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Camilla Townsend. *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma.* The American Portraits Series. New York: Hill and Wang, 2005. 240 pp. $14.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8090-7738-0.

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The Rescue of Pocahontas at the Cost of Her People

John Smith's supposed rescue from certain death by Pocahontas remains a source of debate, investigation, and misinformation. With this volume, historian Camilla Townsend does not actually put the debate to rest (far too many people have grown up watching Disney and Terrence Malick movies to completely stamp out the romanticized version), but she largely succeeds in a rescue of her own: namely that of the Indian girl Amonute (her real name) from the clutches of the cardboard character Pocahontas. This contribution and Townsend's expertly crafted prose make *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* a welcome addition to the library of any reader interested in colonial America, Virginia, indigenous people, or gender history. However, its value for the ethnohistorians of seventeenth-century Virginia is limited.

This book aims to recapture the humanity that the myth of Pocahontas stole from Amonute. Along the way, we learn much not only about the Native American girl behind the myth but also about the reality behind America's fabled founding. Townsend's primary thesis is not a particularly new one. Specifically, she argues that the Algonquian girl Amonute was subverted into the mythical Pocahontas to serve the needs of the settlers and backers of the Jamestown expedition as well as interested observers within the government and general populace of England. Since that time, romantic poets, proponents of American exceptionalism, and Hollywood moguls have continued to twist reality to the point that the real Pocahontas no longer exists. According to Townsend, she "was as brave as all her people–not a simple joyful worshipper of English men or power, but a real and complicated woman with her own plans, goals and ideas" (p. xi).

After demonstrating this already well-established fact, the author illuminates the truth obscured over the course of four centuries. Early chapters pay close attention to the political, social, and cultural underpinnings of both Virginia Algonquians and Englishmen on the eve of colonization. From there, Townsend examines the initial months following the establishment of Jamestown and the enmity that followed as well as Pocahontas's kidnapping, imprisonment, marriage, conversion to Christianity, and finally her death. Townsend strives to present each of these situations not from the perspective of the English but from the perspective of Pocahontas. In doing so, she powerfully demonstrates that, in each of these instances, Pocahontas, and by extension her people, managed English colonialism according to their own desires and objectives. Rather than recalcitrant obstacles who opposed English colonialism due to their placement on the primitive end of a falsely dichotomous European scale, Virginia Algonquians sought to establish their relationship with the colonizers on terms favorable to themselves. In Townsend's words, "realpolitik not inherent egalitarianism" dictated the stratagems employed by Pocahontas's father both within his chiefdom and in his dealings with the English (p. 14).

Read in this light, Pocahontas's supposed rescue of Smith constitutes more a ploy to obtain the Englishman's loyalty than the manifestation of sexual desire portrayed by Smith. Pocahontas's conversion to Christianity and her marriage to John Rolfe represent more an attempt to establish a cultural and familial bridge between the two cultures than the obvious outcome of a situation in which an Indian once exposed to the benefits of English culture immediately casts off her previous culture to rush headlong into the glories of Christianity and Anglicization. Finally, Townsend characterizes Pocahontas's fatal trip to England as a last attempt (a desperate one, in Townsend's opinion) to both further cement the kinship relationship between her people and the English and to obtain crucial intelligence about them, which she could deliver to

her father upon her return. Of course, she did not return, but the reports brought back by members of her delegation played a large role in convincing her father to retire and her uncle Opechancanough to pursue a much more militant policy in regard to the Virginians.

The catastrophic results of that policy lead Townsend to a rather pessimistic and contradictory conclusion. She chastises those who contemplate an outcome other than the destruction of the Powhatan Confederacy and the removal of nearly all Indians from Virginia by the beginning of the eighteenth century as naïve. However, in the same section, she celebrates the persistence of Algonquian peoples in Virginia today. The reader is left wondering which of these outcomes to believe. Should we come away from this book encouraged by the centuries-long persistence of Virginia Algonquians or saddened by their inevitable destruction?

While Townsend gives proper credence to the choices of Pocahontas in determining the course of her life, she does so to the complete disempowerment of virtually every other actor in the narrative. The historiography of colonial Virginia cries out for a comprehensive treatment of all players in thiscomplex drama, one in whichindividual choices of all parties receive equal weight. Sadly, this is not that book. The fault for this may lie much more in the limitations of Townsend's choice of analytical objectsthan any actual flaw in her analysis. The decision to limit the study to a biographical treatment of Pocahontas necessarily limits Townsend's ability to examine colonial Virginia with the kind of breadth and depth required to produce this complexity.

Less troubling, but still problematic,isTownsend's insistence on placing Pocahontas at the scene of Smith's intended execution/adoption at the hands of her father, and her implicit, but thinly evidenced,argument that the rapacious sexual desires of colonial organizers and adventurers represent the leading edge of English colonization. While gendered assumptions and sexual desires no doubt occupied significant space in the thoughts of men like Richard Hakluyt, they hardly outweighed Hakluyt's religious, political, and economic beliefs about colonization. In the case of Smith, Townsend agrees with the overwhelming evidence produced by previous scholars that Smith's life was never in danger and that the incident more than likely constituted an adoption ritual. Yet, she feels compelled to place Pocahontas at the scene despite equally overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Finally, Townsend's outright refusal to view Powhatan through any other lens than that of the western notions of realpolitik and geopolitics detracts from the book's value for ethnohistorians. In one section,she flatly states that "the Indians were not essentially different from Europeans" (p. 14). Later,she condescendingly chastises well-intentionedanthropologists for attempting to explain Indian activities via the tenets of Indian culture. While seventeenth-century Algonquians obviously made calculated political decisions based on accruing the maximum amount of benefits possible, the notion that these calculations completely negated the very powerful spiritual and cultural imperatives underpinning their very identities as Algonquian people represents at best an enormous misunderstanding or at worst a kind of academic colonialism.

Lest readers interpret these criticisms as an outright condemnation of the book, let me conclude by stating that *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* is one of the best books on the subject of the Indian girl who entered into the English and, by extension, the American imagination over four hundred years ago. The strength of Townsend's writing and her nuanced portrait of Pocahontas have convinced me to replace the current monograph on colonial America I use in my U.S. history survey course with this one. Despite its lack of value as a work of ethnohistory, it will provide me ample ammunition against the Disney and Malick adherents in the class.

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