



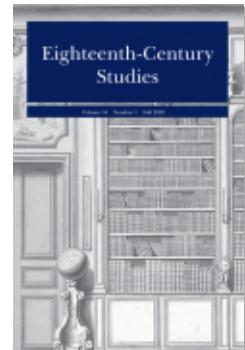
PROJECT MUSE®

---

*Posthumous America: Literary Reinventions of America at the End of the Eighteenth Century* by Benjamin Hoffmann (review)

Mary Helen McMurran

Eighteenth-Century Studies, Volume 54, Number 1, Fall 2020, pp. 230-232  
(Review)



Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecs.2020.0103>

➡ For additional information about this article  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/771849>

Benjamin Hoffmann, *Posthumous America: Literary Reinventions of America at the End of the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Alan J. Singerman (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 2018). Pp. 256; 3 b/w illus. \$34.95 paper.

The fur traders, Jesuit missionaries, Acadian colonists, and military figures who feature in French colonial history are mostly a distant memory in *Posthumous America*. The subject of this study is not New France or its demise, but an America that resides in French consciousness around the turn of the nineteenth century. French writers' image of America is, in short, a trace presence of an idyllic past rather than a young, bustling nation. *Posthumous America* examines this phenomenon by making three distinct arguments: America is construed "posthumously" in French writing as a wistful evocation of a Golden Age, as a necessary failure of utopic expectations, and as a projection of European civilization. The book's lengthy single-author studies of John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Claude-François de Lezay-Marnésia, and François-René de Chateaubriand track these modes of posthumous construction, relating them as exemplary of France's "retrospective idealization" of America (5). Each chapter includes biographical information, and although the historical and political contexts of the American and French Revolutions are not ignored, the stated purpose is to recuperate the literary qualities of these writers. Their literariness, according to the author, stems directly from the "psychological mechanisms" of recollection—a Proustian affair of recreating a past that is irretrievably lost and yet vividly present in the writing.

Crèvecoeur famously lauds America's potential for prosperity and community, but also highlights the constant threats to its harmony. Hoffmann's argument is that Crèvecoeur commemorates an America before the ravages of its war for independence: "[t]he American Dream is already dead in the *Lettres*, and Crèvecoeur writes in the present the posthumous representation of a reinvented Golden Age" (41). Lezay-Marnésia, the subject of the second chapter, is virtually unknown to dix-huitiémistes, and Hoffmann has also published a helpful edition of the primary text analyzed in this chapter, *Letters Written from the Banks of the Ohio*, in French with an English translation by Alan Singerman. He was a minor aristocrat who, after founding a society of landowners, proposed a colonial settlement in what is now Ohio. The project was conceived at the height of the French Revolution and designed as a refuge for exiles who intended to preserve France's noble past in a new world. Although Lezay-Marnésia's empty promises and poor calculations, not least due to other rightful claims on the lands, resulted in his personal and financial ruin, his writings insist on maintaining the dream of a perfect felicity in America—a dream that was unrealizable from the start.

The trajectory from Crèvecoeur to Lezay-Marnésia reveals the intensification of a political conservatism that contrasts sharply with the views of both their fellow French citizens and Americans. Crèvecoeur highlights the destruction of the American Revolution and alludes to a similarly harmful fracturing of his homeland caused by the radicalism of the French Revolution. His America, "a mirage in the past," (65) is posed as the model for France's future. Lezay-Marnésia, for his part, envisions a regenerated monarchism in America grounded in the values of the French nobility. Chateaubriand, whose doomed expedition in America began as a way to escape the French Revolution, is also a political reactionary: he mourns the loss of New France, not simply as territorial diminishment, but

because it represents the waning of French imperial glory. If these writers' politics seem out of touch with the reality of the early American nation, it is because each is progressively more detached than the previous one from emerging U.S. society. Of the three writers, Crèvecoeur is the only one who lived in America long enough to put down roots before fleeing the American Revolution, and the only one who returned to the country, temporarily, after his return to France. His credibility as a witness to events in America results in the dialogism, or perhaps vacillation, found in *Letters from an American Farmer*, the two French editions of the *Letters*, and his *Voyages*. Lezay-Marnésia spent only two years in America, in a failed attempt to superimpose French society on it. Chateaubriand visited America for only a few months, and his writings about the journey, not completed until decades later, have always been understood as transparently fanciful.

