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*A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813-1814*, by Gregory A. Waselkov

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Overall, this compilation really works. It conveniently compiles a wide variety of narratives on a telling moment in colonial American history from the perspectives of all those involved, and it brings freshness and insight to documents (namely *The Redeemed Captive*) previously seen through old eyes. I recommend this book for a wide variety of courses, such as history classes on American Indians, colonial America, and colonial contact or literature courses on Atlantic literatures or captivity narratives, just to name a few. The editors have also admirably illustrated the volume with twenty-four pictures and five clear and helpful maps created by Kate Blackmer.

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**A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813–1814.** By Gregory A. Waselkov. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 414 pages. \$39.95 cloth.

I had the ill fortune to finally see the film *Hotel Rwanda* the very same week that I finished reading Gregory Waselkov's superb treatment of the events culminating in the disastrous fall of Fort Mims on the Creek frontier during the Redstick War of 1813–14. Although both works uncover instances of humanity in a groundswell of violence, they are also depressing reminders of the constancy of bigotry, intolerance, and hostility. Given the chronic flirtation of our species with large-scale violence we clearly cannot lay all tragic acts and consequences of warfare in the last several centuries at the doorstep of colonialism. But as both movie and book demonstrate, one can hardly ignore how colonialism and its legacy have an unparalleled record of pitting indigenous brother against brother and parent against child.

Internecine Creek conflict expanded into the Redstick War and spilled into the Mississippi Territory within the backdrop of the War of 1812. The British and American competition to gain the allegiance of Indian nations that had become so familiar during the Revolutionary War played out with similarly tragic consequences some thirty years later—the fostering of a factionalism that inevitably weakened the nations at the same time that it hardened American attitudes against Indians. As Waselkov documents, the multiethnic Creek confederacy situated at the strategic convergence of Spanish Florida (a nominal ally of the British) and the Mississippi Territory was relatively untouched by the War of 1812. Yet the promise, however faint, of an ally against continuing American encroachments on Creek lands was enough to help galvanize a movement behind the leaders of an anti-American faction known as the Redsticks.

The Redsticks, in reference to their red war clubs, mobilized in 1813 at the same time that military leaders in the Mississippi Territory were stretched thin attempting to fortify the Creek frontier to the east (in what is now Alabama) while guarding New Orleans and Mobile against the potential of British invasion. Fort Mims, although one of the larger compounds (about 1.25 acres)

on the frontier, was actually a hastily fortified plantation complex. It was manned by about one hundred and fifty militia and volunteers and served as a refuge for hundreds of women, children, and slaves. Negligent vigilance by the fort commander combined with a well-orchestrated surprise attack by a force of about seven hundred Redsticks overwhelmed the defenders and led to a considerable loss of life, including many civilians. The Redsticks took a number of the surviving women, children, and slaves to the Creek nation, who were rescued later by American forces.

Interestingly, the actual event that rapidly became popularized as a massacre of whites in American news accounts, literature, and poetry occupies a somewhat minor portion of *A Conquering Spirit*. With an anthropologist's eye, Waselkov is much more concerned with prologue, aftermath, larger context, and the indigenous dimension of the civil war. In the increasingly atomized and mobile world we live in today it is difficult to appreciate the complex network of allegiances that characterized Creek life in the early 1800s, and Waselkov skillfully renders a complex portrait of divided loyalties to matrilineage, clan, town (*tahwa*), Creek confederacy, and colonial power. The Métis in the region, who were typically of mixed Creek and American or European descent, occupied a particularly precarious yet flexible zone that often allowed them to move between cultural worlds. Waselkov observes that the battle at Fort Mims is typically portrayed as an Indian attack on a white settlement, when in reality Creek internal divisions had led to a significant presence of Métis and even a handful of pro-American Creek within the confines of the fort. A particular strength of the book is that it profiles a number of key individuals who played a major role on both sides at Fort Mims and describes how their respective paths led to their part as either defender or attacker on that fateful day of 30 August 1813—roles that in many instances easily could have been reversed.

A few thoughts about the notion of massacre: the evidence Waselkov presents amply demonstrates that a number of those in Fort Mims—combatant and civilian alike—were killed after their capture, often involving horrible means such as evisceration and dismemberment. Not surprisingly, as this became known there was uproar in the United States over the perceived viciousness of Indians. It is worth noting that it was common among southeastern Indians to view body and soul as intertwined and that disruption of the body disrupted the victim's afterlife. Not that I'm a major proponent of cultural universals, but the belief in corporeal and existential disordering in warfare is common, ranging from Bronze Age Greece to Dynastic Egypt. I make this point not to excuse killing, which is always a tragedy, but to argue that what is viewed as a gratuitous form of violence in one society may be viewed as necessary in another, particularly during times of conflict. Needless to say, the widespread portrayal of the fort's downfall as both a defeat of whites and a massacre had the effect of inflaming passions and fears throughout the Mississippi Territory.

How important was the Redstick War, and particularly the Fort Mims disaster, in turning prevailing American opinion toward the policy of Indian removal, as opposed to what appeared to be at the time other options of

coexistence or assimilation? This is a central question for Waselkov: one he admits cannot be answered with certainty but surely is worthy of debate. The Creeks, Métis, and Americans had sustained a successful if uneven experiment of living in proximity to one another from the period of 1790 to 1813 that, Waselkov argues, had some chance of continuing in one form or another. Instead, the Redstick War threw a delicate balance askew, the Fort Mims massacre solidified American stereotypes about Indian brutality, and Andrew Jackson's successful quashing of the rebellion gave rise to the popularity of an ardent proponent, and later architect, of removal. Contrary to Waselkov's more optimistic thoughts about the possibility of an alternative history, his descriptions of the rapid settler-fueled growth of the Mississippi Territory at the expense of Indian lands gave me the impression that an unhappy ending for the confederacy in the Southeast was a foregone conclusion. In particular, his descriptions of the rapidly rising sense of manifest destiny among Americans in the early nineteenth century make it seem that Indians and Spanish alike were widely viewed as temporary impediments to the expansion of the fledgling United States.

Waselkov nicely details the mythology that quickly arose surrounding Fort Mims, including the actions (heroic and otherwise) of certain individuals, how many died, and who deserved blame for its fall. His study makes important strides toward clarifying and correcting these issues. More important, in my opinion, are his views on the indigenous framing of the Redstick War. The selection of Fort Mims for attack, for example, was due less to any obvious strategic importance and more to the desire to exact revenge on pro-American Métis defenders who had inflicted painful Redstick losses at a skirmish earlier that year. Particularly illuminating is Waselkov's discussion of the visit by Tecumseh in 1811 and subsequent spread of prophet movements among the Redstick faction calling for extermination of the Americans. Nature also plays a role. The massive series of earthquakes along the New Madrid fault in 1811-12 lasted for three months and were felt as far east as Georgia. These were widely viewed as apocalyptic by people of all faiths and reenergized Protestant revivalism alongside the prophet movement in the Southeast.

For those familiar with Waselkov's prominence as an archaeologist of Southeastern tribes, it might be surprising that excavations at Fort Mims receive little explicit mention in this book. But it is obvious that his research revealed to him that there was a much wider history to be told that went well beyond the archaeological record, one that involved the people outside the fort as well as those within it. With that goal in mind, he has done an exemplary job of portraying a pivotal point in the history of Indian relations in North America.

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