

Paradise Lost, a Republic Gained

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Peaceable Kingdom

Lost

The Paxton Boys and the
Destruction of William Penn's
Holy Experiment



KEVIN KENNY

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As the hostilities of the American Revolution were subsiding in the winter of 1782, the Ohio frontier witnessed one of the most gruesome wartime atrocities in American history. On March 9, American patriot militiamen from nearby western Pennsylvania marched into the Moravian mission community of Gnadenhutten and condemned nearly one hundred neutral Christian Indians to death for allegedly aiding and abetting enemy Indian attacks against frontier white settlers. Unimpeded by the scant evidence to support their accusations, the frontier patriots quarantined their suspects overnight while they deliberated on the most efficient method of exacting justice. Throughout the next morning, while praying and singing hymns, the incarcerated Indians were dragged in pairs to a nearby slaughterhouse where they were bludgeoned to death. In the end, the victims consisted of twenty-eight men, twenty-nine women, and thirty-nine children, and their remains were stacked inside the building while the entire town was burned to the ground. The leader of the massacre, Colonel David Williamson, was later valorized and elected sheriff of a local county in the new United States (232).

In his most recent work, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment*, Kevin Kenny sees this systematic mass execution as the nadir of a long declension in Indian-white relations. Kenny's book traces this bloody course, and explains how the peaceful stability forged through treaties between the colony's Quaker founder, William Penn, and Indians of the Susquehanna Valley had long since eroded under the pressures of Euro-American frontier expansion by the time of the American Revolution. Over the course of the century, moreover, various socio-political developments slowly altered white settlers' attitudes toward their diverse native neighbors, and culminated in their association of all Indians with the tyrannical authority of a corrupt and negligent imperial government. By 1776, backcountry Indian-hating had become a patriotic virtue as quintessentially American as independence, self-sacrifice, and egalitarianism. The incident at Gnadenhutten in 1782, Kenny concludes, simply demonstrated the shocking extent to which Penn's cross-cultural dream had been denigrated by the gradual coalescence of a nascent racism and the patriotic reform of local land laws and government structures.

Kenny's narrative begins with the legendary negotiations with the Delaware Indians at Shackamaxon in 1682, and then with the Conestoga and Shawnee at Philadelphia in 1701. These treaties, which consummated William Penn's vision, paid natives for land cessions and encouraged them to coexist with colonists in neighboring communities. Two pivotal occurrences, however, quickly exposed the fragility of this working arrangement. Kenny sees the mass influx in the 1710s of Scots-Irish Presbyterians from the northern Irish province of Ulster as an enormous counterweight to the principles laid forth by the earlier treaties. Unlike the area's English Quaker and German and Swiss Mennonite colonists who exhibited pacifism, charity, and simplicity, the new arrivals "embodied a rapacious form of colonialism" centering on a militant Protestantism steeled in the bloody ethno-religious conflicts of Ireland during the previous century (21). Unscrupulous in their dealings with Pennsylvania's Indians, and unlawful

in their settlement patterns in the backcountry, the Ulster Presbyterians threatened the tenuous authority of the Penn family proprietors and the local Assembly. Out of this tension, the settlers grew increasingly suspicious of Indians' privileged legal status, which stood in stark contrast to the evictions and arrests that they suffered at the hands of a distant and seemingly unsympathetic colonial government.

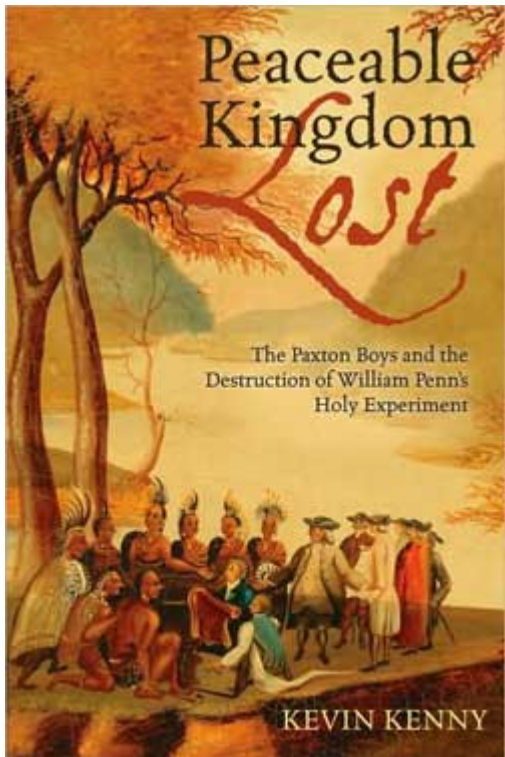
Corrosive pressure on William Penn's settlement was also originating from within his own family. Kenny sees William's heir, Thomas, as a profit-monger with few qualms about fleecing Indians in order to capitalize on lucrative deals with wealthy land speculators and legitimate settlers. The most famous example of this was the Walking Purchase in 1736, which used an obscure and ambiguous land transaction from 1686 to defraud the powerful Delawares out of their land possessions in eastern Pennsylvania. Thomas also negotiated with the Iroquois to the north, who in turn had long claimed Pennsylvania's native groups as tributaries, and worked with them to oversee the dispossession of most eastern Indians from their valuable land claims. The baffled Delawares retreated west, though they would never forget the Penn family's betrayal of their sacred trust. When imperial war with France came to Pennsylvania in 1754, the displaced Delaware and Shawnee seized the opportunity to exact retribution. Violence had finally descended on the peaceable kingdom.

