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CHAPTER TWELVE

The Amerindian population in 1763

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THE end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 brought dramatic changes to the balance of power in North America and set the context for the American Revolution in Amerindian country. For more than half a century, Amerindian peoples of eastern North America had cultivated economies and political identities in relation to the French and British empires. In the treaty of Paris that ended the Seven Years' War, France ceded to Britain all of its claims to North America east of the Mississippi, while Spain handed over East Florida. Britain's American empire, which had consisted primarily of a string of coastal settlements until that point, suddenly stretched from the Mississippi delta to the rocky outcroppings of Newfoundland and embraced half a continent. For eastern Amerindians this was a decisive change: their ability to navigate between European powers suddenly disappeared, and they faced instead British officers and Anglo-American colonists who were determined to cast Amerindian relations and western policy in a new mold. These changes led Amerindian communities throughout eastern North America to reconsider their relations to the British colonies and Crown.

1 Accommodation

By 1763, the Amerindian societies of North America had been adjusting to the wrenching effects of European colonization for more than a century and a half. Dozens of distinct peoples, often sharing some broad cultural patterns but speaking many languages and pursuing a variety of social, economic, and political strategies, faced unprecedented challenges to their survival. European diseases devastated Amerindian communities, destroying some altogether and reducing the populations of others by as much as 90 percent. English settlers fought desparate wars for control of Amerindian lands, while new patterns of trade and alliance led some Amerindian groups to make all-out war on others. Communities and polities disintegrated and collapsed, and new, multi-ethnic villages and composite political groupings emerged from the ruins. Gradually a kind of equilibrium returned to Amerindian country, based on increasingly stable patterns of trade, alliance, mediation, and accommodation. Perhaps 150,000 Amerindian people still inhabited the eastern woodlands in 1763.

They faced an uncertain future. For two generations, Amerindians and Europeans had cultivated political, economic, social, and cultural ties that knitted together backcountry communities and improved intercultural relations. The Iroquois confederacy cultivated alliances with the British colonies of New York and Pennsylvania through its easternmost tribe, the Mohawks, and another alliance with New France through the Senecas in the west, while the confederacy council at Onondaga maintained an official policy of neutrality toward both empires. This allowed the Iroquois to trade both in Canada and New York while they steered a middle course in diplomacy. The Shawnees in the Ohio Valley sought alliances with Pennsylvania and New France at the same time, and many Ohio Amerindian communities had regular contacts with traders from both empires. In the Gulf South, the Choctaws played French and British interests off one another as well.

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These play-off strategies gave some Amerindian groups latitude and leverage in their relations with the European powers.

The fur trade in the north and the deerskin trade in the south brought both prosperity and dependency to Amerindian communities and gradually transformed the material conditions of their residents' lives. Amerindians hunted with guns and wore European clothing; in many Amerindian towns traditional wigwams and longhouses stood alongside single-family cabins in the European style. Cash economies often prevailed in trading communities, and Amerindian women began to raise chickens, pigs, and cattle to supplement traditional diets. As alcohol devastated some Amerindian towns, Christian missionaries who preached abstinence and individual moral responsibility occasionally gained headway. At the same time, colonists grew maize, adopted useful Amerindian technologies like the canoe, and learned new methods of hunting and warfare. By the mid-eighteenth century, diplomatic protocols between colonies and Amerindians were sufficiently well-established that conflicts could often be settled peacefully. All these developments reflected growing contact and interdependence between Amerindian and European communities.

The Seven Years' War disrupted these patterns and unleashed unprecedented levels of violence throughout the British backcountry. The worst fighting between colonists and Amerindians came in western Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia, where the Ohio Amerindians raided mercilessly for several years, and in Cherokee country, which was invaded by the South Carolina militia in 1760. New levels of mistrust reigned among Amerindians and colonists alike in many of the regions touched by war. When France withdrew from North America in 1763, Amerindian leaders throughout the eastern woodlands feared that British commanders might scorn their interests and Anglo-American colonists might trample their claims to land.

