

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 1985

**Review of *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos*
By Richard White**

David Reed Miller

D'Arcy McNickle Center for the History of the American Indian

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Miller, David Reed, "Review of *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* By Richard White" (1985). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1836.
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1836>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos. By Richard White. Lincoln; University of Nebraska Press, 1983. Maps, tables, notes, bibliographical essay, index. xix + 433 pp. \$26.50.

In his 1954 essay entitled "Social Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Comparison," Fred Eggan called for studies to define carefully the parameters of research "combining the sound anthropological concepts of structure and function with the ethnological concepts of process and history." Historian Richard White presents an important contribution with this monograph, which exemplifies a response to the challenge put forth almost thirty years ago. White's decision to blend methodological and descriptive devices, drawing on the literatures of several disciplines, demonstrates his willingness to present the complexity of human interactions in an effort to reconstruct the perspectives of three Indian peoples in such a way that their attitudes toward their lands and ways of life

teach the reader new lessons.

Using a case study approach, White compares subsistence systems, land relationships, and diachronic social change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos. He explores the social, cultural, and historical development of a "dependency" relationship for each group within the enveloping, larger non-Indian society in three regions of the United States. His survey for each of the groups covers staggered time periods: the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries for the Choctaws, the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries for the Pawnees, and the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries for the Navajos. White addresses the environmentalist stereotype often attributed to American Indians. He demonstrates how meaningless this generalization is, and how it dissolves the uniqueness of particular historical experiences. White also illustrates the changing subsistence patterns and land relations for these three peoples and focuses on their particular choices and responses both as creators of their worlds and as respondents to forces and threats to their ways of life.

This is not a work about victimization; it is about creative, courageous, and sometimes hopeless responses to overwhelming pressures. The book is not about environmental determinism but about the worlds of three Indian peoples employing particular subsistence systems that fulfilled the needs of their societies at the time of contact with non-Indians. Under pressures from epidemics and market economies, these societies were pushed out of balance, subjugated, and forced into a relationship of dependence which White defines as the "conditioning of one economy by another." This gradual disruption of societies occurred both implicitly and explicitly, but the process must not be seen as causal in one

sphere alone, such as economics. White ably demonstrates the complexity of interchange between the tribes being described and their various adversaries—environmental, economic, political, or cultural—and shows that specific influences must be made "understandable only [from] within specific histories."

This volume is a must for those interested in the increasing refinement of the tribal histories of American Indian peoples. The Choctaw descriptions are the strongest and most original in the monograph. The Pawnee analysis focuses heavily on interpretations of fire and horse utilization that need to be further augmented with descriptions of other aspects of Pawnee cultural history. The Navajo experience reflects a lack of description of the nature of the constituency of particular leaders, and does not have enough emphasis on purposeful ambiguity as cultural strategy, especially during the years of stock reduction.

This important study, backed by extensive research in the primary documentation of these three groups, leaves some basis for uneasiness. The pressures upon each of the groups in their specific regions was finally unique, but White does little to synthesize the experience of each into any major set of conclusions, other than to demonstrate that a state of dependency resulted from historical interactions with non-Indians. He glimpses the importance of cultural explanations of historical experience by individuals, communities, and societies, but steers clear of the next level of analysis: how the creation of shared perception influenced action, and how participants in events made decisions individually and corporately about their lives.

DAVID REED MILLER
D'Arcy McNickle Center for the
History of the American Indian
The Newberry Library