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## INTRODUCTION

## Revising the American Past

There was a time when people thought "history" was "the past," uniform, unchanging, finished; but as with styles in clothing, personal appearance, and deportment, we now know our view of the past to be affected by shifting tastes and values. What one age thinks insignificant is thrust to the center by another, and what another age regarded as crucial may later seem trivial. New information is discovered, influences are traced to different causes, and new light is cast on the actors. History is caught in a cycle of rebirth, never completely to come to a final rest, always open to revision.

The first American historians began, understandably, to write about what was at hand. Each one set out "the beginnings" by drawing on materials in the language he knew: Englishmen, on what was available in English; Spaniards, in Spanish; Frenchmen in French; Dutchmen, in Dutch.

Sadly, no literate person knew enough of any Native American language to record the histories of the many societies of early America north of Mexico. To judge by what we know of similar societies elsewhere, myths, legends, and deeds were recited or sung. Like Homer in his account of the Trojan War, orators often "froze" their accounts by putting them into poetry or rhymed prose; probably American Indians did too. Others, the first American historians, used mnemonic devices, often patterned wampum belts or notched sticks, to help them remember. Some of the belts survive, but we cannot capture what they helped Indian historians recall. The best we can do is to "reconstruct" what might have been from the information we get from contemporary visitors, accounts from later times, comparative studies from other tribal peoples, and on occasion archaeology.

For the blacks who began to arrive in the New World in the sixteenth century, information is even more tenuous or distorted: this is not only because few Europeans were interested in the lives of people they treated as domesticated animals but also because by the time blacks settled in America, their diverse African cultural heritages were eroded or overlaid and the web of their traditional social relations had been shattered.

So what we now have, like all history, is imperfect, incomplete, subject to revision. We keep struggling to get what to us seems a better vision. This effort involves not only digging up more information and revising what we have but also seeking different angles of vision. It is in the angle of vision that I offer a modest contribution because, having spent most of my scholarly career studying Asia, Africa, and Europe, I approach American history from an "external" perspective. That is, of course, how most of those who came to the New World approached America, either driven by events in the Old World or conditioned by experiences there. I believe that this approach enriches the insights to be gained from a study of what happened in the New World. To illustrate this point, consider how colonists thought of the native peoples they encountered.

The initial attitudes of southern Europeans toward native peoples were shaped by their first ventures in colonialism, particularly in the Canary Islands. There, the Spaniards encountered a people known as the Guanache. We would describe them as having a more or less Neolithic culture, but so primitive did they appear that the Spaniards regarded them as mere animals. When the Guanache tried to prevent the Spaniards from seizing their lands, the Spaniards enslaved or exterminated them. Then, on reaching the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, where a score of primitive societies lived, the Spaniards treated these natives as they had the Guanache. And, as they spread out into Mexico and what they called La Florida, it was the Canaries-Hispaniola colonial model they followed. Ironically, had Columbus actually reached Cathay (China) or Chipango (Japan) as he had hoped, the model the Spaniards would probably have followed was not what they learned dealing with the Guanache but what they had been taught in their centuries-long complex relationship with the highly cultured Muslim and Jewish peoples of Muslim Spain, al-Andalus—that is, diplomacy interspersed with warfare but not genocide. Of course, they did not reach Cathay or Chipango, so it was

the Guanache model they applied to Hispaniola, Mexico, La Florida, and, eventually, the North American West.

Meanwhile, the northern Europeans, particularly the English and those people who were to play such a crucial role in their colonies, the so-called Scotch-Irish, were learning the craft of colonialism in fighting the Irish. Since shortly after the Norman invasion of England in the eleventh century, the English had been trying to subdue, segregate, or exterminate the Irish. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, James I encouraged a large-scale migration of Scots to assist them. The Scots took to that task with ruthless vigor. Then, toward the end of the century, when many of them were ejected or frightened into moving across the Atlantic, the Scotch-Irish found the Native Americans much like the Irish in dress, housing, and lifestyle and began to treat them as they, and the English, had treated the Irish.

In these and many other ways, the habits of the Old World were formative in the New World. It follows that understanding them is crucial to an appreciation of early American history; so I begin my account of the "birth" of America at conception rather than delivery. What I particularly want to emphasize is that this book attempts to appreciate what came "before" in Europe and Africa; what role the Spaniards, French, and Dutch played before the "British" became the dominant white Americans; and, insofar as it is now possible to understand, how all these groups impacted upon and interacted with the Native Americans.

