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978-1-107-00562-4 - The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815

Richard White

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## The middle ground

### Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650–1815

An acclaimed book and widely acknowledged classic, *The Middle Ground* steps outside the simple stories of Indian–white relations – stories of conquest and assimilation and stories of cultural persistence. It is, instead, about a search for accommodation and common meaning. It tells how Europeans and Indians met, regarding each other as alien, as other, as virtually nonhuman, and how between 1650 and 1815 they constructed a common, mutually comprehensible world in the region around the Great Lakes that the French called *pays d'en haut*. Here the older worlds of the Algonquians and of various Europeans overlapped, and their mixture created new systems of meaning and of exchange. Finally, the book tells of the breakdown of accommodation and common meanings and the re-creation of the Indians as alien and exotic. First published in 1991, the twentieth anniversary edition includes a new preface by the author examining the impact and legacy of this study.

Richard White holds the Margaret Byrne Professorship in American History at Stanford University and is widely regarded as one of the nation's leading scholars in three related fields: the American West, Native American history, and environmental history. Professor White is the author of five books, including *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991), which was named a finalist for the 1992 Pulitzer Prize. Among other honors, he is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation fellowship.

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# The middle ground

Indians, empires, and republics  
in the Great Lakes region,  
1650–1815

Twentieth Anniversary Edition

RICHARD WHITE

*Stanford University*



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## *Abbreviations*

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|--|---|
| <p><i>DHNY</i> <i>Documentary History of the State of New York</i>, edited by E. B. O’Callaghan (Albany, N.Y.: Weed, Parsons, 1850–51)</p> <p><i>HBNI</i> <i>Handbook of North American Indians</i>, edited by William C. Sturtevant (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978–)</p> <p><i>IHC</i> <i>Collections of the Illinois Historical Library</i> (Springfield, Ill.: The Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1915–40)</p> <p><i>JP</i> <i>The Papers of Sir William Johnson</i>, edited by James Sullivan et al. (Albany: University of the State of New York, 1921–65)</p> <p><i>JR</i> <i>The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents</i>, edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland, Ohio: Burrows Brothers, 1898)</p> <p><i>MPA</i> <i>Mississippi Provincial Archives, French Dominion</i> (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1927–84)</p> <p><i>MPHC</i> <i>Michigan Pioneer Historical Society: Collections and</i></p> | <p><i>Researches</i> (Lansing, Mich.: The Society, 1877–1929)</p> <p><i>NYCD</i> <i>Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York; Procured in Holland, England and France</i>, by John R. Brodhead, edited by E. B. O’Callaghan (Albany, N.Y.: Parsons, Weed, 1853–87)</p> <p><i>PA</i> <i>Pennsylvania Archives</i> (Philadelphia, Pa.: Joseph Severns; Harrisburg: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1852–1949)</p> <p><i>PCR</i> <i>Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania from the Organization to the Termination of Proprietary Government</i>, edited by Samuel Hazard (Harrisburg, Pa.: Theophilus Fenn, 1838–53)</p> <p><i>RAPQ</i> <i>Rapport de l’Archiviste de la Province de Québec</i> (Quebec: Ls-A. Proulx, 1921–28; Redempti Paradis, 1929–44)</p> <p><i>WHC</i> <i>Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin</i>, edited by Lyman C. Draper and Reuben G. Thwaites (Madison, Wis.: The Society, 1855–1911)</p> |
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## *Preface to the twentieth anniversary edition*

It has been twenty years since I wrote *The Middle Ground*, and since then the book has led an interesting life without me. It has jumped disciplines, moving into literary criticism, anthropology, archaeology, and political science, and it has traveled the world – not just to other parts of North America, where I expected it to go, but also to Africa, Asia, Australia, and Europe. And it has time traveled, all the way back to antiquity in some cases.

I recognized soon after the book was published and achieved its initial success that what was good for a book might not be so good for its author. The danger in my case was that I would be trapped in the book and would spend the rest of my career sitting as the judge in the court of *The Middle Ground*. I would have to rule on whether any given example dragged into my court was an actual middle ground or a set of ordinary compromises posing as something grander.

There were several reasons why I wanted no part of this. The first was that the suspects came from worlds that I often knew little about. It took me ten years to write *The Middle Ground*, and the joy of it was the basic pleasure of writing any history: I went to places that seemed strange to me, and gradually the people there came alive and familiar enough so that they seemed more real to me than the people among whom I passed my days. This worried my wife. It still does. But I did not know nearly so well the worlds of these suspects from Africa, Asia, South America, Australia, New Zealand, and more. How could I judge whether they, too, created middle grounds? I had my suspicions, of course, but not enough to acquit or convict.

The second reason for my hesitation was purely practical. I had other things to do. I have been, professionally at least, a lucky man. There is more that I want to research than I will ever be able to explore. I want the books that I write to speak for themselves so I can go on to other things. As soon as it was published, *The Middle Ground* was largely on its own.

The final reason was based on neither my ignorance, like the first reason, or my selfishness, like the second, but on what I understood the concept to be. *The Middle Ground* is a book about, among other things, mutual misunderstandings and the ways that new meanings are derived from them. It is about the virtues of misreading. This puts an author who acts as a judge and accuses his readers of misreading in an awkward position. This is not to

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say that there have been misreadings of the book. I think there have. But one of the things that I learned in writing the book was that such misreadings can be fruitful in their own right.

Those scholars who have used and critiqued the concept of the middle ground have done me a great honor and a great service. They have helped me to clarify my own thinking about the concept. I can refine my own use of the term without claiming that I am the final judge of its use or that there are no other quite legitimate, and perhaps even more useful, ways to employ the concept. By *middle ground* I meant, I realized in ways that I did not fully grasp when writing the book, two twinned things. First, I was trying to describe a process that arose from the willingness “of those who . . . [sought] to justify their own actions in terms of what they perceived to be their partner’s cultural premises.” Such actors sought out cultural “congruencies, either perceived or actual.” These “often seemed – and, indeed, were results of misunderstandings or accidents.” Such interpretations could be ludicrous, but it did not matter. “Any congruence, no matter how tenuous, can be put to work and take on a life of its own if it is accepted by both sides.” This was and is a process of mutual and creative misunderstanding.<sup>1</sup>

But in developing this idea, I did not always separate it from a second aspect of *The Middle Ground*. I was trying to describe – and this took up the bulk of the book – a quite particular historical space that was the outcome of this larger process. This space was the *pays d’en haut*. Because the middle ground is itself a spatial metaphor, the term has allowed a conflation between the process of expedient and creative misunderstanding and the actual space that I was discussing: the *pays d’en haut* or the upper country of French Canada.