Their fears were well-founded. In 1761 General Jeffery Amherst, Commander-in-Chief of British forces in North America, imposed stringent regulations on the Amerindian trade and diplomatic gifts at the many western posts that had just been captured from the French. These regulations struck especially hard in the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes region, where the fighting had devastated local crops; now, because Amherst – who, like most British officers, deeply mistrusted the western Amerindians – wanted to keep their hunters "scarce of Ammunition," it was difficult for many Amerindian towns to support themselves (Hinderaker, 1997, p. 148). The last years of the war brought privation, famine, and disease to many parts of Amerindian country. At the same time, land-hungry colonists were drawn to the vicinity of new western posts like Fort Pitt, where they began to occupy Amerindian territory at an alarming rate. Almost immediately, Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War appeared to have disastrous implications for Amerindians in the West.

2 Resistance

Many Amerindian communities with long-standing ties to the French, especially the Great Lakes groups around Detroit, hoped to revive French power in North America when they discovered British intentions. Western nations – including Delawares, Shawnees, Senecas, Ottawas, Chippewas, Potawatomis, Huron-Petuns, Wyandots, Kickapoos, and Miamis – met in various combinations between 1760 and 1762 to consider an alliance of western Amerindians that might resist British expansion in the West and facilitate the return of French soldiers and administrators, with whom many of them had maintained ties of diplomacy and trade for a century or more. In the end, it was impossible to reconcile the conflicting interests and concerns of all the communities and peoples represented in these meetings to forge a single, coordinated confederacy, but their discussions reflect the widespread anti-British sentiment that quickly took root following the Seven Years' War.

At the same time, many Ohio and Great Lakes Amerindians turned to the teachings of several prophets to explain their declining fortunes. The most notable of them was a Delaware man named Neolin who came

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from a village on the Tuscarawas River in the Ohio Valley. Inspired by a vision in which he was instructed by the Master of Life, Neolin preached a gospel of cultural purification to restore the spiritual power that he believed Amerindians had lost as a result of their contact with Europeans. Neolin, like other Amerindian prophets of the day, believed that Amerindians and Europeans were created as different peoples and must remain separate and distinct from one another. To punish Amerindians for their reliance on European guns and their love of alcohol and other alien goods, the Master of Life had made game increasingly scarce. Neolin emphasized the need to resist English expansion and reform Amerindian societies to restore the world's balance. "If you suffer the English among you," he warned "you are dead men. Sickness, smallpox, and their poison will destroy you entirely" (Dowd, 1992, p. 34). His program of reformation required that Amerindians purge themselves of European impurities and embrace new rituals to restore their power.

These two movements – one to create a pro-French, pan-Amerindian alliance, the other to restore spiritual power to western Amerindian communities – were distinct but mutually reinforcing. Both helped to inspire a young Ottawa war leader named Pontiac when he convinced a group of villagers living near Detroit to take up arms against the British garrison there in the spring of 1763. Word of their attack spread quickly throughout the region and prompted uprisings elsewhere, until by summer's end every British post in the West had been attacked: Forts Edward, Augustus, and Michilimackinac on Lake Michigan, St. Joseph, Miami, Ouiatanon, and Sandusky between Detroit and the Ohio River, and Presque Isle, Le Boeuf, and Venango along the Allegheny River all fell to the attackers, while the garrisons at Detroit and Fort Pitt held out against prolonged sieges. These attacks, which have come to be known collectively as Pontiac's Rebellion, were not part of a coordinated offensive effort, but they illustrate the depth of hostility to British power that prevailed among western Amerindians in the wake of the Seven Years' War.

3 Division

British administrators and army officers learned an indelible lesson from Pontiac's Rebellion: they could not hope to control the West through force and intimidation. It took two years for the British army to reassert its control over the western posts; in the meantime, British administrators had ample opportunity to rethink their western policy. The Proclamation of 1763, issued in October, represented the ministry's first attempt to articulate its new approach. The Proclamation created a boundary between the colonies and Amerindian lands. Beyond the line, settlement was forbidden, land purchases were to be made only by the Crown, and licenses were required for Amerindian traders. The ministry hoped to reduce its expenses in the West to a minimum while it considered the possibility of slow colonial expansion at some future date.

