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Author(s): Edwin C. Rozwenc

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Captain John Smith's Image of America

Edwin C. Rozwenc*

NEARLY a hundred years ago, John Gorham Palfrey, a devoted student of New England's antiquities, remarked to Henry Adams that he had certain historic doubts as to the story of Captain John Smith and Pocahontas. An article in the *North American Review* on that subject, he suggested, "would attract as much attention, and probably break as much glass, as any other stone that could be thrown by a beginner."¹ Adams' essay on Captain John Smith in the *North American Review* was a full-scale attack on Smith's veracity as a historian. He centered his attack on the Pocahontas story as it appears in *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles* published more than a decade after Smith had written his first brief account of his adventures in the New World. Adams frankly stated that his purpose was "nothing less than the entire erasure of one of the more attractive portions of American history."²

For a generation or more after Henry Adams' famous essay, Smith became the subject of one of the most celebrated controversies in American history. To a certain extent, the quarrel over Smith's reputation as a historian became a sectional battle in which Southern writers, particularly Virginians, sought to defend Smith against a Yankee conspiracy to defame him.³ More recent scholarship, however, demonstrates that there is sub-

* Mr. Rozwenc is a member of the Department of History, Amherst College.

¹ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York, 1931) p. 222. Henry Adams' account of the genesis of his essay on Captain John Smith makes the episode briefer than it really was. Actually, Adams began his investigations in the British Museum in 1861 and the article in the *North American Review* was not published until 1867. See letters to Palfrey and Charles Deane in Harold Cater, *Henry Adams and His Friends* (Boston, 1947) pp. 8-23, 29-36.

² Henry Adams, "Captain John Smith," in *Chapters of Erie and other Essays* (Boston, 1871), p. 193. The original article appeared in the *North American Review*, CIV (Jan., 1867) 1-30.

³ See Jarvis M. Morse, "John Smith and His Critics . . .," *Journal of Southern History*, I (1935), 124. Edward Channing was certain that the controversy was used "to stimulate Southern hatred of New England scholars." *A History of the United States*, I (New York, 1905), 174.

stantial truth in Smith's historical writings, even in the fantastic European adventures recorded in *The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captain John Smith*.⁴

The interminable debate as to whether the dramatic Pocahontas story can be preserved as part of a true record of the American historical experience has diverted attention from other important questions about Captain John Smith. Those we raise must be concerned with more than the truthfulness of his historical accounts, important—and fascinating—as such questions may be. The redoubtable Captain's accounts of the settlement of Virginia lie athwart the starting point of our history and in one way or another we must come to terms with them. His writings, indeed, are one of the first attempts to make an imaginative reconstruction of the origins and meaning of the American experience.

Every man's vision is directed by the metaphors which rule his mind. We must, therefore, seek to discover how Captain Smith chose to give order and meaning to his experiences in the New World: what models of historical reporting were available to him and what resources could he draw upon out of the imaginative experience of Europeans to construct his own narrative? In the light of these questions, we begin to see how a spirit of knight-errantry and the yearnings of a self-made man are interwoven in his conception of America and its possibilities.

The *Generall Historie*, which contains the fullest account of Smith's experiences in America, adds new dimensions to the literary conventions of the chivalric romance. The third and fourth books, particularly, have a dramatic rhythm and an exciting vividness that charmed Americans for generations until Henry Adams began to throw his stones. Excitement and suspense are at high pitch throughout the *Generall Historie*; surprise attacks and ambuscades, spectacular Indian fights in boats and canoes as well as in the forest, colorful Indian feasts, dances and ceremonies fill its pages. The creation of tension prior to the deliverance by Pocahontas is a little masterpiece of dramatic preparation. Our hero is tied to a tree, and

⁴ See Bradford Smith, *Captain John Smith: His Life and Legend* (Philadelphia, New York, 1953). The author attempts a full-scale defense of the truth of the *True Travels* as well as Smith's other historical writings. See Chap. 2 and especially appended essay by Laura Polanyi Striker, pp. 311-342. See also Philip L. Barbour, "Captain John Smith's Route through Turkey and Russia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XIV (July 1957), 358-369, and prefatory essay by Laura Polanyi Striker in the new edition of Henry Wharton's *The Life of John Smith, English Soldier* (Chapel Hill, 1957), pp. 1-31.