I think I was fairly specific about the elements that were necessary for the construction of such a space: a confrontation between imperial or state regimes and non-state forms of social organization, a rough balance of power, a mutual need or a desire for what the other possesses, and an inability of one side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to do what it desired. Force and violence are hardly foreign to the process of creating and maintaining a middle ground, but the critical element is mediation.

The mediation process is something more than compromise. If all the middle ground meant was compromise between opposing interests, then it would be a concept with little or no utility because compromise is widely recognized by scholars, political actors, and the general public. Why invent

<sup>1</sup> I have in mind here the sympathetic but quite trenchant critique by Philip J. Deloria, “What Is the Middle Ground, Anyway?,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (January 2006); Richard White, *Middle Ground*, 52–53.



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a new name for it? A middle ground is the creation, in part through creative misunderstanding, of a set of practices, rituals, offices, and beliefs that although comprised of elements of the group in contact is as a whole separate from the practices and beliefs of all of those groups. In a partial sense, it is a form of what Lévi-Strauss referred to as a *bricolage*: using materials at hand to overcome a new obstacle, but Lévi-Strauss, as I will discuss later, also set limits on what *bricoleurs* could do and the tools available to them that makes the middle ground something more than his concept of *bricolage*.<sup>2</sup>

I always thought that the middle ground as a process was present in other places and other times: I did not, however, think that every time you find this process at work you would find the construction of a coherent space that is the equivalent of *pays d'en haut*. There are instances in which the process can be evident, but the space may fail to emerge. The French penetrated deep into North America, and west of the Missouri River many of the practices of the middle ground – alliance chiefs, the calumet ceremony, gift exchanges, Catholic missionaries – went with them. There were, too, numerous examples of expedient and creative misunderstandings, but there was no long-lasting equivalent of the *pays d'en haut*.<sup>3</sup> The space of the middle ground depended on the creation of an infrastructure that could support and expand the process, and this infrastructure was possible only when there was both a rough balance of power and a mutual need between the parties involved. Middle grounds as coherent spaces were difficult to produce, but I am not surprised that scholars have found other areas of the Western Hemisphere that contained middle grounds, as has, for example, Claudia Garcia, who has employed the concept in studying the Mosquito Indians at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>4</sup>

The ways in which the processes of the middle ground produce coherent spaces equivalent to the *pays d'en haut* do not have to follow the exact model that I described in *The Middle Ground*. I am perfectly willing to admit that the process of the middle ground and what Jonathan Lipman in his *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* calls “a place in which peoples adjust to their differences while positioned between cultures” do not necessarily depend on an exact replication of the sequences of development in the *pays d'en haut* or a reliance on the same or even similar institutions. When Lipman finds a “long process of sometimes expedient, sometimes deadly, mutual misunderstandings,” I feel like I am in familiar territory,

<sup>2</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 16–17.

<sup>3</sup> Richard White, “Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (January 2006): 9–14.

<sup>4</sup> Claudia Garcia, “Ambivalencia de las representaciones coloniales: Líderes indios y zambos de la costa de Mosquitos a fines del siglo XVIII,” *Revista de Indias* LXVII: 241 (2007): 673–94.

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even though I know nothing except what Lipman tells his readers of the Muslims in his particular section of Northwest China.<sup>5</sup>

I have been particularly pleased when other scholars underline aspects of the process that I recognized but did not fully explore and make their own original use of it. I have long admired and used the work of James C. Scott, but when he in *The Art of Not Being Governed* emphasizes the “case for beginning with the elementary unit of the household and treating villages, tribes, and confederations as provisional and shaky alliances,” he underscores a particular aspect of the *pays d'en haut* that, although he credits me with using it to “brilliant effect,” he uses far more effectively. He takes my sometimes naïve empiricism and turns it into a much more formidable comparative analysis with fuller theoretical insight.<sup>6</sup> Scott is interested in “zones of insubordination,” particularly shatter zones in which fragments of larger groups seek sanctuary and opportunity beyond the reach of states or conquerors. His larger project is an attempt to understand Zomia – a name for an area that includes the highlands of Southeast Asia in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma but stretches into India and includes four Chinese provinces. These areas were used as a refuge over centuries for people in flight from state-making projects who came to form “a vast state-resistant periphery.”<sup>7</sup> He links Zomia to similar regions of refuge in Latin America, Brazil, the Andes, and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> In Zomia, as in the *pays d'en haut*, identities are often plural, local groups are often autonomous, and groups readily fragment.<sup>9</sup>

I am nearly as pleased when people fail to find a middle ground as when they do, for a negative finding also involves an effort to take the concept seriously. Henry Reynolds states flatly that “[t]here was no ‘middle ground’ in Australia.”<sup>10</sup> The concept is imperial in that it is often found in the company of empires, but I never had imperial ambitions for the concept itself. After all, if the middle ground was everywhere, then it might as well be nowhere at all. The best historical concepts are those that are good to think with, and when I find scholars actively engaging the concept, rigorously applying it to their own material, and then explaining why what they found

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), xxxiii. For the different use of the term to understand Mongol relations with the Manchu, see Johan Elverskog, *Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism, and the State in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>6</sup> James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 38.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, ix, 129–31.

<sup>8</sup> Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 131–37.

<sup>9</sup> Scott, *Art of Not Being Governed*, 210–11.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Reynolds, *The Other Side of the Frontier* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006), 7.

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was not really a middle ground, I am proud of the book. It is doing its work well. In a book such as Pekka Hämäläinen's recent *The Comanche Empire*, no middle ground emerges, but to the extent that the concept helped Hämäläinen refine his own ideas about the quite interesting and important social formation that he found in Comancheria, it did its work well.<sup>11</sup>

When the concept of the middle ground has moved over into other disciplines, the scholars using it have usually, but not always, been concerned with American Indian peoples. Literary critics such as Amelia V. Katanski have found emergent middle grounds in Indian boarding schools and used the concept to interpret texts about these boarding schools.<sup>12</sup> And Harwig Isernhagen has found echoes, but hardly a recreation, of the middle ground in Federal Writer's Projects texts from the 1930s and 1940s in the Midwest.<sup>13</sup> And scholars have found the middle ground useful in describing contemporary political developments. Beth A. Conklin and Laura R. Graham found the concept useful in understanding environmental conflicts in the Amazon, particularly in "arenas where Amazonian Indians and environmentally concerned outsiders interact." Their middle ground is "a political space, an arena of intercultural communication, exchange, and joint political action."<sup>14</sup>

The book has hardly been uncontroversial, but the attacks on it, both implicitly and quite explicitly, have not led me to change my mind about the concept itself or its particular manifestation in the *pays d'en haut*. If anything, they have hardened my position because I think there are very important issues at stake. I have no intention of answering all the criticisms of *The Middle Ground*. I am perfectly content to have readers determine the merits of such critiques, but I will address two works that raise larger issues about both the nature of relations between empires and pre-state societies and the possibilities of cross-cultural understanding and accommodation. These are issues of considerable importance and continuing interest to me.

