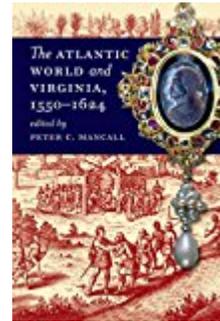




Peter C. Mancall, ed. *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550-1624*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007. xii + 596 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5848-6.



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Published on H-Atlantic (June, 2008)

In 2004 the College of William and Mary, the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation hosted a commemorative conference on Jamestown, this one entitled “The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550-1624.” More than half of the papers at the conference did not deal directly with Jamestown, Virginia, or England at all, and ranged all over the globe in search of a new context for what we now think of as a relatively minor event in the grand scheme of things in 1607. The conference boasted lengthy papers in marathon three-hour sessions that exhausted the brains and behinds of participants and attendees alike (and prompted more than one attendee to dub the affair “the Jamestown death march”), but the wide profusion of knowledge that poured forth at the conference was both overwhelming and intriguing. The conference’s eponymous volume of collected essays is now available; at 596 pages it is a weighty tome, but it represents the diffuse and often bewildering state of knowledge about Virginia between 1550 and 1624 in its broad Atlantic context.

This Atlantic inquiry takes into account Native North America, European colonial powers, and West Africa. The footnotes are festooned with references to primary and secondary sources in many languages—English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and German—

showing the breadth and depth of the research intrepid Atlanticists are now pursuing. Virginia is presented as a small and precarious outpost of the many Atlantics written about here: the Iberian Atlantic, the Spanish Atlantic, the Portuguese Atlantic, the Black Atlantic, the French Atlantic—the list goes on. (Indeed, there are so many Atlantics in this book one wonders if the terminology of the Atlantic is becoming meaningless in its profusion.) The collection, arranged in five groupings of three to four essays each, brings ethnohistory, African history, and global histories of empire into early Americanists’ orbit. This densely packed book of essays brings all the promises—and challenges—of Atlantic history to bear.

The volume opens with a set of essays on “Native American Settings,” examining the Native peoples of the Virginia Tidewater, in the land they called Tsenacommacah (our place), and their immediate neighbors in the southeast. Daniel K. Richter’s contribution investigates what he terms a “prestige-goods economy,” in which the Europeans were not potential conquerors but rather sources of new and powerful objects that would enhance and solidify the power of chiefs, who had to redistribute goods in order to remain in their subjects’ good graces. Richter, in thus explaining Tsenacommacah’s political economy, offers one plausible reason for why Indians (here called Tsenacommacans) did not expel the new-

comers. Richter also argues that this “native world of goods” vanished in the dire bloodshed of 1622. James D. Rice’s essay, “Escape from Tsenacommacah: Chesapeake Algonkians and the Chesapeake Menace,” offers yet another explanation for Native reluctance to overpower and eject the English. Rice pleads with scholars to lose their “Powhacentric” view of the world and examine the proto-historical Chesapeake, demonstrating the complexity of Indian politics and the uses Indians made of the English invasion to resist inclusion the Powhatan polity and to pursue their own goals. Joseph Hall identifies a broader Native context for the Chesapeake world in the chiefdoms the Spanish encountered in present-day Georgia in the sixteenth century. The Spanish gained and maintained influence in the region by offering gifts to offset their own military vulnerability. Hall argues that Indians “incorporated these goods into age-old and frequent contests for influence within and among these polities. These goods and this political competitiveness endowed Native societies with a flexibility that would serve them well amid the crises that accompanied colonial competition after 1607” (p. 96). The section represents the latest in ethnohistorical inquiry, tracing the contrasting shapes of Native polities and economies and the various ways Native North Americans reacted to Spanish and English incursions. The Chesapeake experience after the invasion of the English stands in stark contrast to the Oconee Valley chiefdoms during and after the Spanish *entrada*, and reminds scholars to pay attention to the many ways Indians had of approaching and dealing with European incursions.