Indian braves dance around him, painted in a fearful manner, shaking rattles and shouting; there are orations, with the chief priest speaking in a "hellish voyce," and the pitting of white man's magic against Indian magic. Throughout the narrative, Captain Smith looms above all other men, matching wits with a wily and resourceful Powhatan, issuing commands, performing acts of individual heroism when personal bravery was the last resource.⁵

The *Generall Historie*, indeed, breathes a spirit that we associate with the popular romances of the Elizabethan Age. As Smith grew to manhood on a Lincolnshire farm, the vogue of the medieval chivalric romance was at its height in England. Popular versions of the knightly deeds of Guy of Warwick, Tom of Lincoln, and Palmerin of England fell from the presses like autumn leaves and fed the imaginations of middle-class readers for generations.

Although little is known of Smith's reading habits, Bradford Smith has reminded us that the Captain's imagination was fired by the heroic models of the knightly romance.⁶ In the autobiographical *True Travels*, written a few years after the *Generall Historie*, Smith chooses to recall that, when a young man, he left his home for a time and retired to a wooded area. "Here by a faire brook he built a Pavillon of boughes, where only in his cloaths he lay. His study was *Machiavills Art of warre* and *Marcus Aurelius*; his exercise a good horse, with his lance and Ring; his food was thought to be more of venison than anything else. . . ." His life as a knightly hermit attracted notice and he was soon invited to Tattersall Castle, the seat of Henry, Earl of Lincoln, where he was taught the finer arts of horsemanship by an Italian riding master. Afterwards, he went to the Low Countries to begin his series of "brave adventures" across Europe.⁷

The romantic hermitage in the forest by "a faire brook" smacks of a Robin Hood without followers. There are resemblances, too, to certain familiar patterns in the Arthurian romances. Tom of Lincoln and Bevis of Hampton lived in fields and forests as shepherd boys until their true nobility could be put to the test before the princes and ladies of the world.

As for Smith's later adventures in Europe, we are reminded of Guy of

⁵ *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, ed. Edward Arber (Edinburgh, 1910), II, 395-400. Hereafter cited as Smith, *Works*.

⁶ Bradford Smith, *Captain John Smith*, pp. 26-27, 36-39.

⁷ Smith, *Works*, II, 823.

Warwick who "enjoyed" his ladylove to watch and wait while he proved himself by "deeds." He then set sail for Normandy and fought his way through Flanders, Spain, and Lombardy, eventually to fight the Saracens at Constantinople. Smith followed a similar pattern of great deeds from the Low Countries across Europe to the Hungarian plains. There, in single combats before the eyes of the two armies, "the Rampiers all beset with fair Dames," Smith slew three Turkish champions with lance, pistol, and battle-ax. Their decapitated heads were mounted on lances at the subsequent ceremony, and the General of the army bestowed on Smith a promotion, "a faire Horse richly furnished," and a "Semitere and belt worth three hundred ducats." ⁸

Like many a knight of old, Smith was rescued by a fair lady at the moment of direst peril—not once, but three times. The beauteous Lady Tragabigzanda aided him when he was a captive of the Turks; the Lady Callamata gave him succor after he arrived half dead from his fearful flight from Turkish captivity across the Russian steppes to the Don; and Pocahontas saved his life in the New World whence he had gone to add new deeds to the brave adventures already accomplished in the Old. Unlike the heroes of knightly romances however, Smith never had affairs of love with his rescuers. They were stage deities who intervened at the proper moments, and always women of high rank—an aid no doubt to Smith's pretensions to being a gentleman, coat of arms and all.

