

Lakota America: A New History of Indigenous Power

Review Number: 2449

Publish date: Friday, 30 April, 2021

Author: Pekka Hämäläinen

ISBN: 9780300255256

Date of Publication: 2019

Price: £16.99

Pages: 544pp.

Publisher: Yale University Press

Publisher url: <https://yalebooks.co.uk/display.asp?k=9780300255256>

Place of Publication: New Haven and London

Reviewer: David A. Nichols

The indefinite article in the subtitle of Pekka Hämäläinen's new book tells, to those familiar with the author's first monograph and its professional impact, its own story. Ethnohistorians writing Native North American history in the later 20th century cast Indigenous Americans as heroic underdogs in a long, bitter struggle against Euro-American colonialism. Particularly in their battles against the expanding United States, Native peoples - according to these accounts - faced lengthening odds and eventually could manage little more than bare survival. Histories of "Indigenous power" remained thin on the ground until the first decade of the 21st century.⁽¹⁾

The publication of Hämäläinen's *Comanche Empire* helped create a new narrative of Indigenous American history: a story of growth, wealth, and triumph. This 2008 study of the powerful equestrian polity that dominated the southern Plains and southwestern borderlands garnered a few critics, but its admirers and imitators proved far more numerous. Professional authors who have joined Hämäläinen in his inversion of the Indigenous declension narrative have included Michael Witgen, Michael McDonnell, Matthew Bahar, and Ryan Hall. In late 2019 Hämäläinen reinforced the Indigenous-power school of interpretation with a deeply researched and insightful monograph on the most famous of all Native North American nations: the western Ojibwa, or Lakotas.⁽²⁾

As in his first book, Hämäläinen in *Lakota America* presents readers with a history of expansion, success, and magnanimity. The Lakotas began the 18th century as a beleaguered, marginalized people of the western Great Lakes country. Their better-armed Cree and Ojibwa adversaries muscled them out of the best beaver-hunting territory and excluded them from the vital French trading network. Moving westward with their Dakota kinfolk, the Lakotas reinvented themselves as bison-hunting nomads. A few generations after beginning their migration, the Lakota people became (to borrow a phrase of John Murrin's) "beneficiaries of catastrophe." Internecine warfare and the Plains smallpox epidemic of 1780-82 decimated Native communities in the middle Missouri Valley, creating a power vacuum that the Ojibwa (Seven Fires) could and did exploit. Lakota thiyospaye (bands) moved into a region rich in "water, grass, game, timber, and shelter," and made it the "meridian" of their nation's power (pp. 99, 142).⁽³⁾

The Missouri basin's physical resources allowed the Lakotas to increase their population, their herds of

horses, and their “harvest” of bison and other animals - their biological power. The river’s proximity to British and French trading systems allowed Lakota men to augment their technological power, represented by the firearms and metal weapons they obtained through commerce. Manpower, horseflesh, and gunpowder they then turned into military strength. Lakota raiders harried the riparian communities of the Pawnees and Omahas, driving them away from prime pasturage and water supplies. Later in the 19th century hunters pushed further west, into the territories of the Cree and Crow nations, staking in the process a firm claim to the fertile Black Hills (or Pahá Sápa) and their reserves of food and forage. Even while fighting their long war with the United States, the Lakotas were undertaking in the northwestern Plains a sustained expansion of their power, wealth, and influence.(4)

Lakota power also grew from the nation’s cultural adaptability, its people’s willingness - indeed, eagerness - to embrace change, and from its leaders’ political flexibility. Like their Algonquian-speaking neighbors, the western Ochethi Sakowin adopted firearms and horses at the earliest practicable date; unlike most of them, they relocated to the tallgrass prairies early in the 18th century, and adopted a more diffuse and nomadic social organization. Authority among the Lakotas, however, became not diffused but fluid, flowing seasonally between the captains of hunting and war parties and the civil chiefs who administered larger encampments. Political fluidity let the nation’s thiyospaye draw people together into large, if temporary, trading or military encampments; enabled them to create regional leadership councils in response to larger problems; and eventually, by the 1860s and ‘70s, let them build an “empire” (p. 284) of warriors from different bands and nations.

