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Colonial Prehistories of Indigenous North America

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Colonial Prehistories of Indigenous North America

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Review Essay

Colonial Prehistories of Indigenous North America

One of the most common inquiries received by Filson Historical Society librarians concerns the myth of Prince Madoc and the Welsh Indians. Of the myth's many versions, the one most familiar to *Ohio Valley History* readers goes like this: Madoc, a Welsh prince escaping an internecine conflict over political rule at home, supposedly sailed to North America in the twelfth century. His force either landed at the Falls of the Ohio or made it there after landing further south and being driven north by hostile locals, possibly Cherokee people. Madoc and his contingent intermixed with Indigenous populations, whose fair-haired, blue-eyed, Welsh-speaking descendants are said to have resettled at Devil's Backbone, a bluff overlooking the Ohio River on which, legend has it, they built a stone earthwork. Later, many were supposedly slaughtered by local Native people, possibly at Sand Island. The survivors retreated down the Ohio River and up the Mississippi River, joining local Indigenous populations, possibly the Mandan people.

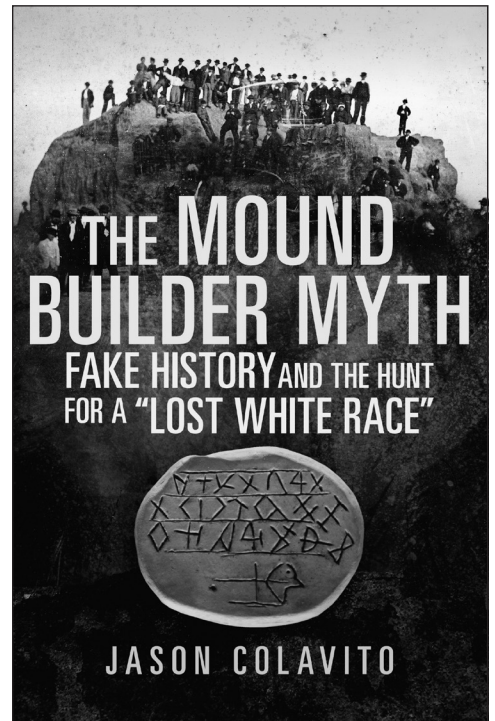
Pre-1900 searches for the "prehistory" of North America, which ranged from flawed archaeological and ethnological projects to outright fabrications and frauds, produced a range of mythologies about the North American continent's peoples, flora, fauna, lands, and waterways. This process gained steam in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the elaboration of prehistories such as the Madoc myth, versions of which can be found in works such as John Filson's *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke* (1784) and Robert Southey's epic poem, *Madoc* (1805). In such works, the myth stands as a justification for white colonial projects in North America, figuring Native peoples as savages and European settlers as civilized utopians on a freedom mission, escaping from the strife of war back home. This freedom, one might observe, relies on the subjugation of Indigenous people by white colonial oppressors.

The power of the Madoc myth lies, in part, in its uncritical retelling. This iterative, ongoing settler-colonial process forever defers its narrative ending, the discovery of Madoc's descendants. This unending deferral, combined with the always already lost evidence on which believers stake their claims for the truth of the myth, forever warrants the search. One just has to keep looking, keep digging, keep objectifying Indigenous bodies, keep occupying Indigenous lands, until one finds proof. Until then, the myth's uncritical telling and retelling perpetuates colonialist desire for the search.

Two recent works address the history and ramifications of such storytelling by seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century Euro-Americans: Jason Colavito's *The Mound Builder Myth: Fake History and the Hunt for a "Lost White Race"* and Elizabeth Fenton's *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*. Both books take up the scientific, religious, political, economic, and social motivations for developing and deploying mythologies like that of Madoc and the Welsh Indians.

Colavito's book focuses on Anglo-American mythologies about the origins of Native American earthworks, colloquially known as "Indian mounds," and, relatedly, the origins of North American Indigenous peoples themselves. Written as a public-facing academic work, Colavito's book is deeply informed by careful primary source work. He brackets his study with canonical works of American historiography, works that credited Native peoples as the builders of their moundworks. On one end stands eighteenth-century works of natural history such as Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785–87), and on the other end stands late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century works such as Frederick Jackson Turner's *The Frontier in American History* (1920). Colavito's main focus, however, is those works written during the century-plus period between these bookends. Key figures and contexts addressed include late-eighteenth writers such as Filson and J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur; nineteenth-century politicians such as William Henry Harrison and Andrew Jackson, who used racist "mound builder" myths to justify violence and removal; contributions to nineteenth-century scientific discourses such as Caleb Atwater's, Constantine Samuel Rafinesque's, Henry Schoolcraft's, and Joseph Priest's deeply problematic studies of American "prehistory"; and uses of and responses to theories about the lost tribes of the Kingdom of Israel by religious figures such as Joseph Smith.