The fantastic adventures recorded in the *True Travels* were regarded by Henry Adams as partly fictitious and as a further reason for impugning the reliability of Smith's writings. More recent investigations have shown us that the inconsistencies and seeming inventions in Smith's writings are greatly outnumbered by reports and observations that have successfully passed the critical scrutiny of geographers, anthropologists, and historians. Henry Adams' generation was enthralled by the possibilities of scientific history, and Adams himself sought to discover whether history could be written "by the severest process of stating, with the least possible comment, such facts as seemed sure." Nevertheless the artist and the scientist are as inseparably connected in all of his historical writing as the two opposite faces of an ancient deity. Perhaps if Henry Adams had not been a mere "beginner" when he wrote his essay on Captain John Smith, he might have been able to appreciate that Smith's historical writing was affected by the popular literary attitudes of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 838-840.

Yet the influence of popular literary taste alone cannot account for the character of Smith's historical writing. We must remember also that the conceptions of the nature of history and of the office of the historian as it was held in Smith's day differ greatly from our own. When Smith's *Generall Historie* was written, one of the most widely read historians in England was Sir Walter Raleigh. In a panegyric on history prefixed to his own *History of the World*, Raleigh wrote:

True it is, that among other benefits, for which History hath been honoured, in this one it triumpheth over all human knowledge—that it hath given us life in our understanding, Since the world itself and life and beginning, even to this day: yea it hath triumphed over time, which besides it, nothing but eternity hath triumphed over . . . And it is not the least debt we owe to History, that it hath made us acquainted with our dead ancestors and out of the depth and darkness of the earth, delivered us of their memory and fame.

The end and scope of history, Raleigh wrote, was to "teach by example of times past such wisdom as may guide our desires and actions"; the memory and the fame of the great deeds of men were the best examples.⁹

No less was Captain John Smith a child of the Elizabethan Age. In 1630, he wrote, "Seeing honour is our lives ambition, and our ambition after death, to have an honourable memory of our life: and seeing by no meanes we would be abated of the dignitie and glory of our predecessors, let us imitate their vertues to be worthily their successors . . ." ¹⁰ His opening lines in the third book of the *Generall Historie*, which relates the dramatic story of the founding of Virginia, express his desire for the "eternizing of the memory of those that effected it." ¹¹

Smith's concept of history and his literary imagination gave him the proper dress with which to clothe his image of America. The deeds of Englishmen in Virginia were as worthy of being eternized as those of the Spaniards in Peru and Mexico. Although no gold and silver were discovered in Virginia, Smith saw much that was wonderous in the accomplishments of "those that the three first yeares began this Plantation; notwithstanding all their factions, mutinies, and miseries, so gently corrected, and well prevented. . . ." He challenged his readers to "peruse the

⁹ See Charles H. Firth's "Sir Walter Raleigh's History of the World," *Proceeding of the British Academy*, 1917-18, pp. 427-446. Quotations taken from pp. 432-433.

¹⁰ Smith, *Works*, II, 936.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 385.

Spanish Decades, the Relations of Master *Hackluit*, and tell me how many ever with such small meanes as a Barge of 22 (*or rather two*) tuns, sometimes with seaven, eight, or nine, or but at most, twelve or sixteene men, did ever so discover so many fayre and navigable Rivers, subject so many severall Kings, people, and Nations, to obedience and contribution, with so little bloudshed."¹²

We can understand, therefore, why so much is related about Smith's explorations and Indian fights, and so little is told us of the day-by-day events at Jamestown. Whatever his motives to puff up his personal reputation, history was a matter of the glories and great deeds of men—not their prosaic daily affairs.

Yet we must not be led into a mistaken idea of John Smith's conception of America by the romantic glitter of many of the narrative passages in the *Generall Historie*. America was not simply another field of action for a bold knight. America was a land of opportunity—where men of enterprise might create a flourishing social order. The idea of America that is revealed in other portions of Smith's writing is filled with expectations of great opportunity for the individual even if the society of the New World does not change all of the distinctions of the English social order. John Smith was a self-made gentleman and the impulses that made for social mobility in Elizabethan England are writ large in his estimate of the New World's possibilities.

