

*For God, King, and People: Forging Commonwealth Bonds in Renaissance Virginia.* By ALEXANDER B. HASKELL. Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 400 pages. Cloth, ebook.

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The English colonization of Virginia in 1607 is a developing story. Many long years ago, the early Chesapeake was routinely relegated to the historical shadows by virtue of the much greater interest in colonial New England. In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the transformative social and economic histories of the region by scholars associated with the Chesapeake School effectively destroyed that way of doing business. The historians, however, left themselves open to the criticism that they believed that the seventeenth-century Chesapeake was more important in the larger scheme of things than had been the case. In response, over the last few decades, historians have reframed the history of the early Chesapeake in light of the reality that the colony was planted in Native ground, on the periphery of an Atlantic world largely defined by the Spanish and Portuguese, and was but one small piece of a global puzzle centered more in the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean.<sup>1</sup>

The early history of Virginia has been well served by scholars recently, but it is now hard to escape the impression that it was of marginal interest to contemporaries during its formative years. As a result, there is renewed attention to the process by which Virginia accrued greater significance. Some scholars have even returned to what looks like the first principle of the old Imperial School—that Virginia (or any other colony) can only be understood if we first remember that it was an appendage. Recent studies of servitude and slavery, for example, have shifted even more away from demand-side considerations to supply-side narratives in order to make sense of how England made Virginia. Paradoxically, the political, social, and economic realities of London appear increasingly important to scholars hoping to understand the American colonies more fully.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Examples in this mold include Alison Games, *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560–1660* (New York, 2008); Michael Guasco, *Slaves and Englishmen: Human Bondage in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2014); Andrew Lipman, *The Saltwater Frontier: Indians and the Contest for the American Coast* (New Haven, Conn., 2015); Jonathan Eacott, *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600–1830* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2016); Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, ed., *Entangled Empires: The Anglo-Iberian Atlantic, 1500–1830* (Philadelphia, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Abigail L. Swingen, *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire* (New Haven, Conn., 2015); John Wareing, *Indentured Migration and the Servant Trade from London to America, 1618–1718: “There is Great Want of Servants”* (Oxford, 2017).

Alexander B. Haskell's *For God, King, and People* reflects this tendency to place Virginia in broader imperial context. In a similar vein to other scholars who have examined the intellectual underpinnings of English colonialism, Haskell is interested in the complicated and shifting ways that Renaissance ideas framed how colonial promoters justified their actions in America.<sup>3</sup> Renaissance Virginia, he asserts, was as much an intellectual endeavor on the part of people deeply concerned about the past as it was an enterprise executed by people with eyes fixed on the future. Unlike scholars concerned with cross-cultural encounters, economic development, or emerging labor regimes, Haskell is fascinated by the relationship between commonwealths and colonialism. He argues that colonial enterprises were viewed as two things at once: a mechanism by which human beings, as God's agents, extended dominion over the earth and a divinely inspired procedure for creating new commonwealths. In this context, the establishment of Virginia was consistent with widespread understandings of both history and providence, and it generated debate in England about sovereignty, the nature of government, and the character of civic communities. As Haskell asserts, Virginia was never simply a colony. It was a proving ground for emerging ideas about kingship, the state, and political communities.

Haskell's humanist proponents of colonization were deeply concerned with the lawfulness of colonialism and how human endeavors mirrored what they understood to be God's will. This premise leads Haskell to emphasize the importance of casuistry, or "the art of aligning human behavior with Providence in light of the difficulty of knowing God's will with assurance" (56). The logic of casuistry shaped the writings of the elder Richard Hakluyt and John Dee and the advice they offered Elizabeth I. Importantly, Renaissance humanists, in this telling, planted the intellectual seeds for a Virginia that was imagined at the moment of its creation not simply as a colony but rather as a commonwealth in its own right, an argument that establishes the ground upon which Haskell builds the rest of his book.

Would-be English captains such as Sir Walter Raleigh emerge as especially important figures in the early parts of this book. Individuals who "brought singular capacities for martial and civil affairs . . . [and] a felt obligation to chronicle" (90) their endeavors were the fulcrum in English efforts to justify colonization. Before 1603, English captains were especially crucial to imagined colonization schemes because the existence of a female sovereign gave special importance to captains as non sovereign men "who were unusually capable of wielding sovereign powers that had their origin in God" (98) but could never be fully executed by a woman. To Renaissance

<sup>3</sup> A partial list would include Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500–1625* (Cambridge, 2003); Peter C. Mancall, *Hakluyt's Promise: An Elizabethan's Obsession for an English America* (New Haven, Conn., 2007); Nicholas Popper, *Walter Raleigh's History of the World and the Historical Culture of the Late Renaissance* (Chicago, 2012).

humanists, the best defense of, and argument for, colonization was that it was not only lawful but a moral obligation. It was therefore imperative that individuals such as Sir Humphrey Gilbert evinced qualities of valor, nobility, and godly virtue. Elizabethan captains, however, were more often selfish, profane, and feeble. Disorder and disagreement, arguably the hallmarks of early English colonialism, limited English efforts before Jamestown.