The major empirical attack on *The Middle Ground* has been from Giles Havard, who, surveying the early period covered by the book, asserts, in effect, that there was no middle ground in the *pays d'en haut*. Havard also makes an interesting theoretical attack. The strongest conceptual attack, however, has come from James Merrell. Our books share some common

<sup>11</sup> Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 8, 54, 130.

<sup>12</sup> Amelia V. Katanski, *Learning to Write "Indian": The Boarding-School Experience and American Indian Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 17, 105.

<sup>13</sup> Harwig Isernhagen, "Identity and Exchange: The Representation of 'the Indian' in Federal Writers Project and in Contemporary Native American Literature," in Gretchen M. Bataille (ed.), *Native American Representations: First Encounters, Distorted Images, and Literary Appropriations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 186–87.

<sup>14</sup> Beth A. Conklin and Laura R. Graham, "The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 97 (Dec. 1995): 695–710.

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figures, but he only touches on the fringes of the *pays d'en haut*, and he barely mentions *The Middle Ground*. He does, however, challenge the possibility of successful mediation and the creation of the common world that I describe.

Havard makes his most detailed criticism of *The Middle Ground* in his *Empire et métissages: Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660–1775*, and a second more nuanced criticism in his recent review of the French edition of my book. Havard is a formidable scholar and *Empire et métissages* is an impressive book, but its argument of a *Pax Gallica* and French mastery is in many ways a reconceptualization of exactly the concept of imperial power and dominance that I set out to critique in *The Middle Ground*. To the extent that Havard recognizes the operation of a middle ground, he sees it only as a tool of French manipulation of Indians. Indeed, he regards interpretations that stress Indian manipulation of Europeans as an imposition of a Western point of view on Indian actions that proceed from quite different cultural premises.<sup>15</sup>

When Havard argues that mediation itself can be an instrument of power, I do not disagree. This is one of the theses of *The Middle Ground*. The book does not deny the power of empires, but rather it limits and complicates that power. Where Havard and I differ is in seeing mediation as a French invention and imposition. Mediation had European equivalents, but its forms and inspiration in the *pays d'en haut* were largely native. As Bacqueville de la Potherie (also known as Claude-Charles Le Roy) noted in his *Histoire de l'Amérique septentrionale*, the Potawatomis were the original mediators and rivals of the French. European politics of empire persisted, but the alliance, as I argued, “merged the French politics of empire with the kinship politics of the village.” Far from being a simple tool of empire, mediation was a time-consuming, expensive, often frustrating endeavor that French officials, particularly those new to Canada, often rebelled against. As Louis Antoine de Bougainville complained, it was a work of “eternal little detail, petty, and one of which Europe has no idea.”<sup>16</sup> Mediation was power, but in the *pays d'en haut* it was a paradoxical power.

The French were at their strongest when they appeared, at least to themselves, the most weak. When they offered goods freely, when they mediated quarrels, when they stayed Algonquian hatchets and covered the dead, then they achieved a status that no other group could rival.

They were, conversely, at their weakest when they appeared the most dangerous and powerful. When Onontio, either for his own reasons or at

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Havard, *Empire et métissages: Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660–1775* (Sillery, Quebec: Les Éditions du Septentrion, 2003), 400–03, 759. *Revue D'Histoire Moderne Et Contemporaine* 57-1 (2010): 204–06.

<sup>16</sup> *Middle Ground*, 35, 37, 173.

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the urging of his allies, abandoned mediation and deployed force, then his special status began to dissipate. One welcomed a kind father; one sought protection against a vengeful father. The logic of the alliance could not easily encompass a father who participated in, rather than settled the quarrels of his children.<sup>17</sup>

Havard not only wants to resurrect a quite old-fashioned imperialism in which Europeans always command, but he also appeals to a now old-fashioned structuralist anthropology rooted in a simplification of the more problematic assumptions of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Havard has caused me to return to the work of Lévi-Strauss, who at one point had a great influence on my thinking, and whose work and boldness I admire. When Havard accuses me of ignoring the differences between hot societies (historical, progressive, cumulative) and cold societies (so-called primitive societies removed from “history” and progress and devoted to cyclical repetition), he is right. I do not accept rigid distinctions between people of history and people both “without history” and who refuse to understand their experiences historically. The societies that created the middle ground were hybrid. They certainly have ritual means to deny the disruptions of history, to restore all to a balanced and anterior state, but not only are these rituals themselves very often new and historical, but they could be consciously created and manipulated to achieve new ends. They were meant to shape events and create, if necessary, new structures. I think virtually all societies contain aspects of cyclical and historical thinking, but in this I am not that different from Lévi-Strauss at his more nuanced.

Lévi-Strauss was a brilliant, complicated, and, over the course of a long life, not always consistent thinker. His structuralism made him inclined to begin with binaries, and he certainly believed that the “characteristic feature of the savage mind is its timelessness; its object is to grasp the world as both a synchronic and a diachronic totality.”<sup>18</sup> His views became more nuanced and complicated over time. It is easy to miss this nuance because the connotation of the very term *savage mind*, the English title of his classic work, distorts his arguments. He intended to distinguish between ways of thinking – mythical or “wild,” on the one hand, and “scientific” on the other – in all human beings rather than create a typology of societies, but because virtually all of his examples were drawn from premodern and non-state societies where his “wild” thinking predominated, it became very easy to read him as creating a dichotomy between “savage” societies and the civilized. He had so often to deny the accusations of formalism and idealism leveled against him and to

<sup>17</sup> *Middle Ground*, 182–83.

<sup>18</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 263.

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cite his advocacy of historical interpretations because his histories sometimes seemed so hypothetical and his categorical thinking was so pronounced.<sup>19</sup>

To see an historian such as Havard citing the more ahistorical aspects of Lévi-Strauss is doubly odd. First, because the received idea of Indian peoples as being either a people without history or a cold society incapable of thinking historically would seemingly be the first thing an historian would question, and, second, because it neglects the odd dance Lévi-Strauss did with history. He embraced it in one place and implicitly denied its reach in others. He defined the ambition of the historian as striving “to reconstruct the picture of vanished societies as they were at the points which for them corresponded to the present, while the ethnographer does his best to reconstruct the historical stages which temporally preceded their existing form.” Typically, he began with a simple binary division. Anthropologists studied diversity in contemporary space; historians studied diversity across time.<sup>20</sup> This is a division of labor few modern historians would accept, but neither is it one that Lévi-Strauss clung to very consistently. He often made a more expansive history part of his anthropology. In a 1960 interview Lévi-Strauss clarified his explanation of what he meant by a “hot” society. “We try to define,” he said, “ourselves in opposition to our ancestors. Change is thus much more rapid. We are not only aware of the existence of history but we wish with the knowledge we have of our past to reorientate the future, legitimize or criticize the evolution of our society.”<sup>21</sup> “Hot,” in this sense of ourselves as living in a world different from our ancestors and using the “knowledge we have of our past to reorientate the future,” is quite close to what many historians mean when they use the term *modern*. Hot and cold societies were to Lévi-Strauss poles, and actual societies existed along a continuum. He did not intend to describe societies with utterly discrete and incommensurate ways of thinking.