What of the Native Americans? Were they really comparable to the Guanache or the Irish? The answer is both obscure and complex: complex because the Native Americans were divided into hundreds of societies at various levels of cultural florescence, and obscure because none of those living in the areas that ultimately became the United States left written records. Consequently, we must derive what we can know of them from the observations of Europeans who were usually ignorant of their languages and hostile to their beliefs. Two exceptions are the Virginia planter Robert Beverley in the late seventeenth century and the surveyor-general of North Carolina, John Lawson, who visited Indians, saw how they lived, inquired about their beliefs, and then recorded them. Other than they, the most observant of the European reporters visited the native societies after their ways of life had been affected by difficult-to-estimate degrees of contact.

Thus even the best accounts are seriously flawed, and flawed in ways we sometimes cannot judge.

From their earliest accounts it is clear that the British colonists, unlike the Spaniards, found the Indians worthy of respect. They observed Indians living in well-organized societies, comfortably adapted to their environment, healthy, and physically impressive. It was only as the immigrants learned how to feed themselves, grew in number, and overwhelmed their immediate neighbors that they began to hate and despise the Indians. Within a few generations, as they spread inland and increasingly took over Indian lands, they came to share the belief that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian." So most of their observations can be used by historians only with extreme caution.

Indians were not the only neighbors of the British colonists. They would have found our neglect of their French and Spanish contemporaries curious indeed. Yet it was not until the 1920s that Spain came to be treated as an integral part of the story of "America." It was not just that the Spaniards had led the European advance into the New World but also that much of what they did set patterns that were, unconsciously and with significant variations, followed by others. Their accounts naturally focused on the areas where they were most active, Nueva España (mainly modern Mexico), which was much more important to Spain than La Florida (the North American southeast); and Nueva Andalucía (the North American west). Although what happened in these areas had important consequences for what ultimately became the United States, few American historians were interested.

We can now see, however, that Spanish explorers not only "opened" the interior of our continent but changed it in significant ways. Perhaps the most powerful change was brought about by their unwitting importation of European diseases to peoples without immunities to them. Thus they set in motion a demographic revolution in which many Native American societies would be wiped out. Indian population uniformly shows catastrophic decline in size, often as much as 90 percent. At the time of "contact," the Native American population east of the Mississippi had reached somewhere around 2 million; and by roughly 1750 it had dropped to approximately 250,000.

With effects similar to disease, Spaniards imposed upon the New World the thriving new business of sugar plantations. They did so partly because the contemporary African states prevented the Portuguese and them from creating sugar plantations, then a major source of wealth, in Africa. Some of those states would not even allow Europeans to establish trading stations in their territories. Thwarted there, the Spaniards (and eventually the French and English) created plantations in the Caribbean where they formed economies, legal systems, and a political order profoundly different from what had existed before. It was this new system, originally worked by Indian slaves, which they carried onto the mainland.

Bartolomé de las Casas, who began his career at age eighteen in 1502 as a *conquistador* and became the first man to be ordained a priest in the New World, recounted the dreadful fate of the the Indians of the Caribbean and Nueva España, which presaged the tragedy that awaited all Indians. *The Devastation of the Indies* shocked many of his contemporaries, but it did not halt a flow of events that, time after time, in various guises and degrees, was to be played out in the conflicts that make up so large a part of North American history.

While Spain was a vigorous imperial power, it was less interested than either France or England in trade and made only limited attempts to colonize North America. Land, which exercised such a profound attraction on British colonists, was far less important to the Spaniards (or the French) than "reducing" the Native Americans and incorporating them into the Catholic fold. The ways in which they attempted to do this illuminate the psychological dimension of colonization.

The ventures of sixteenth-century Spain were tightly organized and centrally controlled. Consequently, we find Spanish state or church documents more prolific and important than personal records. But earlier generations of English-speaking historians used these "quarries" very little, so the integration of Spanish experiences into American history is relatively recent. It effectively began with the work of Herbert Eugene Bolton whose 1921 book, *The Spanish Borderlands*, inspired a new school of American historians.

