

Rumour has it

Eavesdropping on the myths and legends of American history

NEIL RENNIE

Gregory Evans Dowd

GROUNDLESS

Rumors, legends, and hoaxes on the early frontier
391pp. Johns Hopkins University Press. £22.50
(US \$34.95).
978 1 4214 1865 0

Groundless is not a continuous history of ungrounded rumour on the American frontier but an episodic approach to particular topics that attracted rumour, usually but not always fearful. Smallpox, scalping, Indian or black revolts, gold, Indian Removal: Gregory Evans Dowd knows that what is spoken, even falsely or ignorantly, has a kind of reality. Rumours, like myths, speak cultural truths. Of course historians must separate rumours from historical facts, because rumours speak truths of a different kind, articulating a community's fears and hopes, more often the former on the edgy frontier. There are several truths we learn from Dowd's careful investigation of rumours in their cultural and historical contexts: that Indians were not deliberately infected with smallpox hidden in gifted blankets, for example, a perfidy that was proudly claimed or guiltily imagined by white Americans. Also that, contrary to rumour, white American rebels did not scalp British soldiers during the War of Independence, though Indians on both sides of that war were paid for the scalps of enemies.

An absence of one particular kind of rumour is significant for the early centuries of colonization, when there were almost no rumours among white Americans about alliances between black slaves and Indians. Dowd rightly deduces that rumours have to be plausible to be successful, and the silence about any alliance between the two subjugated races – indigenous Indians and

imported Africans – reflects the actual historical absence of such alliances in resistance to the self-imported European colonists. There were linguistic as well as cultural differences between the slaves and the Indians which kept them apart and – I would add – there were also such differences between “the Indians” themselves, who were not a homogeneous people, but belonged to many different tribes, with no collective name for themselves.

Rumours cross – and fill – the cultural gaps opened by frontiers, by their closures of communication and assimilation, but Dowd notes the relative silence of Indians in written records, although they themselves were mysterious and often rumoured about. Because they did not have the means of recording themselves, they speak only dumbly, in others' quotations, in translation and in foreign cultural contexts, speaking always to someone else's purpose, their voices emerging strangely from colonial pens, their meanings dubious not because their words are fictions but because they are misapprehen-



The goddess Rumour; detail from an engraving by Pierre Lombart, in Dryden's verse translation of the *Aeneid* (1697). From *Groundless*

sions, cultural muddles. Dowd speaks sensitively and eloquently to this point in his “Essay on Sources”, but the ethnohistorical dimension of his richly researched book is a little thin. Scalping was rumoured about and

actually experienced by whites, but what did its reality mean to various Indian tribes?

Dowd has researched his rumours scrupulously, recognizing that they are themselves historical facts which need to be discerned by thoughtful detective work based on good evidence. Above all, rumours must be heard from primary sources, not by way of Chinese whispers in secondary sources. *Groundless* is satisfyingly grounded. Dowd has eavesdropped credibly as well as prodigiously, listening to the many voices across time whether recorded safely on microfilm or in the inky scribbles in the National Archives at Kew.

Rumour does recede to a whisper at the conclusion of the book, however, in the era of Indian Removals in the 1830s, when the Indian tribes were being driven West by a mixture of greed, legislation and force. The facts of the Cherokee removal that are narrated to us by Dowd are not mere rumours – and this sad tale is not a new tale, as its old name, the “Trail of Tears”, indicates. Dowd does not bend his ear to the original source of this name, supposedly given to the melancholy journey of the Choctaws by a Choctaw chief, dead-beat in Little Rock, quoted in the *Arkansas Gazette*. But did the Choctaw chief really say that? Indians seldom spoke for themselves in English words in American newspapers. Perhaps the chief did not say the words that white historians have sympathetically – or sentimentally – repeated for him. We may never know.