

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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BOOKSHELF

‘The Indian World of George Washington’ and ‘Young Washington’ Review: Rivals and Partners in a New World

Washington knew that the importance of American Indians matched that of the European powers.

By Peter Cozzens

May 18, 2018 5:28 p.m. ET

On Nov. 26, 1777, Gen. Henry Knox wrote his friend and superior officer George Washington, then commander-in-chief of the Continental Army, that “the People of America look up to you as their Father, and into your hands they entrust their all.” From Knox’s private praise it was a short step to the 1789 newspaper encomiums that praised the newly inaugurated president Washington as “Father of His Country.” And so history has enshrined George Washington.

American Indians, however, saw Washington in a different light. They knew him as *Conotocarious*—an Iroquois epithet for “Town Destroyer”—a “Devourer of Villages” who presided over a dizzying dispossession of Indian country in the interest of solidifying the tenuous new American Republic through controlled but relentless western growth. An honest if ultimately feckless benevolence tempered Washington’s acquisitive policies sufficiently that some Indians would honor him as the “Great Father.” Whether they reviled or honored him, the Indians could not escape his prodigious power to appropriate their land and alter their way of life irrevocably.

Throughout Washington’s long career, American Indians played a central part in his public and private life. As a stumbling young colonial subaltern in the Ohio country, he precipitated the French and Indian War by combining with Iroquois forces in an attack on the French. After the war, he was an aggressive private speculator in Indian lands, who circumvented British law prohibiting land speculation or settlements west of the Appalachians in order to enrich himself. Later, he served as commanding general in a Revolution that shaped the destiny of American Indians no less than it did the Anglo inhabitants of North America, and finally he became president of a Republic bursting with a rowdy and impatient expansionist energy. Washington well understood that the power of American Indians in North America rivaled that of the European powers.

The fateful relationship between George Washington and the Indian tribes that bordered the new Republic is the subject of Colin G. Calloway’s brilliantly presented and refreshingly original “The Indian World of George Washington.” Mr. Calloway, a professor at Dartmouth College, has

written several seminal works on colonial and early-Republic American Indian history: He's well-qualified to remedy a glaring deficiency in Washington biographies, which is the scant attention paid to Indian affairs. For most historians, Washington's partnerships and rivalries with his fellow founding fathers, other internal disputes, and dealings with European powers have taken center stage. But as Mr. Calloway convincingly argues, "Indian land dominated [Washington's] thinking and his vision for the future. Indian nations challenged the growth of his nation, [and a] thick Indian strand runs through the life of George Washington as surely as it runs through the history of early America."

THE INDIAN WORLD OF GEORGE WASHINGTON

By Colin G. Calloway
Oxford, 621 pages, \$34.95

YOUNG WASHINGTON

By Peter Stark
Ecco, 514 pages, \$35

Besides restoring Indian matters to their proper place in Washington's life, "The Indian World of George Washington" illuminates the Indian leaders of his day, great men whom history has all but forgotten. Mr. Calloway deftly brings to life figures such as the Mohawk war chief and statesman Joseph Brant, the Miami war chief and realist Little Turtle and the bicultural Creek chief and consummate diplomat Alexander McGillivray—all towering figures who exercised the sort of outsize influence over the nation's destiny that better known American Indian figures such as Sitting Bull and Geronimo never approached.

An essential new entry in the literature of George Washington and the early Republic, "The Indian World of George Washington" conveys his interactions with Indians and the role of Indian land in Washington's public and personal life "from cradle to grave." For those interested in Washington's early dealings with the Indians and his adventures on the new frontier, an excellent companion work is "Young Washington: How Wilderness and War Forged America's Founding Father" by historian and adventure writer Peter Stark. His book vividly re-creates the 21-year-old Virginian's western mission in late 1753, as a major of the Virginia militia, to



George Washington PHOTO: ART RESOURCE, NY



Joseph Brant, Chief of the Mohawks, 1742-1807 by Romney, George PHOTO: WWW.BRIDGEMANIMAGES.COM

deliver a letter ordering the French to vacate the Ohio Valley. The French ignored Great Britain's demand, and the following year the colonial governor of Virginia dispatched Washington to meet the French threat.

Eager,

ambitious, but utterly ignorant of Indian ways, Washington returned to the wilderness with militia and Indian allies, guided by the crafty Iroquois chief Tanaghrisson (Half King). On May 28, 1754, in a controversial affair shrouded in uncertainty, Washington ambushed a French detachment in what is now Pennsylvania, a clash that came to be known as the Battle of Jumonville Glen. One month later the French overwhelmed Washington at Fort Necessity, though they later released him and his chastened militiamen.

In the wider war that followed Washington's ill-starred expedition, he served as senior American aide to Edward Braddock on the British general's disastrous 1755 campaign to retake Fort Duquesne (present-day Pittsburgh), and later as commander of the Virginia regiment, tasked with defending the colony's frontier against French and Indian depredations.

Mr. Stark presents these stormy events with rare narrative skill that engages all the reader's senses, as in his rendition of the Battle of Fort Necessity: "Hunkered in the trench, the British returned the fire, loading and reloading, musket shots booming toward the wooded hill, smoke rolling over the green meadow. Their grazing horses and cows dropped to their knees, then toppled over heavily, target by French and Indian sharpshooters to starve the British troops."

Mr. Stark's work is supremely entertaining: the pacing superb, the descriptions of conflict and wilderness travails rousing. Though it has less analytical depth than Mr. Calloway's book, "Young Washington" is nonetheless a worthy addition to the shelf of Washington biographies.

Messrs. Stark and Calloway also differ profoundly in their assessment of the young Washington's competence and growth during his formative period on the frontier. Mr. Stark claims Washington underwent a profound transformation: "Traveling between the known, settled world of the Tidewater coast and the unknown world of the Ohio wilderness, with its dark and powerful forces, young Washington . . . faced a series of trials," avers Mr. Stark. "After great difficulty and many mistakes, he returned ultimately, 'the master of two worlds' . . . not only wilderness and civilization, but the disparate parts of his own self."

Colin Calloway, by contrast, offers an unflattering portrayal of Washington on his wilderness odysseys, charging him with repeatedly misreading situations and mishandling Indian allies. Mr. Calloway concludes that, far from mastering the wilderness, Washington was "out of his depth in a complex world of rumors, wampum belts and tribal agendas," and that the bad tactical advice he gave Braddock contributed to the British defeat at the Battle of the Monongahela. Such disparate assessments of Washington's first forays into Indian affairs beckon the reader to venture into the wilderness with both authors and draw their own conclusions. Neither book will disappoint.

—*Mr. Cozzens is the author of "The Earth Is Weeping: The Epic Story of the Indian Wars for the American West," among other books.*

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