In the sixth book of the *Generall Historie* dealing with the prospects of New England, Smith asks:

Who can desire more content that hath small meanes, or but onely his merit to advance his fortunes, than to tread and plant that ground he hath purchased by the hazard of his life; if hee have but the taste of vertue and magnanimity, what to such a minde can bee more pleasant than planting and building a foundation for his posterity, got from rude earth by Gods blessing and his owne industry without prejudice to any. . . .

America is not primarily a place for the soldier-knight; it beckons to the industrious who are willing to build a fortune for themselves and their posterity. But America offers more than a good chance for fortune hunters; it presents the opportunity for creating a happier and more enlightened society. In the same passage, he asks further:

What so truly sutes with honour and honesty, as the discovering things

¹² *Ibid.*, 465.

unknowne, erecting Townes, peopling Countries, informing the ignorant, reforming things unjust, teaching vertue . . . finde imploiment for those that are idle, because they know not what to doe: so farre from wronging any, as to cause posterity to remember thee; and remembering thee, ever honour that remembrance with praise.¹³

This is a magnificent dream of America's possibilities, one which drew thousands of Englishmen to America's shores and is still with us in many respects. But we must remember that this vision of social opportunity is not one of a society of yeoman farmers each relatively equal to the other in his station in life. Much has been made of Captain Smith's effort to organize the labor of the Jamestown settlers when he was president by laying down the rule that "he that will not worke, shall not eate." Yet we must not assume that he was responding to the wilderness environment by instituting a rough-and-ready frontier equalitarianism. This was the order of a military captain seeking to maintain discipline, not that of a social visionary seeking to create a new social order in which manual labor was to have the highest value. Elsewhere, when Smith recounts the story of how he made "two gallants . . . both proper Gentlemen" cut down trees till their tender fingers were blistered, he hastens to add: "By this, let no man thinke that the President, and these Gentlemen spent their times as common Woodhaggers at felling of trees, or such other like labours; or that they were pressed to it as hirelings, or common slaves; for what they did, after they were but once a little inured, it seemed, and some conceited it, onely as a pleasure and recreation."¹⁴ Smith was too proud of his coat of arms acquired by valorous exploits in Transylvania to war upon a social system based on honor and distinction.

Nevertheless, something in Captain Smith, perhaps the hard core of common sense of a man who makes his own way, made him realize that the destiny of North America would not lie with gold and silver treasure. One cause of his quarrels with other leaders in Jamestown had been his opposition to vain searches after fool's gold; he preferred to direct the energies of the men at Jamestown into hacking trees, cutting clapboards, and making pitch and potash for shipment to England. Smith's vision of America is closer to that of Richard Hakluyt and Sir Humphrey Gilbert who thought of America as a place where a balanced English society would grow, producing commodities of use to the mother country

¹³ *Ibid.*, 722-723.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 439.

and serving as a market for the profit of English merchants and manufacturers.¹⁵

America was more than a land of profit and contentment, even more than a land of honor and virtue; it was a presence of great natural beauty. A tireless explorer and map-maker whose observations in Virginia and New England contributed much to the geographical knowledge of the time, Smith was also a man who felt the power and the charm of Nature in the New World. Often his descriptions have the obvious purpose of advertising the New World to prospective immigrants—the climate is temperate, the soil fertile, the woods abound with wild fruits and game, the waters swim with fish in plenty—but there are also frequent flashes of subjective responses to “glistening tinctures” of water rushing over the rocks in a mountain stream, “sweet brookes and christall springs,” the awesome, craggy “clifty rocks” of the Maine coast near Penobscot, the “high sandy cliffs” and “large long ledges” along the coast of Massachusetts Bay. By 1616, Smith had become a convinced “northern man” among those in England who were seeking to promote other colonial ventures in America. He speaks of Massachusetts as the “Paradice of all those parts” and declares “of all the foure parts of the world that I have yet seene not inhabited . . . I would rather live here than any where.”¹⁶ To be sure, any honest New Englander will grant that Smith often exaggerates the fertility of the soil in New England and the moderateness of the climate, but no one can doubt that the natural beauty of the land had cast a spell on the Captain that exceeded the requirements of seventeenth-century advertising!