Kenny's narrative structure is at its strongest when he integrates native experiences and Pennsylvania's broader socio-political development. Led by Teedyuscung in the east and Shingas in the backcountry, the Delawares mounted devastating raids against Euro-American settlements, killing hundreds and forcing thousands to flee their farms and retreat east. Without a legislated militia to protect them, the colony's settlers intuitively fabricated a virulent and enduring stereotype as they "reduced the Assembly to Quakerism and Quakerism to pacifism" (80). Bureaucratic wrangling and stagnation in Philadelphia fueled backcountry beliefs in a negligent legislature conspiring against them and privileging its status among Indian neighbors. A rift was widening between the Quaker faction represented by the Assembly, and the proprietary government that aimed to curb both its growing influence in colonial politics as well as its protection of native interests. Indian and settler actions in the interior, Kenny stresses, fomented the colony's emerging crisis of authority.

The violence saturating Pennsylvania during the Seven Years War and later in Pontiac's War fostered the crystallization of a second, and fundamentally race-based, generalization among frontier settlers, according to Kenny. A group of vigilante settlers from Paxton town embodied this intellectual transformation, as their terrorist acts in native communities ignored the distinction between the colony's peaceful and enemy Indians. George III's Proclamation of 1763 barring white settlement west of the Appalachians only compounded this tension, and galvanized "the sense among frontier settlers that all forms of government were conspiring against them" (133). This powder keg exploded in December 1763, when the Paxton Boys advanced with guns and tomahawks on Conestoga Indiantown—a

“friendly” native community established by William Penn’s 1701 settlement—and massacred the six Indians they found there before burning their cabins. Two weeks later, the Paxtons caught up to fourteen others who had escaped to nearby Lancaster and, in the broad daylight of the town streets, slaughtered them in front of onlookers. Acting on their belief “that all Indians were perfidious and deserving of annihilation during wartime,” the Paxtons’ indiscriminate murder spree reflected a racialized understanding of human difference that moved far beyond ethnocentrism, Kenny points out (167). William Penn’s working arrangement was being undermined not only by retributive violence, but also by a darker perception of an immutable social hierarchy fashioned in the heat of warfare.

Peaceable Kingdom Lost is intended in part as a corrective to older whiggish interpretations that represent the frontier rebels as freedom fighting proto-democrats who sought to topple an archaic form of tyrannical government. By examining their written grievances presented to colonial officials in Philadelphia, Kenny instead argues that the Paxton Boys were virtually indifferent to the issue of political representation and much more driven by local concerns over land issues and security in the backcountry. Rather than advocating provincial autonomy, moreover, the rebels and their propagandists actually identified with the British Crown and many agitated for an alliance with the proprietary family against the local Assembly in the 1760s. When the American Revolution arrived in Pennsylvania, it offered backcountry settlers yet another opportunity to air long-standing grievances over property rights and security threats posed by neighboring Indians. The Paxton Boys were thus not the harbingers of a new egalitarianism, Kenny maintains, but the defenders of a racial order who continually reiterated the “idea of killing Indians as a form of loyal opposition to bad government” (180). The grisly incident at Gnadenhutten in 1782—again extralegal and unpunished—was consummate proof that Indian-hating had become intimately bound up in the movement for socio-political reform on the frontier.



Kevin Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost: The Paxton Boys and the Destruction of William Penn's Holy Experiment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 304 pp., cloth, \$29.95

Readers acquainted with this familiar story may question the novelty of *Peaceable Kingdom Lost*. And their concerns are justifiable. Kenny has impeccably mastered the complexity of this narrative, and his attention to detail coupled with his ability to weave those nuances into a captivating story make his book incredibly informative as well as widely accessible. Yet he is also venturing onto well-trod ground. In the last twenty years, the eighteenth-century Pennsylvania and Ohio backcountries have served as subject matter for a plethora of scholars including Richard White, James Merrell, Eric Hinderaker, Jane Merritt, and Peter Silver, each of whom has probed Penn's Holy Experiment for its lessons on native American history, colonialism, and the emergence of racism in early America. Out of this rich historiography has emerged a general consensus: the mid-Atlantic backcountry was an extraordinarily violent place, where a distant and faction-ridden colonial—and later, national-government fostered the growth of frontier autonomy based on the hatred and destruction of Indians. Though it is evident to readers that Kenny's work does not challenge this orthodoxy, it is unclear if the author himself sees his narrative as substantiating or complicating its contours, or if he is contributing to another set of issues altogether. In sum, readers will have difficulty situating this work in an already exhaustive historiography.

Regardless of these questions, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost* contains crucial implications for native American and early American scholars alike. As the vast majority of today's American Indian reservations lie west of the Mississippi River, many students envision Indians in the past as inhabiting regions "out

there" and beyond the pale of white civilization. Kevin Kenny reveals the intimate proximity of native and Euro-American cultures throughout the colonial period, and demonstrates how the initially benevolent nature of this closeness in Pennsylvania served as the font of later bloodshed and racism. What began as a creative expression of Penn's Quaker piety and pragmatism, as well as native desires for diplomatic and trade alliances, would increasingly serve to legitimate violence between frontier settlers and Indians, each of whom held the other collectively accountable for periodic transgressions against the tenets of the Peaceable Kingdom. The idyllic image of Pennsylvania's early cultural exchange, then, ironically served as the catalyst for the intensifying conflict plaguing the region's backcountry by the late colonial period. Kenny's work reminds us, consequently, of the ubiquity of Indian societies in much of colonial America, a posture defined frequently by natives' physical presence and nearly always by their cognitive primacy in Euro-American minds. In the same vein, this book serves as an example of the ways in which native American and early American histories can be integrated; Indians are not relegated to the margins of America's larger socio-political development, but instead are inextricable from and integral to our understanding of it.