While he briefly describes the aftermath of the Plains Wars and the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre, Hämäläinen’s narrative essentially ends in June 1876, with the triumph of the emergent “Lakota empire” (p. 361) over American cavalry in the Battle of Greasy Grass (Little Big Horn). The story he wants to tell is one of winners and how they succeeded, not (primarily) of loss and survival. Some of the Lakotas’ victories were internal ones against cultural inertia, or came through their expertise in commerce, an enterprise in which their trading partners could also benefit. Many more of their wins came, however, at the expense of other entities, human and non-human. Lakota subsistence and wealth derived from their multi-seasonal hunting of bison, both for food and for saleable buffalo robes. Intensified hunting by the Ochethi Sakowin and other Plains nations, combined with lower-than-usual rainfall and white overlanders’ consumption of forage, severely depleted the Missouri Valley’s bison population between 1830 and 1860. The Lakotas’ subsequent expansion into modern Montana was driven at least in part by necessity.(5)

Other humans, too, lost - and had to lose - the zero-sum contest for dominance of the northern Plains. The horse-and-bison economy depended on scarce resources, and the nation could only augment its wealth and numbers by taking those resources from others. Lakota gains came at many other peoples’ expense, and the enmity that this bred eventually drove some of the Lakotas’ rivals into alliance with the Americans. The Pawnees and Crows, to take two prominent examples, scouted and fought for the United States in the military campaigns of the 1870s. They did not perceive the Lakota polity as an “empire of equals” (p. 243), and preferred to take their chances with the American settler state.(6)

Hämäläinen acknowledges that there were losers within Lakota society, too. Status in the nation increasingly derived from the most profitable economic pursuits, namely bison-hunting and warfare, which led to the concentration of social power in the hands of men, particularly successful hunters and warriors. Many women, particularly captives and younger wives in plural marriages, saw themselves reduced to the status of marginal laborers, producing bison-hide robes and bearing children for their wealthy masters or husbands (pp. 182-183). Lakota women's sons often became losers themselves, in that their own quest for status depended on risky military raids that could end in their deaths and their relatives' immiseration. While she wrote about her own experiences as a Crow woman, Pretty Shield (1856-1944) probably expressed views held by many Lakota wives and mothers, when she recalled that in her youth "young men were always going to war or to steal horses, because they could not marry until they had counted coup...Always there was some man missing...[and] when we women lost our men we lost our own and our children's living. I am glad that war has gone forever."[\(7\)](#)

Nearly a century later, Mary Brave Bird, who as a teenager had not shied from a fight, had second thoughts about interpersonal violence and the glorification of war. In her memoirs she criticized the swaggering, "macho" attitude 20th-century Lakotas sometime expressed toward other Indian nations, and argued that her nation's militaristic history might not provide 20th-century Indigenous people with a useful cultural model. Brave Bird's viewpoint was informed by experience: in 1973 she had taken part in the Wounded Knee II occupation, which gave Lakota and other Native American civil-rights activists a national profile but left massive destruction in its wake. The U.S. government arrested and jailed hundreds of Native participants, Pine Ridge Reservation chairman Richard Wilson (the occupiers' principal adversary) remained in office, Pine Ridge itself saw a multi-year spree of retaliatory murder, and the once-prominent American Indian Movement virtually collapsed from infighting and federal lawsuits. Violent confrontation won AIM sympathetic media coverage, but it also begat more violence and left many Native participants and bystanders worse off.[\(8\)](#)

Violence and acquiescence weren't the only options open to modern Lakotas facing social discrimination and environmental degradation. Brave Bird, a member of the Native American Church, advocated cultural resistance through spiritual revival. Other Native North American activists used publications (like Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins* [1969]), pan-Indian organizing, political lobbying, and lawsuits to confront white American society and its structures of power. Some added nonviolent direct action, like the "fish-ins" of the 1960s and '70s, to their repertoire of protest. In 2016, four decades after Wounded Knee II and a few years after Mary Brave Bird's death, the mass protests at Standing Rock Reservation against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) became the most visible and significant episode of non-violent confrontation in recent Indigenous American history.[\(9\)](#)

