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INDIGENOUS AND IMPERIAL HISTORIES ENTANGLED IN THE UPPER MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

Daniel H. Usner

Jacob F. Lee, *Masters of the Middle Waters: Indian Nations and Colonial Ambitions along the Mississippi*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. 348 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$39.95 (cloth).

In Iowa City late in the spring of 1910, Frederick Jackson Turner, then president of the American Historical Association, was presenting a paper at the third annual meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association, a young organization founded by historians wanting to wrench American history from the firm grip of their profession's eastern establishment. By then one of the nation's most influential public intellectuals, Turner could not resist offering his audience a bold set of reasons why the Mississippi Valley, above all other regions at that moment, was significant in American history. Historians who turned their attention to the Mississippi Valley, he declared, would be exploring "the section potentially most influential in the future of America" and learning about "the most vital activities of the whole nation." Whether examining "movement of population, diplomacy, politics, economic development, or social structure," they would discover "fundamental problems in shaping the nation."¹

Of course, those "vital activities" and "fundamental problems," which Turner went on to delineate in his essay, had everything to do with the imagined destiny of the United States. "From the beginning," he preached to the choir, "it was clear that the lands beyond the Alleghanies furnished an opportunity and an incentive to develop American society on independent and unconventional lines." In perhaps overly radiant language, Turner did acknowledge that "the significance of the Mississippi Valley in American history was first shown in the fact that it opened to various nations visions of power in the New World—visions that sweep across the horizon of historical possibility like the luminous but unsubstantial aurora of a comet's train, portentous and fleeting." That vast region's Indigenous peoples, however, were relegated by the Harvard professor to "the Stone Age, hinted at in legends and languages, dimly told in the records of mounds and artifacts, but waiting still for complete interpretation." France, he went on to claim, simply "wrote

a romantic page in our early history, a page that tells of unfulfilled empire." And Spain, in his view, reluctantly accepted the region from France only "as a means of preventing the infringement of her colonial monopoly in Spanish America rather than as a field for imperial expansion." It took members of the English empire, as Turner predictably concluded, to realize "the importance of the Mississippi Valley as the field for expansion."²

Frederick Jackson Turner's urgent plea to study the Mississippi Valley would be heeded by more and more historians during the twentieth century, and in recent decades we have been busily capturing the region's significance in ways that far surpass what he could have foreseen and perhaps would have desired. Published in 1991, Richard White's prize-winning *Middle Ground* scrutinized Indian-colonial relations across the Great Lakes more closely than ever and produced a concept of "creative misunderstanding" that influenced historical inquiry in every other region of North America. Susan Sleeper-Smith and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, meanwhile, reinforced our knowledge of how intercultural negotiation, exchange, and conflict intricately shaped the lives of Indigenous inhabitants inside western Great Lakes communities.³ Works by Carl Ekberg, Jay Gitlin, Patricia Cleary, and Catherine Cangany discovered degrees of dynamism and levels of rootedness in the region's French colonial society that Turnerian history had also dismissed.⁴ Back in 1910, Turner confined his consideration of enslaved people in the region strictly to the question of how U.S. expansion into the Mississippi Valley had shoved the "slavery issue" to the precarious forefront of American politics. But thanks to important studies by Brett Rushforth and Tiya Miles a century later, the deeper and longer history of how Indigenous captives were exchanged and enslaved in the region is now better understood, adding the midcontinent to what historians have finally realized about the scale and extent of Indigenous slavery across the Atlantic World.⁵

This expanding early American history of the Mississippi Valley, driven in large part by White's replacement of Turner's "frontier thesis" with the "middle ground," has now reached a level of maturity supporting further efforts at revision and refinement. Michael Witgen, Tracy Leavelle, Elizabeth Fenn, Michael McDonnell, Robert Morrissey, David Nichols, and others have recently produced studies that shift the focus more sharply onto connections and interactions originating among the region's Native communities. Therein lay an Indigenous source of geopolitical power and socioeconomic resilience to which European empires needed to adjust and accommodate for any measure of success. And although historians disagree over how much that power diminished going into the nineteenth century, they are paying closer attention to how Native Americans continued to defend their sovereignty and territory in the Mississippi Valley.⁶

Jacob Lee's *Masters of the Middle Waters* is a marvelous example of this important redirection in the historiography. An ambitiously researched and luminously written study of "entangled Native and Imperial histories" across several centuries, this book adds plenty to what its author aptly considers "a new history of colonialism in North America and the processes that culminated in the American conquest of the midcontinent" (p. 233). Deploying a framework that he calls "social geography," Lee tracks "a network of alliances and rivalries that sprawled across the region's waterways" (p. 8). And like those waterways that intersect in complex patterns, as he astutely shows, the social landscape of the upper Mississippi Valley was crisscrossed by kinship networks—networks of Indigenous origin but also of colonial accommodation.

