermath of the so-called Westo War until their final defeat in Florida in 1728.

In order to approach this topic, Oatis re-evaluates Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis and appropriates a modified concept of the frontier as the major organizing principle of his book. He acknowledges many of the critiques of Turner's thesis, noting that its triumphal narrative failed to take into account "a patchwork of racial, class and ecological conflicts" (p. 5). Oatis is not ready, however, to jettison the concept entirely. Instead, he re-defines the frontier "to evoke the interaction of distinct cultures in a context of undefined power relations," emphasizing the processes of "exchange" and "reactive change" (p. 6). He views the Deep South not as a single "southern frontier" but as a "frontier complex," borrowing the term from Jack Forbes, who defined it as "a multiplicity of frontiers in dynamic interaction" (p. 7). Ultimately, though, the frontier concept that Oatis uses still seems rather underdefined. Oatis has not engaged with the concept of the borderlands (which might well apply in a Southeastern context) nor with re-

cent work that has suggested other concepts that might also hold explanatory power. This book does not really contribute, therefore, to the debate about a useful concept to describe North American intercultural interactions.[1]

Oatis adopts a predominantly narrative structure for his account, tracing the development of South Carolina's Indian diplomacy chronologically over the time period under consideration, although he also subdivides the eras he discusses to take on larger thematic questions. Chapter 1 investigates the formation of the Yamasee-English alliance, focusing on the ways in which the English both benefited from and supplanted those Indians' earlier ties with the Spanish at St. Augustine. Chapter 2 traces South Carolina's actions during Queen Anne's War, following the Carolina-led slave trades against Spanish mission towns and efforts to spirit up allies against the French in Louisiana (which were less successful). Oatis argues convincingly that Queen Anne's War and the expanding trade increased the importance of Indian diplomacy for South Carolina, leading to the first efforts to regulate the trade. Chapter 3 looks at South Carolina's involvement in the Tuscarora War and traces the failure of the province's efforts to regulate the Indian trade or discipline trader abuses, which would have tragic consequences all too soon.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 deal with the Yamasee War itself. Oatis argues persuasively that the Yamasee War was not the result of a "general conspiracy" among Southeastern nations. While many tribes had grievances against South Carolina, as well as cultural and even kinship ties to one another (as the Yamasee and Ocheses did), there was no unified plan to defeat the English. Rather, the war involved several groups fighting for different reasons in different places. The Yamasees faced extraordinary debt, the threat of enslavement, the destruction of habitat for the animals they hunted, and continued English encroachments on their land. They suffered the most at the hands of the English and fought first, longest, and hardest for

these reasons. Other groups had other concerns. The Ocheses worried about the diminished opportunity for military triumph and slave taking after the defeat of the Spanish missions, and also worried about the cycle of disease and debt that had overtaken the Yamasees. The Cherokee and Catawba responded to trader abuses, but their commitment to the war was not as strong as that of the Yamasees and English promises of trade reforms (as well as military setbacks) led both groups to make peace quickly.

For the English, the war caused a reorientation in terms of how the colony saw its place in the empire. South Carolina became less self-reliant, reaching out both to other provinces and to the imperial government for help. The war also brought about concerted efforts to improve frontier defense and reform the Indian trade. For the Indians, the outcome of the war is more complex. In the short run, the war caused some groups like the Yamasees and the Ocheses to move further away from the English and to establish closer relationships with England's imperial rivals, the Spanish and the French. It also contributed, however, to both consolidation and a growing factionalism within Indian societies that would complicate Indian foreign relations for decades to come.

Chapter 7 investigates the Creek-Cherokee war that grew out of the events of the Yamasee War and South Carolina's mostly unsuccessful efforts to control the situation. Chapter 8 looks at the continued expansion of South Carolina into the former Yamasee territory and what Oatis identifies as the final defeat of the Yamasee in Florida.

Oatis investigates the relationship between South Carolina and her Indian neighbors during an era that often receives short shrift, largely because of the scanty source material. As an account of South Carolina policy, it is an easy-to-follow narrative that can serve as a good introduction to the time period, and it offers the most extensive account to date of the Yamasee War. Oatis pulls together the many conflicts of the era into a cohesive

story that helps to make sense of the behavior of multiple players. It is unfair, perhaps, to critique an author for the book he did not write. There are, however, many questions left unanswered by Oatis's treatment of the Yamasee War. It would be helpful to know more about the Yamasee themselves. Who were they? How did their proximity to the Spanish and the English alter their culture and society in the years before 1715? How did they adapt to life near St. Augustine after the war, before the final punitive raids destroyed their resistance? An investigation of Spanish records (difficult for many researchers, including this reviewer, for language reasons) might help to answer some of these questions. More analysis of the relationships between the Spanish and the French and the various Southeastern nations would also be useful. These are questions for future researchers to address. Oatis's book is valuable for what it tells us about the actions of South Carolinians during this crucial period of the region's history.

Note

[1]. For an alternative theory of frontiers and borderlands, see Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (1999): 813-841; and the responses in the following issue, including: Even Haefeli, "A Note on the Use of the North American Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (1999): 1222-1225; Christopher Ebert Schmidt-Nowara, "Borders and Borderlands of Interpretation," *ibid*: 1226-1228; John R. Wunder and Pekka Hämäläinen, "Of Lethal Places and Lethal Essays," *ibid*: 1229-1234; and Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "Of Lively Exchanges and Larger Perspectives," *ibid*: 1235-1239. See also Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991) and the recent forum on the book (unavailable to Oatis at the time he wrote): Susan Sleeper-Smith, "Forum: The Mid-

dle Ground Revisited, Introduction," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (2006): 3-8; Richard White, "Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings," *ibid*: 9-14; Philip J Deloria, "What is the Middle Ground, Anyway?" *ibid*: 15-22; Heidi Bohaker, "Nindoodemag: The Significance of Algonquian Kinship Networks in the Eastern Great Lakes Region, 1600-1701," *ibid*: 23-52; Brett Rushforth, "Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance," *ibid*: 53-80; and Catherine Desbarats, "Following *The Middle Ground*," *ibid*: 81-96.

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

Citation: Michelle LeMaster. Review of Oatis, Steven J. *A Colonial Complex: South Carolina's Frontiers in the Era of the Yamasee War, 1680-1730*. H-SC, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13687>



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