Part of Colavito's interpretive power comes from deep dives into the political motivations for and personal stake-holding positions held by historical actors invested in such mythologies. Close readings of Andrew Jackson's use of lost white mound builder mythology to justify Native nations' removals are particularly



Jason Colavito. *The Mound Builder Myth: Fake History and the Hunt for a "Lost White Race."* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2020. 402 pp. ISBN: 9780806164618 (paper). \$24.95.

compelling, and the sections in which these readings appear are worth the price of purchase alone (113–35, 149–53, 188–91). The book’s major strength, though, lies in its relationship to textual archives. In tracking the sheer volume of texts elaborating mound builder mythologies circulating in early American media, Colavito’s work is a tour de force. One cannot underestimate how these works’ intertextual references, liberal quotations, and extensive citations, at best, and their evidentiary frauds, textual forgeries, and rampant plagiarism, at worst, helped perpetuate non-Native theories of mound building. Reconstructing these chains of provenance, link by link, is crucial to demonstrating how even good-faith attempts at knowing the origins of earthworks in particular and the pre-Columbian past in general were rooted in a deeply flawed historiography.

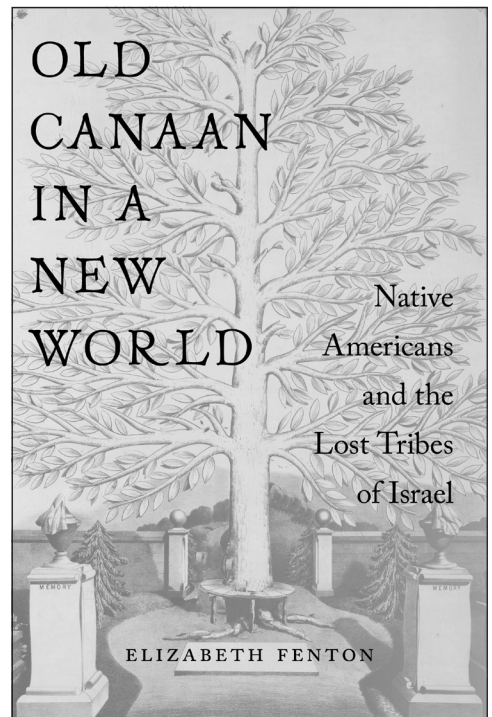
A significant motif in Colavito’s textual history of mound builder myths is the idea of writing itself. Writing, as a concept, appears in discussions of earlier European accounts of Native earthworks, the privileging of records of alphabetic writing in historical research, studies of inscribed Native sign systems such as pictographs and petroglyphs, the relationship of archaeological studies of moundworks to linguistic anthropology, and settler claims of finding pre-Columbian records written in non-Native scripts on objects ranging from stones and birchbark to copper plates and gold tablets. Although Colavito does not delve deeply into scholarship on the relationship among writing practices, history, and colonialism, the motif itself serves as important refrain: writing, in the mound builder mythologizer’s hierarchical imagination, overwrites other forms and formats of knowledge such as nonalphabetic sign systems; material cultures; and the oral traditions of Indigenous knowledge keepers. (For an excellent recent discussion of the category of writing and the concept of “prehistory” in colonialism, please see Gesa Mackenthun and Christen Mucher’s introduction to *Decolonizing “Prehistory”: Deep Time and Indigenous Knowledges in North America*, ed. Gesa Mackenthun and Christen Mucher [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2021], 3–21.)

Colavito’s brief is Euro-American mythologizing. As such, his book does not give significant attention to Indigenous perspectives on their earthworks, even as he tantalizingly cites moments when historical actors did so (48–49), or, more often, did not do so when they had the chance. (On Indigenous perspectives about Native earthworks, see Jay Miller, *Ancestral Mounds: Vitality and Volatility of Native America* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015]). This lack of mindfulness about Indigenous perspectives sometimes leads to prose that can rankle. For example, when discussing Thomas Jefferson’s proto-archaeological approach to excavating Indian Grave mound, Colavito writes: “In another stroke of genius, Jefferson decided to open the mound by cutting a trench into it so he could view the stratification of the interior. By doing so, he would be able to see the mound in cross-section and therefore determine the method of its construction” (24).

Here Colavito celebrates Jefferson the scientist, contributing not only to knowledge of Indigenous earthworks but to archaeological method itself. As such, he stands as a foil to, in Colavito's view, a litany of pseudo- and anti-intellectuals, racist war mongers and apologists, and superstitious peddlers. However, when one remembers that the earthwork was a site of great importance to Indigenous people living in Jefferson's time—a point Colavito mentions—Jefferson's excavation seems less a "stroke of genius" and more a desecration.