The four essays presented in “Africa and the Atlantic” travel the length of West Africa, examining how different regions approached and incorporated European trade opportunities. In contrast to many other Atlantic histories incorporating Africa, the advent, growth, and development of the Atlantic slave trade is not the focus of these pieces, all of which are concerned with understanding the deep context of African participation in the Atlantic world. E. Ann McDougall’s essay, “The Caravel and the Caravan: Reconsidering Received Wisdom in the Sixteenth-Century Sahara,” covers an area neglected by early Americanists and Atlanticists alike, arguing that the seventeenth-century Atlantic World developed as it did because Iberian Europe failed to incorporate the Sahara into its burgeoning trade routes, thus driving European merchants into the West African region of Senegambia. David Northrup challenges scholars to rethink the trope of Africans-as-victims in the sixteenth century, arguing that “Africans were able to deal with

Europeans from positions of strength and understanding in the mid-sixteenth century and needed no persuasion to enlarge their Atlantic trade” (p. 171). Northrup also notes that the Euro-African trade consisted of European cloth, metals, and weapons exchanged for African gold. The slave trade was a minor part of the economic exchange with Europe prior to 1650 (pp. 185-186). Linda Heywood and John Thornton trace African adoptions of European-style diplomacy, Christianity, and literacy to argue that the kingdom of Kongo’s receptivity to European culture contrasted sharply with that of Benin, which rejected European culture. Thus Africans of Kongoese origin in Virginia were able to engage with English culture and use it to carve out places for themselves in the colony. James H. Sweet’s contribution brings West Africa into the Portuguese Atlantic to argue that recreating some semblance of central African culture in seventeenth-century Virginia was unlikely, but that the exposure of the “20. and Odd Negroes” who arrived in Jamestown in 1619 to Christianity allowed these people to more fully enter into English colonial life. There is much in this section for historians of early America and the Atlantic World to absorb; it is clear that in order to understand the Atlantic we must all make more of an effort to better understand West Africa. Standardizing the terminology (phrases like “central African,” “west African,” and other geographical descriptors were used by different authors in contradictory ways) and including more maps (the maps at the beginning of the book and on page 162 were insufficient to the task) would have helped readers grasp unfamiliar material.

The four essays in part 3 examine European colonial models deployed in the Atlantic world around Virginia. Marcy Norton and Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert argue in their essay “The Multinational Commodification of Tobacco, 1492-1650” that “[t]obacco progressed as it did in large part because of multinational exchanges and alliances between [sic] a wide set of actors—Amerindians, Africans, and Europeans” (p. 252). Most interesting here are their descriptions of illicit mercantile connections among the English, Spanish, and Portuguese in the Caribbean prior to the establishment of tobacco as Virginia’s primary cash crop. The English would never have made a success of Virginia if the Spanish had not pioneered a plantation system for producing tobacco in the Caribbean. Two essays on the French Atlantic remind readers that the French, though not as prolific as the Iberians in their colonial ventures, were key to the context in which Virginia formed. Philip P. Boucher “revisions” the French Atlantic (perhaps “revising” might

have been a better term) by rebutting old chestnuts about French interests in the Americas, including the notion that Huguenots were involved in colonial ventures in order to obtain religious freedom. In a nod to the uniqueness of some aspects of the French model, Peter Cook notes that French writers of the sixteenth century described Native societies in terms of kingship, but by the seventeenth century the French had downgraded Indian polities from kingdoms to tribal units unified by kinship ties. The ability of the French to perceive the importance of fictive and actual kinship among the Indians enhanced their abilities as traders, especially in Canada—a model not embraced the Spanish or the English. Concluding the section, Philip Morgan’s “Virginia’s Other Prototype: The Caribbean” argues that “the Caribbean was fundamental to the shaping of early Virginia” (p. 344).

