



Indian Wars of Mexico, Canada and the United States, 1812–1900, by Bruce Vandervort. New York: Routledge, 2006.

This book casts a refreshingly international look at the violent events that took place in “Indian country” in the 19th century. Why juxtapose Mexico, Canada and the United States? Because they belong to the same continent, of course, but also to give the whole affair a sense of proportion. In his preface, the author warns us about

the hyperbole that has attended the Indian wars in North America. Proportionally, Mexico and Yucatán suffered far greater losses in blood and treasure than either Canada and the USA, yet their story is almost unknown in the Anglo-Saxon or broader European world. (xv)

Two distinct periods are treated as regards Mexico: from 1821 to 1876, the Yaqui resistance in the north and the Caste War in the Yucatán; and from 1876 to 1900, the Yaqui wars of the Porfiriato and the guerrilla warfare of the Yucatán (Mexico’s bloodiest). For Canada, we have the Red River expedition of 1870, held here as a perfect exemplar of “war against nature” (213) owing to the extreme travelling difficulties involved, and the Riel Resistance of 1885 and its swift defeat, in relation to which “few armies have gained so much for so small a sacrifice” (227). On the American side, Vandervort describes in some detail the “small wars” (as opposed to the classic European wars) of the young republic: the First Creek War (1813–14); the First Seminole War (1818); the Second Seminole War (1835–42), the longest continuous Indian war in American history; and the intermittent wars on the Plains from 1848 to 1877. The book is divided into two parts: the first one establishes the geographical/cultural contexts of the military operations, and the second is devoted to a description of the wars themselves. A conclusion, aptly titled “Long Shadows,” summarizes the social and emotional legacy of these wars on the North American continent.

In all three countries, whereas the European colonial powers had had some respect for aboriginal communal rights (perhaps because they were able to appreciate them safely at a distance), the newly independent and professedly democratic nations encouraged individualism and the assimilation of Indian groups. In so doing, the three countries shared the same problem of shaking off their European traditions of warfare and adopting guerrilla tactics; as their soldiers were sorely unschooled in these, a deep distrust of professional armies’ ability to fight Indians developed, and in every case the final victory was due to the intervention of a better-organized central government. Except in the Yucatán, Indians were always outnumbered by Whites; the latter inevitably took advantage of this numerical superiority and of their technology, but more importantly they exploited their enemies’ “corrosive

individualism" (15) and knew how to "divide their Indian opponents and use them against each other" (*ibid.*). Indeed, Indian alliances with some of their own kind and even with Whites had long been an adaptive strategy: as in all cases of invasions—see for instance the German-occupied countries during World War II—the thirst for revenge against the aggressor coexisted with all kinds of collaborative behaviours. Naturally, these various reactions were accompanied, and often superseded, by the constant flare-ups of nativist religion and cultural revitalization which characterized aboriginal resistance movements: the Mayan "Cult of the Speaking Cross" in the Yucatán; Big Bear and Riel in Canada; and Tecumseh, Tenskwatawa and Sitting Bull in the United States.

Vandervort succinctly contrasts two traditional outlooks on war:

The Indian view of warfare can be described as *existential*, i.e. that war was a natural human activity whose skilful practice opened the way to glory on this earth and eternal life in the hereafter. For those New World peoples who were of European descent or who had embraced European culture, on the other hand, war was (and is) viewed as *instrumental*, a means to an end. (38)

For Whites, the instrument of war consisted of the militia and the army. In Mexico the *permanentes* (regular army recruited by conscription) were generally inefficient, so Indian fighting became the prerogative of state militias and mercenaries. In Canada, rural and urban militias were normally relied upon until the final interventions of the central government. As for the United States, the army "was more varied than the movies and popular histories would have us believe" (90), and until the Civil War the French influence was profound (it even lingered in the 20th century with such a die-hard traditionalist as General Patton): West Point, where the only foreign language taught was French, boasted a "Napoleon Club," and its graduates, having studied the details of the French conquest of Algeria, were wont to consider Indians the "Arabs of the New World" (60). This lingering legacy of European colonialism among the young American nations is perhaps best illustrated by the unexpected French intervention in Mexican affairs in 1865, which, although ultimately doomed to failure, involved the enthroning of a puppet emperor and the incorporation of some 175 Indians into the Foreign Legion—all this on a land to which France had no reasonable rights.

Vandervort is to be commended for the clarity of his writing and for his no-nonsense attention to those meaningful details which could easily pass unnoticed, as when he remarks that one of the main reasons for the Apaches' superior mobility was their "total lack of Anglo-Saxon sentimentality about horses. They rode their mounts until they dropped dead, then carved them up for meat and replaced them with stolen stock" (194). Striving to avoid presentism, he underlines the various historical interpretations—cultural,

racial, economic, political, etc.—that have taken place in the past 150 years, and his book is full of remarks and reminders which contribute to an intelligent, objective understanding of factual history. For example, regarding the American Civil War he warns us that the common “image of North and South ignoring the West while they fought each other east of the Mississippi is highly misleading” (170–71), as the Union needed western gold and silver, and troops were sent west to guard the transcontinental telegraph network. Another example is Vandervort’s treatment of the battle of the Little Bighorn, where he draws from the latest research by G.F. Michno and J.S. Gray. Highlighting Custer’s association with West Point and its then fashionable Napoleonic ethos, he explains the aberrant use of cavalry alone in the battle: Custer was a western Murat—with much courage but no strategy—pitted against a rational and determined enemy who took full advantage of the cavalry’s short-range weapons and scared riderless horses by waving blankets while picking off dismounted soldiers with longer-range rifles (181).

This book, devoid of photographs but with sixteen excellent maps, successfully weaves together various threads of 19th-century colonialist expansion—both classical and internal. Beyond the three countries concerned, the author often uses his expertise in African colonialism to extend his comparison to simultaneous events in Algeria and South Africa, thus presenting a more global perspective than the book’s title implies. Quoting Tocqueville’s grim opinion of the fate of the Indians (“hunger is in the rear, war awaits them, and misery besets them on all sides”), Vandervort emphasizes their long-term resiliency (124–25) and concludes his work (“Long Shadows”) with the contemporary consequences of the Indian wars covered. In Mexico, an uneasy peace prevails after the protracted Mexican Revolution and the political upheavals of the second half of the 20th century; the Yaquis have been adversely affected by the green revolution, and the Mayas have benefited from the ambiguous blessings of full-scale tourism. Canada still sees manifestations of anger and a stubborn refusal to assimilate. And the American Natives, although few in numbers, have ironically and unwillingly been involved in the more recent offshoots of the colonial movement: those regions of the Third World (Vietnam, Iraq) “into which American soldiers have repeatedly inserted themselves have become routinely referred to as ‘Indian Country’” (247).

All in all, this book is to be read for three reasons: its subject matter and vigorous style make it entertaining; it provides easy reference through its detailed index and maps; and it is based on extensive scholarship backed by copious endnotes and bibliographical references.

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