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REVIEWS

American Beginnings: Exploration, Culture, and Cartography in the Land of Norumbega. Edited by Emerson W. Baker, et al. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 422 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

American Beginnings differs from the standard history most often published by university presses. With its eighty-nine illustrations and ten color plates, the book functions as much as a glossy historical atlas as it does a collection of scholarly essays. The work of thirteen different authors, the essays all contain valuable insights and fit together extremely well. Specifically, the essays analyze issues raised by the University of Southern Maine's Smith and Osher collections of maps. These collections, totaling approximately twenty thousand maps, are especially strong in the area of northeast North America from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. When the Portland Museum of Art in Maine devoted an exhibit to them during the fall of 1988, academics from several countries congregated at a conference in Portland to deliver papers on European exploration, cartography, settlement, and interaction with Native Americans in what is now New England. *American Beginnings* draws its essays from this conference. Focusing on the creation of cartographic knowledge and its use in the colonization of northeast North America, the book admirably fills a glaring gap in the historiography of the Northeast during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Overall, the work draws on James Merrell's premise in *The Indians' New World* (New York: Norton, 1989) that both Indians and Europeans confronted a new world as they interacted. For the editors, the invention of the name *America* is especially important from a cartographic perspective, symbolizing the interweaving of previously discrete European and Native American histories and the setting of both on dramatically new trajectories—hence the title *American Beginnings*. Following through on this theme, the editors provide essays analyzing contact from a variety of European and Indian perspectives.

Despite this stated emphasis on the mutual novelty of experience, the particular essays focusing on early exploration in the sixteenth century tend to view the region, as the editors concede, from "Europe's boat" (p. xxxi). During the early years of their exploration, Europeans fixed their gaze on "Norumbega." As the essays in the first part of this book demonstrate, Norumbega—a geographical entity variously located within what is now New England—was more a product of European imagination and desires than it was an actual place. This notion underpins a central theme throughout the book: Cartography is an interpretive science driven largely by cultural preconceptions and biases. Emphasizing, in the words of Richard D'Abate in chapter 3, the "dislocation between reality and its representation in human thought" (p. 62), essays by John Allen, David Quinn, and Richard D'Abate argue effectively that cultural preconceptions and politics funneled European attention toward Norumbega. Sixteenth-century geographic theories inflated hopes of finding a Northwest Passage to Asia, and competition among European powers made its discovery urgent. D'Abate posits that Verrazano's Edenic portrayal of Narragansett Bay in 1524 epitomized the concept of Norumbega. Subsequent cartographers and explorers took Verrazano's description of an idyllic world where Europeans would want to settle and projected these desires in the construction of Norumbega. Maps of the period show Norumbega appearing in different locations, with topographies and climates radically different from those of the Narragansett Bay, suggesting it existed more as a social construction than a geographic reality. Norumbega, like the Seven Cities of Cibola in the Southwest, served more as a mythic lure for Europeans than as an actual entity.

The editors of the volume have done a commendable job fitting together thirteen discrete essays without masking the tensions

among the various interpretations of the contributors. The most noticeable thread of disagreement among the authors centers around the issue of native agency and power. On the one hand, Harold Prins argues in chapter 4 that the Wabanaki were "[p]owerless to shield their homeland from European intruders" (p. 116). Similarly, in chapter 13, J.B. Harley portrays Europeans as exerting power almost unilaterally as they used their maps to dispossess natives in southern New England. Native input or resistance appears negligible, and the appearance of tribal names on maps signifies the incorporation of these groups into European discourses of domination and subjection, rather than their existence as a force with which Europeans must reckon.

On the other hand, essays in the second section of the book grant Indians greater historical agency. In chapter 6, Bruce J. Borque and Ruth H. Whitehead discuss the problem of the dichotomy historians make between native and European, and they demonstrate the large extent to which native trade middlemen exploited Europeans (p. 131-32). Likewise, in chapter 8, John G. Reid notes the weakness of the European presence in Maine and Acadia and the ability of the Wabanaki to mount resistance. Between these extremes, Kenneth M. Morrison suggests that the Wabanaki "had an informed and realistic view of the challenge of cultural encounter" and that their culture "showed the possibility of cooperation" (pp. 119, 123).

This tension and difference of opinion on Indian agency and power derives in part from divergent assumptions among the authors (and in the field of history as a whole) about epistemology and the relationship between reality and human thought. Although none of the contributors to the collection qualifies as an extreme positivist, their hermeneutical positions span a large spectrum. Of all of the authors represented, J.B. Harley seems most dismissive of the existence of an empirical reality and any impact that it might have on human thought. For him, maps exist almost purely as texts and ideological tools of domination. Challengers to his views might object to his lack of historicism in interpreting maps. For example, he fails to point out that Indians appear on European maps much less frequently after King Philip's War than before. Disregard of the distinction between text and context precludes him from seeing each of the maps he examines as the product of a unique historical situation and leads him to homogenize maps produced at different times rather than seeing the differences among them. Such homogenization in turn leads

him to miss any subtle hints that Indians at times possessed tremendous power and the extent to which maps resulted from a dialectic between Europeans and Indians.

Unlike Harley, who explores primarily the way in which Europeans created an "other" for their own domination, those authors in this volume who focus on the various Indian experiences seem to recognize a greater distinction between text and historical context. This distinction results in a greater recognition of the native impact on history. Perhaps by definition, those seeking to understand history from native perspectives need to understand what forces constrained Europeans when they created texts. In chapter 7, James Axtell, trying to understand Indian perspectives of contact, points to the value of manuscripts and maps ostensibly produced by Europeans. He argues that Europeans "had to interact" with natives and that this interaction "entailed considerable 'conversation'" (p. 150). Indians, from the perspective of Axtell and others, presented a force that explorers had to recognize and a power to which European maps and discourse had to react. Yet the tentative nature of those essays in *American Beginnings* that focus on Indian experiences highlights both the need for more research and the difficulties posed by the scarcity of source material. Future efforts to recover lost native voices may help to reconcile the different views presented in this book.

The interpretive variety among the essays in *American Beginnings* reflects the vitality of the colonial Northeast's historiography and not any shortcoming on the part of the authors or editors. Indeed, some of the chapters suggest issues needing greater research. Little is said about the impact of colonization on Indian family life or gender roles. Nor do any authors make use of the body of documents produced by indigenous peoples in the Massachusetts language during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These documents, although small in number, might provide avenues toward understanding northeastern cultures, just as James Lockhart used indigenously produced documents to illuminate the world of the Nahuas (*The Nahuas After the Conquest*, Stanford University Press, 1992). That *American Beginnings* opens our eyes to the possibilities of such future research highlights the provocative nature of the collection. What is even more notable is that it does this in addition to beautifully filling a gap surrounding the uses of cartographic knowledge in the colonization of the Northeast.

James Drake