A fundamental thrust of *The Middle Ground* is to assert that Indian peoples in the *pays d'en haut* were modern, a people of history whom events had forced to charter a new and dangerous route into the future. They were not captured and imprisoned in some state beyond history. I do not expect that Lévi-Strauss would have agreed with me, but neither would I expect him necessarily to take Havard's position. When Lévi-Strauss attacked Sartre for creating an ahistorical prison in which “each subject's group and period now takes the place of timeless consciousness,” and for the “egocentricity and naivety” of thinking that existential truth lies in a single historical epoch in the

<sup>19</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 1:8–11.

<sup>20</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 256.

<sup>21</sup> Manuel Osorio, “Interview with Claude Lévi-Strauss,” *UNESCO Courier* (Oct. 1990).

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West, he was arguing for porous and social boundaries and comprehension across time and space.<sup>22</sup>

In 1952, with the shock of World War II and fascism still quite fresh, Lévi-Strauss wrote a little book, a pamphlet really, for UNESCO entitled *Race and History*.<sup>23</sup> Parts of it are now quite dated, but much of it remains compelling and fresh. Embedded in it is an argument against the idea of cultures as hermetically sealed containers incapable “of a true judgment of any other, since no culture can lay aside its own limitation.”<sup>24</sup> His ideas of how colonized peoples adjust to the presence of colonizers were sketchy, schematic, and anecdotal, but he clearly recognized that the results were in large part a product of power, and that in conditions of roughly equal power societies adjusted without necessarily surrendering their “*Weltanschauung*.”<sup>25</sup> But more than this, he asserted that “all cultural progress depends on a coalition of cultures,” and that the paradoxical challenge of historical change is that human progress in the widest sense depends on both overcoming difference through coalitions and reproducing difference – because human vitality depends on diversity. In this very broad sense, what Lévi-Strauss thought as the modern challenge was the one prefigured in the *pays d'en haut* and on the middle ground.<sup>26</sup>

Whether I cite a debt to or a difference from Lévi-Strauss thus depends on what particular aspect of his thought is at issue. When he deals in typologies, then I make little use of his work, but he often creates concepts and metaphors that can be expanded beyond his own use of them. His idea of *bricolage* is a brilliant metaphor, but to the extent that he imagined it as a mark of a closed system in which those within are unable to imagine the kind of design and technique that he takes as a mark of science, then the concept is not very helpful to me. But there is no reason that *bricolage* has to be kept pure and confined to premodern societies. *Bricolage* can reach out to include new elements – including those Lévi-Strauss marked as modern or “scientific.”<sup>27</sup> In such combinations it can create the kind of calculated change that we see as a mark of modernity. A leader such as Tecumseh could be, for example, considered a *bricoleur*, but he was also modern and revolutionary.

James Merrell’s critique of *The Middle Ground* in his book *Into the American Woods* is more implicit than explicit. It is in some respects virtually the opposite of Havard’s because where Havard sees overwhelming colonial power and portrays mediation as a successful European tool that ensured

<sup>22</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 249, 254.

<sup>23</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952).

<sup>24</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History*, 47–48.

<sup>27</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 22.

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domination, Merrell portrays mediation as relying heavily on Indian diplomatic practices. And in the broadest sense Merrell's trajectory of Indians as a people who once mattered to Europeans because they were both threatening and necessary but who became "specimens to be pitied or studied" is the trajectory of the middle ground.<sup>28</sup> In its ultimate implications, however, it is quite similar because he too questions the possibility of accommodation in contests between imperial powers and non-state actors. But on the Pennsylvania frontier, an area on the edges of the *pays d'en haut*, Merrell sees no evidence of a middle ground and regards mediation as ultimately a failure. The mediators themselves "were unable to see past their differences in order to embrace their similarities."<sup>29</sup> If all Merrell contended was that mediation failed and no middle ground emerged in Pennsylvania, it would hardly count as a critique of *The Middle Ground* because I never claim that the whole colonial world was the *pays d'en haut*, and my middle ground emerged among the French, not the British. But Merrell's study is not so easily dismissed. Some of the figures in his book – the Montours, George Croghan – are also central figures in mine, but again it is entirely possible that people who succeed in one arena fail in another. What is more significant is that Merrell not only blames the failure in part on the mediators but also sees misunderstanding and distrust as simply dead ends. In Pennsylvania he finds that "misunderstanding and mistrust ruled."<sup>30</sup> Misunderstanding and mistrust also ruled in the *pays d'en haut*, but they were put to creative uses. For Merrell, however, misunderstanding and mistrust seem incapable of generating anything beyond misunderstanding and mistrust. There was no possibility of mutually comprehensible worlds. The very tools – treaties and councils – designed to create a common world made it impossible. The paths through the woods led nowhere.<sup>31</sup>

In order to make sure that Merrell and I are not talking past each other, it is best to reiterate my position in the middle ground and understanding between cultures. One of the books that most helped me in thinking about the middle ground was Greg Dening's wonderful *Islands and Beaches*. Dening was quite literally describing contact along the beaches of Polynesia, but he turned it into a metaphor of contact zones – beaches – and the existing native cultures not fully visible from the beaches. In *The Middle Ground* I was far less interested in examining the interior cultural world – the native islands – than in exploring the beaches from which the vast majority of surviving historical sources survive. In Dening's terms, the middle ground was a kind

<sup>28</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*, 58, 314.

<sup>29</sup> James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 294.

<sup>30</sup> Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 256, 278–79.



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of beach. A native world existed beyond it and was sometimes visible from it, but the existence of the beach did not depend on Europeans fully grasping or sympathizing with what went on within the island.<sup>32</sup>

The middle ground did not involve the achievement of a widespread mutual understanding and appreciation between Europeans and Indian peoples. People did not come together to love one another. Nor does the concept of a middle ground envision the elimination of either native cultures or of European cultures and their replacement by some common hybrid. I presume the persistence of many aspects of the old alongside the creation of the new. As I wrote,

Although identifiable Frenchmen and identifiable Indians obviously continued to exist, whether a particular practice or way of doing things was French or Indian was, after a time, not so clear. This was not because individual Indians became “Frenchified” or because individual Frenchmen went native, although both might occur. Rather, it was because Algonquians who were perfectly comfortable with their status and practices as Indians and Frenchmen, confident in the rightness of French ways, nonetheless had to deal with people who shared neither their values nor their assumptions about the appropriate way of accomplishing tasks. They had to arrive at some common conception of suitable ways of acting.<sup>33</sup>

James Merrell and I share the same question. Can the peoples of two different cultures understand each other to a degree that they can accommodate their differences? In two similar historical contexts we not only arrived at different answers but seem to be looking for different things. I contend that in the *pays d'en haut* the French and the people I lump together as Algonquians created a hybrid world that, although derived from existing French and Indian worlds, was something new. I don't claim the two groups did this by understanding and appreciating the other's cultural perspective, but rather I claim they did it by capitalizing on creative misunderstandings. Merrell seems much more focused on seeing mutual understanding as the route to accommodation.