In his epilogue Hämäläinen stresses the similarities between Wounded Knee II and NoDAPL. Both were highly public confrontations with a hyper-militarized settler state in defense of Lakota sovereignty. The differences between these events, however, prove more instructive. The principal organizers and leaders of the Standing Rock protests were women, like LaDonna Brave Bull Allard and Kim TallBear, and their mobilization was nonviolent from the start. The latter feature arguably gave NoDAPL more strength and staying power than the Wounded Knee occupation, because it allowed organizers to draw in a larger body of volunteers and supporters. Nonviolence, as Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan observed, allows resisters to recruit people who cannot or will not employ violence, including caregivers, many women and older men, and those with moral or religious scruples against taking life. It also allows organizers to shift tactics more rapidly and dramatically than armed rebels can manage. State and federal law enforcement personnel forced NoDAPL protesters to disperse in 2017, but the movement's supporters shifted to a boycott and divestment campaign aimed at the banks which financed the Dakota Access pipeline. By late 2018 the divestment movement had inflicted at least 7,500 million dollars' damage on DAPL's builders and financiers. An allied protest movement against the TransCanada Keystone XL Pipeline achieved its goals when American President Joseph Biden withdrew the pipeline's federal permit in January 2021.[\(10\)](#)

There are comparative lessons here about the vulnerability that can lie behind apparent power and the strength that comes from apparent weakness. Extractive industries, like intensive commercial bison hunting or oil production, can be undermined by resource depletion, falling demand, and high capital and security costs. Modes of production, or of political engagement, that depend on interpersonal violence cannot involve and often cannot benefit more than a minority of their intended beneficiaries. Power still comes from the barrel of a gun, but not reliably, and particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries more Indigenous people can generate the power that comes from the author's keyboard, the lawyer's briefcase and court documents, and the activist's signs, tents, and cellphone cameras. The golden age of Indigenous power may lie not in the 19th century but in the next few decades.

Notes

1. For examples of these declension narratives, see Colin Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 292-301; Daniel Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 216-236. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Joaquín Rivaya-Martínez, "A New Look at Native American Population: Comanche Raiding, Captive Taking, and Population Decline," *Ethnohistory* 61 (Summer 2014): 391-418; Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); McDonnell, *Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015); Bahar, *Storm of the Sea: Indians and Empires in the Atlantic's Age of Sail* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Hall, *Beneath the Backbone of the World: Blackfoot People and the North American Borderlands, 1720-1877* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John M. Murrin, *Beneficiaries of Catastrophe: The English Colonies in America* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1991); Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-1782* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Claudio Saunt observes that the initial Sioux forays into Paha Sapa began in the 18th century. (*West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2014), 148-166) [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 107-109. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Frederick Hoxie, *Parading through History: The Making of the Crow Nation in America, 1805-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 108-109; Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 210. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Frank Linderman, *Pretty Shield, Medicine Woman of the Crows*, quoted in Colin G. Calloway, *Our Hearts Fell to the Ground; Plains Indian Views of How the West Was Lost* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 85. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Mary Crow Dog (Brave Bird) and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Grove Press, 1990), 105-106; Paul Chaat Smith, *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 59; John Truden, "Reexamining Dick Wilson: Oglala Politics, Nation Building, and Local Conflict, 1972-1976," *South Dakota History* 48 (Fall 2018): 173-199. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. Frederick E. Hoxie, *This Indian Country: American Indian Activists and the Place They Made* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012), 338-388; Angela Russell, "Is It Not Right to Help Them Win Their Rights?" in Daniel M. Cobb, ed., *Say We Are Nations: Documents of Politics and Protest in Indigenous America since 1887* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 142. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Nick Estes and Jaskiran Dhillon, eds., *Standing with Standing Rock: Voices from the #NoDAPL Movement* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 1-6, 13-17, 106-118; Andrew Sorensen, "Dakota Access Pipeline

Controversy Cost Companies at Least \$7.5 Billion,” *CU Boulder Today*, 26 Nov. 2018, online at <https://www.colorado.edu/today/2018/11/26/dakota-access-pipeline-controversy-cost-companies-least-75-billion-study-finds> [2] (accessed 1 April 2021).

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2449>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/335115>

[2] <https://www.colorado.edu/today/2018/11/26/dakota-access-pipeline-controversy-cost-companies-least-75-billion-study-finds>