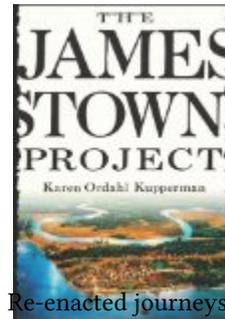


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Karen Ordahl Kupperman. *The Jamestown Project*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007. 380 S. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02474-8.

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*The Jamestown Project* is characterized by its setting of the Jamestown story into a broad Atlantic World contest for empire, as Spain, France, the Netherlands, and England sought to plant colonies and establish control over them in the Caribbean and the Americas. Secondly, it makes excellent use of recent research on climatological changes and environmental history to reveal English knowledge and ignorance of climate, weather, navigation, epidemics of disease, drought, and other conditions. Arrogant disregard for the physical reality of Virginia and Eurocentric assumptions about its native peoples not only affected prospects for success or failure of the colony, but also conditioned relations with the Indians, upon whom the English were initially dependent for survival. Thirdly, it challenges previous historiography on the question of whether Jamestown was a success or “fiasco,” as Edmund Morgan, author of the hugely influential *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (1975), called it.

The 400th anniversary of Jamestown’s founding has launched a frenzied effort to tap the mines and minds of history. Over \$70 million in private and public funding was invested in what the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation, the official sponsor, initially called a “celebration,” before Indian leaders requested it use another term. An expansive visitors’ center was constructed at Jamestown Settlement Museum to replace the structure built in 1957 on the occasion of the 350th anniversary. Exhibits have been enlarged, redone, or newly added, and replicas of ships refurbished, or, in the case of the *Godspeed*, rebuilt. Launched in May 2006 as the official beginning of the commemorations, the *Godspeed* made ports of call at Alexandria, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Newport. Congress enacted one of its renowned “unfunded mandates” to create a John Smith national water

trail and efforts continue to fund it. Re-enacted journeys of Smith’s two voyages can be followed on the Internet. The National Park Service rebuilt its visitors’ center on Jamestown Island, after a hurricane flooded the building—causing untold damage to many artifacts, which are now being restored, where possible to their original condition. On the Island itself, where archaeologist William Kelso discovered the original fort in 1994, a new “Archaerium” sprang up to tell the story of Jamestown and exhibit some of its most notable artifacts, including what is believed to be the skeleton of Bartholomew Gosnold, who first led an expedition to explore the coast of New England in 1602, before planning the Jamestown project. He died in the famous “starving winter” of 1609-10, and his comrades buried him inside the fort. High-profile public events continue throughout 2007 with the visit in May of Queen Elizabeth, accompanied by Vice President Dick Cheney; a Virginia Black Expo in August; several Virginia Indian heritage events; and a year-long federally organized series of topical conferences on democracy at eight Virginia colleges and universities, which culminated in a World Forum on Democracy in Williamsburg in September. Notably absent are any mandates or funding to support scholarship on a scale equivalent to the Virginia Colonial Records Project of 1957. Like the settlers in 1607, Virginians are still searching for gold in the form of heritage tourism.

But 2007 may underscore a major turning point in the historiography that began about one decade ago. Karen Ordahl Kupperman’s *The Jamestown Project* is a good example. Her work turns the previous understanding of Jamestown as a fiasco or failure on its head. With the sure-handedness of a scholar deeply grounded in the history of the early modern world, Kupperman makes a compelling case for Jamestown as a model for all sub-

sequent English colonies, including Plymouth. She is well-equipped to do so, having authored five books and edited three, including an excellent one-volume edition of the works of Captain John Smith. Two of the books have won prizes from the American Historical Association: *Providence Island, 1630-1641* (1993) won the Albert J. Beveridge Prize in American history, and *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America* (2000) won the prize in Atlantic history. Her engaging little book on *Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony* (1984) is scheduled for a second edition within the year. Others have also contributed to the transatlantic roots of Jamestown, moving beyond the narrower parameters of colonial American historiography, more taken with the connections and links to eighteenth-century America. [1]

