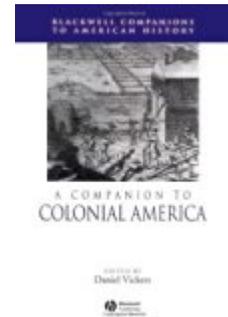


Daniel Vickers. *A Companion to Colonial America* (Blackwell Companions to American History). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003. xiii + 562 pp. \$174.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-21011-5.

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Conceiving “Colonial America”

Graduate students preparing for their qualifying examinations will undoubtedly rejoice in this volume, not only because it seeks to “to provide readers with an introduction to the current state of studies in colonial American history” (p. xiii), but because it proffers a general prescription for absorbing the seemingly overwhelming volume of scholarship that has emerged since the publication of a similar exercise in 1984.[1] Its utility for other users, though, appears problematic. The surveyors employed here to plot the literature on various topics include John Brooke (“Ecology”), Philip Morgan (“African Americans”), Carol Karlsen (“Women and Gender”), Daniel Usner (“Borderlands”), Sylvia Frey (“Causes of the American Revolution”), and Edward Countrymen (“Postscript: Large Questions in a Very Large Place”) and their draught includes comparative essays on the colonial regions that bordered the thirteen British North American colonies that won their independence in 1783. Rather than lamenting the “the chimera of one coherent master narrative” that has continued to recede since that date, though, the contributions celebrate the “remarkable vigor of the colonial field,” and the “multiplication of perspectives” employed, which, the editor contends, constitutes an historiographical strength (p. xii). Fair enough; yet, paradoxically, the character of the contributions here does reflect a common understanding of the colonial past on the part of the authors. For what are we to make of a companion to the subject of colonial America that invokes the name of E. P. Thompson (five mentions in the index) more frequently than it does those of John Smith (one mention, in the essay on “New France”),

Olaudah Equiano (four mentions), or Anne Hutchinson (three mentions)? Or, even more pertinently for subscribers to this listserv, what are we to make of a volume that mentions Immanuel Wallerstein four times, but finds no room for such subjects as the Yamasee War, Eliza Lucas Pinckney, James Oglethorpe, or Robert Beverly?

The common view of the volume arises from the common desire of the essayists in connecting various “societal processes” (p. 28) that, for instance, created “the hegemonic position enjoyed by Europeans over the conquered Indians” (p. 27), that propelled the societies of the North Atlantic world into global “hegemony in the early modern era” (p. 44), that determined “how women and men have identified themselves in the past and how others have constructed them” (p. 226), and that provide “a better view of the class structure and class relations in early America” (p. 276). This “ambitious” work, according to Michael Zuckerman, makes “unprecedented sense of the Chesapeake, or the Lowcountry, or the Delaware Valley,” but, correspondingly, “makes the more general synthesis the more difficult” (p. 319).

Since, admittedly (e.g., p. 259), the historical record reveals scant evidence, at best, that early modern people regarded reality in such terms, “the current fascination with cultural theory, language, and gender,” spun off from the “new social history” of the 1960s and 1970s, has provided, for many twenty-first century historians, the readiest means of analyzing the behavior of colonial Americans. Notwithstanding the lack of contemporary

familiarity with such concepts, modern historians have sought “intersections,” most particularly, between “race,” “class,” and “gender” (e.g. pp. 194-235, 236-258, 259-287, 381, 416-418).

The result, according to Countryman’s encomium, leaves us, apparently happily, moving beyond the “traditional” view of early America. Not only, then, does this collection, by design, lack any essays on specific colonies or, even regions, of colonial British America (outside of the celebrated thirteen), but such enquiries “are of interest [only] because they address one of the themes that the writers here pull together” (p. 536). Instead, the book “complements” the effort made by Alan Taylor’s recent synthesis to enlarge the subject of “colonial America” to include “every place in North America and its neighboring islands that participated in the exchange which began when Europeans and Africans started traveling the great oceans in large numbers” (p. 536).[2]

We should certainly encourage the tendency towards wider perspectives on the history of North America. Yet, as the recent author of just such a study, I must confess my instinctive hesitation about accepting Countryman’s proposition.[3] First, it remains a curiosity that “ordinary people” and the “working class,” presuming that we can accept that such an entity existed in pre-industrial societies, spent considerable time battling “oppression” in the name of what we call today social justice.

