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On Savage Shores: How Indigenous Americans Discovered Europe (2023)

By Caroline Dodds Pennock (Knopf, 2023, pp. 320. ISBN: 978-1-5247-4926-2)

The writings of white authors regarding Indigenous-colonizer relationships have historically focused on Europeans who went to the Americas, such as Hernán Cortés, John Smith, or John Winthrop. These narratives have helped establish a certain viewpoint for these relations, with the white colonizers and their actions being the focus of the narratives. *On Savage Shores*, Caroline Dodds Pennock decides to focus on the Indigenous people who were brought from the Americas to Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. It offers a fresh new look that challenges the readers to rethink some of their preconceived notions about European-Indigenous relations throughout the first few centuries of European colonization and invites them to reconsider Indigenous agency and how some of them viewed the "discovery" of the Americas. As Pennock notes:

This is the story of the people who traveled the other way. For tens of thousands of Native people voyaged to Europe from the very moment of first encounter . . . This book belongs to people like them: to the earliest Indigenous people who crossed the great water between Europe and what we now call 'the Americas' and found themselves confronting strange people in unfamiliar lands. (16)

Throughout the book, Pennock looks at many Indigenous people who were taken from their lands to serve Europeans in many different parts of the continent, including France, England, Portugal, Italy, and Spain. Indigenous peoples written about in the book include Taínos, Tupis and Tamaíos, Guaranís, Roanokes, and Wampanoags, as well as natives from current-day Brazil and Newfoundland. The abductees included men and women of all ages, including children (31). The book is divided into six chapters, each tackling one aspect of the slave trade. The first chapter, "Slavery" is about how Indigenous people were made to be slaves. "Go-Betweens" details those who visited the European courts as traders and interpreters. "Kith and Kin" delves into those who were made to be wives and children of European nobles. "The Stuff of Life" examines how European-Indigenous contact affected the daily lives of Europeans, like the introduction of the tobacco and cocoa plants to the continent. "Diplomacy" covers the Indigenous people who acted as diplomats

representing their peoples, and “Spectacle and Curiosity” portrays how many Indigenous people were made to be objects of curiosity for European populations. With these categories, a wide array of Indigenous interaction is covered, and the effect the Indigenous peoples who have visited Europe had on the continent is shown.

One of the purported goals of the book is to correct some misconceptions regarding Indigenous arrivals in Europe. With this objective, Pennock seeks to dispel the centuries of entrenched narratives that have hindered meaningful discourse surrounding the arrival of Indigenous peoples in Europe. As the interactions between Indigenous peoples and the Europeans increased in both frequency and scope, many mischaracterizations about Indigenous people were made by the Europeans, some of which survive to the present day. An example of this is the myth that Indigenous people saw white people as their gods (93). Pennock clearly states that this myth appears only in “retrospective sources looking back on events” (93), showing how it is a fabricated fact that has affected the historiography regarding Indigenous peoples for centuries. Through these corrections, Pennock demonstrates that many widely accepted beliefs about Indigenous–European relations, such as the idea that Indigenous people were passive observers of colonization or rarely present in Europe, are rooted in longstanding myths. She argues that dispelling these misconceptions requires meticulous scholarship grounded in careful analysis of authentic Indigenous accounts, travel records, and archival materials.

As previously mentioned, although the book details Indigenous peoples forcibly taken from their lands, these are not the only subjects that it examines. The cases of Indigenous diplomats or traders who have traveled to Europe of their own volition are also told. An example of this is Aj Pop B’atz,’ a Mayan king-diplomat from modern-day Nicaragua who refused to bow in front of the King of Spain when he traveled to Madrid in the 1540s (157). Pennock argues that some of the Indigenous people who have gone to Europe were not just “victims” but agents with free will, with unique stories and experiences. She notes:

We need to invert our understanding of encounter to see transatlantic migration and connection not just as stretching to the west, but also as originating there. Indigenous peoples did not need to cross the Atlantic to have interests which bridged it and yet, as we will see, many Native people – mostly young men – would travel east in pursuit of their ambitions, and those of their families and communities. (Pennock 91)

In a way, the book also tells the story of how these people “discovered” Europe. In this context, the book paints a vivid picture of these travelers, providing details on where they served and their impressions of Europeans. The views and attitudes of Europeans towards these people are also featured.

Pennock also includes the remaining fragments of these travelers by examining the tragic fates many of them experienced. She mentions how the graves of these Indigenous people lie across European cemeteries; one example being the grave of an Inuit baby “who was put on show in a London pub before dying and being buried at St Olave’s church, on Hart Street in the City” (15). Many of the stories presented in the book share a similar grim tone. An example is the story of

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“Raleigh,” an Indigenous man taken to England after a 1586 supply run to the Roanoke Colony (108). The Indigenous man is baptized and takes the name of “Raleigh” or “Rawly,” dying a year after his baptism. Pennock comments how “[l]ike so many others, his remains lie unmarked in foreign soil” (109), emphasizing how little was left behind regarding his voyage. As Hele asserts: “Many stories end in tragedy as travelers fell victim to European pathogens, or in silence as individuals vanished after a brief appearance in the written records.” These stories reveal the harsh realities of colonial encounters, leaving behind only fragments of lives that were cut short or forgotten. With them, the author underscores the tragic consequences of colonialism, showing how Indigenous travelers were often reduced to brief mentions in European records.

The book offers a rewarding and informative reading experience that dispels many misconceptions for the common reader and the academic alike in an area that deserves to be studied more rigorously. Although Pennock delves into many sources, including archives, diaries, letters, and court records, she keeps a simple yet engaging tone throughout the book. Her tone enables readers of all backgrounds to follow the stories and the developments surrounding the narratives. By focusing on some of the narratives that have been overlooked in previous studies, she presents a more nuanced view of European-Indigenous relationships. Overall, *On Savage Shores* offers a rich reading experience that enriches the area of study around these individuals with great care and responsibility.

Works Cited

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