

Native American and Colonial Diplomacy Around the French and Indian War

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In the great global and confusing conglomeration of fighting that was the French and Indian War, one major group included in the *title* of the war itself is often overlooked and underrepresented in sources: Native Americans. They played a vital part in the war; as many of the sources later discuss, diplomacy with the various Native American groups like the Cherokee or the Anishinaabe could make or break alliances and even the turnout of the war itself. Many historians such as Wilbur Jacobs and Michael McDonnell suggest that it was through failed diplomatic relations and often the rapid cessation of previously steady gifts to Indian allies from the British that led to the series of conflicts and Anglo-Indian wars following the main conclusion of the French and Indian War. Many important figures discussed in the topic of Indian-colonial diplomacy include William Johnson, Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the British, his assistant George Croghan, and French leader Marquis Louis-Joseph Montcalm. On the Native American side, some major players include groups such as the Odawa, the Cherokee, and the Iroquois as well as individuals like Tanaghrisson of the Iroquois Confederacy and Old Hendrick of the Mohawks. These participants served varying roles of culpability and agency in Indian diplomacy and significance during the war depending upon the source. While it had a bit of a rough early start, after Wilbur Jacobs in the 1950s wrote his foundational book *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts*, the topical research of Native American diplomacy and their role during the French and Indian War has expanded and diversified particularly from the 1980s into today.

Harvard graduate Francis Parkman wrote one of the first comprehensive histories of America in 1884. In *Montcalm and Wolfe* among his many other works, he discussed the French and Indian War through a narrative-style story with a concerning absence of citations throughout a good number of the pages. Through the frequent use of passive voice, Parkman's view of Native Americans was profoundly negative. He commented frequently on their vices such as

their drunkenness as well as discussing the French's lack of control over their Native American allies as though the Indians are incapable of their own agency and control. For instance, when referring to the to the power of the Iroquois, he states "In a certain sense they may be said to have held the balance between their French and English neighbors; but there relative influence had of late declined."<sup>1</sup> His use of the passive voice here lends an incredulous tone to the idea that the Iroquois Confederacy held a major role in relations with the English and French. Parkman's disparagement of the French through lack of control over their Indian allies and of the Indians themselves for their 'savagery' seems to support his argument for the supremacy of British civilization and thus that of the United States.' Later historians, particularly Francis Jennings, are quick to call him on his lack of citations and questionable use of primary sources that often swing towards the British perspective to support his point of view.

After a large gap in source material, the topic of Native Americans in the French and Indian War seemed to pick up again in the 1950s. Wilbur Jacobs, began to recognize the importance of studying Native American perspectives and the role diplomacy and Indian gifts played in relations during and around the French and Indian War. His research opened a new focus on Native American diplomacy and agency that Parkman clearly lacked. In his book, *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts; Anglo-French Rivalry along the Ohio and Northwest Frontiers, 1748-1763*, Jacobs provided through detailed, albeit somewhat excessive, primary source evidence, a strong argument that Indian gifts played a major role in Native American relations on the western frontier in the 1700s. These gifts were critical in allowing the British and French to

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Parkman, *Montcalm and Wolfe*. 3rd ed. (Toronto: Grace P. Coffin, 1912), 1:67.

form and maintain alliances with Native American groups before and during the war, and a lack of gift-giving could create conflict such as the rebellion of many tribes after the British cut them off after the war concluded. While he seemed to struggle with imperialist perspectives in that he still referred to European interaction with Native Americans as a “civilizing influence,”<sup>2</sup> and he focused more on some of the British allies like the Iroquois, although he did differentiate between tribes and regional differences, Jacobs’ work definitely began to create a foundation for the study of Native Americans during the French and Indian War with a specific focus on diplomacy. Unfortunately, the expansion of works in this field did not seem to pick up until the 1980s and early 2000s when historians like Jennings, Brasseaux, and Fred Anderson worked through the growth of New History.

