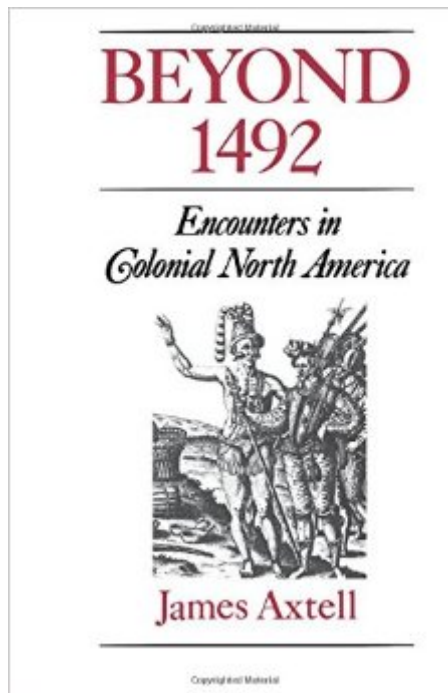


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Beyond 1492: Encounters In Colonial North America



Synopsis

In this provocative and timely collection of essays--five published for the first time--one of the most important ethnohistorians writing today, James Axtell, explores the key role of imagination both in our perception of strangers and in the writing of history. Coinciding with the 500th anniversary of Columbus's "discovery" of America, this collection covers a wide range of topics dealing with American history. Three essays view the invasion of North America from the perspective of the Indians, whose land it was. The very first meetings, he finds, were nearly always peaceful. Other essays describe native encounters with colonial traders--creating "the first consumer revolution"--and Jesuit missionaries in Canada and Mexico. Despite the tragedy of many of the encounters, Axtell also finds that there was much humor in Indian-European negotiations over peace, sex, and war. In the final section he conducts searching analyses of how college textbooks treat the initial century of American history, how America's human face changed from all brown in 1492 to predominantly white and black by 1792, and how we handled moral questions during the Quincentenary. He concludes with an extensive review of the Quincentenary scholarship--books, films, TV, and museum exhibits--and suggestions for how we can assimilate what we have learned.

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Customer Reviews

Currently, there are so many television/radio personalities trying to write history books that it is always refreshing to go back to a "real" history book. Historical conclusions without the verifying facts (a.k.a. footnotes and endnotes) are just random opinions. Axtell's well-researched work is a

good place to start for anyone who wishes to discover the complexities of early colonial history. All too often, what is supposed to be historical analysis is really just political dogma or nostalgia. Axtell's work, much like Richard White (Stanford University), or James Merrell (Vassar College), actually treats early Native American societies as real people with ambitions, faults, and traditions. History is a science, so the facts should speak for themselves. Discovery or invasion? Sometimes these terms have the same historical outcomes.

This work decisively rejects the older extreme of Indians as savages benefiting from white European civilization, and the newer extreme of Indians as hapless victims of unilateral European rapacity, greed, and genocide. Author Axtell stresses the way that Indian ways rapidly changed as an outcome of contact with Europeans. For a time, the relationship benefitted both parties. Axtell cites estimates of the total population of 1 to 12 million Indians in North America in 1492. (p. 203). He repeatedly cites diseases, usually inadvertently introduced by whites, as by far the main cause of the subsequent decimation of the Native American population. (p. 105, 145, 155; see especially pp. 235-on, 262). The "no genocide" statement, mentioned by another reviewer, deserves to be quoted in full: "Certainly no European colonial government ever tried to exterminate all the Indians as Indians, as a race, and you can count on one hand the authorized colonial attempts to annihilate even single tribes." (p. 261). Europeans sometimes made slaves out of Indians, but such situations were generally exceptional. The lurid portrayal of Spanish colonists is, in large part, Anglo propaganda. (pp. 205-206). At the same time, certain Spanish clergy condemned the enslaving and exploitation of Native peoples not as something inexpedient, but as inherently immoral. (pp. 246-on). The author rejects the premise that Indians had no concept of property ownership. The woodland tribes owned land communally, the individuals owned objects. (p. 202). Tribes were semi-sedentary, not nomadic. (pp. 107-108). Axtell portrays Indian attacks on European settlements as responses to earlier injustices and provocations. In doing so, he seems to ignore the warring tendencies, between certain Indian tribes, that had long preceded Columbus. Trade between Indians and European settlers was paramount. While the trade items sometimes included alcohol and worthless trinkets, they mainly featured valuable materials. In fact, the economies of Indian tribes generally increased, above that of their pre-Columbian counterparts, because of trading practices with European settlers. (pp. 129-on). The author rejects the premise that Indians accepted European ways only because the latter forced it on them, or because the poverty caused by their disrupted ways forced them to do so. In many instances, Native Americans deliberately relocated in order to benefit more from trade, etc., with whites. (p. 108). Others accepted European ways because they

saw them superior in some way. (pp. 116-118). In New England, some Indians voluntarily adopted essentially European ways, in terms of religion, agriculture, dress, furniture, and even housing. (p. 146).