The four essays of part 4 make enlightening forays into the intellectual worlds of European colonization in the Atlantic, though they focus mainly on the English experience. The section opens with Andrew Fitzmaurice’s outstanding essay, “Moral Uncertainty in the Dispossession of Native Americans,” a careful examination of the reception of the Salamanca School in England as the English struggled to justify new colonial ventures. The English, he argues, eventually used the natural law principles that Spanish scholars had used to defend the rights of Indians, to argue that Indians in fact had no such rights. David Harris Sacks zeros in on one colonial writer, Richard Hakluyt the younger, to examine the many facets of this colonial promoter, scholar, and Church of England minister. Hakluyt is not an easy figure to pigeonhole, and Sacks’s essay will hopefully prompt further scholarly examination of him. Yet another famous colonial promoter, Sir Walter Raleigh, is the subject of Benjamin Schmidt’s essay. By posing two questions about Raleigh—how did Raleigh read, and how was Raleigh read?—Schmidt attempts nothing less than a new way of approaching the history of the book and of reading. Schmidt uses the examples of two of Raleigh’s most famous prose works, *The Discovery of Guiana* (1595) and *The History of the World* (1614), to explore the ways in which Raleigh read and wrote. David S. Shields uses the post-Virginia career of that other English swashbuckler, John Smith, to think about Smith’s connections with parliamentarians in the late 1620s who were beginning to openly combat Charles I’s policies. Smith’s writings, Shields argues, were his posterity. Though I would dispute his suggestion that Smith is forgotten today (a contention belied by the recent spate of books addressing Smith), Shields gives voice to a colonial writer after he

had already done his most famous deeds. (I mean “voice” here literally. At the conference, Shields’s presentation featured his voice for Smith, a gravelly, overconfident tone with what sounded suspiciously like a southern accent.) With the exception of Fitzmaurice’s essay, the offerings in this section are limited to the English experience. In keeping with the tone and tenor of the conference, it would have been useful to read essays on a more broadly Atlantic intellectual history.

The final three essays of the volume face the enormous task of braiding these competing and often mutually contradictory Atlantic narratives together. James Horn’s essay, “Imperfect Understandings: Rumor, Knowledge, and Uncertainty in Early Virginia,” approaches the problem by returning to a question the initial essays asked: why didn’t Powhatan and his people drive the English out when they had the chance? And why didn’t the Spanish react militarily to the English presence in North America? Horn argues that only long exposure to one another convinced the Indians and the English that coexistence was next to impossible, and that only gradually did the Spanish realize that the struggling English colony had grown too strong to be easily overthrown. By 1625, he writes, “a new power had arisen in North America” (p. 540). This is the significance of Jamestown—a colony on the outskirts of an increasingly complex Atlantic World—it survived, and it thrived. J. H. Elliott’s penultimate essay solves this problem by arguing that Virginia’s significance can only be understood in the context of the Iberian Atlantic World: by 1625 Virginia, though only a “minor player,” had embraced the Iberian plantation model, but was already rejecting the fluid racial categories of Spanish and Portuguese America. Stuart B. Schwartz closes the volume with a brief overview of what he terms the “historiography of the greater South Atlantic,” (p. 559), tying the collection together by suggesting that, for future inquiries, “[o]ur categories of analysis must be less rigid, our understanding of ethnic and cultural boundaries more fluid, and our expectations about the perceptions and prejudices of peoples in the past less definitive” (p. 569).

Schwartz’s point is well taken: one of the fundamental contributions of Atlantic history has been to encourage historians to be less dogmatic about geographical boundaries and to investigate the interconnectedness of the early modern world. Yet another of Elliott’s points is also well taken: the histories of American Indians, Africans, and Europeans are, as he writes, “not easily integrated” (p. 541). Thus this superb scholarly volume demonstrates both the strengths and weak-

nesses of an Atlantic approach to a tiny settlement like Jamestown. These essays take seriously the importance of understanding all of the players and the intricacy of Jamestown's many Atlantic contexts. But the weakness here is that it is difficult to bring the various excellent topical and methodological strands suggested by these outstanding essays together into a coherent narrative. I suspect that creating a new, Atlantic narrative will be the work of a generation for historians.

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Citation: Rebecca Goetz. Review of Mancall, Peter C., ed., *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550-1624*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

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