The Amerindians of the trans-Appalachian West were divided and uncertain how to respond to British power in the wake of the western rebellions. From the country of the Creeks and Cherokees in the South to the Great Lakes, Iroquoia, and beyond, the end of the Seven Years' War brought crises, new choices, and sharp disagreements. Disease and famine challenged the survival of Cherokee and Ohio Amerindian communities; the loss of French ties seriously disrupted the economies of many groups in the Mississippi and Great Lakes basins; the return of British traders flooded Amerindian towns with unprecedented quantities of liquor; along the margins of colonial settlement, squatters were taking up Amerindian lands at an alarming rate. The deerskin trade among the southeastern Amerindians, especially the Creeks and Choctaws, fell into the hands of a few traders who were especially adept and ruthless in their commercial activities. Carrying large quantities of rum to Amerindian towns, they sold it at great profit to hunters returning home with a season's take of deerskins. Hunters might trade the product of three or four months' work for a drinking binge, only to find that they had nothing left with which to provide for their families. Drinking was an especially destructive force in Amerindian communities.

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It led to fights, murder, and discord; it set community leaders against hunters and wives against husbands; it sapped a town's economic resources and encouraged overhunting of animal populations. The rum trade drove many men, and even entire communities, into debt; when this happened, traders gained leverage to acquire grants of Amerindian land.

While some Amerindian leaders continued to counsel resistance to British power and cultural purification of Amerindian communities, others argued that it was necessary to cooperate with imperial officials in order to regulate trade, restrain settlement, and mediate conflict. John Stuart, the superintendent for Amerindian affairs for the southern colonies, advised the king's ministers in London of the need to restrain unscrupulous traders and keep squatters off Amerindian lands if the empire hoped to avoid another expensive and bloody Amerindian War. William Johnson, Stuart's counterpart in the northern colonies, argued that Britain needed to adjudicate the proliferating boundary disputes between the colonies and western Amerindians and carefully control any future westward expansion. Stuart maintained especially close ties with the leaders of the Creek confederacy, while Johnson identified primarily with the concerns of the Six Nations of the Iroquois confederacy. The Iroquois claimed to speak for Amerindian groups throughout the northeast, including those of the Ohio country, by right of conquest. Johnson hoped to capitalize on this claim to centralize and streamline Indian policy by conducting all of his Amerindian diplomacy through Iroquois spokesmen who would act as intermediaries with other groups. Thus the Iroquois confederacy became increasingly pro-British in its official policy, but the Amerindians of the Ohio Valley and Great Lakes chafed under the yoke of Iroquois domination.

In many Amerindian communities, an older generation of leaders had had its fill of war and advised cooperation with British officers. But their authority was challenged with increasing frequency by younger, militant men, some of whom continued to be influenced by nativist prophets. One observer noted that younger men among the Ohio Delawares "began to despise the counsel of the aged, and only endeavored to get into favor with these preachers, whose followers multiplied very fast" (Dowd, 1992, p. 37). In the Ohio Valley, these Amerindian prophets were often competing directly for adherents with Moravian missionaries who were also gaining followers, especially among the Delawares. The Moravians planted a series of mission towns, first in Pennsylvania and later in the Ohio Valley, where they imparted Christian beliefs to their converts and at the same time encouraged them to adopt European-style farms, houses, and crafts. Travelers were struck by the "regularity, order, and decorum" of the Moravian Amerindian towns (Calloway, 1995, p. 1). Some Delaware leaders who were not attracted to Christianity nevertheless welcomed the Moravian influence for other reasons. They hoped the missionaries might teach their people craft skills that would make Amerindians less dependent on Europeans. Following the Moravian example, a number of Amerindian towns banned alcohol to control its devastating effects. Though they were not Christian converts, the Delaware counsellors White Eyes and Killbuck hoped to convince the King to appoint a schoolmaster and an Anglican minister to teach their children English language and customs.

The struggles and divisions that emerged after 1763 in Amerindian country grew, ironically, from the pursuit of a common goal: the preservation of Amerindian autonomy and independence in the face of rising British power. The future was uncertain; no one knew whether that goal would best be secured through cooperation with British officials and a partial adoption of European ways, or whether the only viable option was to reject British influence and resist the empire with force. Time would show that the British Empire, though its power was unmatched anywhere on the globe at the end of the Seven Years' War, was incapable of controlling events in the American backcountry. But in 1763 that realization lay still in the future.

FURTHER READING

Anderson, Fred: *Death and Taxes: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of the British Empire* (New York: Knopf, forthcoming).

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