REVIEW: 'Masters of Empire,' by Michael A. McDonnell

Book review: The Anishinaabeg, who lived along the Great Lakes, played off English and French alliances and had a deep impact on events.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Star Tribune | DECEMBER 23, 2015 — 10:52AM

After the French and their Indian allies attacked Deerfield, Mass., in 1704, New England colonists tried to persuade the Anishinaabeg to join forces with them and the Iroquois in a raid on Montreal. If such an alliance were forged, Jesuit priest Pierre Charlevoix declared, “one solitary campaign would be enough to oblige all of the French to leave Canada.”

Though less well known than other native people, the Anishinaabeg, who lived near Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, played a pivotal role in imperial politics in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Drawing on Anishinaabeg accounts (in addition to records left by French and English colonists), Michael McDonnell, a professor of history at the University of Sydney, demonstrates that these Indians should not be viewed as pawns in a European chess game.

They achieved a measure of prosperity by building networks of kinship and maintained a balance of power between themselves and their potential enemies by forming and re-forming alliances. Their actions, McDonnell claims, “would reshape the modern geopolitical landscape and forever change the course of North American history.”

At times, McDonnell’s contentions race ahead of his evidence. The fate of New France “lay in Indian hands” in the 1750s, he writes, “and the French could do little about it.” If the British wanted to occupy French posts and increase trade “they would have to do so on Indian terms.”

The Seven Years War, McDonnell argues, was “remarkably successful” in achieving recognition of native sovereignty. In its aftermath, the Anishinaabeg “brought the British to heel by force and persuasion.”

That said, McDonnell’s angle of vision provides a fresh — and important — perspective on the history of colonial America. The Proclamation of 1763, which reserved all lands from the Great Lakes to Florida, and from the Mississippi River to the Appalachians for Indians, and had a chilling effect on the colonists, he explains, was clearly designed to appease the Indians.

To get the Anishinaabeg to re-establish a trading post and “protect it as far as they are able,” McDonnell indicates, the British spent nearly as much on “presents” as they would raise in revenue from the Stamp Act. And he makes an intriguing claim that had Gen. John Burgoyne received as much assistance from the Indians as the French had received in 1757, the British might have prevailed at the Battle of Saratoga in 1777 and “changed the course of the Revolutionary War.”

Like all fine works of history, “Masters of Empire” will force readers to think hard, this time about how much influence and power Indians had in colonial America — and about when and why they lost it.

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