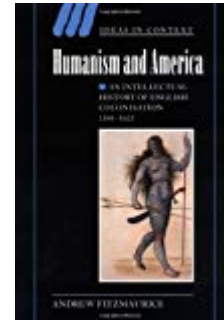


Andrew Fitzmaurice. *Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500-1625*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. x + 216 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-82225-1.



Reviewed by Mike Braddick

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Historians of the earliest phases of English overseas expansion have traditionally been skeptical about the explanatory power of principles in understanding that phenomenon (at least those aside from greed, selfishness, and arrogance). Political ideas are often seen as unconvincing explanatory alternatives to real motives, and more convincing explanations of motivation are usually found in material interest, sometimes said to be "cloaked" by more elevated rhetoric. Long ago Quentin Skinner used the example of an Elizabethan merchant to demonstrate that even where such rhetoric did not reveal the actual intentions of the merchant it still had effects on political action. In order to represent actions motivated by self-interest as actually pious, the merchant had to sustain plausibility; that involved not just tailoring his principles to meet his actions, but making sure that his observable actions conformed to the version of them that he was presenting.[1] The historiography of Elizabethan and Jacobean overseas expansion, however, has remained resistant even to this weak claim for the role of ideas in shaping political and commercial action. Recent works by David Armitage and, now, by Andrew

Fitzmaurice, remedy that defect and at the same time help to knit together various strands of historical writing.[2] For example, it makes more sense of the relationship between English political culture--increasingly likely to be described by historians as a renaissance culture containing important elements of humanist and republican thought--and the opportunities perceived in the opening up of the Atlantic; and helps to forge a closer connection between the historiography of the English Atlantic and that, say, of the Spanish Atlantic. This is an important and thought-provoking book which deserves a wide readership.

Fitzmaurice demonstrates through close reading of promotional pamphlets, contemporary plays, sermons, and related material that those involved in Atlantic trade and settlement explained themselves in humanist terms, and employed humanist rhetorical techniques. Active adventurers can be demonstrated to have been educated in these values and to have made reference to them in explaining themselves and their enterprises. In the first two chapters he explores the "moral philosophy" of Tudor and Jacobean colonization

around two central concerns of humanist thought: the virtues of an active life and the pursuit of glory; and the potentially corrupting effects of luxury. These points of reference were common to proponents and critics of colonization. Greed and profit were potentially corrupting and proponents disavowed them as motives, emphasizing instead how colonization represented an appropriate project in which to display virtue. Their critics claimed that the problems of early English colonization arose from the pursuit of profit, but did not reject the overall frame of analysis—humanist principles seem to have been accepted in these debates as the means by which to appraise the virtue and value of colonizing ventures. In the early-seventeenth century, Raleigh's account of himself can be seen to have made reference to the values of the "new humanism" of Machiavelli, with an emphasis on interest and necessity as public (if not private) virtues. The Virginia Company, however, confronted by a disastrous commercial record continued to stress virtue, the active life, and glory as the real reasons to support its ventures. This emphasis can be seen too in the promotion of (the equally commercially problematic) Newfoundland enterprises and it provides a point of contact with the ideology of New England settlement: the creation of active commonwealths of civic virtue, Fitzmaurice suggests, bears some comparison with the creation of active communities of reformed Christianity. The following chapter examines the rhetoric of promotional literature, demonstrating again the importance of humanist practices and beliefs to the conduct colonization. Following humanist teaching, for example, those who wrote considered themselves to be as active in the enterprise as those who adventured—to speak was to act, and to act in this way was an important part of the virtuous life.

As settlements developed, the defense of rights to possession became a more pressing concern, both against the claims of natives and rival European powers. Here Fitzmaurice detects a fair amount of shiftiness among proponents of colo-

nization, but an important element of the shiftiness was again a desire to avoid the corrupting effects of greed. Moreover, there was no very comfortable acceptance of dispossession—promoters were at their happiest in arguing for the rights to settle land as an extension of trading ventures and were least happy when forced to claim the right to dispossess natives. Down to 1620, Fitzmaurice argues, there was a profound anxiety about this issue, which reflects the continuing importance of a Ciceronian concern about corruption. It was against this background that we should understand the subsequent development of arguments based on necessity and interest. For Fitzmaurice this represents a shift of emphasis within humanism away from Cicero and towards Tacitus and Machiavelli, rather than the adoption of a new and convincing justification of rights to dispossess. Reason of state displaced justice with the result that "self-preservation was elevated above virtue" (p. 186). Possession was made possible not by a "coherent justification of colonisation," then, but by the displacement of the earlier anxiety about it.

By tracing the influence of a particular set of discourses, Fitzmaurice has established their importance to discussions of overseas expansion. But he frequently wants to go further, claiming that they were determining, and absorbing wider and wider areas of discussion into a broadly "humanist" set of practices. For example, the claim that humanism "shaped" the English understanding of the new world (p. 7) elsewhere appears as a claim that "the humanist imagination dominated colonising projects" (p. 1) or that "humanism provided the terms in which the actions of colonisation were understood" (p. 19). This stronger position is advanced as a comparative point too: that humanism did more to "shape" English understanding "than that of other Europeans" (p. 7). There is even a hint that the shift in emphasis towards necessity and interest was prompted by intellectual concerns, rather than a set of responses to an increasingly pressing practical difficulty. In

defending this stronger set of claims, Fitzmaurice assimilates other forms of discourse to humanism. Sermons, for example, are rhetorical performances of a humanist kind, and a means by which those lacking more formal humanist education were introduced to fundamental renaissance values. Plain style in speaking was a humanist strategy to avoid charges of self-indulgent corruption, not a Baconian commitment to more transparent speaking. At this point it becomes difficult to see exactly what is meant by a "humanist" and what, if any, contemporary motivations cannot be brought within its umbrella. If everything is humanist, what has actually been explained? Do we now need to explain which interpretations of humanism are important? Moreover, in arguing his stronger position, Fitzmaurice has to confront the issue of the social penetration of these ideas. In his discussion of Virginia, he is clear that he is talking about the Company's promotional literature, not colonizing practices or the beliefs of the (often low-born) settlers. But he does suggest that these latter groups were persuaded to venture their lives by sermons, and goes on to attribute this to the power of sermons as humanist, rather than religious, performances. In pushing beyond the weaker claim in these and other directions Fitzmaurice can expect some skeptical reactions; but to have established the weaker claim so effectively represents an extremely important contribution to the field.

Notes

[1]. Quentin Skinner, "Language and Social Change," in *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 131-132.

[2]. David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

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