The solution to this crisis in colonization was the invention of “the state” as both the prime mover and the logical outcome of colonial endeavors. In this context, Haskell unpacks one of his more interesting arguments: that the early modern English state and the Virginia colony were parallel projects in commonwealth building. Members of the circle surrounding Secretary of State Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury, are credited with making the argument that “colonization performed by the state was . . . the honorable alternative to . . . moral licentiousness, . . . belligerence and profit seeking” (153) that had been common among English privateers at the end of the sixteenth century. Concerns about the potential abuses of monopolies certainly gave pause to some observing new entities such as the Virginia Company, but the argument that joint-stock companies honorably made membership open to anyone willing to pay facilitated a broader “conflation of joint-stock companies and the commonwealth” (158) that reshaped colonial affairs.

The Virginia Company, accordingly, worked to organize the colony as a civil polity, implementing a governing council to give the colony a “new, more state-like bearing” (168) and investing a governor with significant executive power. Unfortunately, James I did not see things the same way as the Renaissance humanists around him, instead perceiving Virginia as a source of revenue or convenient place to stash away “notorious ill livers” (189). It also did not help the cause of those who argued that Virginia was a public project, godly endeavor, and civil polity that its two most important patrons—Salisbury and the king’s eldest son, Prince Henry—died in 1612. What originated in many people’s minds as a providential civic endeavor began to devolve into a commercial enterprise that privileged the voices and values of merchants at the expense of the gentry by the early 1620s.

The humanist vision of providential Virginia did not disappear, however, as planters subsequently took up the humanists’ argument that Virginia was not simply a colony but a nascent commonwealth in its own right. Accordingly, they claimed that the Stuarts were obligated to attend to the moral bonds that required the king “to play the part of the colony’s monarch and not simply its prime merchant” (209). Virginians and their allies at home maintained that an irrevocable bond existed between planters and the king and, further, that the commonwealth of Virginia should be thought of as one of the king’s kingdoms. Certainly, there were critics of the colony, such as those who saw only carnality, ignobility, and irreligiosity in Virginia. And with the publication of Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* in 1651, the argument that colonization was “a continuation of the divinely ordained

act of planting new states" (272) ceased to convince. Mid-seventeenth-century Virginians such as Sir William Berkeley might imagine that they inhabited a kind of minstate—a commonwealth on the rise—but Hobbism proved to be the new order of the day, especially after the Restoration. With the emergence of the unitary state in which sovereignty was vested in the kingdom rather than the king himself, it was difficult to imagine colonies as anything other than commercial appendages.

Haskell's is a thoughtful treatment of an oft-ignored part of the Virginia story, but it is not without certain limitations. One will not find here, for example, any real consideration of the meaningful ways Native peoples shaped the history of seventeenth-century Virginia beyond how they were perceived by English observers or how they presented literate English people opportunities to make philosophical or theoretical arguments. Natives certainly do things, but Haskell is not especially interested in their side of the story. Pocahontas, for example, appears in the book once, in a passing reference to her marriage to John Rolfe, but only because Haskell wants to make a point about the morality of colonization. One also searches in vain for any consideration of the intersection between colonialism and slavery or servitude. Certainly, there is an argument to be made that they were of relatively minor importance in Virginia during the period under study. Yet even if Virginia's emerging commitment to human bondage was locally grown, there is enough evidence to suggest that the subject was a point of tension. It would be useful to know more about how contemporaries wrestled with this issue in light of Haskell's argument.

These sorts of observations, however, are less criticisms of the book than they are understandable limitations of any intellectual history of early Virginia. Haskell is primarily concerned with how a small circle of advocates made sense of English colonialism in ways that had more to do with the interlocutors themselves than with colonial sites. And he may be right that the questions that interested people the most (and most of the people) about colonialism at the dawn of the seventeenth century were self-centered. He wants to know how English colonial promoters and early modern political theorists justified, defended, and celebrated governance in a commonwealth during these transformative but tumultuous decades of English history. There is real value in that project, and careful readers will be rewarded with new insights about England and Virginia during the early decades of the seventeenth century. Haskell's history of Virginia articulates in convincing fashion that the colony was not merely a physical space or the seedbed for the mercantile empire that would grow to fruition in later decades. Virginia was also a long argument rooted in the concerns of Renaissance humanists, one that they would ultimately lose to commercial interests, but not before they shaped the political culture of both the colony and the English nation.