

French-Native American Relations in the Great Lakes Region

by Edward I. Maxwell



The Great Lakes region of the Louisiana territory, referred to as the *Pays den Haut* in French, has a particularly remarkable history, considering the prevailing nature of European-Native American relations. While the conquistadors of Spain, who toppled the Inca and Aztec empires, were ruthlessly pursuing gold, the French settlers of the *Pays den Haut* were compelled to take a more diplomatic approach. Richard White is an American historian who has made the most significant contribution to the study of this specific time and place in history. White's book, *The Middle Ground*, sought to oust previous ideas about how the French and Native Americans interacted.

To begin, French-Native American relations in the *Pays den Haut* were so different from European-Native American interaction in general across North and South America because of extensive cultural exchange. French fur-trappers and traders populated the Great Lakes region and funneled countless pelts to forts and outposts as a way of earning their livelihood. In the course of his activities, a fur-trapper would become acquainted with countless Native American tribes and communities across the region. This acquaintance tended to result in greater cooperation. There was a very romantic idea, previous to Richard White's work, that the French were more naturally inclined to form bonds of brotherhood with Native Americans than the English or Spanish. White argues that this theory ignores the important circumstances that are particular to the *Pays den Haut*.

Power is one of the most important things to consider when studying the French-Native American relations in the Great Lakes region. French settlers were not able to dominate their exchanges with the Native Americans of the *Pays den Haut* in the way the English and Spanish were able to overrun the Native American populations they encountered. French fur-trappers and traders were forced to deal with the Native Americans on equal terms. This parity, or sameness, forced Native Americans and French settlers to make certain deals and compromises, and become more accustomed to each other. This led to a level of cultural exchange that was unparalleled in North America at the time.

White details instances in which French fur-trappers and traders would use marriage as a way to solidify an alliance or business partnership with certain tribes. A French trader might marry a chief's daughter or, if the tribe had a female leader, the Frenchman would marry the chief herself. Connecting himself firmly to a particular tribe through marriage, the fur-trapper would gain access to new supply lines and perhaps more game-rich portions of the wilderness. White also points out that Native Americans would seek out the Frenchmen as well, seeking to make alliances that suited their needs. The demand for furs in France was tremendous, and there was much wealth to be made by those who delivered quality pelts. Different Native American tribes and communities of the *Pays den Haut* viewed this as an opportunity to increase their wealth and power in the region and, therefore, sought out ways to strengthen alliances with the traders who exported, or shipped out, pelts to France. The main point of the matter is that neither side (French or Native American) was able to fully exploit the other. Both had goals specific to the time and region and saw ways to achieve those goals through cooperation.

One of the main points in White's argument is that over time, through greater intermingling on equal footing, the cultural exchange between Frenchmen and Native Americans resulted in the growth of an entirely new culture and political economy unique to the *Pays den Haut*. White argued against the idea that there was a tit-for-tat bartering of traditions and customs. Instead, through the natural progression of relations-riddled with small misunderstandings, different expectations, and shared goals-new customs and traditions arose. White viewed these moments of compromise as moments of creation. Rather than mourn for the traditions and customs that were lost, White stressed the new world that was built within the Great Lakes region.

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1. Which Europeans settled in the Great Lakes region of the Louisiana Territory?

- A. the French
- B. the English
- C. the Spanish
- D. the Germans

2. What does the author describe in the passage?

- A. ways in which the French exploited the Native Americans in the *Pays d'en Haut*
- B. reasons why the fur trade was not successful in North America
- C. arguments made in historian Richard White's book *The Middle Ground*
- D. the problem of Spanish settlements in the *Pays d'en Haut*

3. Richard White suggests that French and Native Americans dealt with each other on equal terms in the *Pays d'en Haut*. Which evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

- A. French fur-trappers and traders populated the Great Lakes region and funneled countless pelts to forts and outposts as a way of earning their livelihood.
- B. Both the French and Indians had to make certain deals and compromises as they were unable to fully exploit each other.
- C. The cultural exchange between Frenchmen and Native Americans resulted in the growth of an entirely new culture and political economy unique to the *Pays d'en Haut*.
- D. White's book, *The Middle Ground*, sought to oust previous ideas about how the French and Native Americans interacted.

4. Based on the passage, what was the main factor which motivated the interactions of the French and Native Americans in the *Pays d'en Haut* region?

- A. desire for cultural exchange
- B. desire for peace
- C. desire for equality
- D. desire for wealth

5. What is the passage mostly about?

- A. a comparison of French and Spanish relations with Native Americans
- B. an analysis of French relations with Native Americans in the *Pays d'en Haut*
- C. the cultural exchange between Frenchmen and Native Americans in the *Pays d'en Haut*
- D. how French fur-trappers and traders populated the Great Lakes region

6. Read the following sentences from the passage: "Different Indian tribes and communities of the *Pays d'en Haut* viewed this as an opportunity to increase their wealth and power in the region and, therefore, sought out ways to strengthen alliances with the traders who exported, or shipped out, pelts to France. The main point of the matter is that neither side (French or Indian) was able to fully **exploit** the other. Both had goals specific to the time and region and saw ways to achieve those goals through cooperation."

What does the term "**exploit**" mean in this context?

- A. understand
- B. treat unfairly
- C. work with
- D. forgive

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

_____ Richard White published his book, a romantic idea existed that the French were naturally more inclined to form bonds of brotherhood with Native Americans than the English or the Spanish.

- A. Consequently
- B. Before
- C. At Last
- D. Ultimately

8. List at least two ideas that Richard White's *The Middle Ground* sought to oust.

9. Describe how intermarriage could benefit both French and Native Americans.

10. Prior to Richard White's work, there was a romantic idea that the French were more naturally inclined to form bonds of brotherhood with Native Americans than the English or Spanish.

How did Richard White dispel this idea? Use information from the passage to support your answer.