



**Richard Handler, Eric Gable.** *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg.* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997. x + 260 pp. \$64.95, library, ISBN 978-0-8223-1978-8.



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By now we are all familiar with the constructivist view of culture and history, but this familiarity aside, few if any works convey this approach with the cogency of Handler and Gable's *The New History in an Old Museum: Creating the Past at Colonial Williamsburg*. The authors provide an overview of the Williamsburg project, from its beginnings in the visionary zeal of W.A.R. Goodwin, rector of the Burton Parish Episcopal Church, whose lobbying efforts between 1924 and 1927 resulted in John D. Rockefeller's commitment to a massive historical preservation project aimed principally at the eighty eight original colonial buildings in Williamsburg. The real value, however, in this book is in its exhaustive investigation of the ideological conflicts that have been at work in the day-to-day operations of the Museum since it was first incorporated in 1928. The institution's persistent "image problem" (apparently, many people think of it as a theme park rather than a museum) is rooted in its "hybridity... its dual character as educational institution and business concern (p. 29)." The authors trace the image of the Museum during WWII and into the Cold War, noting the predominantly celebratory and patriotic function of the institution, functions that re-

mained intact until 1977, when, under the influence of new trends in academic historiography (i.e., social and labor history), Colonial Williamsburg made an attempt to move out of the celebratory mode in favor of critical education, guided by the belief, as an official document put it, that "understanding how patriots and loyalists reached their different points of view has greater educational value than approving or disapproving of the decisions they make. Learning to make informed, reasoned judgments in matters concerning public policy has become, in our view, more important to a sane, planned future than merely reaffirming our assent to the principles of self government (p. 67)."

The authors then provide an examination of the actual operations of the museum under this new paradigm, and disturbingly, we see that such intentions are little match for the conflicted goals that are reflected in the institution's bipartite structure. The Williamsburg educational project, the authors claim, has been plagued by a kind of object-fetishism (the "quest for mimetic accuracy" [p. 76]), the dual-yet-contradictory myths of nostalgia and progress, and most of all, by the at-

tempt to run the museum according to a consumer satisfaction (rather than an educational) model. Of particular interest here are the sections dealing with the training of museum guides ("interpreters"). Also instructive is the authors' analysis of the way the museum deals with the slavery issue and the differences between the approach of African-American interpreters and their white counterparts. It is in this area, the authors argue, that Colonial Williamsburg often fails in its educational mission.

The authors follow this with discussions of labor problems at Williamsburg and a detailed and critical look at the influence of the corporate paradigm on Colonial Williamsburg's day-to-day educational activities, an influence that often reduces the educational process to what the authors call "good vibes."

The *New History in an Old Museum* is interesting not only for its object of study, but for what it reveals about the mechanisms of history-making; in this regard, Handler and Gable succeed in making constructivism tangible through a specific study. Another important lesson taught by *The New History in an Old Museum* concerns the university's current struggles with corporatism, and more that a few times, I found disturbing parallels between the "good vibes"/consumer satisfaction approach and current trends in higher education. I would recommend this book for scholars and students in any of the cultural studies disciplines.

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