The collection here, thus, privileges the sort of “sensitive and engaging portrayal of George Robert Twelves Hewes, a poor cordwainer in pre-revolutionary Boston” who “transformed” himself from forelock-tugging supplicant to independent artisanal “citizen” (p. 282), made by Albert F. Young a generation ago, to the “more familiar story” of the printer’s apprentice-turned-Patriot Benjamin Franklin (p. 278). It also emphasizes studies that have “expanded our knowledge of popular political culture” in Philadelphia, a city with a population several streets ahead of its competitors at the time, in the aftermath of the American War of Independence (p. 211).

The historical reality, of course, remains that many so-called ordinary folk pursue and pursued social, economic, and political opportunities at the expense of others as readily as their counterparts in the upper orders have done, as the character of the early history of South Carolina, for instance, demonstrates. Africans and American Indians (both as slaves and otherwise) offered all too ready targets for those in pursuit of these quests.

Second, despite their commendable quest to widen

the historiographical lens, these essayists remain largely focused on the “New World.” Richard Johnson does offer a sketch of the history of scholarly thinking on “Empire,” but this concentrates on the nature of colonial politics, while Carole Shammas’s contribution on “The Origins of Transatlantic Colonization” reviews some of the political and economic backdrop to European overseas expansion.

Of course, a concentration on the Western Hemisphere gives us the best sense of what people on the ground did with respect to “colonial America,” but it leaves the question of why they did it unanswered in many important respects and it largely ignores the activities of metropolitan actors who had interests in and responsibilities for American empires. These people provided the role models, the capital for trade and settlement, and the requisite political connections for “early Americans” to advance socially, economically, and politically.

Their connections extended across the Atlantic. To take “the South” as an example, we cannot derive a clearer image of the character of the early history of those colonies without a better understanding of the political activities of such men-on-the-make as John Rolfe, William Claiborne, Robert Ingle, Maurice Mathews, and Sir Nathaniel Johnson, whose tack included the cultivation of powerful transatlantic patrons.[4] The rise to prominence of these “Americans” then, in turn, accompanied the creation of the cultural and social parameters that came to define early America. Moreover, tracking developments on both sides of the ocean brings into better focus when and why those parameters came under challenge.

Finally, we should certainly welcome more comparative studies of colonization, both within and without the British empire. But to what degree should such analyses supersede “traditional” accounts?

Significantly, Alan Tully’s essay on “Colonial Politics” addresses the question of historiographical balance in a rather different way than the general tack taken here. After noting that every “colonial political universe” entailed such issues as the dynamics of migration, identity formation, electoral jockeying, and imperial contacts, Tully observes, “if we take the challenge to explore these circumstances in the different colonies, if we rethink the relationship between colonial political singularity and trans-colonial, transatlantic commonalities, we will certainly become more knowledgeable of what exactly constituted the early American political plurality.” Through such analyses, “of course, we will gain a better under-

standing of the rich relationship of the politics of the colonies to their descendent societies” (p. 307). It is hard to argue with that proposition.

Notes

[1]. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole, *Colonial British America: Essays in the New History of the Early Modern Era* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

[2]. Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settlement of North America* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

[3]. L. H. Roper, *Conceiving Carolina: Proprietors, Planters, and Plots, 1662-1729* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[4]. L. H. Roper, “Charles I, Virginia, and the Idea of Atlantic History,” *Itinerario*, 30 (2006), forthcoming.

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