An essential premise behind Lee's embarkation onto midcontinental waters is his emphasis on what American Indians and European colonists had in common, rather than on what they did not. The diverse peoples converging in the region between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, he asserts, "organized society primarily through kinship." Well aware of the historiographical provocation offered here, Lee challenges what he calls "a false dichotomy between Native peoples who built societies around kinship and Europeans who focused on race" (p. 4). This claim is strongly supported by scrutiny of personal relationships formed between Illinois Indians and French colonists who reached "overlapping understandings of the roles of wives and husbands and the relationship between in-laws" (p. 63).

A central thesis running throughout *Masters of the Middle Waters* is that patterns of migration, conflict, and alliance dating to at least the chiefdom of Cahokia continued to matter throughout Indigenous nations' interaction with one another and with a series of imperial interlopers. Lee begins to make this case with a vivid description of Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet's visit to the Illinois town of Peoria in 1673, observing that it was "one in a series of encounters between newcomers and local stretching back thousands of years" (p. 17). The calumet ceremony witnessed by those passing strangers had for a long time been a means of creating fictive kinship for purposes of trade and diplomacy, so French officials had no choice but to adopt the practice if they wanted to secure alliance with the Illinois and other Mississippi Valley nations. France also had to entangle itself in preexisting conflicts between Indian nations, whether or not they served imperial interests. And at the most intimate level of interaction, Indian and French individuals entered into marriages where Native women played the key role in raising intercultural families and adapting Catholicism to their kinship needs.

While examining the years of France's imperial presence in the region, Lee does not ignore important shortcomings in colonial policy. Concerned about losing their grip on colonists who "became enmeshed in the world shaped and controlled by Native peoples" (p. 60), French officials attempted with

some effect to separate colonial from Indian communities. They also refused to include Native allies within their own kinship networks, thereby jeopardizing influence over alliances necessary for the fur trade. With inadequate military power, insufficient trade and gift merchandise, and weakened kinship connections, the French empire's sense of dominance was delusional in the face of the "complicated web of rivalries and alliances" maintained by the upper Mississippi Valley's Indigenous peoples. Lee cleverly closes his discussion of the region's French colonial period by pointing out that a map drawn by Chickasaw chief Mingo Ouma in 1737 more realistically represented the mid-continent's political world than did French colonial maps.

It is not uncommon for historians to mark the Treaty of Paris in 1763 as the beginning of a transformation in Indigenous-colonial relations in the Mississippi Valley. Lee, however, demonstrates that little actually changed on the ground as Indian nations "continued to deal with one another and with Europeans on the basis of long-standing alliances and animosities" (p. 124). In the most innovative section of this book, the author interprets what happened during the late decades of the eighteenth century as a "conflict between grand visions of possibility and the reality of the region's social landscape" (p. 124). Indigenous legacies still shaping diplomacy, conflict, and kinship continued to matter, and many French and Indian people used that local knowledge to their advantage. Some newcomers, meanwhile, benefited from those insights, while others suffered from arrogant dismissal of them.

For this analysis, Lee lumps three seemingly incomparable groups—Native followers of Pontiac, British imperial officials, and Anglo-American traders—into a single category of people bringing into the region their own visions of a world without the French empire. "All of them," however, "soon learned that the persistence of social networks created before and during the French regime limited their opportunities" (p. 124). Although built on the midcontinent's kinship network, Pontiac's alliance unraveled because General Thomas Gage mobilized agents possessing the knowledge and connections needed to negotiate a resolution. Britain quickly lost sight of that on-the-ground approach, however, so violence resumed and escalated east of the Mississippi.

