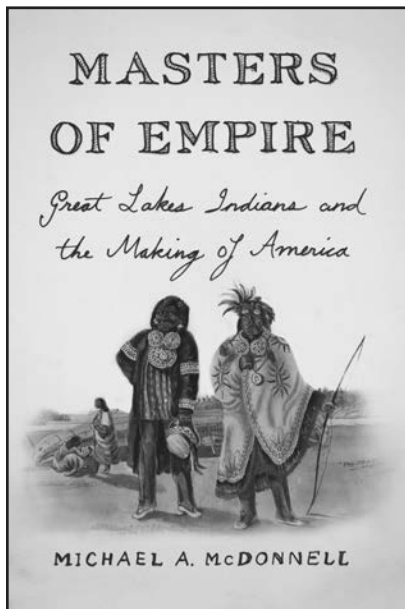


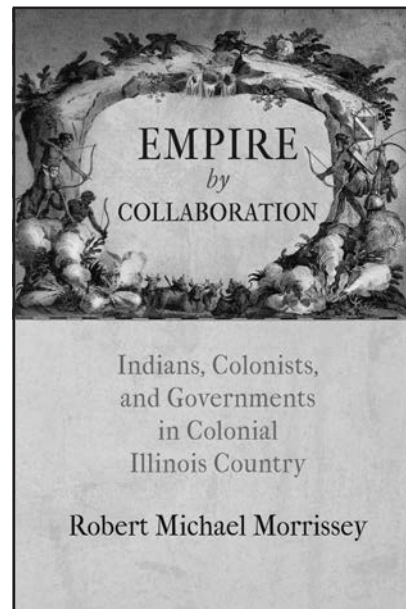
Review Essay

Re-Thinking Indigenous Power in Trans-Appalachia

While they explore different geographic areas, Michael McDonnell and Robert Morrissey make the same overarching argument: seventeenth and eighteenth-century trans-Appalachia was a highly mobile, flexible, and Indigenous world in which European empires struggled on the periphery. McDonnell focuses upon the Great Lakes Anishnaabeg who, with Michilimackinac Odawas leading the way, powerfully shaped imperial dynamics across the continent. Just to the south, Morrissey explores Indigenous power and its consequences via the Algonquian-speaking groups that “colonized” the Illinois country in the late sixteenth century. Either way, these two scholars make it clear that the numerical, economic, and political balance of power in trans-Appalachia lay with Indigenous people. Europeans commonly had to subordinate their interests to Natives, create military alliances that forced them into awkward situations about which they knew little, and collaborate with groups far away from the loci of European power.



Michael McDonnell. *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2015. 416 pp. ISBN: 9780809029532 (cloth), \$35.00.



Robert Morrissey. *Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 352 pp. 24 illus. ISBN: 9780812246995 (cloth), \$45.00.

McDonnell asserts that access to the Great Lakes was crucial to European empires in early modern North America. It was the gateway to the *pays d'en haut*, after all, which meant that anyone interested in fur trading would have to travel through the region. And because their homeland ranged across the Lakes, the Anishnaabeg (specifically, the Odawas near the straits between Lakes Michigan and Huron) were the key to European projection there. They were, McDonnell says, “at the center of a powerful network that expanded over the colonial period. They and their kin dominated the Lakes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were able to manipulate relations with newcomers, including Europeans, to their advantage” (17). This “manipulation” began in earnest in the 1650s, when Haudenosaunee attacks caused Hurons to disperse from their homelands. Having lost their connection to *pays d'en haut* fur, New France had little choice but to cultivate a direct relationship with the Anishnaabeg. Their subsequent “alliances” clearly revealed who was in charge—the French had to travel to the Anishnaabeg for diplomatic purposes, not vice-versa. Nor were these alliances a guarantee of stability, because they were formed between specific Native towns and individual French traders rather than between two overarching polities. A major consequence was that the Anishnaabeg continued to engage in commerce/diplomacy/warfare to which New France was not privy, which in turn meant that French officials often suffered from unsettling lacks of knowledge and control. Nothing illuminates this reality more than the Iroquois wars of the 1690s, when French leadership in many cases watched helplessly as events occurred around them. At best, they could only “infer their success by the ‘marked inactivity’ of the Iroquois,” the abandonment of particular Indigenous villages, and by other ambiguous signs (66).

The Anishnaabeg, in short, were “masters” of empire along the Great Lakes. It was a reality that continued well into the eighteenth century, perhaps most notably in what McDonnell calls the First and Second Anglo-Indian Wars (traditionally, the Seven Years’ War and Pontiac’s War). The former broke out in 1752 when the French “attacked” the Miami town of Pickawillany. Historians long have seen this attack as a crucial turning point in continental affairs, mostly because it set in motion a chain of events eventually leading to the Seven Years’ War. McDonnell concurs, but insists that scholars “have lost sight of how much Native Americans drove the story” of that war (161). The Pickawillany attack, he explains, was orchestrated by the Anishnaabeg and was merely the first of a number of confrontations in which Native nations pursued their own agendas between 1753 and 1763. Despite Eurocentric narratives of the Seven Years’ War, French and British demands were secondary (if at times overlapping) concerns for Native polities. Moreover, argues McDonnell, this First Anglo-Indian War brought together a pan-Indigenous alliance for the first time, most powerfully in the form of the forty different nations taking part in the siege of Fort William Henry in 1757.