The French role in American history came earlier to the attention of American historians primarily because the French were active closer to the main population centers of the British colonists and because their European

their Native American neighbors, on whom they depended for food and instruction. Because they often did not understand the nature of Indian society or government, they explained it in the only terms they knew, European titles and offices. They found "kings" everywhere they went. They were also struck by how much the Indian villages reminded them of English villages. Later historians, whose contemporary Native Americans were the semi-nomads of the Great Plains, forgot these early accounts. It was "politically correct" to portray all Indians as nomads to whom land had little value; this explained and partly justified colonial land-grabbing. It is only recently that we have revised our vision of the northeastern Indians to see them, as indeed they were, as settled villagers and farmers to whom land was supremely important. In some ways, our most valuable legacy of the very early times is the collection of what survived of the drawings made in 1585 by John White. They enable us to come as close as we ever will to seeing how the native population actually looked and in what they lived.

For the growing Atlantic coastal colonies of Englishmen, Scots, Irish, Germans, and others who were absorbed into what modern writers call British America, relatively abundant records exist. From the very early days, William Bradford is one of the most important chroniclers. His and other early accounts were concerned primarily with their tiny societies: how communities ruled themselves; drew up laws; developed legislatures, courts, and administrations; and, above all, worked their lands. While they focused on local events and papers, they had also to deal with their British patrons and crown authorities. It was not until nearly the end of the nineteenth century that the first historian tried to make use of the British records. Alexander Brown's *The First Republic in America* and *The Genesis of the United States* challenged scholars to go back to original documents, because, he argued, the British had suppressed some of the important information in the published materials. Partly stimulated by him, a virtual industry began to assemble and make available all the papers that survived.

Until fairly recently, these and other colonial records focused attention on the creation of institutions and the promulgation of laws and regulations by the settlers and away from relations with the native peoples. "Serious" historians paid little attention to the way people lived in the new environment.

The first ventures into social history—what people ate, how they were

rivalry spilled over into the New World where it also drew in Indian allies and ultimately exploded in the French and Indian War. In addition to these stirring events, French officials and explorers also left several works of vivid description that were easier to access than dry official reports. Notable among these was the account of Sammel (as he spelled his name) de Champlain, who tells us how French imperial strategy emerged and set out the impact of firearms on Indian societies. While little remains of the engravings of Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, they offer a contemporary view of Indian villages. Canada naturally figured prominently because that was where most of the French efforts focused, but the French role on the southern Atlantic coast has now begun to attract the attention of scholars.

Most of the raw materials and finished products (the primary and secondary sources) we have, however, are by English-speaking colonists. The first materials that came to hand were accounts of the voyages of discovery. Historians treat these tales of derring-do, many of which were collected by Richard Hakluyt, as raw materials; but Hakluyt, as he freely acknowledged, thought of them as propaganda for English imperialism. The adventurers who wrote them were reporting to their sponsors, glorifying their achievements, justifying their failures, or encouraging further investment in their projects. Some of their reports, then considered confidential government documents, were suppressed, expurgated, lost, or destroyed. Others were not read until long after they were written, but in the aggregate they were the "mine" that earlier American historians worked.

English ventures into the northeastern coastal areas, Virginia and New England, were initially "privatized" and more freewheeling than those of the Spanish, so the early reports were more personal and less official. Captain John Smith was as accomplished and flamboyant an autobiographer as he was a soldier; his account of the Jamestown settlement was published in London in 1624 to great acclaim. Among modern historians, David Beers Quinn was particularly diligent and able in his efforts to compile records of the early English, Spanish, and French explorers such as *The Roanoke Voyages, 1584-1590* and *England and the Discovery of America, 1481-1620*.

Just as the early colonists were sensitive to the activities of Spaniards to the south of them, they were acutely aware of—indeed, often respectful of—

housed, the clothing they wore, how they kept warm, how they moved about—these and other things were stimulated by the writings of the colonists about themselves. One of the fundamental problems they faced was their identity: at first all of them would have said that they were Englishmen; but as years passed, we begin to hear three words that suggest a blurring of this identity. Increasingly, England was referred to as the “mother”; the new lands, originally thought of as “plantations,” came to be identified as discrete “colonies” that were the “daughters” of England. In them we can discern a common historical experience of growing up and growing apart. That is everywhere the nature of colonialism.