Such moments highlight the challenge of writing about the sacred, a challenge Elizabeth Fenton also takes up in *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*. Readers will find that Fenton's scholarly monograph deepens the analysis of a particular strand of Anglo-American thinking about pre-Columbian Native people Colavito too addresses: Hebraic Indian theory. Fenton defines this theory as "the notion that indigenous Americans might be, in part or in whole, descendants of the lost tribes of Israel," who supposedly disappeared after the Kingdom of Israel's defeat and banishment by the Assyrians but most likely "assimilated into the cultures among which they were exiled" (1, 6).

Fenton begins with extremely careful attention to the social politics of her project. For example, alongside historicizing the balance she strikes between historical word usages and the interpretive terms in her own prose, she recognizes that words like *Hebraic* and *Indian* operate in different registers across current-day scholarly conversations, religious communities, and Indigenous peoples. Moreover, her willingness to lay bare her own social position in relation to these constituencies is very welcome (3–5). Fenton then clarifies and narrowly defines the parameters of her study: "Just as this book is not about actual Judaism, neither is it about the real, lived histories of Native American people and nations. In tracing the Hebraic Indian theory from its origins in English literature through the nineteenth century, this book demonstrates how a fantasy about human origins infused the Western hemisphere and its colonial projects with urgent religious significance through three centuries" (5).



Elizabeth Fenton. *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*. New York: New York University Press, 2020. 272 pp. ISBN: 978-1479866366 (cloth). \$35.00.

Fenton's study contains two three-chapter sections. The first of these focuses on the development, uptake, and elaboration of Hebraic Indian theory. Chapter 1 focuses on seventeenth-century writings by Thomas Thorowgood, who used the theory to adapt to early modern changes in assessing the burden of evidence according to ideas of probability rather than binary structures of belief. Chapter 2 examines James Adair's anthropological approach to the question of Indigenous origins, laid out in his *History of the American Indians* (1775), an attempt to empirically study Native cultural practices for their affinities with biblical sources. Chapter 3 analyzes the uptake of Cherokee writer Elias Boudinot's use of Hebraic Indian theory in *A Star in the West* (1816) by the Pequot writer and Methodist minister William Apess in his autobiography, *A Son of the Forest* (1829). It is unclear to me (in a good way) how Fenton can claim that she is not, as she earlier puts it, writing in part "about the real, lived histories of Native American people and nations" (5), when she then offers a chapter in which she historicizes how two Native American writers used Hebraic Indian theory to assent to possible futures for Indigenous lives. Acts of writing are "lived," too!

The second half of Fenton's book focuses on historical moments of Hebraic Indian theory's decline and marginalization in American culture. Chapter 4 focuses on the epistemological claims undergirding the Book of Mormon's discovery narrative, as well as its narrative of alternative biblical origins for North America's Indigenous peoples other than the lost tribes. Chapter 5 considers the role of Hebraic Indian theory for understanding the ramifications of Indian removal as represented in James Fenimore Cooper's novel, *The Bee-Hunter; Or, the Oak Openings* (1848). Chapter 6 analyzes DeWitt Clinton Chapman's novel, *Beyond the Verge: Home of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel* (1895), which marks the passing of Hebraic Indian theory into and out of historiographic practices related to studies of Native earthworks and the nineteenth-century vogue for hollow earth theory.

Fenton's book is even more rewarding when one recognizes that each chapter does not simply provide insight into the (American) history of a singular biblical mystery. Her work is a history of knowledge. The temporal structure of the story of the lost tribes, "their as-yet-unnarrated future," writes Fenton, "holds infinite possibility for the remedy of national and religious crises," making it available for addressing upheavals in what we know and how we know it that were wrought by "evangelism, trade policies, national expansion, and scientific endeavor" (8, 13). As Fenton puts it, "Hebraic Indian theory often inhabits the space of epistemological change. Developments in probability theory, ethnography, geography, astronomy, and geology all have served as sites for the theory to manifest and evolve" (19).

Fenton's interest in questions about knowledge culminates in a coda centered on the present day. There, she considers how the narrative deferral that

shapes questions about ancestry and origins at the heart of Hebraic Indian theory manifests in the political and religious uptake of genetics, which has predictably failed “to unveil a biblical past for Native peoples” (209). No matter, suggests Fenton, for the “failure” of genetics to locate the tribes is just another waypoint along an ever-receding horizon. For the millennialist set, a future iteration of the Hebraic Indian theory holds out “hope”; if not genetics, then surely another means of knowing is at hand. But there is a darker side, hints Fenton, regarding those who are “concerned with population origins.” In the face of existential crises about Indigenous peoples and biblical peoples, they “will have to content themselves with collecting data, looking over their shoulders, and waiting for answers” (209). Colavito’s study of Euro-American mythologies about white mound builders suggests that contentment is not likely. Hard-earned, learned expertise is under attack. The vandals are at the gates, wielding their alternative facts, fake news, and *Ancient Aliens* soundbites in “a rejection of science, social progress, and equality,” abetted by the uncritical retellings of myth (337).

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