In a more abrasive entrance into the field in the 1980s, Francis Jennings spends his first and last words on the page of his 1988 work *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years* dismantling other historians. From Parkman to the Beards, he points out their errors, racism, perpetuation of falsehoods, portraying victims and villains, and butchering source material to meet their needs. He thoroughly criticized Parkman and discussed how Parkman’s book *France and England in the Americas* was so maddening that he wrote this book as a reaction and response to it in 1988, almost *a hundred years* after Parkman wrote his books. Unfortunately, Jennings failed in his goal of discrediting Parkman’s work as his writings are still fairly popular today and at least one of his writings of the French and Indian War are used in most of the works that follow. His book also intended to respond to what he viewed as the

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<sup>2</sup> William R. Jacobs, *Diplomacy and Indian Gifts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1950), 5.

failings of other historians with aspects such as glorifying the war and ignoring major players. Jennings also made an effort within the text to address discrepancies in source material such as determining the death toll at Fort William Henry; he attempted to focus on and argue for the active role that Native Americans played in the war with regard to fighting in it and diplomacy – good and bad – and in his preface, he claimed there are a lot of sources on Native American perspectives, attitudes, etc. that are simply overlooked or ignored. He argued that it was important to write a new narrative of history that focused on the perspectives of as many players as possible and to hold each one culpable for their actions. Jennings approached research through a somewhat ethnohistorical approach and stated that he wanted to open more discussion of the Native Americans in the French and Indian War.<sup>3</sup> Furthering the idea of focusing on the importance of Native Americans, French source “Franco-Indian Diplomacy in the Mississippi Valley, 1754-1763: Prelude to Pontiac’s Uprising?” by Carl A. Brasseaux and Michael J. Leblanc from 1982 discussed the French perspective of diplomacy during the French and Indian War and how important Indian alliances were to the French. This reinforced Jacobs’ earlier supposition of the crucialness of Native American allies to the French war effort. They also argued how French alliances and diplomacy with the Indians helped to spark the Anglo-Indian wars that followed after the French and Indian War had mostly concluded and reasoned that

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Jennings, *Empire of Fortune: Crowns, Colonies, and Tribes in the Seven Years War in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), xxii.

looking at these events from the French perspective explained events that Parkman had previously mislabeled a ‘conspiracy.’<sup>4</sup>

Some works that developed in the late 1980s and 1990s focused on more specialized areas regarding Native American-colonial diplomacy. Historian James Merrell in his book, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* from 1999 focused primarily on diplomacy in Pennsylvania. He argued that there were many aspects of diplomacy on the Pennsylvania frontier that were overlooked or ignored; particularly he felt that negotiators were ignored often because they are hard to define and it was difficult to move beyond sources such as diaries that only discuss one negotiator and to generalize their experiences to other negotiators. Merrell expressed the belief that studying negotiators can develop a greater understanding of Native Americans and the diplomacy around the Pennsylvania frontier such as how looking from the perspective of these negotiators disproves the idea that colonists and Native Americans in Pennsylvania had positive relations regarding cooperation over land. More of the colonists saw relations with these groups as a temporary necessity while the Native American groups were attempting to use land agreements and treaties to coexist enough to keep the settlers at a reasonable distance from their homes. Merrell also interestingly called his book’s structure “unconventional”<sup>5</sup> as it alternated chapters on the legends of the woods with analysis of key

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<sup>4</sup> Carl A. Brasseaux and Michael J. Leblanc, “Franco-Indian Diplomacy in the Mississippi Valley, 1754-1763: Prelude to Pontiac’s Uprising?” *Journal de La Société Des Américanistes* 68, no. 1 (1982): 59–70, accessed November 10, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.3406/jsa.1982.2209>, 65.

<sup>5</sup> James Hart Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 39.

elements of negotiation. Within the book, he scrutinized and more closely examined what many primary sources and other writers call “big events” like treaties, etc.

Following this greater focus on widening the playing field in the French and Indian War to focus on more actors, Fred Anderson worked to synthesize the variety of areas in the French and Indian War in his 2000 work *The Crucible of War*. Anderson is now known as one of the most prominent scholars in the subject of the French and Indian War, and he discussed the role of Native Americans and diplomatic interactions a fair amount in *The Crucible*. He tended to acknowledge and critique Parkman and others’ work more gently than Jennings; he tried to build on rather than refute previous narratives and to bring in and strengthen the role of previously marginalized perspectives like the provincials and Native Americans. Anderson used a wide variety of sources including, Parkman, Jennings, and Jacobs in his research.

Reaching the 2000s and today, research in the field is much broader with a greater focus on the agency and complexity of Native American relations, There are a variety of sources and historians that look at Native American diplomacy, specifically during and around the French and Indian War such as Jane Merritt. Her book, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700-1763*, looked at the relationships between Native Americans and white colonists, and she argued that race became a defining point of contention on the Pennsylvania frontier despite being initially “negotiable and tolerated”<sup>6</sup> differences early on. Tensions and competition over land, resources, and conflict from the French and Indian War

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<sup>6</sup> Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Empires on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier, 1700-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 4.

largely contributed to this breakdown. The book more thoroughly examined these differences and how the relationships declined into conflict over time. Additionally, one of the points she argued was that rising nationalism among both Native Americans and whites further contributed to the break down.

