

Masters of Empire: Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America by Michael McDonnell

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Masters of Empire
Great Lakes Indians and the Making of America

by Michael McDonnell

New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2015. 416 pages. \$39.99 hardcover. ISBN 978-0809029532

A quick glance at the title might give the impression that this is another book about empire where Europeans are depicted as the “masters.” That is not the case. Here the “Masters of Empire” are the Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes. The write-up inside the front cover describes it as a “radical reinterpretation of early American history from a native point of view.” Yet rather than a dramatic departure, this book represents a culmination of decades of research and writing on the subject, providing a comprehensive account of the Indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes and the Anishinaabeg in particular.

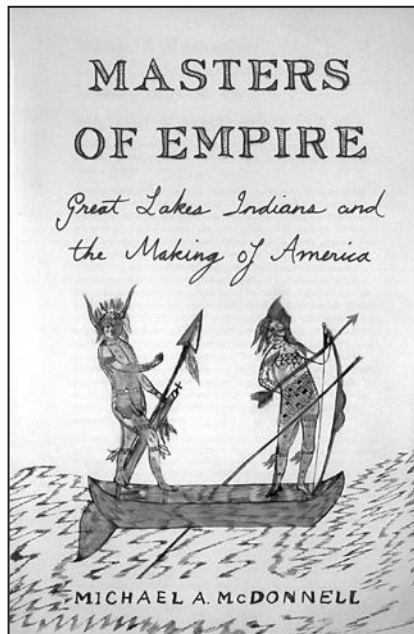
The narrative revolves around one specific location of strategic importance in the Great Lakes: the straits of Michilimackinac between Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. This is the cosmological centre of the Anishinaabeg world and where the Three Fires Confederacy of the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi is said to have diverged. It was the historical meeting place of the Odawa, Potawatomi, Chippewa, Algonquin, Nipissing, and Mississauga peoples, all of whom spoke a different dialect of Anishinaabemowin. By the seventeenth century it was surrounded by Odawa Anishinaabeg villages. It was a

site of natural geographic importance due to its proximity to resources, nearby farmland, and because it was the choke-point on the major east-west conduit through the Great Lakes. When the French were expanding westwards from the St. Lawrence valley, Michilimackinac was the strategic location that controlled access to Lake Michigan, the Illinois country, and Louisiana. Ontario readers may wonder if it is worth reading a book that focuses on a location that is now the northern tip of Michigan. The answer

is yes. This area had a wide-ranging influence over the history of the Great Lakes region and the fate of the French and English empires.

Anishinaabeg peoples are foregrounded throughout the book. McDonnell critiques the work of previous historians who “failed to appreciate their significance in the history of the continent”(5). No longer sidelined or depicted as pawns in European imperial schemes, their activities are traced in detail and their influence high-

lighted. They are depicted as savvy negotiators. They traded in multiple markets to get the best returns. They provided important services such as canoe manufacturing and repairs. They provisioned the fur trade with



supplies of fish and corn. They cemented themselves as interlocutors by building extensive kinship networks with European traders and maintaining a balance of power by continually renewing alliances, using their considerable military strength to leverage better terms. McDonnell rejects explanations of Indigenous dependency on European trade goods, instead emphasizing Anishinaabeg “strength and expansion in the midst of empire” (15). Seventeenth-century French claims of possession in the *pays d’en haut* are revealed as preposterous; when the French established a post at the straits in 1683, their arrangements reflected their frailty more than their dominance: “the French were there because the Anishinaabeg wanted them there” (52).

This book challenges some of the assertions of the mainstream historiography. In particular it challenges depictions of power relations made by Richard White in his influential 1991 publication *The Middle Ground*. Rather than the Anishinaabeg being refugees from Iroquois war parties in a shattered mid-seventeenth-century world, they are depicted instead as resilient, functional, and indeed powerful communities. Rather than French diplomacy acting as “imperial glue” to hold the Indigenous peoples in the region together, the Anishinaabeg instead utilized their traditional kinship, clan or *doodemag* networks, and intertribal alliances to secure their power and agency. While *The Middle Ground* depicts a tenuous balance of power between Indigenous peoples and the French, here the power is depicted as firmly in Indigenous hands. The Anishinaabeg led, and “most of the time the French could only follow” (91).

Many pivotal historical events that shaped the history of the Great Lakes are interpreted through this lens. The intertribal dynamics surrounding the Fox Wars are presented in detail. The Seven Years’

War, according to this account, started in the forests of North America with an Anishinaabeg raid on Pickawillany in 1752, a Miami village, and subsequently spread to Europe. Addressing the presence, influence, and motives of the Anishinaabeg at battles throughout the war, there are excellent discussions of Indigenous participation and how events were viewed from “Indian Country.” There are interesting accounts of influential figures such as Charles Michel Mouet de Langlade, an important mixed-race leader who negotiated alliances with the French and then the British, but who was not, as had been previously assumed, the leader of Indigenous forces at Braddock’s defeat in 1755. Clarifying and centring his and other Anishinaabeg leaders’ roles in the crucial historical events of this period is long overdue.

If criticism is to be made of this masterful work of history, it is that in relentlessly stressing Indigenous agency, the book at times may overstate the Anishinaabeg as the key determiners of European imperial fortunes. Speculation about how the American Revolution might have unfolded differently had there been a stronger alliance between the British and the Anishinaabeg, for example, is interesting but it remains a historical hypothetical, useful to contemplate but very difficult to prove or disprove. On the whole McDonnell is very careful with his interpretations and analyses, and the book is meticulously researched and very well written. It is highly recommended to anyone with an interest in the history of Indigenous peoples, colonial North America, or the Great Lakes region, whether they be professional historians or lay readers.

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