Aside from short voyages made to New England, Smith's experience with America was limited to the two years he lived in Virginia; yet to the end of his days his heart and mind were bewitched by America, as it was and as he dreamed it; and Americans in turn have been betwitched by him ever since. In the words of the poet:

He is one of the first Americans we know,
And we can claim him, though not by bond of birth,
For we've always bred chimeras.¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. George B. Parks, *Richard Hakluyt and the English Voyages* (New York, 1928), pp. 89-98; also David B. Quinn, *Raleigh and the British Empire* (New York, 1949), pp. 16-17.

¹⁶ Smith, *Works*, II, 719, I, 193-194.

¹⁷ Stephen Vincent Benet, *Western Star* (New York, 1943), p. 72.

In a very compelling sense, John Smith is an American historian—one who tried to express the meaning of events in the origins of American experience. By the modern canons of history, a man who writes of events in which he is a participant is already suspect, but, when he does so with zestful attention to his personal exploits, we are tempted to dismiss him as a braggart and a liar. Nevertheless, there is an intractable worth in John Smith's historical writings that will not allow us to cast them aside. Wesley Frank Craven says of him: "Allowing for the exaggeration of his own importance, it must be recognized that his works contain much reliable information and that he himself was a man of real courage and strength. . . . His judgment of the conditions of the colony and their causes in the maladministration of the company through the years immediately preceding its fall are supported in the main by a careful study of the sources now at hand."¹⁸

By and large, the discrepancies of fact in his historical writing, involving as they often do such questions as the numbers of Indians who guarded him or the quantities of food served to him, are really trivial matters—the peccadillos of an amateur historian over which we need not blush any more than we do for the peccadillos of a historian of any age. The greater amount of data in Smith's historical writings has survived tests of credibility in every generation since they were published. The Pocahontas story may be an invention of Smith's mind, or of many minds in the taverns of seventeenth-century London, but on the basis of recent re-examinations of the evidence, the critical historian can admit the likelihood of Smith's deliverance by "the Indian princess" with fewer doubts than he might have had a generation ago.¹⁹

Smith's historical imagination is one key to our understanding of the approach of Englishmen to the New World. He wrote of a brief moment only in the minuscule beginnings of Anglo-Saxon culture in North America. But he brought to his relation of events in Virginia the spirit of knight-errantry which still had a hold upon the imaginations of men in Elizabethan and Jacobean England and gave to Englishmen a vision of America as a place in which to achieve personal honor and glory. When

¹⁸ Wesley Frank Craven, *Dissolution of the Virginia Company* (New York, 1932), p. 5.

¹⁹ The best recent examination of the literary legend of Pocahontas is Jay B. Hubbell's "The Smith-Pocahontas Story in Literature," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXV (July 1957), 275-300.

we remember W. J. Cash's penetrating analysis of the aristocratic ideals of the South, we can understand readily that the chivalric spirit of the *Generall Historie* makes the defense of John Smith's reputation by Southerners something of an automatic reflex. The *Generall Historie* points to social attitudes and styles of life that actually became fundamental social traits in Virginia and much of the South.

But Captain John Smith is more than a totem in the Southern tradition of chivalry. After his brief trials and encounters in Virginia, he understood well that America was destiny and possibility—that America's history lay in the future. He saw that destiny in terms of opportunity for improvement. America would be a place where men might find economic betterment, not by plunderings of gold and other treasure, but in a balanced society of husbandmen, tradesmen, and merchants. The New World, withal, would be a place where men might teach virtue and establish a morality free of the encumbrances of the Old. John Smith's *Generall Historie* is an important part of the deeper cultural consciousness which has sustained this perennial faith in the promise of American life.