The second Anglo-Indian War, or “Pontiac’s War,” further illuminates Native power in trans-Appalachia. In this case, Michilimackinac Odawas pursued war with the British as part of a strategy to secure their power at the straits between Lakes Michigan and Huron. When combined with the pan-Indigenous coalition attacking British interests further south, the net effect was to “change the course of American history” (217). How? The incredible costs associated with Jeffrey Amherst’s failed military strategy drove “home the urgent need for restoring imperial policy and order” (230). The struggle over the future of the British Empire in North America, in other words, was rooted in the west. The costs associated with incorporating and stabilizing the region within the empire forced new rounds of taxation and the closure of trade loopholes that corrupt easterners had become accustomed to exploiting. To understand the Revolution, one must start in trans-Appalachia.

Robert Morrissey complements and reinforces *Masters of Empire* in significant ways. He begins his story with an analysis of a 1772 appeal by European settlers in “British” Illinois to the leaders of the empire. Their request was for a stronger imperial presence in North America—a seeming curiosity given how many of their eastern counterparts were articulating the opposite position. To Morrissey, the Illinois appeal perfectly reflects the commitment to collaborative governance which Illinois residents and their forbearers—both Indigenous and European—had shared for nearly two centuries. The story begins in the late sixteenth century, when Algonquian-speaking Indigenous people left Lake Erie and settled in Illinois. Their in-migration set in motion significant out-migration on the part of previous inhabitants: Oneotas went west, for example, while Quawpaws went south to the Arkansas River Valley. Fort Ancient cultures, moreover, broke up between 1650 and 1680 and went in multiple directions, only to return to the Ohio Valley in the early eighteenth century. At any rate, these newcomers were the first wave of “colonizers” in the region, argues Morrissey. Eventually known as the Illinois, in the early-to-mid-seventeenth century they created a culture that blended eastern Algonquin experiences with symbols and activities explicitly western. The initial centerpiece was bison hunting. Bison herds also were relatively new to the Illinois prairies, but they were abundant and potentially useful in multiple ways. Hunting them required greater “organization and scale,” however, the result of which was that the Illinois people established a “more unified and cohesive society than was typical of Algonquians and pre-bison Oneota” (23). In the mid-seventeenth century the Illinois added slave raiding to their economic endeavors, while at the same time establishing themselves as middlemen in other forms of mid-continental trade. Their willingness to colonize and exploit borderland resources, says Morrissey, made them flexible, opportunistic, and powerful.

French settlers (Jesuits or otherwise) had absolutely no control over this complex and fluid Indigenous world. To survive they had to defer to Indigenous trade

priorities and diplomatic protocols. A middle ground defined by mutual misunderstanding and accommodation this was not; rather, it was informed, purposeful collaboration, with the Illinois leading the way. And the collaborative impulse gradually bled over into the relationship between European settlers and imperial leadership. To ensure a presence, New France (and eventually Louisiana) officials dealt less rigidly with the settlers, voyageurs, and coureur des bois in Illinois. In turn, settlers fearlessly discarded colonial and imperial directives that were contrary to local interests. When officials failed to abide by the “rules” they paid the price, perhaps most notably in the failed regime of Fort Chartres commander Jean Jacques de Macarty. This multilayered collaborative imperial structure worked, argues Morrissey, and led to a mutually acceptable, stable order across the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In a system such as this one Illinois colonists became something other than “anarchists bent on autonomy and independence. They welcomed empire into their lives and did so willingly, not submissively” (10). Illinois residents wanted to continue this system after the British claimed jurisdiction in the 1760s. Parliament found it difficult to oblige, but locals nevertheless continued to push for a strong—and collaborative—imperial presence in the Revolutionary era.

Taken together, McDonnell and Morrissey insist that scholars need to re-frame the trans-Appalachian experience by placing Indigenous groups at the center. I could not agree more, although two observations are in order. First, it is important to remember that the Anishnaabeg and Illinois lived in close proximity to one another. Their interactions were extensive, complicated, and forced the French to think about Indigenous policies more broadly than with just one group or the other. I would add that the Haudenosaunee, Miamis, and Shawnees to the east, and Chickasaws and Cherokees to the south, regularly traveled into and out of these regions, a point well understood (and accounted for) by French officials in the early eighteenth century. Despite the understandable insistence by Morrissey and McDonnell that the Anishnaabeg or the Illinois were the essential “key” to trans-Appalachia, it seems more accurate to say that no single group controlled this world or its European connections. Second, although McDonnell rightly warns that scholars should rely less on European words in a given moment and more on Native actions over time, both narratives occasionally slip into the trap of defining Indigenous polities through their European interactions. It is an important trap to avoid. Native peoples’ actions and identities had as much or more to do with inter-Indigenous issues than they did either with the British or French.

These observations are not meant to suggest anything negative about these two powerful monographs. Both provide tremendous insight into trans-Appalachian life as well as the region’s impact upon the North American experience. Indeed, scholars will be chewing on *Masters of Empire* and *Empire by Collaboration* for years to come.

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