

REVIEW ESSAY: Did Pennsylvania Have a Middle Ground? Examining INdian-White Relations on the Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania Frontier

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REVIEW ESSAY: Did Pennsylvania Have a Middle Ground? Examining INdian-White Relations on the Eighteenth-Century Pennsylvania Frontier

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Abstract

NEARLY EVERY STUDENT and scholar of Pennsylvania history is familiar with the story of the Paxton Boys. It has come to occupy an infamous but lasting place in the landscape of colonial Pennsylvania history. Indeed, several important scholarly books published over the last twelve years have afforded considerable attention to the Paxton Boys and their motivations for murder. This essay is, for the most part, about what historians have said about those motivations and the conditions that precipitated them.

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The relations between Native Americans and white settlers—the middle ground—served as a gigantic trade zone in which culture became the economic goods of demand.

White argues that for the middle ground to work, neither side could militarily dominate nor extract the other. Because of the demographic balance, all were forced to live together which necessitated tolerance. As Jacobs notes, the middle ground, did not suddenly appear on the historiographical scene. Rather, it is a synthesis or “filling out” of other theories. Another fruitful area of middle ground study is

nineteenth-century Indian Territory (now Oklahoma). During the 1800s, thousands of Indians moved (mostly forced) there, creating new homes and communities. But if whites crossed the line – as they were doing – time was no longer on the side of the Indians. In other words, if white and Indian worlds kept colliding, Indians would remain in a savage state and continue to kill, capture and torture whites (p.66). In this view, it was the speed of European settlement that caused the problem, but attempts to curtail settlers’ westward movements proved futile. Griffin argues that in the minds of European observers in the mid 18th century, Indians were ‘redeemable’ or improvable, given time, and the introduction to civilization and Christianity; they were not irredeemable savages. Abduction of whites, by Indians, was another major phenomenon of frontier conflict in the 18th century, and of the cultural uses of the conflict.