In this regard, Merrell and I are looking for two different and incommensurate things, and I could leave it at that, but to do so would slight the very serious issues that Merrell raises. In a single sentence at the end of his book, perhaps written more for effect than anything else, he took a question about the impossibility of “Indians and White people” living together on the

<sup>32</sup> Greg Dening, *Islands and Beaches: Discourses on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774–1880* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1980).

<sup>33</sup> *Middle Ground*, 50.

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Pennsylvania frontier without “a perpetual Scene of quarreling” and universalized it across all American history. In contrast to his careful consideration of the Pennsylvania woods, he offered no evidence for this. He mentioned Wounded Knee, indicated that nothing has changed in the twentieth century, and moved on. The question is as close as he comes to saying directly that a middle ground never emerged in North America, but asked in the context of *Into the American Woods* it has implications for the middle ground. If accommodation and understanding were not achieved in Pennsylvania, and if they were never achieved elsewhere during the centuries of contact on the continent, then the inevitable conclusion seems to be that such accommodation is dismayingly difficult, if not impossible, for Western cultures when in contact with non-Western peoples.<sup>34</sup>

I obviously do think that mutual comprehension and accommodation, although hardly without quarreling or violence, has been historically possible between Indians and Europeans and their descendants; that, after all, is what *The Middle Ground* is about. But what interests me is less how Merrell and I read our particular slices of the historical record than the premises that lay behind his assertion of nearly half a millennia of incomprehension and conflict seemingly so total that comprehending and accommodating the other in North America seems for all practical purposes impossible.

To make a historical claim that eighteenth-century Indians and colonists never could understand and accommodate each other, despite their belief that they at least on occasion did, necessarily involves a claim by historians that they can understand things in the past that historical actors themselves did not understand. In principle, I agree with this claim, and there are easy examples of cases in which this is true. When people in the eighteenth century were describing physical phenomena – eclipses, earthquakes, epidemics – that we can also directly observe, there is certainly reason to make a claim for our superior understanding. When, however, they are describing cultural phenomena for which they are often our only source, the situation is different. What is at issue is less absolute truth claims than their ability to derive mutually comprehensible meanings and, in effect, to communicate and to act together. When an historian denies that such communication existed, both we and they descend into a fog, and we, as much as them, are faced with all kinds of interpretative difficulties. How can we know what is going on?

I presume that Merrell wrote his book because he thought he had come to understand both colonists and Indians. Authors often fail to understand their subjects, but it would be a strange book whose purpose was to demonstrate the author’s failure to understand his subjects. Because Merrell achieves what his subjects supposedly could not do, the question becomes how. He

<sup>34</sup> Merrell, *Into the American Woods*, 301.

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is, after all, laboring under formidable difficulties. He is separated by two centuries or more from a native society that left few or no written records of its own. There are colonial sources of Indian actions but by Merrell's account these are largely records of the writers' bewilderment and incomprehension.

There seems to be only two ways that we can claim to know about eighteenth-century Pennsylvania Indians. The first is through surviving historical accounts, virtually all of which are either by non-Indians or transcribed by non-Indians. Merrell sees them as evidence of misunderstanding and incomprehension. To know that they are records of incomprehension, he must have some other way of knowing about colonists and Indians. This leads to a second common claim made by ethnohistorians. They know the past through knowing the present. A native cultural tradition has persisted intact over time into the present or near present and either has entered the anthropological record or survives among particular Indian peoples or native intellectuals. There are all kinds of thorny methodological issues here, but all that concerns me is the claim that a common understanding is possible. At some point, modern historians claim to understand an American Indian cultural tradition and to have reached some kind of working accommodation with Indian peoples. They think the meanings they have derived can be read back into the past.

Ethnohistorians have sought to combine the persistence of cultures with the fragmentary evidence of the past to yield a hybrid knowledge of the past. The ethnohistorical technique of upstreaming – reading contemporary cultural practices back onto the past – makes use of the assumption that modern scholars can do what Merrell contends eighteenth-century colonists could not – understand the Indian other and share common practices with them. I have grave problems with upstreaming that are not germane here, but I have no problem with the underlying assumption that Indian peoples can and do teach scholars alien to their communities much about those communities.

I extend that assumption into the past and presume that people could create common understandings and common practices across cultural boundaries in the past just as they do in the present. I don't think people in the past, any more than in the present, fully understood each other. To me that is the beauty of the middle ground: it allowed people to forge mutual understanding out of similarity and misunderstanding. For a scholar to deny this possibility is to appropriate to ourselves an ability that we deny to the people we study. Such an assumption seems both arrogant and unlikely. Knowing that cultural practices traveled; knowing that individuals passed from one community to another, happily or unhappily; and knowing that people married, traded, fought together, and more, it is hard for me to conceive of the impossibility of successful communication and occasional accommodation. That it did

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not always or usually lead to a middle ground is not the issue. It is the possibility that I want to leave open. The safest approach is to assume that our sources must be a product of, and thus a preservation of, some degree of reliable communication between past actors. I am not arguing that everything in them reflects accurate understandings, but only that they do reflect communication and thus at least partial understandings. To claim otherwise is to cut off the intellectual branch that we are sitting on. All goes dark. The only honest response of an historian would be to say nothing or to write only of those who produced the records and assert that colonial records produce only knowledge about colonists. The postmodernist turn that took this position was honest, but it also led to a kind of cultural solipsism. It is what Lévi-Strauss critiqued even before postmodernism.

The question of speaking across cultural boundaries and forging new systems of meaning seems so important to me in the early twenty-first century for much the same reason that similar problems seemed so important to Lévi-Strauss in the mid-twentieth century, when he wrote *Race and History*. *The Middle Ground* is a work of history, but it is also something more. It is an exploration of accommodation and social change, of the constant and related production of common meaning and difference. It is a concept that I would hope has work to do in the world. As Jonathan Lipman notes, “Most, if not all, of the contemporary world’s nation-states are coming to terms with domestic minorities – people who belong to more than one culture simultaneously; people who live in the ‘middle ground’ and who have created new and syncretic cultures there.”<sup>35</sup> And more than that, in a world where once again pundits, with many opinions and less knowledge, assign whole peoples to alien pasts that are unable to comprehend modernity, the middle ground seems to me a place of hope.

