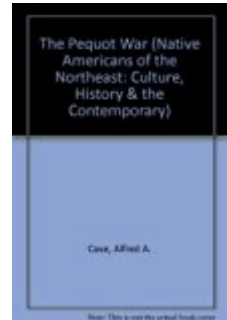


**Alfred A. Cave.** *The Pequot War*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996. ix + 219 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-029-1.



**Reviewed by** Robert E. Weir

**Published on** H-PCAACA (October, 1996)

Hurtling east from Norwich, Connecticut, one encounters an entrepreneurial wonder, the giant Foxwoods Casino owned by the Mashantucket Pequot Indians. In addition to the resort, the area is dotted with clinics, Indian schools, golf courses, and gleaming new housing complexes financed by mostly non-Indian gamblers.

This is remarkable given that 360 years ago the Pequots were nearly the victims of total genocide. In a well-written and meticulously researched new book, Alfred Cave details that earlier tragedy. In 1636, New England Puritans and Indian allies launched a full-scale assault on the Pequots. By 1637, a substantial portion of the Pequot nation lay dead or was bound for slavery in the Caribbean. Puritan incursions shattered a decade and a half of relatively peaceful Indian relations established by the Pilgrims of Plymouth. For the remainder of the century New Englanders engaged in periodic warfare against Natives, with other tribes suffering the Pequots' fate.

The Puritan thesis of Pequots as aggressor has long been debunked, and Cave provides a concise historiographical overview in his introduction.

His thesis is straightforward: "The Pequot War in reality was the messy outgrowth of petty squabbles over trade, tribute, and land among Pequots, Mohegans, River Indians, Niantics, Narragansetts, Dutch traders, and English Puritans" (p. 178). But what sets Caves' work apart from others is the emphasis he puts on how the Puritans transformed "petty squabbles" into "a cosmic struggle of good and evil in the wilderness" (p. 178).

Cave shows how Puritans were constrained by a bipolar cosmology. Despite pre-settlement visions of living in harmony with Indians, Puritanism had little respect for cultural diversity. The founders of Massachusetts Bay divided the world into the Godly and the damned. Even before open conflict erupted, Puritans equated the "savage" lifestyles of Native peoples with Satanism. Each misunderstanding between English and Natives served to steel Puritan resolve to resist evil. Ministers reinforced this by linking conflict with God's testing of the "Saints." From this perspective warfare against the Pequots was a holy crusade, and official histories portrayed it as such.

But Cave cautions that these were *ex post facto* justifications whose true roots were more materialistic than pietistic. In his dense third chapter Cave masterfully follows the twisted path to war. Within four years of the establishment of Massachusetts Bay, Puritans had already settled in what would become the colony of Connecticut. There they first came into conflict with Pilgrim settlers at Saybrook, with several competing land claims granted in England, and with Dutch traders. In this European chess board of intrigue, Natives were the pawns. Each claimant was able to find Native tribes willing to forge alliances in order to humble traditional enemies. Cave credits the Mohegan sachem Uncas as being especially adroit at using the English to assist his designs against the Pequots. It did not take much for warfare to erupt in volatile Connecticut, and Cave suspects that Puritans like John Winthrop actively sought a pretext. Ironically, conflict began when the Dutch killed a Pequot sachem and the tribe mistakenly killed John Stone, an English privateer, in retaliation. Mutual mistrust bogged negotiations for the capture of Stone's assassins, and Puritans responded by torching a Pequot fort at Mystic. An alliance with the Mohegans and Narragansetts sealed the Pequots' fate.

Cave deftly crafts his research and is critical of his primary sources written by Puritans and their admirers, though at times he force fits ideology and materialism. Cave wants to locate conflict in a God vs. Satan duality, but the evidence suggests that the roots of conflict were decidedly less lofty. A more thorough linkage to land and the lucrative international fur trade is necessary for a complete understanding, but perhaps Cave felt it unnecessary to repeat this well-told tale. Another avenue not pursued is a discussion of how changes in New England ecology precipitated conflict. The expansion of trade from the coast to the interior put pressure on natural resources, caused shifts in the ecosystem, and altered Native lifestyles. Alliances made with the English were, in

part, made more attractive because of such changes.

Cave might well reply that these changes were less evident at the time of the Pequot War. Its hard to fault his assertion that Puritans came to New England predisposed to clash with Indians. How much they thought of Satan versus how much they dreamed of material gain is more problematic. But even if Cave occasionally overstates his case, students of popular culture and American studies will revel in his fascinating portrait of how competing intellectual worlds collided. In his final chapter he attempts to link the Pequot War to the myth of the frontier and demonstrates how the "Satanic savage" eventually yielded to metaphors of the "noble savage," thereby completing the circle from first contact to final conquest. Quite a task in 178 pages, but Cave manages it with aplomb.

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**Citation:** Robert E. Weir. Review of Cave, Alfred A. *The Pequot War*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. October, 1996.

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