Perhaps not surprisingly, the 2007 anniversary has evoked a countervailing preoccupation with Jamestown's legacies for later American history. The Federal Planning Commission, which organizes the series of conferences, sees democracy as Jamestown's greatest legacy. Another legacy hunter, David Price's popular book, *Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Heart of a New Nation* (2003), adds to democracy the legacies of free enterprise (Virginia Company investors) and a model for the modern corporation (the joint stock company). One of the more interesting products of the New Jamestown history has been the challenge to past and some present efforts to make Jamestown appear progressive, by ignoring the seventeenth century and rushing forward to the eighteenth century, when presumably our national history was more glorious. Especially pointed is Kupperman's criticism of what might be called the legend of America's creation as a nation founded by the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock and celebrated ever since in Thanksgiving. Kupperman labels it "our agreed upon national story" that conjures up images of religious freedom, humble people in search of a place to practice their religion, live in harmony with Indians, and cultivate the land with family labor. These are "the forbears we prefer to acknowledge" (p. 2). This "good origins versus bad origins dichotomy" is grounded in specious premises and fails to understand Jamestown in its broader context (p. 2).

It should be noted that Kupperman does not gloss over or excuse the calamitous events of seventeenth-century Virginia. She acknowledges the "greedy, grasping" investors and their "arrogant backers" in England, the "belligerent intrusions on the Chesapeake Algonquians," born of English ignorance, the atmosphere of death and despair within James Fort, the later land ex-

ploitation, imported Africans, and the institution of slavery. "This is the creation story from hell" (p. 1).

Instead of telling the story as a kind of cut and dried matter of harvesting trophies of national history, usually measured by modern ideals and standards, Kupperman's challenge is to view history as process, "the story of a world in motion" as Bernard Bailyn characterized the "contours of Atlantic History."<sup>[2]</sup> The beauty of this approach to history is the preservation of the contingency and uncertainty of outcome under which all people of the past (and present for that matter) live. In *The Jamestown Project* we witness the English reading travel accounts, or as scholars making contacts with Muslims and searching to understand Islam. Books about other worlds pour from the presses, planners read the reports of Thomas Hariot and see the Theodor DeBry engravings of John White's watercolors of plants, animals, and Algonquian Indians from the Roanoke Colony. Plays and masques portray exotic people and places, not the least of all, America as a virgin land "redolent of promise and ready to blossom" (p. 130). Was it truth or fiction? The answer mattered less than the question, Kupperman reminds us. Eager to outmatch the Spanish and establish their place on the world stage, the English project planners desperately sought to find a model for success, ironically borrowing from the very Spanish they hated, especially in their relations with the Indians.

This "hunger for the new" (chapter 4) led naturally to gropings to understand phenomena of the natural and physical worlds of America and ultimately to a "welter of projects" (chapter 6). Lacking knowledge and understanding of the new, supernatural explanations arose as reasons for drought (God's displeasure), disease epidemics (comets), hurricanes and earthquakes (Indians manipulate the weather), and even inoperable muskets (Indian priests). In dealing with the Indians, the English tried to apply the Irish model of colonialism: control and conform their cultures, language, dress, religion, agriculture, and politics to English models of civility. Consequently, conflict and warfare accompanied English-Indian relations, the products of fear and uncertainty about "the other," a concept Kupperman uses in her earlier work to capture the dynamic series of understandings and misunderstandings that shaped these encounters.

After about a decade, the "projectors" realized that transplanted people could be motivated only if they had a stake in the outcome. It was not enough to nag and threaten settlers with "he who does not work should not

eat,” as John Smith announced. Nor did the regimen of Dale’s laws–rules to govern every activity from eating, drinking, even worshipping with a tolling of bells and prescriptions of harsh penalties for violations–produce stability. So Virginia Company officials instituted the headright system, with the incentive of land ownership at the end of indentured service. Company officials also rounded up and imported marriageable brides. The success of tobacco and the chance to get fifty acres of free land after four to seven years of labor produced the necessary ingredients for a stable labor force and family life. Now each family had a stake in the outcome. The 1620s and 1630s witnessed a great migration of people, as James Fort grew into James Cittie. The English had finally learned how to make a successful colony. Ultimately, the outnumbered Indians were killed by disease and warfare, and the remainder confined to small reserved areas. Later when tobacco increased demands for labor, Africans were imported to replace indentured servants. And the rest is history.

## Notes

[1]. Most notably April Lee Hatfield, *Atlantic Virginia: Intercolonial Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Two recent collections of essays reframe our understanding of the history of Jamestown and empire: Robert Appelbaum and John Wood Sweet, eds., *Envisioning an English Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); and Peter C. Mancall, ed., *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550-1624* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

[2]. Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 61.

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