<sup>35</sup> Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*, xxxvi.

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## *Introduction*

Stories of cultural contact and change have been structured by a pervasive dichotomy: absorption by the other or resistance to the other. A fear of lost identity, a Puritan taboo on mixing beliefs and bodies, hangs over the process. Yet what if identity is conceived not as [a] boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject? The story or stories of interaction must then be more complex, less linear and teleological.

James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*

The history of Indian-white relations has not usually produced complex stories. Indians are the rock, European peoples are the sea, and history seems a constant storm. There have been but two outcomes: The sea wears down and dissolves the rock; or the sea erodes the rock but cannot finally absorb its battered remnant, which endures. The first outcome produces stories of conquest and assimilation; the second produces stories of cultural persistence. The tellers of such stories do not lie. Some Indian groups did disappear; others did persist. But the tellers of such stories miss a larger process and a larger truth. The meeting of sea and continent, like the meeting of whites and Indians, creates as well as destroys. Contact was not a battle of primal forces in which only one could survive. Something new could appear.

As many scholars have noted, American myth, in a sense, retained the wider possibilities that historians have denied American history. Myths have depicted contact as a process of creation and invention. With Daniel Boone and his successors, a “new man” appeared, created by the meeting of whites and Indians, a product of the violent absorption of the Indians by the whites. Myth, however, only partially transcended the stories of conquest and resistance. Only whites changed. Indians disappeared. Whites conquered Indians and made them a sacrifice in what Richard Slotkin called a “regeneration through violence.”

The story told in this book steps outside these simpler stories and incorporates them in a more complex and less linear narrative. The book is about a search for accommodation and common meaning. It is almost circular in form. It tells how Europeans and Indians met and regarded each other as alien, as other, as virtually nonhuman. It tells how, over the next two centuries, they constructed a common, mutually comprehensible world in the

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region around the Great Lakes the French called the *pays d'en haut*. This world was not an Eden, and it should not be romanticized. Indeed, it could be a violent and sometimes horrifying place. But in this world the older worlds of the Algonquians and of various Europeans overlapped, and their mixture created new systems of meaning and of exchange. But finally, the narrative tells of the breakdown of accommodation and common meanings and the re-creation of the Indians as alien, as exotic, as other.

In this story, the accommodation I speak of is not acculturation under a new name. As commonly used, *acculturation* describes a process in which one group becomes more like another by borrowing discrete cultural traits. Acculturation proceeds under conditions in which a dominant group is largely able to dictate correct behavior to a subordinate group. The process of accommodation described in this book certainly involves cultural change, but it takes place on what I call the middle ground. The middle ground is the place in between: in between cultures, peoples, and in between empires and the nonstate world of villages. It is a place where many of the North American subjects and allies of empires lived. It is the area between the historical foreground of European invasion and occupation and the background of Indian defeat and retreat.

On the middle ground diverse peoples adjust their differences through what amounts to a process of creative, and often expedient, misunderstandings. People try to persuade others who are different from themselves by appealing to what they perceive to be the values and practices of those others. They often misinterpret and distort both the values and the practices of those they deal with, but from these misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices – the shared meanings and practices of the middle ground.

This accommodation took place because for long periods of time in large parts of the colonial world whites could neither dictate to Indians nor ignore them. Whites needed Indians as allies, as partners in exchange, as sexual partners, as friendly neighbors. The processes of the middle ground were not confined to the groups under discussion here. Indeed, a middle ground undoubtedly began among the Iroquois and the Hurons during a period earlier than the one this book examines. The middle ground was not simply a phenomenon of the *pays d'en haut*, but this mutual accommodation had a long and full existence there. The *pays d'en haut*, or upper country, was the land upriver from Montreal, but strictly speaking it did not begin until the point where voyageurs passed beyond Huronia on the eastern shore of Lake Huron. The *pays d'en haut* included the lands around Lake Erie but not those near southern Lake Ontario, which fell within Iroquoia. It took in all the Great Lakes and stretched beyond them to the Mississippi. In the seventeenth century, the *pays d'en haut* included the lands bordering the

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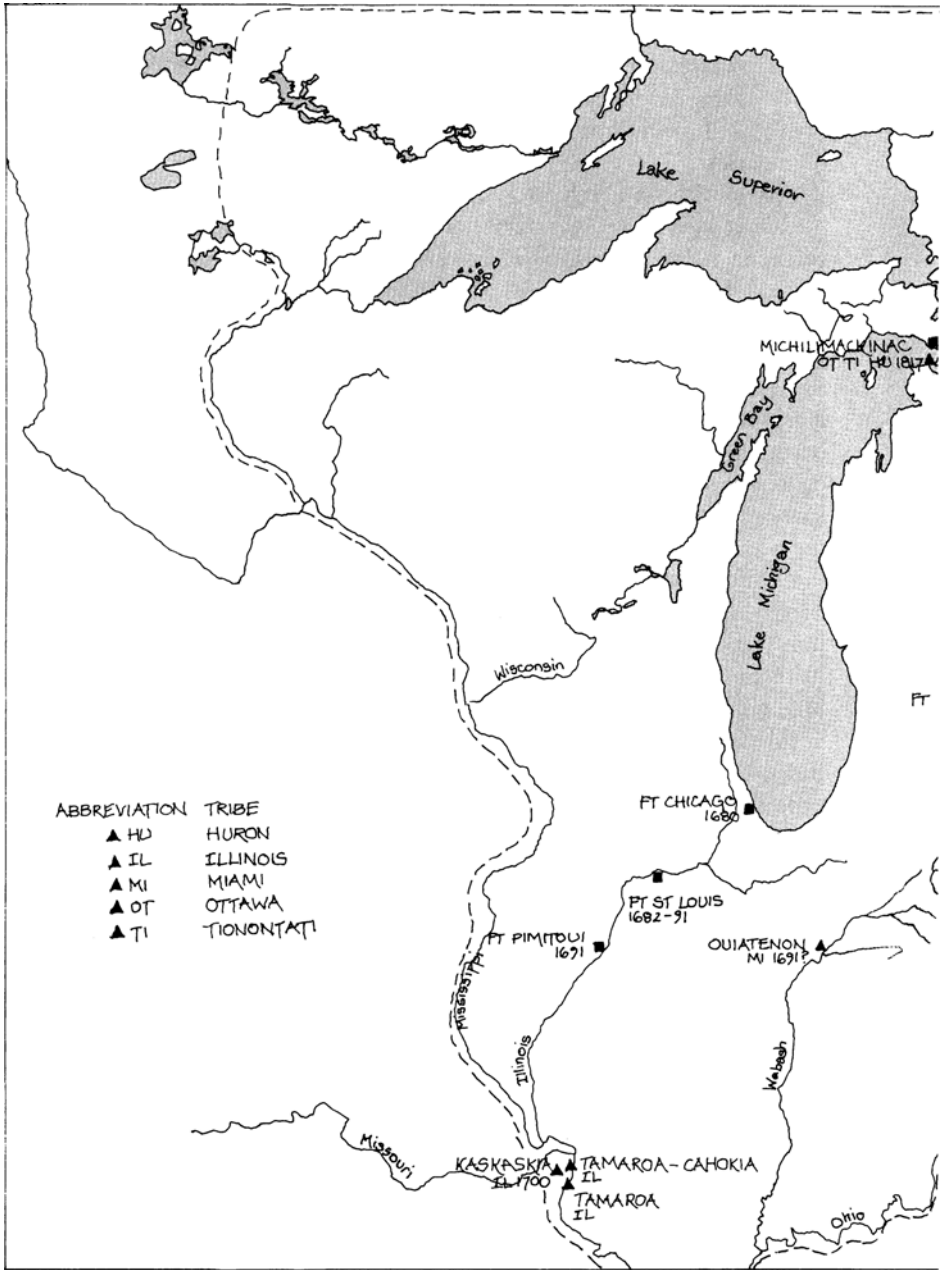
rivers flowing into the northern Great Lakes and the lands south of the lakes to the Ohio. As the French fur trade expanded, the *pays d'en haut* expanded with it, but in the frame of this book, the *pays d'en haut* retains its original boundaries.

