1776: Beyond the colonies

Claudio Saunt’s ‘West of the Revolution’ offers important narrative of Native American role in early U.S. history

BY DOUG KIEL

According to standard narratives of the American Revolution, the military path toward independence began with a “shot heard round the world.” But Claudio Saunt’s “West of the Revolution: An Uncommon History of 1776” reveals that when the 13 colonies united against the British and declared their independence, most of the continent hardly took notice. In fact, the colonies represented less than 4 percent of North America’s total population at the time, yet most accounts of 18th-century America are fixated on that 4 percent. “West of the Revolution” offers a bold and inclusive narrative, highlighting stories that collectively remove the colonies from the center of early American history.

Saunt’s view of the Revolutionary period looks outward to the continent as a whole, framing the inhabitants of the Atlantic Seaboard as just one player in a diverse cast. It presents a corrective to the long-reigning popular historical narrative that regarded peoples and places in the West as insignificant in the American story until the United States brought them into the fold. Saunt reminds us that “between the continent’s far edge and the Appalachians stood thousands of towns and villages, whose millions of residents spoke diverse languages and belonged to a multitude of nations.”

He succeeds in making 1776 a surprisingly unfamiliar time, taking the reader on a journey from the Aleutian Islands of Alaska to the Catholic missions of California, and from the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming to the port at Havana, Cuba.
Though popular accounts of the Revolutionary period often obscure the West, Saunt’s prologue underscores that the Revolution was, in no small part, about the West as British restrictions on western settlement incited the colonists’ resistance. After the conclusion of the French and Indian War, King George III issued the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which established a dividing line between British and Native American territories. British subjects in the colonies were not to settle west of the Appalachian Mountains, and they were barred from purchasing lands from Indian nations.

Defiantly, Richard Henderson of North Carolina negotiated with three Cherokee leaders and acquired the deed to an enormous 22 million-acre tract that covered most of present-day Kentucky and part of Tennessee. He envisioned establishing a 14th colony west of the mountains. North Carolina and Virginia nullified that deed, however, but did leave Henderson with 200,000 acres for his “trouble and expense.” A prohibition against western settlement was among the principal reasons colonists such as Henderson revolted. George Washington himself was among those hungry for such lands.

The first of Saunt’s eight chapters is set against the violent backdrop of Russian/Aleut encounters in Alaska. After the Aleuts attacked and killed dozens of Russian hunters who were trapping and trading fur within their territory, Captain Ivan Solov’ev exacted horrific revenge on hundreds, perhaps thousands of Aleuts. In one instance, as Saunt notes, “He reportedly practiced a cruel experiment: arranging the Aleuts in a line, he fired at the first to discover how many people the bullet would pass through.” Relations between the Russians and Aleuts quickly devolved into a brutal exchange of retribution. Compounding this, each ship that set out from Siberia for Alaska during the second half of the 18th century — approximately 80 of them — devastated the Aleut people with violence and disease.

Saunt then turns his attention to San Diego. In light of the Russian presence in the Aleutian archipelago and their claim that the present-day Northwest Coast was part of “New Russia,” the Spanish established a presidio and mission at San Diego in an attempt to protect their interests in establishing control of California. With European diseases ravaging Kumeyaay Indian communities, and domesticated animals damaging traditional sources of subsistence, many Kumeyaays sought baptism and refuge at the mission to assure their survival. As Saunt explains, “the rapid conversions hid a deep dissatisfaction with the Spanish presence,” and soon the Kumeyaays burned the mission to the ground.

From there, Saunt follows Juan Bautista de Anza and his party as they explore the San Francisco Bay area and establish first contact with the Ohlone people (or Costanoans), and then, in Chapter 4, charts the Dominguez and Escalante Expedition that set out in July 1776 in search of a route to connect Santa Fe and Monterey, Calif. Before passing through the San Joaquin Valley and arriving at their destination on the Pacific Coast, the team would first have to traverse the Colorado Plateau, the Great Basin of Utah and Nevada, and the treacherous Sierra Nevadas. Though the expedition never made it to California, instead returning to Santa Fe through Arizona, the cartographic resources it developed proved invaluable in aiding future explorers.

Saunt then shifts his focus to the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) and Cumberland House, an important fur trade depot in Saskatchewan. Not only were native people key to sustaining a lively trade economy, but as Saunt points out, “The long and difficult winters meant that HBC servants ... were, to their dismay, literally dependent on Indians for their sustenance.”

The year 1776 also marks the arrival of the Lakotas in the Black Hills, a landscape that would come to be held as sacred to the Lakota people, even part of their origin stories. Exactly a century later, the Lakotas and Northern Cheyennes defended their home in the Black Hills War, of which the Battle of the Little Bighorn, also known as Custer’s Last Stand, is among the most notable military engagements. Just one week before Americans celebrated their centennial as an independent nation, the defeat of Custer and the 7th Cavalry served as a powerful reminder that much of the continent remained Indian country.

Saunt also takes the reader to Osage country, where the Osage people “reigned over both natives and nonnatives alike, not only dominating the region between the Missouri and the Arkansas but also expanding farther south to the Red River,” the present-day northern border of Texas.

Saunt’s final chapter, the strongest in the book, follows Creek Indian traders on their journeys to the bustling urban markets of Havana. “West of the Revolution” situates the birth of the United States in a historical moment marked by longstanding conflicts between European empires and Indian nations vying for power, territory and resources. For those readers familiar with Colin G. Calloway’s “One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark” (2005) and Daniel K. Richter’s “Before the Revolution: America’s Ancient Past” (2011), Saunt’s “West of the Revolution” will be an enriching and complementary read. That the book only gestures to Hawaii in the final pages, rather than devoting fuller coverage to its histories, is a surprising omission. As Saunt indicates, mere days after the Americans declared their independence from the British Empire, Capt. James Cook set sail in the English Channel, making a voyage that would initiate a period of momentous change in the Hawaiian Islands.

Despite this omission, “West of the Revolution” makes a significant contribution to our understanding of this volatile and formative period in American history, and it is a contribution we cannot afford to overlook. Under Saunt’s stewardship, Native American histories do not disappear into the background as subordinate to the rising drama of U.S. independence; rather, indigenous predominance on the continent becomes visible.

Doug Kiel is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of History at the University of Pennsylvania. He studies Native American history and the history of the American West.

— Jeremy Mikula