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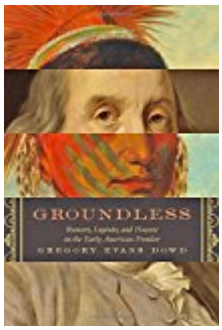
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gregory Evans Dowd. *Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 408 S. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1865-0.



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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (September, 2017)

How do historians deal with so-called rumors? What seems to be quite the opposite of what they aim for – namely reliable information – can prove to be a very important kind of source material, as Gregory E. Dowd shows in his book "Groundless." He uses the lens of what he calls "urgent communication" (p. 8) in order to elicit social relations and cultural norms in early North America. In his conceptually organized introduction he explains that his book focuses on rumor and legend as means to interpret the realities and uncertainties people lived in. Furthermore, he understands these events to be instruments that served to mediate political situations as well as develop a historical understanding of origin and belonging. For Dowd, as a historian, rumors function like a mirror of how a group sees the world. Yet, this book operates on a double threshold: in addition to rumors being situations of liminal and uncertain knowledge he focuses on events and exchanges at the American frontier. Thus the name of the book: "groundless."

On the one hand, it alludes to situations of encounter, when communication between colonial powers or between European settlers and Native Americans lacked common ground or a common cultural frame of reference and, therefore, led to misunderstandings. In that sense Dowd sees rumors as negotiations over meaning and of the imaginable within certain groups. On the other hand, these acts of communication were tied to very concrete acts of land grab and conflicts over property as wells as natural resources (e.g. gold). Therefore, the author also highlights the role of strategic misinformation as a weapon of warfare, through which political factions within North America tried to disguise their intentions, to hurt and discredit enemies or to create confusion amongst their adversaries. In that he very much dwells upon Marc Bloch's interpretation of rumors that goes beyond mere falsities or mere stories: Bloch suggested to view them as stories people tell about themselves and their everyday lives, as means to vent emotions and as expressions of threats and hopes. Marc Bloch, Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre, in: Revue de synthèse historique 33 (1921), S. 13–35.

The main structure of the book is chronological. In six main chapters Dowd covers a time span between the late colonial period and the Early Republic. In his first chapter he starts by taking a look at major rifts in colonial America, namely conflicts between English and Spanish colonists or over slavery. The most convincing part of this chapter is, however, Dowd's discussion of narratives about pox-infested blankets that European settlers allegedly distributed amongst Native Americans in order to infect and kill them. Here, the author is able to peel off the many temporal layers of this 'legend.' He traces the origins of the story back to the 18th century, but also the effects it had on historians writing about this period. As his critical discussion of the 'blanket legend' almost entirely debunks the validity of this interpretation, he also emphasizes the role of scholars in continuing this story and becoming legend tellers themselves. In his second chapter Dowd focuses solely on the English-Native-American relations during the late colonial period. By exploring the emergence of stereotypes and enemy images he describes an atmosphere of uncertainty and mutual distrust, in which intentions remained unknown to the other party. This ambiguity led to panic on both sides and rumors became expressions of worst-case scenarios, where eager minds imagined English troops as being preparing another attack on Cherokee settlements or Native American tribes were seen as constantly forging alliances with enemies of the English crown. The third chapter covers rumors and acts of "domination." One part focuses on Indian rumors of sexual violence and exploitation of enslaved people by their owners. Dowd skillfully explains how these stories of rape and abuse "reveal the deep and justified anxieties about physical exploitation" Indians experienced during the colonization of North America. Secondly, this chapter analyzes white fears of Indian-African American conspiracies and possible insurrections. Yet, as Dowd shows through his analysis of rumors these events were only thinkable as violent interventions that were ultimately led and conducted by European rivals, such as the Spanish or the French.

In the final three chapters the book moves into the period of the Early Republic. First, Dowd hones in on the role of rumor and legend during the revolution. A hoax of Benjamin Franklin marks the strategic use of rumor in diplomacy. At the same time, rumors of scalpings made the round especially among British soldiers during the Revolutionary war. It is, however, remarkable that a considerable number of these unfounded stories attributed such brutal acts to American Patriots, who – through a transfer of Indian qualities – to the British eye became even more treacherous and barbarous. In this trope, political ideology overlapped with a European discourse about civilization and savagery. Second, returning to slavery and Native American relations the author revisits two themes he already explored in earlier chapters. On the one hand, he fathoms the complicated formation of frontier slavery in stories about Native American-Black alliances that were even supported by the Spanish in Florida. On the other hand, the legend of infectious blankets gets revisited – this time under the conditions of scientific exploration and medical advancements combined with harsh anti-Indian policies of the Jacksonian period. When Indian vaccination against small-pox became en vogue under the Jackson administration, Native Americans, on the one hand, welcomed the gesture, but, on the other, remained suspicious of scientists and administrators being agents of white control and, ultimately, of Indian removal. In his final chapter, Dowd dives into the grapevine about a murder case in the 1830s.

The strength of this book is, certainly, the variety of important topics and themes the author touches upon. Reaching from Spanish-English colonial relations to conflicts between Native American and settlers or political rumors in the Early Republic. Dowd very much succeeds in

showcasing that rumor and legend are an important source for historians or as he sums up his own agenda: rumors and legends have an "independent life, strong agency, and deep meaning" (p. 293). Through very detailed micro-historical analysis Dowd, in an impressive manner, is able to trace back the emergence of different stories and reports. However, as a reader I found myself sometimes lost in those details without seeing greater themes and common threads. Sure, the author is especially able to frequently show how Native American communities were affected by the spread of uncertain information, but also how they could use them for their own purposes. However, in this potpourri of themes and stories more conceptual considerations sometimes fall short. With its methodological introduction the book starts out very strong, but over the course of reading the use of these concepts remain vague themselves. How do rumors become legend? What is the difference between the two? A more decisively interdisciplinary approach would certainly have been helpful to address these kinds of questions.