I have, with some reluctance, referred to the people living within the *pays d'en haut* as Algonquians. The term is admittedly problematic. *Algonquian* refers to a language group the domain of whose speakers stretched far beyond the *pays d'en haut*. And not all the peoples of the *pays d'en haut* were Algonquian speakers. The Huron-Petuns were Iroquoian as, later, were the offshoots of the Iroquois – the Mingos. The Winnebagos were Siouan. I have, however, taken the term as a collective name for the inhabitants of the *pays d'en haut* because Algonquian speakers were the dominant group, and because with the onslaught of the Iroquois, the Algonquians forged a collective sense of themselves as people distinct from, and opposed to, the Five Nations, or the Iroquois proper. Most, and often all, of these villagers of the *pays d'en haut* were also enemies of the Sioux and of the peoples south of the Ohio. A collection of individually weak groups – originally refugees – these villagers created a common identity as children of Onontio, that is, of the French governor. I have imposed the name “Algonquian” on them to distinguish them from Onontio’s other children, with whom they often had little contact.

In writing this history of the *pays d'en haut*, I am practicing the “new Indian history.” But as new histories age, they become, in part, new orthodoxies while surreptitiously taking on elements of the older history they sought to displace. This book is “new Indian history” because it places Indian peoples at the center of the scene and seeks to understand the reasons for their actions. It is only incidentally a study of the staple of the “old history” – white policy toward Indians. But this book is also, and indeed primarily, a study of Indian-white relations, for I found that no sharp distinctions between Indian and white worlds could be drawn. Different peoples, to be sure, remained identifiable, but they shaded into each other.

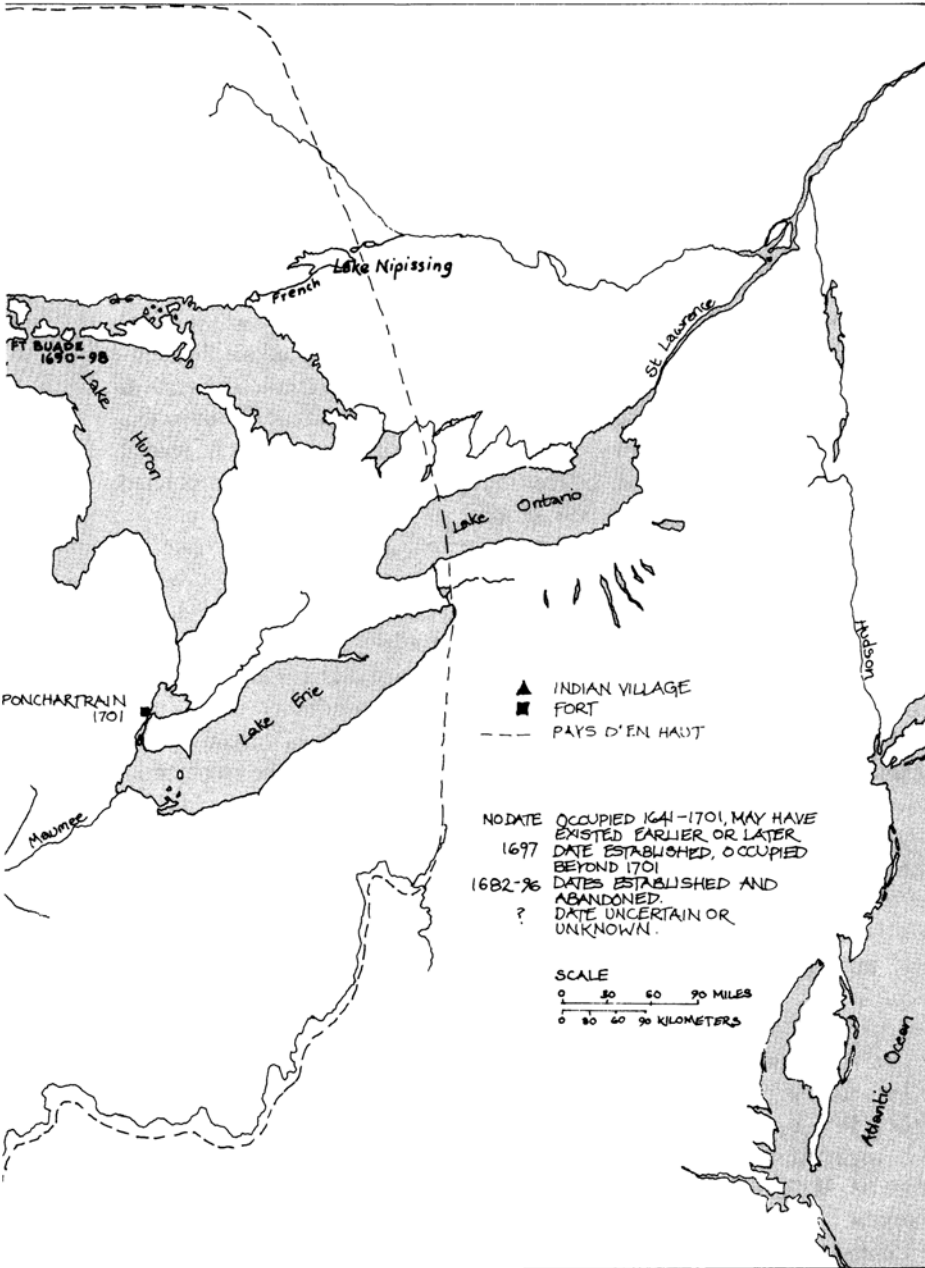
For the purposes of this book, many of the conventions of both the new history and the old are of dubious utility for understanding the world I seek to explain. I am, for example, describing imperialism, and I am describing aspects of a world system. But this is an imperialism that weakens at its periphery. At the center are hands on the levers of power, but the cables have, in a sense, been badly frayed or even cut. It is a world system in which minor agents, allies, and even subjects at the periphery often guide the course of empires. This is an odd imperialism and a complicated world system. Similarly, the European writings of the period on Indians – the endless dissertations on the *sauvage* (savage) – become of marginal utility for understanding a world where Europeans living alongside Indians of necessity