Many sources looked at how important various Native American groups like the Iroquois Confederacy, Anishinaabe, Ohio Valley Indians, Cherokee nation and their individual contribution were, as well as the negative effect trade dependency had on these groups – particularly the Iroquois. Native American perspectives and roles also started to find their way into larger narratives such as Alfred A. Cave's book *The French and Indian War* written in 2004. Cave recognized the crucialness of the Indians during the war and in causing conflict before and after – particularly regarding the impact of causing a trade dependency with the British. William Hofstra organized several historians and their research into actively looking at the French and Indian War through the lens of cultural conflict in the aptly titled book from 2007: *Cultures in Conflict: The Seven Years' War in North America*. Including an intro by Anderson, Hofstra's collection included essays focusing on the Iroquois and Ohio Valley Indians and looking at how these nations were affected and played a role in the French and Indian War and once again looking at the impact of trade and their role in conflict. Hofstra discussed in the preface that his goal with this collection and its preceding research project was to address a lack of focus on the role of society and culture in the conflict of the French and Indian War. This he felt was needed to give a greater understanding of the perspectives and the effects of the war on those cultures.

In looking at Native American diplomacy more specifically as Merritt and Merrell did, there are also several masters' theses published that engage with research within this field further demonstrating its growth. United States Marine Major Kevin Moody wrote his 2008 paper,

“Cultures in Conflict: An Assessment of Frontier Diplomacy during the French and Indian War” for his master’s in military studies. Moody provided a great look comparing and contrasting the diplomacy of the French and the English, particularly looking at how much more intimate French relations were versus the British who saw Native American aid as an unfortunate necessity that they worked to eliminate once they no longer needed to depend on it after the war. He also argued how this attitude of the British contributed to the Anglo-Indian wars and conflict after and during the major conflict of the French and Indian War. Moody’s argument for the role British diplomatic failures continued to build on the argument of Wilbur Jacobs from the 1950s as Jacobs too saw the change in the British treatment of Native Americans as a major example of the importance of Indian Gifts. In “Kina Dnwendagnag Miigsaabiigan Miinwaa Niizhswasebboon Gii Miigaading (Wampum Belts: All My Relations and the Seven Years’ War),” author and Anishinaabe herself, Lesley Kimewon focused primarily on wampum belts and the major role that they played in Indian diplomacy and relations as well as some of the meanings and significance of the types and styles of wampum belts exchanged. While Jacobs had discussed this topic somewhat in his book, he primarily focused on the monetary value of said belts, whereas Kimewon, fulfilling a master’s degree requirement for art history, focuses more on the meaning. Her Anishinaabe heritage also gave more of a unique perspective to the scholarship as she likely wrote with more background and understanding of the culture and meaning behind these tools of diplomacy like the wampum belt.

One of the most recent publications, Professor at the University of Sydney, Michael McDonnell like Jennings discussed the importance of reexamining existing source material for Native American perspectives and a different take on what the British and French are overtly saying in their sources. He spent a lot of his article “Maintaining a Balance of Power:

Michilimackinac, the Anishinaabe Odawas, and the Anglo-Indian War of 1763” discussing how British failings, and more specifically William Johnson’s, in understanding Native American politics, motives, and structure contributed to the conflict and Anglo-Indian wars following the French and Indian War. McDonnell argued that historians and readers must understand the motivations of players involved in the war, such as in this paper the Anishinaabe’s goals to use diplomacy with the French and British to maintain their independence and balance their power with that of the groups in the south like the Iroquois. McDonnell provided a well-developed argument demonstrating how looking at things from a broader stage with Native Americans serving more prominent roles helps to explain some of the previously misunderstood ‘mysteries’ of the French and Indian War. Primarily in this case, he used this method to explain the post-war conflict between British and colonial forces with the Anishinaabe at Michilimackinac.

Overall, the field has expanded greatly since Jacob’s published his foundational work to open the field of looking at Native American perspectives in the war. From more synthesized histories like Jennings, Anderson, and Cave to in-depth studies that focus on specific Native American groups or regions such as Merrell’s *Into the American Woods* or McDonnell’s “Maintaining a Balance of Power...,” the field has clearly begun to diversify and develop more recognition and research. I hope to see the topic continue to expand and play a larger role in more encompassing narratives of the French and Indian War.

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