Unveiling the minds of the men and women who lived not only long ago but in circumstances very different from ours is one of the most difficult challenges of history. When people write for others to read, they often magnify or diminish or even invent or suppress, so what they really thought or did is often elusive. Private diaries are therefore especially valuable. One of the more bizarre pieces of scholarship was the deciphering of the code used by William Byrd to record his frank and sometimes salacious account of his life. Landon Carter's diary, which is more accessible, has more recently become available and is the basis of an excellent account of eighteenth-century Virginia. From them we get rare and intimate views of the thoughts of prominent members of the Virginia aristocracy in the early eighteenth century. Letters and papers become increasingly rich and abundant later in the eighteenth century. Benjamin Franklin provided us with a gold mine; George Washington's diary is now available on a compact disc; most of the figures who played key roles in the Revolution—except for Samuel Adams, who destroyed his—have left us their voluminous correspondence. These sources can be mined both for accounts of the major events and also for intimate details of the writers' lives.

Such materials virtually forced an enlargement of the scope of American history. It was no longer enough to know that institutions existed; they had to be seen in action, and the purposes of the men who manipulated them had to be explored. Then overarching themes could be announced to attempt to bring order into the myriad details.

Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 provided one of the most stimulating of these overarching themes in his interpretation of the role of the fron-

tier in American history. He turned our attention away from the towns along the Atlantic coast toward the interior in the seventeenth century. For Turner, the actors who counted were the white settlers and those who urged them on or tried to control them; but inevitably those with whom they interacted, the Native Americans, had to be understood. That understanding was long in coming.

Until the twentieth century, historians were content to portray what Richard White called *The White Man's Indian*. “Colonial and early American historians have made Indians marginal to the periods they describe,” wrote White. “They have treated them as curiosities in a world that Indians also helped create.” Having rediscovered them, some historians echoed Bartolomé de las Casas in treating them as tragic victims, as merely the objects of white people's action. This was perhaps inevitable, since most of what we have to draw upon was recorded by whites who not only did not fully understand Indian culture but regarded Indians only as competitors or even terrorists. Progress toward regarding Indians as people with discernible interests, policies, and both successes and failures came only recently. Carl Bridenbaugh rediscovered perhaps the first of the anti-colonial Indian statesmen in late seventeenth-century Spanish America and speculated on his possible role in Jamestown in the early eighteenth century, thus tying together three early American themes: the Spanish, English, and Indian. Many scholars have now joined a wave of revisionism regarding the Indians. Stimulated by a new generation of historians, we are beginning to see them vigorously interacting with one another and with white societies; recognizing them as actors rather than as objects; and seeking to comprehend their often complex attempts to protect their way of life through resistance, accommodation, diplomacy, and unification. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Indian “seers” were trying to formulate religious-political doctrines to stave off the religious-political attack of the Europeans. We know something about a few of them but virtually nothing about what were probably many more. The most imaginative and interesting speculation on what an Indian history might have been is Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America*.

Inspired by their propaganda, infuriated by European disdain, and terrified by the destruction of their societies, Indians in Spanish-controlled

Pueblo country and in the Ohio Valley rose against and almost destroyed the Europeans. Theirs were the great rebellions against colonialism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They failed. What is interesting, and only now beginning to be appreciated, is how sophisticated and subtle were the diplomatic, military, and religious forces at work and how astute were some of the Indian leaders. For the first time since the very early colonial period we come up against true Indian statesmen like Shingas, Pontiac, and Joseph Brant who tried to formulate a way to reconcile the Indian desire for autonomy with European ambitions. Despite recent progress, we still look through this glass darkly.

Until recently, black people were seen both in the singular, one category rather than peoples of diverse languages, religions, societies, and even races, and only when they came "onstage" in the New World. Attempts are being made to understand better the often violent but frequently also subtle ways in which blacks were integrated into American history. What now emerges is that we have to deal with the African component of our history in three interlocking but different categories: who the Africans were, how the blacks got to the New World, and what happened to them when they arrived.

Little by little, they are now being traced back to their complex roots. African societies were as diverse as Indian societies, with some large and centralized empires commanding relatively huge armies while hundreds of village-based states had evolved not only legal systems but impressive public institutions; agriculture and long-distance trade were even more highly developed than those practiced in North America; some societies had developed impressive metallurgy and textile industries; and literacy, particularly in the Muslim areas, was widespread. Much of the African part of this story is still obscure.

Relatively speaking great progress has been made on understanding the Middle Passage, the slave routes to the New World. A number of accounts by<sup>4</sup> white slave traders describe in horrifying detail what the voyages were like. Randy Sparks followed the path of two African slave traders who were themselves enslaved to put together a fascinating account of their experience in *The Two Princes of Calabar*. Robert Harms took the log of one vessel, the *Diligent*, to give a detailed but relatively benign picture of the passage.

Another account by a former slave, Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), is unique.