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developed a far more intimate and sophisticated knowledge of Indian peoples than did European savants. What Rousseau thought about Indians matters, but to understand the *pays d'en haut*, it does not matter as much as what the habitants of Vincennes or Kaskaskia thought, or what Onontio, the French governor at Quebec, thought.

The usual conventions of writing about Indians were as unhelpful as unmodified ideas about imperialism, world systems, or savagery. Ethnohistorians have increasingly come to distrust the tribe as a meaningful historical unit, and the *pays d'en haut* was certainly not a place where tribal loyalties controlled human actions. I have used tribal designations throughout this book, but they should be understood largely as ethnic rather than political or even cultural designations. The meaningful political unit in this study is the village, and Indian villages usually contained members of several tribes, just as Anglo-American villages in the backcountry usually contained members of several different ethnic groups.

I have also tried to avoid the ethnohistorical technique of upstreaming, although diligent readers will, I am sure, find places where I have indulged in it. Upstreaming is a technique of using ethnologies of present-day or nineteenth-century Indian groups to interpret Indian societies of the past. If assimilationist studies have a built-in bias toward the disappearance of earlier culture, then upstreaming has a bias toward continuity.

I have similarly tried to avoid using the term *traditional* to convey any meaning but old. The Indian people I describe in this book have no essential Indianness. They are people who for a long time resolutely fought the European tendency to create them as the other. They asserted a separate identity, but they also claimed a common humanity in a shared world. They lost the fight to establish that claim, and this book is in part the story of that loss. Just as anthropologists and ethnologists have come to recognize how they, through their research, create the other as object, it is time for historians and ethnohistorians to pay more attention to such creations in the past and their own roles in perpetuating and adding to them.

The world of the *pays d'en haut*, then, is not a traditional world either seeking to maintain itself unchanged or eroding under the pressure of whites. It is a joint Indian-white creation. Within it well-known European and Anglo-American names appear: the Comte de Frontenac, Sir Jeffrey Amherst, William Johnson, Daniel Boone, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. So, too, do well-known Indian names such as Pontiac and Tecumseh. That so many names significant in the larger American history occur in this story without dominating it indicates that the parameters of American history need readjusting. Colonial and early-American historians have made Indians marginal to the periods they describe. They have treated them as curiosities in a world that Indians also helped create.

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This was a world created in the midst of great and far-reaching changes. To readers it may seem a world in perpetual crisis, but this is partially an artifact of the way I tell the story and of the nature of the records. I open with the onslaught of the Iroquois, who may appear initially as a *deus ex machina*. The wars of the Iroquois proper, or the Five (later Six) Nations, were, however, a result of changes as complicated as any I present here. The reader should not mistake their warfare for “normal” Indian warfare in North America. It, too, was a complex product of European expansion. By devoting a key part of the first portion of the book to the Fox, and by focusing a middle portion of the book on the confrontation along the Ohio, I emphasize the major crises of the alliance. This tactic is necessary because in crises the relations among these people emerged most clearly and also because the crises generated the most records. It should be remembered, however, that during most of the time between 1680 and 1763, the vast majority of Algonquians remained Onontio’s loyal children.

The real crisis and the final dissolution of this world came when Indians ceased to have the power to force whites onto the middle ground. Then the desire of whites to dictate the terms of accommodation could be given its head. As a consequence, the middle ground eroded. The American Republic succeeded in doing what the French and English empires could not do. Americans invented Indians and forced Indians to live with the consequences of this invention. It is the Americans’ success that gives the book its circularity. Europeans met the other, invented a long-lasting and significant common world, but in the end reinvented the Indian as other. Ever since, we have seen the history of the colonial and early republican period through that prism of otherness.

I would not have undertaken the research for, and writing of, this book if I had recognized the amount of labor it would involve. Indeed, this volume, which I originally envisioned as centering on Tecumseh, has become a *Tristram Shandy* of Indian history. It ends with what was once to be its beginning. Tecumseh becomes the product of an older history, not the creator of a new one.

The book is the result of extensive research in French, Canadian, British, and American archives. I decided to use the most accessible source whenever possible in citing the result of my labors in footnotes. Hence I cite published documents when they are available and manuscript documents only when there is no reliable published version. When a translation seems unreliable or incomplete, I say so in the footnote and use the manuscript document.

Because I found so much that surprised me and found my perspective on the period changing as the research for this book proceeded, I have, with one minor exception, refrained from publishing any of this material in an earlier form for fear I would only have to repudiate it later. I have,

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Richard White

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## Introduction

however, presented parts of this research as papers at various forums at the University of Chicago, the University of Arizona, Michigan State University, the University of Utah, the University of California at San Diego, and the D'Arcy McNickle Center of the Newberry Library. I would like to thank those who read all or parts of the manuscript. First, of course, are the editors of the series in which this volume appears, Fred Hoxie and Neal Salisbury, and Frank Smith of Cambridge University Press, but also Bill Cronon, James Clifton – who, luckily, demolished some of my earlier formulations – Marty Zanger, Ramon Gutierrez, Pat Albers, and Beverly Purrington. I would also like to thank Dean Anderson, whose excellent dissertation at Michigan State University, fortunately, coincided with my own examination of the fur trade. Dean's work on the material exchange involved in the trade is far more detailed and comprehensive than the small parts I have cited here, and interested readers should consult his dissertation. Helen Tanner's *Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* served as the basis for the maps in this book, and I owe her a scholarly debt.

I would also like to thank for their financial assistance the Rockefeller Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the University of Utah, where I taught most of the time while this book was being prepared. The Rockefeller and Guggenheim foundations, in particular, were both generous and patient, and I am grateful for their aid. At Utah, Larry Gerlach, who chaired the History Department, made the department both a pleasant and a stimulating place to work. This is an achievement that only those who have had experience with the higher administration at the University of Utah, and the constraints on education in Utah, can appreciate.