

[Kamoie on Rice, 'Nature and History in the Potomac Country: From Hunter-Gatherers to the Age of Jefferson'](#)

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James D. Rice. *Nature and History in the Potomac Country: From Hunter-Gatherers to the Age of Jefferson*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. xiv + 338 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-9032-1.

Reviewed by Laura Croghan Kamoie **Published on** H-DC (September, 2012) **Commissioned by** Mary Beth Corrigan

An Environmental Perspective on Chesapeake History

James Rice provides a useful Native American and environmental perspective on Chesapeake history in his book, *Nature and History in the Potomac Country*. Rice's general premises are that "the histories of culture and environment cannot be understood separately" (p. 2) and "decisions made by Native Americans in the centuries prior to the arrival of Europeans turned out to be binding on their successors, for the geography of war and diplomacy that they had created during the ecological crisis of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries persisted even into the mid-eighteenth century" (p. 207).

Rice asserts new ways to frame the periodization of Chesapeake history--both of which suggest that 1607 was not the watershed moment more Eurocentric histories have cast it to be. Rice argues that the Potomac Country became the locus of a north-south fault line that separated different climates, topographies, lifeways, and cultures between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. The geopolitical realities that created competition and conflict during the pre-contact period not only continued but also decisively shaped Anglo-Indian relations until 1800. Rice's analysis of seventeenth-century Anglo-Indian warfare and diplomacy in Maryland and Virginia and shifting early eighteenth-century Anglo-Indian diplomacy across the whole mid-Atlantic (including Iroquoia) is the strongest part of his argument. Moreover, he correctly emphasizes the role of native peoples in shaping fundamental aspects of colonial life by demonstrating that the regional diplomatic configuration Algonquian and Iroquoian peoples forged "had effectively regulated the timing, extent, and character of European colonization in the backcountry" (p. 207).

Rice emphasizes that the transformative moment occurred not in 1607, but in 1650, further contributing to a new periodization of Chesapeake history. According to Rice, "the first half of the seventeenth century brought relatively few major changes to the Native peoples of the Potomac" (p. 71). Native Americans saw new potential allies and trading partners in the European newcomers, but two generations passed before differing environmental sensibilities, diplomatic goals, and economic ends turned Anglo-Indian relations from often cooperative, complementary, and equal to irreconcilable and unequal. The mid-seventeenth century saw a significant uptick in English population, the landed expansion of tobacco, an escalation in Maryland-Virginia conflict, and the marked dispossession and declining fortunes of the Algonquian tribes. Rice's insight that changes "in the 1650s and 1660s revolutionized life on the Potomac" (p. 121) effectively allows him intellectual

room to analyze alternate interpretations for the evolution of Anglo-Indian relations beyond the arrival of Europeans, and emphasizes how and why earlier native geopolitical realities influenced life in the seventeenth-century Chesapeake.

Rice's work is also notable for bringing numerous strains of early American historical inquiry together. In his analysis of Anglo-Indian diplomacy and relations, Rice effectively applies the new Indian history of Richard White's middle ground concept--an idea that said Anglo-Indian cultural change occurred in "middle ground" places where neither side could dictate behavior, thus forcing accommodation--to the Chesapeake.[1] In emphasizing the ecological and environmental causes and consequences in the Potomac Country, Rice brings the groundbreaking analyses of early American environmental historians William Cronon and Alfred Crosby to bear on Chesapeake history. Rice's comparative analyses of European and Indian environmental sensibilities engages the nature-versus-nurture debate explored by early American historian David Hackett Fischer and others.[2] Rice enriches this debate, as he asserts that the environment shaped both the Indians and the colonists, who "drew upon English conceptions of nature" and developed a colonial ideology "firmly rooted in the English ecological imagination" (p. 79).

For all of these reasons--his unique analysis of the early Chesapeake and his synthesis of several important early American historical inquiries--Rice's book is a work to which historians of early America should pay attention. There are a few points with which some might quibble. Rice occasionally uses historical imagination to hypothesize what Indian life might have been like, an approach ethnohistorian Dan Richter popularized in his tale of American history from an Indian perspective.[3] Rice's characterization of a non-diverse, mid-eighteenth-century Chesapeake economy does not take into account more recent work done on the topic. And, finally, the personal tone of the chronologically expansive "Coda" could strike some as stretching far afield of his subject (though I personally appreciated it). However, none of those detract from a work that is chronologically, geographically, and intellectually ambitious and successful.

Notes

[1]. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[2]. William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Alfred Crosby, *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (New York: Praeger, 1973); and David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[3]. Daniel Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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