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Author

Mancall, Peter C.

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Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Clash of Cultures. By Frederic W. Gleach. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. 243 pages. \$60.00 cloth.

There are few moments in American history more famous than the English establishment of Jamestown in 1607. In many historical accounts, the establishment of colonial settlements along the banks of the James River, a tributary of Chesapeake Bay, marked the real beginning of "American" history, by which historians meant the history of the English colonies in eastern North America. The founding of Virginia became a crucial part of the American national narrative not only because the English survived there. Just as important, that moment in history was, as countless United States history textbooks have told generations of students, filled with moments of great triumph and adversity: widespread death among the colonists; the heroics of Captain John Smith; his rescue by Pocahontas; the insurgence of native Powhatans against the English in 1622; and the English reprisal for this "massacre." Although serious historians have long since abandoned their mindless celebrations of English success along the James, most textbook accounts still depict the encounter from the perspective of the English colonizers and tend to pay less attention to the views of the Natives who lived in the region. It is in this context that Frederic Gleach has offered a new interpretation of seemingly long-familiar events. Though not all readers will necessarily agree with the ways in which Gleach has reached new conclusions, his reinterpretation of the clash between the Powhatans and the English should nonetheless make all readers recognize that the events in the area in the early seventeenth century were caused not by the English alone but, rather, by the ways that Natives and newcomers treated each other.

Gleach is not, of course, the first scholar to focus on interracial relations in this region. Frederick Fausz and Helen Rountree have each described the encounter before, paying particular attention to the Powhatans. A number of other scholars, most notably Edmund Morgan and David Beers Quinn, have made the interaction between the English and the Powhatans crucial elements in their accounts of the development of English America. But Gleach does not reinvent the wheel here. Instead, his interpretation is inspired by works of anthropologists such as Marshall Sahlins and Greg Denning. Gleach's goal is to discern the "cultural meanings and relationships" (p. 13) evident in meetings between Powhatans and colonizers. To do so he "interpolate[s]" from ethnographic accounts, including later descriptions, to reconstruct the native system of beliefs and understanding, in the same way that historians have long reconstructed the English colonial world-view, in order to evaluate the actions that arose from those two very distinct orders" (p. 17).

The bulk of the book consists of careful analyses of crucial moments in the history of the Chesapeake region from the 1570s to the 1640s. But before Gleach trains his focus on that chronological period, he first provides chapters entitled "The Native Context" and "The English Colonial Context." Gleach uses these chapters to describe how the different peoples who met along the banks of the James River understood the world around them. Needless to say, the Powhatans and the English possessed strikingly different value systems. Yet each seemingly

welcomed, at least at first, the possibility of trading with the other. But actual contact brought problems that neither group had anticipated. Epidemic diseases, probably begun by a Spanish missionary expedition that tried to colonize among the Powhatans in 1570, reduced the numbers of Natives in the region even before the English arrived. But though the Powhatans learned about aspects of European culture from the Spanish, and though Powhatan himself managed to solidify his control over neighboring groups after the Natives destroyed the mission, nothing could have prepared them for the arrival of the English. For the English, unlike the Spanish, came not to convert Indians to Christianity; they came to take the land that belonged to the Powhatans.

