Plotting Carolina on Anglo-American Axes

In this dense and intense account of shifting political sands in proprietary Carolina, L. H. Roper challenges a number of commonly held assumptions about the colony in its infancy. South Carolinian settlement was dominated by Barbadians, who inexorably dragged with them a model of plantation slavery which they looked to recreate just as soon as they hit on a suitable staple crop. The Goose Creek Men, a handful of fractious settlers who dominated the region around Charles Town and thus the provincial assembly, sought at every possible juncture to thwart the inept Lords Proprietor and their antiquated schemes to establish feudal baronies that might bolster their incomes. Obstreperous settlers refused to submit to executive power, shunned the constitutional system favored by the proprietors, stifled religious toleration in favor of a taut Anglicanism, and inevitably brought down the proprietary regime in a coup in 1719. This narrative (albeit rather caricatured here), and the assumptions which underlie it, is the adversary against which Roper launches a flurry of assaults.

Roper’s challenges are based on extensive and impressive archival research, as is evidenced in the 575 endnotes. These meticulous findings, in conjunction with a number of critical gaps in the historical record, lead readers of Conceiving Carolina down a number of unexpected avenues. Roper focuses almost relentlessly upon the expectations, motivations, and behavior of the leading metropolitan Lords Proprietor and their principal provincial agents and provocateurs. Unsurprisingly, such scrutiny tends to complicate attempts to separate and categorize them into consistent factions: proprietary vs. non-proprietary, planter vs. Indian trader, or Anglican vs. dissenter.

The Lords Proprietor, Roper argues in chapter 1, were motivated as much by public service as by private interest: “it does not appear ... that the Lords primarily regarded Carolina as an opportunity to make money neither did they hold out any particular expectations for their American estates” (p. 26). His analysis of the Fundamental Constitutions, an organizational framework for Carolina famously co-authored by John Locke, also leads him to be less skeptical than other historians about the proprietors and their plans. The critical factor here, which differentiates Roper from others, such as Meaghan Duff, is the amount of emphasis and credibility he places on the processes of deputization and delegation that were written into the contract.[1] Roper’s proprietors are less meddlesome in theory as well as in practice.

In subsequent chapters, Roper turns to other purported weaknesses in his adversary, the “customary view of early South Carolina’s development” (p. 52), relating to the settlers themselves. He contends that Barbadian influence, especially among the Goose Creek Men, has been overstated, observing that a substantial proportion of their leaders arrived directly from England, and had no prior experience of slavery. The characterization of the Barbadian party as Anglican is also challenged, on the basis that there is no record of a clergyman in the colony prior to 1695. Finally, Roper disputes that the Goose Creek Men formed a consistent “anti-proprietary” faction at all in Carolina, or that they repudiated Lord Ashley’s
vision of a colony with a hereditary aristocracy and en-
tailed estates because it restricted their activities. Roper
stresses that Maurice Mathews and his Goose Creek co-
conspirators never objected to the Constitutions on philo-
sophical grounds, and that they viewed themselves as
clients who “still had a regard for the duty they owed
their masters” (p. 53). More persuasively, he traces their
voulable recourse to the original socio-political frame-
work every time proprietors tried to amend regulations
in the 1670s and 1680s.

Conceiving Carolina is a story of contention and
competition, of shifting allegiances and erupting
factionalism—just not necessarily along the fault lines
that other historians have described. Roper’s pugilistic
style, unlike that of his Indian-raiding historical subjects,
takes few prisoners, and in places vehemently opposes
the syntheses of Eugene Sirmans, Robert M. Weir, and
Verner Crane.[2] But if much of this is rather negative,
Conceiving Carolina does make some important posi-
tive contributions to our understanding of the evolution
of the province. The central deterministic feature out-
lined in the book is the trade in Indian slaves. Almost
all of the structural aftershocks that Roper documents
in Carolina’s political evolution were generated by this
fault line and its consistent volcanic activity between the
colony’s founding and the cataclysmic Yamassee War
of 1715, which helped bring about the anti-proprietary
rebellion.

Conceiving Carolina also neatly draws parallels be-
tween the metropolitan political machinations of the pro-
prieters and the provincial ambitions of settlers. Roper
boldly ventures linkages between the disruptions in late-
seventeenth-century Carolina and the upheavals of Stu-
art Britain. His Anglo-Carolinians were not far-flung
independent pioneers holding revolutionary machina-
tions or proslavery expectations, but were intricately
connected to political currents in the metropolis, both
practical and theoretical. While much of this compara-
tive tracking is impressive and persuasive, it suffers from
a couple of limitations, particularly in chapter 1.

Firstly, some of the generalizations that are made
about the nature of early modern English/British society
are excessively broad, or rather unclear. For instance,
some may question the rather sweeping assertion, or
the worth of the assertion, that “discontent, often vio-
 lent, simmered throughout the period from the ‘Henri-
cian Reformation’ of the 1530s (and, of course, earlier)
through the Reform Bill of 1832.” Why stop at the Re-
form Bill? Equally, though I undoubtedly do an injustice
to the author by taking quotes out of context, the mean-
ing is sometimes rather obfuscated. “The manorial court
provided a key mechanism to ensure that everybody did
what they were supposed to do in early modern England
and consequently manifested the social character of real-
ity at this time. It, then, provided a means for resolving
the local concerns of those who inhabited the wider end
of the society of orders” (p. 22).

Secondly, despite the author’s manifest appreciation
and clear chronicling of the centrality of Indian slaving
to the twisting and turning of factional fortunes in early
Carolina, the “Atlantic” approach adopted is essentially
bipolar and rather ethnocentric. To belabor the pugilistic
analogy to excess, while Roper undoubtedly lands plenty
of notable blows on the “customary view” of early Car-
olinian history, his ducking and weaving is also signifi-
cant: “the present study, then, makes no attempt to dis-
cuss Africans and Indians per se” (p. 3). There is little
doubt that the handful of salacious white men discussed
here in engrossing detail played a significant short-term
role in dictating the socio-political development of early
Carolina, and that their life cycles (migrations, impris-
onments, and deaths) affected the nature of life in the
colony and kept it closely tied to events elsewhere. And
to be fair, as Roper points out, there is scant source ma-
terial with which to assess the influence of subaltern
groups. But given his ingenuity in positing counterfac-
tuals elsewhere, perhaps he might have dealt more fully
with the potential agency of southeastern Indians, or
the potential impact of the increasing number of African
slaves, upon Anglo-Carolinian political evolution. Nei-
ther the notion of “tragic pragmatism” nor the process of
the “plantation substituting for the manor” that are
referred to, tantalizingly, in the penultimate page have
received sufficient attention in the manuscript.

Those looking for a comprehensive history of the
early Carolinas are likely to find themselves dissatis-
fied with Conceiving Carolina as a stand-alone piece
(it hardly touches on the Albemarle Sound settlement
and spends little time on the economy or the Ya-
massee War, for instance). But it brings to the table
a well-researched and provocative account of the exhilar-
ating characters—whether proprietors or provincials—
who fought for socio-political authority and leadership
in early Carolina, emphasizing their common “Anglo-
Atlantic” worldview. Some readers may feel that Roper
has administered knockout blows to the orthodoxies he
challenges, others that he has merely landed minor
bruises. Either way, it is an enjoyable tussle.
Notes


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