

Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal

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Recommended Citation

Isenhower, Zach (2020) "Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.22.1.08

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol22/iss1/8>

Review

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Winter 2020

Smithers, Gregory D. *Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2019. PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN: 978-0806162287. pp. 270

Recovering the Indigenous South

“Stories matter,” writes Gregory D. Smithers, an uncontroversial but important opening given the scope of the work that follows in *Native Southerners*. Smithers ranges from prehistoric settlement to the removal crises of the 1830s, taking an ambitiously inclusive approach to the Southeast’s diverse Native communities. He introduces readers to the Native South as defined by indigenous words, actions, historical consciousness, and identity. *Native Southerners* conveys the tremendous changes wrought through Euro-American colonialism and Native adaptation, and just as importantly, continuities, all in a narrative driven by Native agency.¹

Smithers’ latest book expands the sensitive analysis he focused on Cherokee adaptation and resilience with *The Cherokee Diaspora*, to include Native communities across the South. *Native Southerners* privileges their definitions of community and identity, thus it also benefits from Smithers’ scholarship comparing the fraught relationship between science and racism in the U.S. and Australia. He does not ignore archeological and anthropological findings. Rather, he “interrogates” them from the perspective of Native origin stories and oral histories. The results reveal the depths of cultural influence in European scientific thought, as well as the capacity of Native stories for tremendous accuracy. Indigenous histories accurately highlight the impacts of climate change, for example, while western empiricism fixated for centuries on racial pseudoscience. Yet Native stories are often regarded as mere “myths,” and inherently less useful than supposedly rational scientific discourse. This juxtaposition recovers indigenous critiques that Euro-American claims of scientific certainty often aimed at denying Native historical

¹ Gregory D. Smithers, *Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 11.

consciousness. By dismissing Native explanations of the past and present, Euro-Americans also dismissed Native claims on land, resources, and sovereignty.²

Smithers is especially skilled at illustrating multilayered Native agency. His broad narrative tracks massive changes, as with the coalescence of large confederacies such as the Creeks, or the migrations that established the Cherokees in the Southeast, but Smithers does not neglect local variation. The Creek elder Tomochichi opted to retain reciprocal ties with colonial Georgia despite Creek policies. During the American Revolution, Catawbas refused to join pan-Indian efforts to restrict encroaching settlement, fearing reprisals from neighboring Americans, and as a result suffered Cherokee retribution. These case studies emphasize the variation and rationality of Native decision-making in a predominately Native region, while still acknowledging the forces of colonialism and imperial conflict.³

Concisely synthesizing large changes with suitably diverse representations of the Native South occasionally obscures the stories Smithers wants to privilege. He writes that Caddo stories offered strength “to meet the challenges of settler colonialism,” but becomes so caught up describing Caddo migrations that readers do not really see these stories, or how they empowered Caddo communities. Likewise, Smithers mentions that Natchez people, who fled devastation at the hands of the French in 1730 and found shelter in Creek, Cherokee, and Choctaw territories, retained their Natchez identities. Natchez resilience seems the perfect example to illustrate the power of Native stories, even in the face of apparent community dissolution. Smithers misses some of these opportunities as he pushes the narrative onwards towards the removal crises of the 1830s.⁴

The breadth of *Native Southerners* no doubt necessitated such decisions, and Smithers makes them with care. Overall, the book strikes an effective balance between details and large-scale trends. It serves as an accessible introduction to the indigenous cultures and pasts of the Southeast, but it also offers insightful questions and perspectives to readers acquainted with the

² Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 24-31, 36-43. For Cherokee experiences during removal, see, Smithers, *Cherokee Diaspora: An Indigenous History of Migration, Resettlement, and Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015). For comparative work on racism and science, see, Smithers, *Science, Sexuality, and Race in the United States and Australia, 1780-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

³ Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 95-98, 120-121.

⁴ Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 83, 85, 86.

Native South. *Native Southerners* ultimately conveys a sense of the region not as a bygone place in time, but as a consistent, if ever-changing, Native homeland.

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