Meanwhile on the river's other side, "French traders, Spanish imperialists, and Native peoples merged personal kinship-based ties and the resources of the empire to pursue complementary goals" (p. 155). Here is where individuals like Pierre Laclède and his stepson Auguste Chouteau come into play as perhaps the most resourceful of all francophone colonists at achieving personal fortune and power within the Mississippi Valley's social geography of diplomacy, trade and kinship. By pursuing predictable channels of interaction, the Laclède-Chouteau family harnessed Spain's imperial resources for personal gain—even when Auguste and his son Pierre were defying that regime's

policy toward Osage enemies and benefiting the political rise of Pawhuska inside the Osage nation.

When it comes to entry into the midcontinent by the United States empire, Lee offers no surprising observation. Its agents became the first outsiders wielding enough power to impose the “vision of an ethnically and racially homogeneous society” (p. 11), and by the 1830s the U.S. dominated the region like no empire had done before. In explaining that familiar process, however, Lee does provide some fresh insight. The U.S. “brought a new form of imperialism to the midcontinent” (p. 196), rejecting Indians as marriage partners while forming close personal relations with francophone colonists. This is how the meaning of kinship was significantly tightened and a racialized divide set into place for the first time. The consequences for Indigenous people were profound at multiple levels, most immediately as the Chouteaus’ friendship with territorial authorities after 1803 facilitated U.S. acquisition of Indigenous land while expanding their own landed wealth. And therein lies an irony that punctuates Lee’s central argument in *Masters of the Middle Waters*. By relying on a convergence of Anglo-American and francophone kinship networks, the U.S. empire in the trans-Mississippi West perfected old imperial strategies. Even though that empire “differed radically from its predecessors,” as Lee concludes, “its rise to power had stemmed from familiar sources” (p. 230).

Research across an array of French, English, and Spanish sources went into *Masters of the Middle Waters*, enabling Lee to explain so carefully the intricacy and durability of kinship relations found over such a long span of time. In another book published in 2019, *The Heartland: An American History*, Kristin Hoganson unspools more recent stories about the Midwest to unearth “a mesh of global entanglements, stemming from searches for security and power.” In that study of Champaign, Illinois, the Kickapoos are featured as important Indigenous actors. But in order to track the region’s worldwide connections across the centuries, Hoganson’s history of the Midwest—told in defiance of a “heartland” mythology that still prevails—encompasses everything from the production of beef and corn to the sciences of ornithology and meteorology.⁷

The Indigenous and imperial entanglement of interactions skillfully explored by Lee exposes a much earlier global significance for the history of the midcontinent. It is a significance unimagined by Frederick Jackson Turner a century ago when, although considering American Indians to be savage, he did at least suggest in passing that their history in the Mississippi Valley was “waiting still for complete interpretation.”⁸ Over many decades and across multiple colonial regimes, Native Americans managed to shape and control formative connections with the Atlantic World. And the forms of exchange, diplomacy, and kinship that they deployed back then have enduring consequences for their descendants’ sovereignty and territory today.

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1. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (originally published in 1920), (1986), 178.

2. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 179–81, 183.

3. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (2001); Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, *A Gathering of Rivers: Indians, Métis, and Mining in the Western Great Lakes, 1737–1832* (2000); Murphy, *Great Lakes Creoles: A French-Indian Community on the Northern Borderlands, Prairie du Chien, 1750–1860* (2014).

4. Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* (1998); Ekberg, *François Vallé and His World: Upper Louisiana before Lewis and Clark* (2002); Ekberg, *A French Aristocrat in the American West: The Shattered Dreams of De Lassus de Luzières* (2010); Jay Gitlin, *The Bourgeois Frontier: French Towns, French Traders, and American Expansion* (2010); Patricia Cleary, *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil: A History of Colonial St. Louis* (2011); Catherine Cangany, *Frontier Seaport: Detroit's Transformation into an Atlantic Entrepôt* (2014).

5. Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (2012); Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (2017).

6. Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (2011); Tracy Neal Leavelle, *The Catholic Calumet: Colonial Conversions in French and Indian North America* (2012); Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Encounters at the Heart of the World: A History of the Mandan People* (2014); Robert Englebort and Guillaume Teasdale, eds., *French and Indians in the Heart of North America, 1630–1815* (2013); Michael A. McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (2015); Robert Michael Morrissey, *Empire by Collaboration: Indians, Colonists, and Governments in Colonial Illinois Country* (2015); David Andrew Nichols, *Peoples of the Inland Sea: Native Americans and Newcomers in the Great Lakes Region, 1600–1870* (2018).

7. Kristin L. Hoganson, *The Heartland: An American History* (2019), xv–xxvi.

8. Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, 179.