

ton's luck in finding the Ledfords, perseverance in studying them, and skill in narrating their seven-generation story, readers have an absorbing and illuminating family history.

Sangamon State University,
Springfield, Ill.

Cullom Davis

Their Number Become Thinned: Native American Population Dynamics in Eastern North America. By Henry F. Dobyns; including an essay with William R. Swagerty as coauthor. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, in cooperation with the Newberry Library Center for the History of the American Indian, 1983. Pp. 378. Notes, tables, maps, figures, bibliography, index. \$29.95.)

In *Their Number Become Thinned* Henry F. Dobyns attempts to identify the "major dynamics of population trends" for native North America and to analyze, as an "illustrative" example, the demographic history of the Timucuan chiefdoms of Florida (p. 4). Dobyns's theme is the depopulation of native North America by exotic diseases to which Indian peoples had no immunity. His account of the impact of these epidemics is not only lucid it is also suggestive in its examination of the relationship between demographic and social change.

The meat of this book, however, and the part sure to inspire controversy, is Dobyns's attempt to establish the original size of the populations these diseases ravaged. He initially calculates a figure of eighteen million people for the North American continent, but his most original work is done in the case study of the Timucuans. Dobyns proceeds methodically. First he assesses the carrying capacity of the land at a given level of technology. He then turns to estimates made by Europeans of warrior strength, village size, and the number of people living in each house. On the basis of his data he makes several estimates of population in the mid-sixteenth century. Finally, Dobyns determines what epidemics had already swept over the Timucuans by this date and uses the death rates such epidemics had inflicted elsewhere to calculate backwards to pre-epidemic populations. He suggests that 722,000 people lived in the Timucuan chiefdoms in 1517. The highest current estimate is 20,000. Such figures suggest the boldness of Dobyns's revisionism.

This book is a major work of scholarship, one that is both methodical and ingenious, but its large conclusions often flow from sparse evidence. To share Dobyns's conclusions readers will have to share his assumptions. Dobyns, for instance, works from the basic Malthusian premise of cultural materialism: population

will inevitably increase to the limits of subsistence. Not all scholars would agree that this has been demonstrated, nor will all be convinced by more specific uses of evidence. Paintings of dubious ethnographic validity and estimates of field size by passing Spanish marauders are translated into caloric yields from hunting and agriculture. A rough numerical parity between chiefdoms and between villages within chiefdoms is assumed so that one estimate of warrior strength or village size is applied to other groups for whom no data exist. Here Dobyns is struggling with lack of evidence, but in his discussion of soil fertility and Indian agriculture he often proceeds with little reference to available scientific research. Finally, in his calculations he sometimes writes as if epidemics produced identical death rates regardless of social conditions. These and similar issues will almost certainly make this book the center of a fruitful and significant scholarly controversy.

University of Utah, Salt Lake City

Richard White

Book Reviewers

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