We have almost nothing by blacks offering real insights into slave life in America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and probably never will. We are forced to rely on accounts by contemporary whites and some later accounts by blacks. We are now able, however, to move out onto the fringes, to see how runaway communities (of which some were mixtures of blacks, Indians, and whites, known as maroons or *cimarrones*) established themselves; how transracial ties were created; how religious thought permeated the hundreds of small and often isolated communities; and how visions of freedom survived to be expressed when opportunity afforded at the outset of the Revolution. A major start has been made, but this remains still almost uncharted territory in American history.

Analogous to but less tragic than the story of the blacks who came unwillingly to America was the migration of the many thousands of frightened, condemned, indentured, or exiled Scots, Englishmen, Irish, French, and German people. Abbot Emerson Smith led the way in the 1930s, and now scores of studies take up each ethnic and social group.

Once the immigrants from Europe and Africa arrived, it seemed possible for American historians to stop at the water's edge. What happened *here* was American history; what happened *there* was European, English, French, or Spanish. Contemporaries did not share this view. They were well aware of what was going on in and beyond Europe; already in the seventeenth century they were creating markets, exporting and importing. Later, in the eighteenth century, popular movements in England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Corsica, and even distant Poland would attract their attention. Only recently have we rediscovered the "outreach" of our history. Franco Venturi, Pauline Maier, and Bernard Bailyn have each contributed to broadening this view.

Economic affairs were already being discussed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Adam Smith wrote perceptively about colonialism in *The Wealth of Nations*, and he was by no means the first or only one to do so. Mercantilism, against which he inveighed, was in part an attempt to figure out the proper relationship of the "mother" country to the "daughter" colonies.

Religion as expressed in cultural orientation was at the forefront of Spanish, French, English, and—as we now know—Native American thought. It was what brought many of the Europeans to the New World and was one means through which Indians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries sought salvation. Each major group sought to protect itself from outside intrusion, and particularly from attempts by the Spanish, French, and English to destroy Indian beliefs. Catholic missions or *reducciones* in La Florida, some time around the middle of the seventeenth century, contained perhaps as many as 30,000 Indians; New England Protestant “praying towns” were smaller partly because the people who might have lived in them had been killed or chased away, but at their height, they may have reached over 2,000. The French efforts fell somewhere in between and were scattered more diffusely across a far larger expanse around the Great Lakes region.

The most interesting, longest-lasting, and largest-scale field of this cross-cultural influence is the experience of the American black community. Black people’s modification and adoption of Christianity is particularly fascinating because, on the surface, it appears so illogical that blacks would adopt what they and the Indians regarded as “white men’s religion.” How this happened, who promoted it, why they did, and what the blacks found in Christianity are among the most subtle problems of American history. They have echoes today in the attempts by large numbers of blacks to find a different religious and cultural orientation in their interpretation of Islam. But we are learning that these ventures also have African roots: large numbers of Africans had become Muslim and even larger numbers were certainly influenced by Islamic ideas. Moreover, at least some African religions were monotheistic and lent themselves to being influenced by either Islam or Christianity.

In the period that led up to the Revolution, books, articles, and collections of papers are uncountable. Several, however, merit special attention. Pauline Maier’s, noted above, is one. Another of Bernard Bailyn’s studies, in addition to his *Ideological Origins*, is his focus on the conflict between “radicals” and “conservatives” in Boston in *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*. Arthur M. Schlesinger studies the “newspaper war” in *Prelude to Independence*; and Hillier B. Zobel gives an almost blow-by-blow account of the last days before the Revolution.

Among the newer tools available to historians is archaeology. Archaeology not only enables us to understand what sort of buildings early peoples built and what sort of tools and weapons they used, but also what they ate and how hard they worked.

Climatic change has also shed new light on events: in the “little ice age,” the migration of cod caused the first European fishermen to come to America. On the North American landmass, it caused a decline in agricultural productivity; consequently, Indian societies scattered from previous urban concentrations like the surprisingly large town of Cahokia, where perhaps as many as 20,000 people lived. From this new knowledge, we have had to revise the earlier and more comfortable notion that, since the Indians were nomads, taking Indian land did not much matter.

Certainly no society has ever expended more time, talent, and treasure on learning about itself than the American. The task is far from complete. And now we are finding that in almost every way, we have had to revise, enrich, extend, and internalize our view of the American past. My purpose in writing this account is to put together an overall view of the process during which the America we have so fortunately inherited was born.