



PROJECT MUSE®

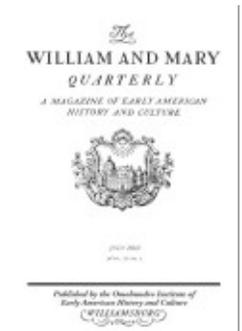
*"The Chiefs Now in This City": Indians and the Urban
Frontier in Early America* by Colin G. Calloway (review)

Kate Fullagar

The William and Mary Quarterly, Volume 79, Number 3, July 2022, pp.
458-461 (Article)

Published by Omohundro Institute of Early American History and
Culture

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wmq.2022.0034>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/861445>

"The Chiefs Now in This City": Indians and the Urban Frontier in Early America. By COLIN G. CALLOWAY. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 283 pages. Cloth, ebook.

Reviewed by Kate Fullagar, *Australian Catholic University*

At the enormous conference between Indigenous and colonial leaders in Augusta, Georgia, in November 1763, a Cherokee leader from Chota staged a piece of political theater. Kittagusta, "the Prince of Chota," stretched out before the assembled delegates "a string of beads with three knots." He explained that the first knot was Chota, the leading town of the Overhill Cherokee. The last knot was Charleston, the main town of the Carolina colonists. The knot in between was Fort Prince George, the small British encampment that had served as a major trading depot through the 1750s and was the site of a treacherous colonial massacre of Cherokee hostages in 1760. Three years later, Kittagusta expressed hope that the talks between each town "shall always be kept straight."¹

Kittagusta's theatrical flourish speaks to many of the themes of Colin G. Calloway's *"The Chiefs Now in This City": Indians and the Urban Frontier in Early America*. Firstly, the book shows how strongly Native Americans in the early modern era incorporated colonial centers into their own geographies. Secondly, it demonstrates that they understood those centers in relational and comparative ways to their own towns. Finally, Calloway emphasizes a history of nonviolent exchange and communication between Natives and European settlers in early North America that is often swamped by the more dramatic episodes of warfare and bloodshed.

Kittagusta's pointed inclusion of Fort Prince George's darker role in the Cherokees' past, as a site of massacre as well as of trade, also reminded his audience that he never forgot the deception and danger that colonists always posed—a theme to which Calloway's book gestures perhaps less than Kittagusta would have liked. Though Calloway flags the "dispossession and racial violence" (194) of colonial American history, he focuses most of his attention on the way that Indians negotiated for peace, trade, and work, and on how they "adapted to new pressures" (3). This decision to emphasize the more peaceful forms of encounter between Natives and settlers is deliberate; noting the magnitude of work—including his own—that already exists on treaties and frontier violence, Calloway argues here for a deeper inquiry into

¹ "The Talks of the Chickesaw, Upper and Lower Creeks Chactaw Cherokee and Catawba Indians. . . ." Nov. 8, 1763, in "Minutes of the Southern Congress at Augusta, Georgia," *Colonial and State Records of North Carolina*, II: 183–91 ("string," 186, "shall always," 187), <https://docsouth.unc.edu/csr/index.php/document/csr11-0084>, accessed March 2022.

all the other forms of interaction between these two groups of people in North America.

This quest leads him to the colonial town. As Calloway remarks, “Chiefs Now in This City” were far more common sights than either contemporaries or later historians have recognized. He stresses that the image of Indians beating a steady if melancholy retreat further and further into the so-called backcountry as the settler revolution advanced westward with relentless force is a damaging myth that obscures how “Indian people frequently moved toward rather than away from them [urban areas], as they responded to new centers of power . . . and took advantage of new economic opportunities” (3). In other words, Calloway shows that Indians recognized dividing lines in the middle of newcomer settlements rather than beyond their horizons and also that these edges could be the basis of productive as well as destructive relationships. He adds to Patrick Spero’s recent dictum that frontiers existed “anywhere Indians were” by revealing how, from a Native perspective, they popped up “anywhere colonists were” (4).²

There are disadvantages to Calloway’s emphasis on the positive elements of Native-European interactions, though. Balancing narratives of tragedy and possibility is the hardest and most common problem for any historian of Native America; to gain a fuller understanding in this case, *The Chiefs Now in This City* might best be read alongside some of Calloway’s own earlier books, especially *The American Revolution in Indian Country* and *Pen and Ink Witchcraft*, which more fully detailed Indian bloodshed and cultural loss.³

The Chiefs Now in This City covers the entire Eastern Seaboard of North America, from the Mi’kmaq in Canada’s eastern Maritimes to the Creek near Saint Augustine in the south, and extends from Algonquin land in the east to Sioux country in the west. But it is not organized along geographic, chronological, or national lines. Instead, Calloway intermingles examples from Indian groups according to topic. These include the short-term visits of diplomats and travelers, the long-term residence of workers and servants, the health challenges Indians faced in colonial towns, and their consumer habits, religious practices, leisure activities, and acts of departure. As a subtle nod to the persistence of empire for Indigenous people through the late eighteenth century, even while colonists switched from subjects to citizens, Calloway grants no special notice to the American Revolution. He does, however, concede that his central dynamic of Natives and settlers intermingling in cities changed significantly after about 1800. As he explains, after this time, “Indian allies were less crucial to the United

² Quoted from Patrick Spero, *Frontier Country: The Politics of War in Early Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia, 2016), 159 (“Indians”).

³ Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge, 1995); Calloway, *Pen and Ink Witchcraft: Treaties and Treaty Making in American Indian History* (New York, 2013).

States. . . . Meanwhile, the [federal] government would extend its reach into Indian communities" (196). Into the nineteenth century, Indians faced an increasingly monolithic, and increasingly militarized, colonial power that simply took rather than bargained for their land.

The bookend chapters of this work elaborate its most trenchant claims. In the initial two chapters, Calloway establishes his Indigenous-centred perspective, implicitly critiquing the ongoing dominance of colonialist assumptions in early American history. "For most of the continent's history," he reminds us, "America's towns and cities were Indigenous" (20). He proceeds to explain that towns were for centuries the standard unit of Native life and that throughout the early modern period Indian centers were often larger and more complex than colonial ones. He emphasizes the eagerness with which colonists agreed to host and entertain visiting Indians; the pressure to woo Native factions away from European rivals never relented during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However "unexpected" they might have become in the modern era, as Philip J. Deloria has discussed, Calloway insists that Indians in white-built towns were a constant and indeed encouraged phenomenon before 1800.⁴

The middle chapters are more informative than argumentative, less concerned with shaking up historiographical commonplaces about the frontier's agents than with unpacking a lost social history of Indians in colonial towns. Chapters 4 through 7 illuminate much unknown or neglected data about what Indians ate and drank while in town, how they managed to keep themselves healthy in notoriously unhealthful urban centers, what they made of colonial religion, law, and slavery, how they dressed, and what shows they attended. As ever with Calloway's research, the evidence is fascinating, rich, and enjoyable to read.

Calloway engages with the (ironically) more abundant literature on Native Americans visiting Europe in a slightly opaque manner. In the introduction, he claims that Indians in colonial towns "did not generate the same level of media attention as did 'exotic' visitors to London or Paris" (7), obliquely referring here to the innumerable reports, squibs, prints, ballads, and celebrity audiences that Native Americans garnered while in Europe through the eighteenth century. Later in chapter 2, however, he asserts that Indians in "Philadelphia or Charleston . . . still attracted curiosity and crowds" (48). No doubt they did provoke some press and onlookers, but Calloway's treatment of this subdued attention would have been more satisfying if he had entered the debate about what exactly drove their appeal to Europeans in this period. Did the popular attention present Indians as stereotypes of otherness? And if so, what political purposes did this serve? Or did it focus instead on them as proof that Indians did not conform to stereotypes? In which case, how did this alter colonial behavior? Scholars have wrestled with these questions in European history but less so in American

⁴ Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence, Kans., 2004).

history.⁵ Either way, it would have been helpful to underscore that in neither Europe nor European America were Indigenous travelers predominantly seen as freaks or spectacles, as was the case in the mid-nineteenth century.

The final chapter returns to Calloway's steadfast commitment to the Indigenous perspective. "Long before Europeans appeared on the scene" (186), he asserts, Native leaders traveled hundreds of miles to see each other in order to secure relationships. That they similarly did so in the colonial era—to and from colonial towns, and now with colonial peoples—should therefore be seen as a continuation of this trend rather than an innovation. Just like earlier Indigenous travelers, too, Native visitors often brought home gifts, stories, and occasionally spouses from their journeys. In the colonial period, however, Calloway admits that the effect of these journeys could be—or increasingly did become—more difficult for Native societies. As often as travel bestowed prestige on a returnee, it also engendered envy, mistrust, and social disturbance. Some returnees faced ostracism and even physical punishment for their association with peoples who were slowly taking more and more land from them. Calloway's hint at darker consequences here is one of the few times in this book that he gestures to the more brutal and negative aspects of Native encounters with European empire.

Calloway describes his book as having a very simple purpose: "to show how often delegations of Indian people traveled to cities in early America and to consider what they might have experienced while they were in and about town" (4). Plainly, *The Chiefs Now in This City* does a great deal more than this. It convincingly shows that Indians were far more present in so-called colonial spaces than has been assumed. In challenging a long-held presumption that Indian people only made history when in Indian places, the book helps redefine our understanding of cultural edges: as Calloway writes, "The 'chiefs now in this city' were not all Indigenous heroes waging unwavering resistance to settler colonialism. Nonetheless, they were on the front lines of contact, collision, and confluence with the Atlantic world" (195). These travelers made the colonial town a part of their own world, complicating any clear notion of where liminal zones truly lay.

Less than two pages in the book are given to how Calloway's story of coexistence collapsed as it moved into the 1800s. More attention to the grimmer parts of the Indian experience of urban colonial peoples might have helped prepare general readers better for understanding this transition. Kittagusta's memory of Fort Prince George certainly meant that he, for one, would not have been too surprised. As a fresh contribution to expertise on early American encounters, however, Calloway's latest production more than delivers.

⁵ For examples in European history, see Troy Bickham, *Savages within the Empire: Representations of American Indians in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005); Kate Fullagar, *The Savage Visit: New World People and Popular Imperial Culture in Britain, 1710–1795* (Berkeley, Calif., 2012).