



Thundersticks: Firearms and the Violent Transformation of Native America by David J. Silverman.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2016. Pp. xii, 371. ISBN 978-0-674-73747-1.

Review by Robert S. McPherson, Utah State University–Blanding (bob.mcpherson@usu.edu).

Most historians writing about the turbulent past of Native America touch on the profound political, social, economic, and cultural changes that firearms brought to specific tribes or regions.¹ In *Thundersticks*, David Silverman² (George Washington Univ.) has built on the relevant primary sources and the most current secondary scholarship to provide a sweeping look at this multifaceted topic.

Selecting several representative tribes across various regions of what is now the United States, Silverman examines the changes wrought by firearms.

From the early days of Atlantic Coast colonization in the seventeenth century, through the end of the Plains wars in the late nineteenth century, one group of Indians after another used firearms to revolutionize their lives. The first groups to adopt these weapons sought a military advantage over their rivals. Those who managed to seize temporary control of an emerging gun market transformed themselves into predatory gunmen, terrorizing entire regions to seize captives, plunder, land, and glory. In the face of such gun-toting expansionist powers, neighboring peoples had little choice but to respond in kind. They could plainly see that the groups most at risk of subjugation, forced adoption, enslavement, displacement, and death were the ones who failed to provide their warriors with guns and ammunition.... The result was the serial eruption of regional arms races across the continent over the course of more than 200 years, [which] would not subside until a rough balance of power was achieved through the widespread distribution of guns. (8)

Half of *Thundersticks* concerns the colonial era, with chapters on New England tribes and the Iroquois, the southern colonies and the Five Civilized Tribes, King Philip's War, the French and Indian War, and the War of 1812. Later chapters cover the Russian, British, and American conquests of the Northwest Coast and Alaska; the Seminole Wars in Florida; the Comanche and other groups on the prairies and Southern Plains; and the horse-and-gun frontier up to Blackfeet territory to the north. Bookending the case-studies in the body of the text are an introduction highlighting the Lakota (Sioux) story at the time of Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, and a conclusion on the takeover at Wounded Knee in 1873.

The stories of each group and region the author discusses had both unique aspects and many similarities. Whether dealing with Spanish, French, English, or Dutch purveyors of firearms, the

1. See, e.g., George T. Hunt, *The Wars of the Iroquois: A Study in Intertribal Trade Relations* (Madison: U Wisconsin Pr, 1940; rpt. 1960), and Frank Secoy, *Changing Military Patterns on the Great Plains, 17th Century through Early 19th Century* (1953; rpt. Lincoln: U Nebraska Pr, 1992).

2. His previous work includes *Faith and Boundaries: Colonists, Christianity, and Community among the Wampanoag Indians of Martha's Vineyard, 1600–1871* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2005), *Red Brethren: The Brothertown and Stockbridge Indians and the Problem of Race in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2010), and *Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics and Narragansetts: Diplomacy, War, and the Balance of Power in Seventeenth-Century New England and Indian Country* (id., 2014).

Indians faced initial questions about what exactly they could procure in exchange. For example, the Iroquois, who needed consistent access to beaver furs, served as middlemen between other tribes and the sources of weapons; they were forced to acquire the newest and best firearms available in order to maintain superiority in armaments over other tribes.

The Iroquois traded with the French in Canada and the present-day United States, the Dutch in today's New York State, the English in the eastern colonies, and other Indian groups who might form strong ties with the Europeans. Gaining and maintaining supremacy often meant over-trapping their own territory, seizing other tribes' land and resources, and even exterminating some Indian groups like the Hurons. They capitalized on their proximity to the Great Lakes, the Saint Lawrence River, and the Lake Champlain-Lake George-Hudson River complex to control access to trade. The Indians' diplomatic relations with Europeans hinged on calculating how the English, French, and Dutch were getting along, who would provide powder and flint as well as muskets, and who would help maintain the weapons once obtained. All this in a context of the ever-shifting geopolitics of the colonial world.

Silverman also dispels lingering doubts about the competency of Native American self-governance, stressing in each chapter that the tribes knew best how to shape their own destinies, even if many did not succeed. They lived in a fluid environment during times of tough decisions, when faulty agreements or misunderstandings could spell their doom. The image that emerges from the author's case-studies is that of highly intelligent people pursuing their own destiny rather than of mere pawns in the schemes of white men. Indeed, they often out-traded and out-maneuvered their colonial counterparts. The Indians sometimes obtained enough weapons, powder, and lead to allow them to stockpile them in reserve. Their sharp dealing often provided white men "on loan" to fix muskets, or skilled craftsmen to teach them how to maintain them for free. The Indians encouraged disputing factions to compete in order to lower prices, creating or dissolving alliances to their own advantage. Silverman rebuts some personal accounts of Indian warfare that disparaged their skill in the use of weapons, citing many sources that attest to excellent marksmanship.

All of this came at a high price. While some earlier colonial conflicts, like King Philip's War, sent a bloody message to the New England colonists, later wars increasingly favored the white man. White settlers' numbers grew dramatically, disease decimated Indian groups, the American military assumed the role of fighting, and such Indian resources as the beaver, otter, and buffalo diminished in number and purchasing power, all of which set the stage for defeat.

The unwillingness of indigenous communities to see political rivals claim the lion's share of this trade and gain the political and military rewards, created an arms race to the bottom as the people exhausted their natural resources and turned their weapons against each other.... When such losses would stop, nobody knew. Predatory warfare, environmental degradation, and catastrophic population loss—all linked to guns—were of a piece in the cycles of colonialism in Native America. (189)

In this excellent book, David Silverman has taken a complex topic and, with well chosen examples, clarified patterns emerging over two centuries from one coast of a continent to the other. In the process, he persuasively dispels a number of misconceptions about the expansion of the "gun frontier" and the effectiveness of Indian involvement.

Thundersticks features lucid prose, pertinent pictures, and sufficient maps. Its author's special expertise is in the colonial era, but all his case-studies are discerning and cogent. While specialists will welcome this addition to their libraries, instructors of advanced undergraduate and graduate-level courses in Native American and colonial history or culture should consider assigning the

book. Apart from its other virtues, it foreshadows today's pervasive influence of technology, the "Balkanization" of neighboring countries, arms races, the effects of colonialism, and culture disruption.