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The discovery of the Americas with its diverse Native populations was a paradigm-shifting event in Europe. The presence of hitherto unknown populations untouched by Christianity undermined traditional Judeo-Christian views about the world, its creation, and its sacred geography. Though the discovery shook old beliefs, it did not shatter them. Over the centuries, scholars and intellectuals, especially those of strong millennialist Protestant convictions, tried to explain the unexpected presence of Native peoples on the other side of the Atlantic in biblical terms as they struggled to make their existence compatible with Judeo-Christian religion.

Despite the subtitle, this book does not discuss Native Americans but focuses instead on a series of authors who reasoned that the Indigenous peoples of the Americas were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel as described in the first and second book of Kings in the Old Testament. In short, this is an intellectual history. It is the history of an idea, in this case, the Hebraic Indian theory. Like so many other ideas about Native Americans, this one tells us more about the non-Indigenous settlers than the people they had come to replace.

This topic is not new, but Elizabeth Fenton, a professor of English at the University of Vermont, has written a compelling new synthesis. Although the Lost Tribes theory never gained wide acceptance in the United States, Fenton traces the genealogy of the idea from its first appearance in Thomas Thorowgood's 1650 tract, *Iewes in America*, through James Adair's immensely influential *History of the American Indians* (1775), to Elias Boudinot's 1816 treatise, *A Star in the West* and William Apess's 1829 memoir, *A Son of the Forest*. Echoes of the theory are also found in the *Book of Mormon*, as well as novels including James Fenimore Cooper's *The Bee Hunter* (1848) and De Witt Clinton Chipman's fanciful 1895 novel *Beyond the Verge*.

Fenton convincingly shows how the theory of the Hebraic Indian served American colonialism and Manifest Destiny. For some, the theory was a call to action to spread the Gospel to the Indians in...
order to bring about the millennial prophecy of the second coming. Indeed, some authors argued that the United States was to be the place where this millennial prophecy would be fulfilled. Occasionally, it directly served American Indian policy. Andrew Jackson, for example, alluded to the theory in his second inaugural address when he claimed that Native Americans were guilty of exterminating an earlier “powerful race” (p.179) (presumably the Lost Tribes), thus presenting his Removal policy as an act of historical retribution that conveniently absolved the United States of its moral culpability in dislocating Native nations.

Although not widely accepted, the Hebraic Indian theory nevertheless had remarkable staying power in the United States. This longevity is in part due to its ability to change in order to remain relevant to other contexts. In a fascinating final chapter, Fenton shows how the discussion of Old World origins has tainted present-day genetic research into Native American origins. DNA research mapping the human genome promises to settle, once and for all, the question of where Native Americans migrated from. Apparently, old ideas, no matter how improbable, die slowly—if they die at all.

The book has a few problems. Amusing is Fenton’s apparent discovery that the nineteenth century was a racist era. More serious, however, is the presentism that periodically dots the work. For instance, calling James Fenimore Cooper a “white nationalist” (a term now associated with neo-Nazis) in an otherwise fascinating chapter, seems oddly anachronistic (p. 145). Also problematic is Fenton’s tendency to judge all nineteenth-century thinkers by their racist and colonial notions rather than by the strength and originality of their ideas. Focusing on their flaws, she turns these intellectuals into conspirators whose main objective is to serve the colonial project rather than depicting them as people struggling to make sense of the world and the time they were born into. One example of using present-day standards to evaluate a (now rightfully forgotten) work is her discussion of De Witt Clinton Chipman’s 1896 novel, Beyond the Verge: Home of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The book was buried practically immediately after its publication in 1896, but Fenton exhumes it to slaughter it again for its flawed premises as well as its stilted narrative. Still, these lapses can be easily forgiven, because the strengths of Fenton’s book far outweigh its limitations.

Adepty jumping back and forth between literary analysis, intellectual history, and religious studies, Old Canaan in a New World is dizzyingly erudite. Luckily, this does not impair the book’s accessibility. In fact, it is an enjoyable read that will simultaneously appeal to readers interested in literature, American studies, and religion.
If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-early-america

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