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The Misunderstood Mission of Jean Nicolet: Uncovering the Story of the 1634 Journey

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Book Reviews and Notices

The Misunderstood Mission of Jean Nicolet: Uncovering the Story of the 1634 Journey, by Patrick J. Jung. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2018. vii, 225 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$28.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Roger L. Nichols is emeritus professor of history at the University of Arizona. He has written extensively about American Indian history and about the history of the frontier and the American West, including frontier exploration.

Most students of midwestern history have heard of the series of French explorers who crisscrossed the Great Lakes and the upper Mississippi River valley. In *The Misunderstood Mission of Jean Nicolet*, Patrick Jung examines the development of the erroneous popular depictions of the life and work of Jean Nicolet, who traveled from New France to the shore of Lake Michigan in the early seventeenth century. Jung begins with a Wisconsin public school presentation of Nicolet as a French explorer meeting the Pauns (Winnebago) in 1634, wearing a Chinese silk robe and thinking that he had arrived in China. From there, much of the rest of the discussion focuses on how that idea developed and how historians and others have kept it alive for generations. In his examination, Jung asks a series of questions about particular events or people and presents his version of what happened. The book's thesis is that narratives showing Nicolet as an explorer looking for the fabled Northwest Passage to Asia are mistaken. He presents Nicolet as a diplomat, not an explorer.

Because there is little evidence related directly to Nicolet, Jung devotes only one of five chapters to him and his actions. Instead, he offers a thorough examination of the career of Samuel de Champlain, the military commander of New France during the early seventeenth century and Nicolet's immediate superior. Much of the discussion of Champlain repeats earlier scholarship about him. Jung uses that scholarship to support his view that, by the 1630s, the French leader had focused his efforts on building a strong colony rather than on searching for a route to Asia. The analysis identifies two threats to Champlain's plans for strengthening New France: the dangerous Five Nations Iroquois Confederacy in neighboring New York and, less understood, the Pauns (Winnebago), who seemed to threaten the far western fur trade. Jung shows how Champlain dealt with the Iroquois himself but sent Nicolet,

a skilled translator and experienced diplomat, west to seek peace with tribes there.

Jung concludes with a wide range of questions: who went with Nicolet, which route they used, even what year the expedition occurred. To answer these queries, Jung examines and usually discounts earlier scholarship and shows how it contributed to existing misperceptions of the diplomat's actions. He carefully dissects the myth that shows Nicolet awing the Indians in his Chinese silk robe, suggesting that it was a mere silk cape that would have been used in France as a mark of his rank. In dismissing that image, Jung points to studies of public memory and how historical reproductions develop.

The scholarship here is wide-ranging and thorough but offers no gripping narrative. Instead, Jung offers a detail-laced prose in which he admits that "Jean Nicolet's journey did not make any great impact on the larger community of New France" (149). That being the case, one wonders how much the study contributes to any new or expanded understanding of midwestern history.

The Alchemy of Slavery: Human Bondage and Emancipation in the Illinois Country, 1730–1865, by M. Scott Heerman. America in the Nineteenth Century Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018. 239 pp. Maps, illustrations, graphs, notes, bibliography, index. \$45 hard-cover.

Reviewer Sharon E. Wood is professor of history at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. The author of *The Freedom of the Streets: Work, Citizenship, and Sexuality in a Gilded Age City* (2005), she is writing a life history of Priscilla Baltimore, a slave who liberated herself and became a leader in the free black community of St. Louis and southern Illinois.

This is a book for anyone interested in the history of the Midwest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or the history of slavery in North America. Drawing together political, legal, and social histories, Heerman traces the practice of human bondage in a place often considered a "free" state. Although common wisdom assumes that Illinois, carved out of the Northwest Territory, was closed to slavery under U.S. law, historians generally understand that the practice of enslavement persisted in the state at least until 1845. Heerman offers a clear and detailed history of slavery's tenacity — and why only the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution actually ended slavery in the Land of Lincoln.

Heerman builds his argument on a framework of empires: Indigenous, French, British, and American. The "alchemy" of his title captures the way migrants into the Illinois country successfully maintained