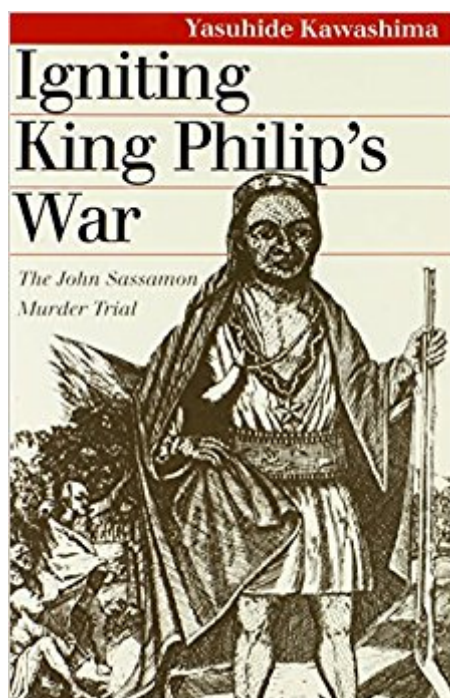


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Igniting King Philip's War: The John Sassamon Murder Trial



Synopsis

The subjugation of Native Americans by European immigrants grew out of a violent clash of cultures that, in retrospect, hid real opportunities for peaceful coexistence. Key elements of this tragic tale can clearly be seen in Yasuhide Kawashima's chronicle of the events surrounding a criminal trial in Puritan New England—perhaps the earliest landmark case in American law. In 1675, Wampanoag Indian John Sassamon was allegedly ambushed and murdered on his way home from Plymouth, where he had warned the colonists about his people's plan to attack them. An investigation led to the trial and execution of three Indians based on the testimony of only one suspect witness. The verdict aggravated tensions between Indians and settlers and ultimately ignited King Philip's War, after which Indians were subjugated, their villages effectively became reservations, and all hope of bicultural existence vanished. Although it is usually considered from a political or cultural standpoint, Kawashima retells the story of the murder and trial from the perspective of legal history and overlapping jurisdictions. He shows that Plymouth's aggressive extension of its legal authority marked the end of four decades of legal coexistence between Indians and colonists, ushering in a new era of cultural and legal imperialism. Kawashima views this seminal legal conflict as a reflection of much larger cultural differences between the two groups. Within that context, however, he also questions the validity of the proceedings themselves. In the end, Kawashima suggests, the murder verdict was a rush to judgment that rested on the shaky foundations of neglected forensic evidence as well as procedural violations of colonial law that ignored the rights of the accused. That decision marked a turning point in Euro-Indian relations and set the pattern for the ultimate marginalization of all Indians in North America. Kawashima's explication of those events casts history in a new light and shows us the critical importance of this landmark case.

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Customer Reviews

"Kawashima has provided a thorough yet concise treatment of the most important legal proceeding in the history of England's North American colonies. It is a pleasure to follow his detective work through the maze of forensic possibilities in the John Sassamon case."--James D. Drake, author of King Philip's War: Civil War in New England, 1675-1676 "The fact that this case became one of those crucial flash-points in relations between natives and newcomers makes this book especially important. What emerged in that courtroom, and in the executions that followed, was the deep and abiding mistrust that had developed between various groups of peoples in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Will intrigue readers both inside and outside academe."--Peter Mancall, author of Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America

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Some repetition, some writing that could have been tighter, but this is an excellent and sensible compilation of difficult to find information. Conclusions drawn and observations of the impact that the trial had on New England culture are logical and believable.

I actually was a student of Dr. Kawashima this last semester. It was very interesting to look at the legal and cultural differences between natives and colonists in this book. I learned a lot.

Kawashima's excellent dissection of the animus behind King Philip's War, the last gasp of Native

self-determination in New England, is an important addition to cultural anthropology as well as to New England history. Using the alleged murder of John Sassamon, a "praying" Indian with English language skills, as his touchstone, Kawashima goes on to explore the basic meanings of terms like "property" and "permanent advantage" as viewed by seventeenth century English and by the native inhabitants of what we now call New England, whose language, capacity for massive violence, and fundamental psychology were so very different. Sassamon, who sometimes functioned as a translator for Philip, was caught hopelessly between two irreconcilable worlds, and therefore, could not prudently be trusted by either. But, as long as Philip had such men as translators within his orbit, he could lay some claim to the sovereignty of his people, which, after all, had been granted by the original pilgrim settlers. Thus, when Philip's proxies were called before colonial authorities to stand trial for Sassamon's wintry death and were almost summarily executed after a guilty verdict, much more was being said beyond the mere surmise, and, in evidentiary terms, it came to little more than that, that Philip was behind it. Cultural antagonisms made the near genocide of native peoples, like the Pequots, and eventually the "protected" Wampanoags and Narragansetts, virtually inevitable. What Kawashima does so well is to make the evolution of the conflict more understandable by probing the grey areas, and owing to acculturation, the "grey people," caught between two worlds, like Sassamon, Miantonomi, Uncas, and even Philip himself, as they struggled to accommodate the white man while appropriating enough of his coveted technology to stay autonomous. A losing battle, that.

A useful contribution to the understanding of early colonial conflicts, and the roots of genocide.

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