Professor James Axtell of William and Mary is a historian who is not out to assign blame. In his book *Beyond 1492: Encounters in Colonial North America* (1992), Axtell analyzes the encounter from four different viewpoints: through Indian eyes, from a European perspective, through both simultaneously, and from the contemporary vantage point as we struggle to grasp the concepts behind the encounter. A noted scholar of Native American history, Axtell interprets contact as a complex process full of decisions made by all parties involved. Axtell's depiction of the conquistadors and the Spanish military is not as monochromatic as historians playing the blame game. Stressing that we learn nothing by using glib labels, Axtell demonstrates that the root of the word "conquest is simply 'to seek.'" Most were seeking wealth, but usually did not fit the stereotyped image of a conquistador, and even fewer made a profession of it. Axtell urges us to consider that many were not only "ruthless Indian fighters" but were also probably "doting fathers and unfaithful husbands, devout Catholics and poor scholars, dutiful sons and headstrong servants, ardent gardeners and heavy drinkers, gentle lovers and gouging businessmen--bundles of human contradictions." Most were not trained soldiers. The invaders of Panama numbered 91, and 41 had no fighting experience; they were farmers, sailors, craftsmen, and merchants. This hardly fits the image of the bloodthirsty, battle-hardened warriors who only wanted to kill. Just as he has trouble accepting stereotypes of the conquistadors that lead to confusion and not understanding, Axtell has serious reservations about using the term "genocide" to refer to every Indian death caused directly or indirectly by a historical European or American. To use it in this fashion is in "total disregard of the accepted definition of the word" which was coined in 1944 to describe Nazi actions aimed at destroying all Jews. Axtell uses a succinct and historical definition of the word "genocide," which refers to "a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator." The term "genocide" simply cannot refer to warfare, especially over 500 years, because it is a contradiction in terms. Besides the many problems with semantics, Axtell disputes the accuracy and utility of using "genocide" to describe Indian and European encounters. Indians were far too valuable as labor for a state to institute an intentional policy of destruction. In order to constitute genocide, it must be state-instituted, so "renegade" settlers cannot be accused. Besides, Axtell reminds us, "the vast majority of settlers had no interest in killing Indians," and most "immigrants hardly, if ever, saw, the

original owners" of the land. These people only wanted a better quality of life, so if we decide to condemn them for that, we should also condemn ourselves for wanting the same thing. Axtell shows that no government ever tried to eliminate "all Indians as Indians, as race, and you can count on one hand the authorized colonial attempts to annihilate even single tribes." The definition of "genocide" implies a state-supported program of elimination. What happened in the Americas was haphazard and unplanned and patently was not a state program bent on native depopulation. Perhaps the largest depopulation factor resulted from the unintentional introduction of European diseases such as smallpox, measles, influenza, and the bubonic plague to which Indians had no biological resistance. An airborne virus, Smallpox was the most virulent and the most contagious; Axtell found that the disease killed from 50-90 percent of Indians in small villages. These diseases traveled faster and claimed more lives than soldiers and their swords and bullets. Axtell takes pains to analyze the more fluid state of relations that existed between colonists and Indians. In response to European encroachments, Indians sold land, made alliances, traded furs, worked on farms, and engaged in offensive and defensive military campaigns. Reminding us that "encounters were never between generic 'Indians' and 'Europeans' but always between segments. . . of native groups . . . and subgroups of European nationalities," Axtell provides many examples of how interactions varied from one encounter to another. By condemning Europeans and Columbus, we "reduce the Indians to passive victims and deny them an active role in the making of history, theirs and ours together." He declares that we must realize that "Indians, in large measure, fashioned their own new world." Reading *Beyond 1492* is like cutting butter with a hot knife; the prose is eloquent, the arguments well-reasoned. Axtell's professional detachment, what he terms "a lack of personal interest in the evolution and denouement of past events," is necessary to achieve historical understanding. He urges us to scrutinize labeling, avoid "sloppy handling of moral vocabulary," and calls for a moratorium on the guilt we have "about the real or imagined sins of our fathers and forefathers and people to whom we have no relation whatever." Axtell's lack of condemnation adds to the overall readability and credibility of his book, but it will not please everyone.

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