Hoffmann's arguments about how spatial and temporal distance enables the literary imagination are among the most persuasive in the book. The overall thesis of the book—that the retrospection and memorialization of a country that never existed is achieved by skillful fictionalization with complex motivations and implications—is borne out, first, through Hoffmann's careful teasing out Crèvecoeur's multiple writerly guises, his borrowing from other authors, and the scattering of his reminiscences in fragments. The claim is also strongly supported in Hoffman's discussion of Lezay-Marnésia's distortions, which derive from the self-delusions of a promoter. The book's focus on imagination as self-delusion reaches a zenith or nadir depending on one's viewpoint of fictionalizing one's remembrance, in Hoffman's discussion of Chateaubriand. In the *Voyage en Amérique* and the American books of his grand opus, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, the transposition of experience into writing is mediated by memories reconstituted after the original manuscripts were stolen or lost. Chateaubriand admits that fiction, be it the contrivance of the writer as a character or the alteration of the passage of time, becomes a reality that displaces the truthful account.

*Posthumous America*, in addition to introducing scholars to Lezay-Marnésia, offers an engaging literary analysis of authors seldom treated by literary scholars and rarely considered as a group. Even more importantly, it draws out the complexities and continuities of commemorative idealization in French writing on America. Published in French last year, *Posthumous America*'s intended audience appears to be French literary scholars, as indicated by a preponderance of references to the French literary canon including, inevitably, Rousseau, but also much less inevitably, Baudelaire, Balzac, and Philippe Labro's memoir about attending college at Washington and Lee in the 1950s. The author has effectively tethered his main theme to the French literary art of *nostalgie*. If Hoffmann's research on the primary texts and contexts is competent and useful to other readers, the framework, specifically its aesthetic and psychologizing approach elaborated in the relatively short fifteen-page introduction as well as throughout the individual author studies, is only indirectly engaged with current scholarship in transatlantic studies or early American studies. French writers' America may not be a template for the ideologies that come to define the nation, but, for this very reason, their America might be productively set against that of early Anglo-American writers generally considered to be the founders of national political and social identity, and of the ensuing debates over that identity. In other words, Hoffmann might have brought out these French writers' divergence from capitalist, common-sense, future-oriented Anglo-Americanism as a means of exposing the distortions of the inchoate self-image of the early nation.

These French writers might also be juxtaposed with their Anglophone contemporaries with respect to the systematic oppressions of Indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans, and particularly the role played by literary discourse. While slavery goes unmentioned, Indigenous Americans feature prominently in the authors studied, and their views are accordingly interpreted, but only via the limited lens of Indigenous peoples as European constructions. When addressing Crèvecoeur's condemnatory observations on "Amerindian culture," but also describing him as empathetic to native peoples, the author argues that the racist discourse of the period does not fully explain Crèvecoeur's position. This point seems to miss the racism of Crèvecoeur's platform of preservationism: his supposition of a vestigial native culture denies their actual survival. As Hoffmann argues, Chateaubriand, in pursuit of the truth of the imagination, transforms the decline of native peoples into extinction, and turns their images into apparitions, which, in specular fashion, can then confirm the greatness of the French civilization. Hoffmann's reading method, which consistently points back to the primary author's own self-absorption, would be both more nuanced and more powerful if it were backed by the kind of historicist research and methods in Indigenous studies currently taken up by many early Americanist scholars. Hoffmann's explanation of Crèvecoeur's vast and complex self-translation of the *Letters* into French should have updated the Frenchification thesis advanced more than fifty years ago with more recent translation theory. One curiosity in the book's scholarly presentation is the organization of the bibliography into multiple subsections. The secondary works are placed under headings for each of the three primary authors, while other cited sources fall awkwardly in "Complementary Works" and "Complementary Literary Studies"—a design not particularly useful to the reader seeking a reference in an alphabetical list. Despite minor deficiencies, however, this analysis of the French disenchantment with the myth of America provides a beneficial counter-narrative to the autochthonous stories of enthusiastic progress or resilience in ways that resonate with the America of 2020.

---

BRYAN C. RINDFLEISCH, *Marquette University*

---

Colin G. Calloway, *The Indian World of George Washington: The First President, the First Americans, and the Birth of the Nation* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018). Pp. 640; 20 illus. and 8 maps. \$21.95 paper.

Colin Calloway's latest book—in a career filled with pioneering works in Native America and early American history—effectively demystifies George Washington by firmly rooting his lifespan from adolescence to the presidency in Indian Country: "Indian people . . . loomed large in Washington's world . . . [and] his life intersected constantly with them, [as] events in Native America shaped the direction his life took" (4). Washington's pervasive exposure to the Indigenous peoples of eastern North America was nowhere more evident when it came to land, for "Indian land dominated his thinking and his vision for the future," given his occupations as surveyor, speculator, military commander, and president (4). Washington was surrounded by "the Indian world of his time"; his life was shaped by collaborative and oppositional relationships by Indian people (15). The enormity of this influence is central to Calloway's purposes for the book: "this is not another