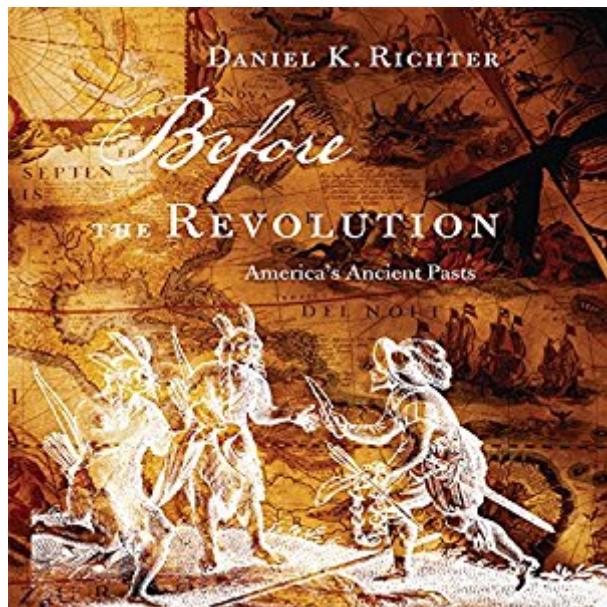


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Before The Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts



Synopsis

America began, we are often told, with the Founding Fathers, the men who waged a revolution and created a unique place called the United States. We may acknowledge the early Jamestown and Puritan colonists and mourn the dispossession of Native Americans, but we rarely grapple with the complexity of the nation's pre-revolutionary past. In this pathbreaking revision, Daniel Richter shows that the United States has a much deeper history than is apparent - that far from beginning with a clean slate, it is a nation with multiple pasts that stretch back as far as the Middle Ages, pasts whose legacies continue to shape the present. Exploring a vast range of original sources, *Before the Revolution* spans more than seven centuries and ranges across North America, Europe, and Africa. Richter recovers the lives of a stunning array of peoples - Indians, Spaniards, French, Dutch, Africans, English - as they struggled with one another and with their own people for control of land and resources. Their struggles occurred in a global context and built upon the remains of what came before. Gradually and unpredictably, distinctive patterns of North American culture took shape on a continent where no one yet imagined there would be nations called the United States, Canada, or Mexico. By seeing these trajectories on their own dynamic terms, rather than merely as a prelude to independence, Richter's epic vision reveals the deepest origins of American history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Daniel Richter's "Before the Revolution" is among a handful of recent major histories of early America that compel a serious re-thinking of our political and economic origins - particularly in light of current voices in national and state politics. First, one must admire the extraordinary grasp of

detail evident in this work. The book must be a summa of an entire lifetime of careful study. But more importantly, details in this work paint the larger movements of life throughout the settlement of this country. Richter's conceptual handle on the themes of America's early development are richly conveyed throughout every stage in this history. One looks to historians for far more than facts and Richter delivers in very compelling ways. The prose is lucid and gives a solid narrative sense without losing the reader among tangential episodes. The book gives yet more evidence of how profoundly early American culture and settlement events were shaped by religious and political trends in England and Europe. Richter captures the conflation of spiritual/religious motives with raw greed for land and power in ways that make a mockery of typical lay renderings of this time period. One's understanding of the sources for slavery of Native Americans, Irish and English down-and-outs, and then of Africans are exhaustively conveyed in this text. One cannot walk away feeling utterly freed from the lasting effects of this history. Richter's work stands among several others of note for this time period. Fred Anderson's "The Crucible of War" is another richly detailed and comprehensive account of some of the same period.

The power and clarity with which Professor Richter writes are absolutely breathtaking. The author presents a richly nuanced picture of the dependence of developing societies and civilization upon such factors as climate, agriculture, and religion. Alas the darker side of humankind is also highlighted in its tendency toward criminal conduct (warfare, extortion, and slavery) along with the cynical manipulation of religious beliefs to defraud the more gullible, yet productive, members of the local population. The author draws many parallels between North Americans and European developments during the Medieval Warm Period. While Europeans were building magnificent cathedrals, the indigenous Americans were busy constructing huge mounds for burials and other religious rituals. And on both continents, a pyramidal caste structure emerged to enrich and enthrone the most successful thugs and warlords. This is the true origin of all who claim royalty. Similarly, the origins of capitalism, and patriarchal entitlements are shown to be a consequence of English and European fiefdoms. Professor Richter's wonderfully concise condensation of centuries of interaction between competing parties is both a blessing and a curse. Each chapter is filled with so many points worthy of contemplation that I was routinely frustrated by the pressure to continue on without pause. Thankfully, he provides a superb epilogue to sum up many of the points that might occur to the reader along the way. For instance, he points out that the Native Americans were by no means passive victims of European aggression, land theft, and racism. Indeed, they had become skilled in the process of playing one European super-power against the other, to increase

their own power and dominate their traditional foes.

Prof. Richter's "Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts" attempts an interpretive history of North America and European contact beginning in medieval history and ending with the French and Indian War (or Seven Years' War). The strengths of the book lie in its broad-scope narrative that encompasses not only English, but also French and Spanish colonization in North America, but, at least as important, Native American prehistory and history. The cohesiveness of the narrative is strong, as Richter manages to move for the most part chronologically, with few jumps forward or backward, while still maintaining wide geographic coverage. And he provides some very useful insights along the way, such as the fact that Protestant colonists likely felt that the British crown's policy of religious toleration was tyrannical. His interpretive goals however do not seem fully achieved. His aim is to describe several eras of colonization and interaction thematically, and he labels them, successively, as those of Progenitors, Conquistadors, Traders, Planters, Imperialists, and Atlanteans; and he further attempts to demonstrate how each of the latter eras manifested the themes of those preceding it. So he is attempting an interpretation that is somewhat at odds with itself -- delineating separate eras in colonial history, but also arguing that the dominant themes of preceding eras were always manifest. Neither goal is completely achieved: Not every of his eras in colonial history seems so distinct, and the connections Richter purports to draw often come across as more his own personal view than truly evidence-based.

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