Much of Gleach's book recounts the pivotal moments in the history of territory that the English named "Virginia" in honor of Queen Elizabeth I. He thus focuses on the initial creation of an English colony at Jamestown; the tensions that led up to violence in the early 1620s; the so-called "Great Massacre of 1622," which Gleach terms a "coup" in his redefinition of that crucial event; the aftermath of that conflict, including the violence of the mid-1640s; and then a brief history of the region after 1646, including material on the tensions that led to Bacon's Rebellion in 1676. Throughout these chapters Gleach provides telling commentary on pivotal moments and demonstrates the benefits of seeing history from the perspective of the Powhatans as well as from the perspective of the English. Thus he dwells on the Powhatans' capture of Captain John Smith and his eventual release. To Smith, and to generations of American historians—and to anyone who watched Disney's *Pocahontas*—the venerable English captain escaped only because Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas intervened. But as Gleach sees the event, drawing both on Smith's multiple accounts of the incident and his understanding of Powhatan culture, Smith survived not because of Pocahontas' pleading but, instead, because the Powhatans had no real intention to kill him in the first place. What the Powhatans intended in the abduction and ritual preparation for Smith's execution was to teach the English a lesson: to let them know that they could settle in the area only under the conditions dictated by the Natives who dominated that territory. To the Powhatans, the ritual signified that the English needed to confine their activities to limited territory, thereby allowing the Jamestown colony to survive as yet another community dependent on Powhatan for whatever prosperity it might enjoy. But the English never understood what the Powhatans had in mind. They continued to expand their settlements, especially after they realized the profitability of tobacco production in the mid-1610s.

Gleach's effort to reconstruct race relations from the perspective of each participant has obvious benefits. Yet as Gleach and every other historian who has treated this pivotal time at this place have realized, the documentary evidence is much more abundant for the colonists and their perspective than for the Powhatans. Gleach does not abandon the attempt to explicate events from the Powhatans' view. Instead, he draws on materials from similar Native peoples in eastern North America, including written accounts by non-Natives who observed Indians. Thus Gleach's fascinating explication of the Natives' worldview includes quotations from the Jesuit missionary Marc Lescarbot's reflections on the Micmac headman Membertou, the Reverend John Heckewelder's eighteenth-century comments on the Delawares, an account of

“Algonquian style” warfare typified by an episode among the Ojibwas in 1763, as well as writings by English colonists such as Robert Beverly (who inhabited Virginia almost a century after the English first arrived there) and Roger Williams (who observed Massachusetts Algonquians in the seventeenth century). Gleach also includes the writings of modern anthropologists who commented on the Crees, Ojibwas, and Fox. Gleach is too good a scholar to draw on this material silently; instead, he suggests to the reader as he progresses, the only way to understand the Powhatan worldview, the only way to make sense of it in all of its complexity, is to be open to finding evidence from similar cultures and then applying that evidence to the case of the Powhatans. In other words, Gleach does not claim that he can use evidence from these other peoples simply because they are Indians, or because many spoke Algonquian languages. He makes careful decisions about what evidence to include and justifies those decisions. It will be up to Gleach’s readers to question whether his decision to move well beyond the documentary evidence on the Powhatans has helped him to decipher their world.

Yet even readers who support Gleach’s attempt might find certain passages troublesome. For example, he claims that “the descendants” of the original English “intruders are the ultimate authorities over history and, in some ways, even over the Indian descendants themselves” (p. 202). But certainly not every scholar who has written on this topic is of English descent, and in this age in which the past is so frequently contested it is difficult to imagine that anyone has a monopoly on its interpretation. Also, some readers might question the need for lengthy quotations in the text; these include not only an almost three-page reprinting of a 1646 treaty, but also long passages relating to events in other times and places (such as the account of a “former Indian agent” in the late nineteenth-century West on p. 201).

These caveats aside, *Powhatan’s World and Colonial Virginia* should be read by anyone interested in the initial contact between English colonists and the Native peoples of the first permanent English colony in North America. As Gleach correctly notes in his conclusion, the “Powhatan construction of reality, the interrelationships they saw between aspects of culture and the natural world that were seen as separate by English colonists, and the aesthetic sense in which they evaluated actions were all quite distinct from the colonial English understanding” (p. 205). We will never understand the myriad possibilities open during the period of contact if we ignore the basic fact that the tragedy of the early colonial period occurred in large measure because the newcomers could never grasp why the Natives acted in the ways that they did, and the colonizers often responded not with efforts to adjust their goals but instead acted with greater aggression to pursue their original vision. It is no coincidence that the territory where Powhatan once resided is now called Virginia; nor is it a coincidence that that headman’s descendants struggle today not only to maintain elements of their traditional culture, but even to be recognized by the federal government as a specific Native nation.