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**Daniel Richter. *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Past*
Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011**

Reviewed by John Grayzel

Daniel Richter's *Before the Revolution* provides a broad historical sweep of the dynamics between groups, settlements, and settlers, as well as between the populations inhabiting North America and the engaged European powers circa 1492 to 1774. For those of us accustomed to using the revolution and 1776 as our reference point for the start of the American nation and its character, it is a long needed wake up call. Though we are aware that Europeans have been systematically interacting with the continent since Columbus's voyage in 1492, as Americans our understanding of American character, behavior and society is almost entirely post-revolutionary. Our official heroes and references are the founding fathers, upon whom we look with nostalgia for a supposed time when virtue and talent seemed to reign. At the same time, our intellectual reference for enduring American character and behavior is the 1830s Jacksonian revolution, which gave formal power to the white middle class and championed the values of the common man. These values, in the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville, were work, making money, individualism, and the promotion of equality -- to the detriment of merit and intellect. (Tocqueville felt that this situation was saved only by the American capacity for creating quick associations for mutual benefit, a penchant that he felt resulted in a vibrant civil society but a weak government.)

Richter paints for us a dramatically different picture. His picture is of an America that, for most of the 275 years prior to its becoming an independent country, was a cauldron for the collection of the flotsam and jetsam of not only a distressed Europe but also the remnants of those local North American Indian populations who had lost up to 90 percent of their population to European-brought diseases. In that cauldron, things did not meld. Rather they alternated between being settled on the bottom of the vessel and swirling around whenever some outside force (usually conflict) stirred the pot.

To give structure to that phenomenon of periodic repositioning, Richter provides a simple framework for understanding what seem to have been 40-50 year cycles of alternative organizing principles for the colonial political economy. Richter characterizes six such, in their order of appearance, as: Progenitors (the agriculture based societies of the pre-European indigenous population), Conquistadores (those who came to conquer that population and extract its wealth), Traders (those who established opportunistic relations primarily for the exchange of European goods for furs), Planters (a relatively elite group that established both small and large agricultural plantations to produce goods for local, Caribbean and European markets), Imperialists (who sought to establish an imperial style domination of the American political-economy by the British Crown after the restoration of the Monarchy in 1660), and the Atlanteans (those commercial interests that regularly plied their trade across the Atlantic and up and down the Atlantic coast of North America).

The resulting characteristics of that pre-revolutionary stew were far different than the shared American character identified by Tocqueville. As related by Richter, to see America before the Revolution was to see: 1) an incredibly heterogeneous population (British, Scots, French, Dutch, Africans, Germans, Irish, Basques, Jews, Swedes and settled Indians); 2) the continuous economic, political and military alliances and encounters between European settlements and the surrounding Indian tribes; 3) the key role that mutually antagonistic Christian Churches played in the ordering of public life; 4) a dramatic lack of social, economic and political equality -- with much of the population being pauperized bonded laborers; the majority of the others surviving as indigent farmers or craftsmen, and a small but dominating political, propertied and religious elite; and 5) the constant presence and influence, through their representatives, of various Europe overlords. All of these strands were clearly different from the money-motivated individualist mediocrity of equality that characterized America *per* Tocqueville.

Richter does a good job of chronicling the key events, circumstances and relationships. His book is a valuable reference text for envisioning those times. However, he draws no deep lessons from that period in terms of understanding post-revolutionary times, nor does he extract any larger message as an insight on society and civilization *per se*. In fact Richter sort of consciously punts on the question of greater meaning to be garnered from those times when he ends the book with the quote: “After all,” wrote black Atlantean Olaudah Equiano quoting the prophet Micah, “what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God’?”

Such an ending I find spiritually warming but intellectually lacking. Richter’s book raises a host of questions: How did this diverse “before the revolution” world so quickly morph into a perceived single shared national character? What elements of that pre-revolutionary past, if any, can enrich our understanding of present day America? Are there lessons to be learned that have a large relevance to our understanding of the development of human societies and civilizations?

Personally, I think one can draw larger lessons from this study in terms of understanding the difference between a society and a civilization. What we see in Richter’s book is clearly not America as a civilization or even a sub-set of Western Civilization. America appears as an amalgamation of transacting and transecting fragmented cultures. Certainly it evolved its functional ways and organizations as needed, but it did not begin its journey to an “American Civilization” until it had created its national identity and corresponding independent institutions. It is as if American before the revolution was a supersaturated solution of diverse whirling elements, none truly dissolved. Somehow, from this solution, between 1776 and 1830, under the dynamic circumstances of revolution, independence and territorial expansion, precipitated out a perceived American character. By the time

Tocqueville came to America in 1832 that character had been sufficiently formed for him to characterize it in a way still pertinent today:

... it is easy to perceive that almost all the inhabitants of the United States conduct their understanding in the same manner, and govern it by the same rules, that is to say, that without ever taking the trouble to define the rules of a philosophical method, they are in possession of one, common to the whole people... (that is) to evade the bonds of system and habit, of family maxims, class-opinions, and in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson used in doing otherwise and doing better; to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone; to tend to results without being bound to means, and to aim at the substance through the form--and if I seek among those characteristics the principle one which includes almost all the rest, I discover that, in most operations of the mind, each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding. (Alexis de Tocqueville. *Democracy in America*. Book I, Chapter I. "Influence of Democracy on the Action of Intellect in the United States")

Oh well, maybe Richter, as an American, is leaving the resolution of any questions of greater meanings to the individual efforts of our own understandings? If you are interested in such questions, read the book. It is worth the effort.