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A Brief and True Account of the Writings of Capt. John Smith and the Beginnings of American Literature

By Robert Alexander Armour



This portrait of Capt. John Smith appeared on a 1616 map of New England. The image was colorized by Jamie May from an original engraving by Simon de Passe.

On August 14, 1608, Captain John Smith and twelve men turned their shallop¹ out of the Chesapeake Bay into the Rappa-hannock River. By turns rowing and sailing, they were there to explore and map this body of water, while making contact with the people who lived in the outer reaches of Chief Powhatan's empire.

Three days later they encountered hostile Rappahannocks, who thought the Europeans were allied with enemy Indians who had stolen Rappahannock women. The Rappahannocks suckered the English in toward shore, possibly close to the mouth of the

Piscataway Creek,² with offer of baskets of food and goods for trade, then they attacked the shallop. The Europeans, however, forewarned by Mosco, their Indian guide, had armed their ship with reed shields that protected them from barrages of arrows. Musket fire from the ship soon sent the attackers into the cover of the deep woods. The next day the party of adventurers proceeded up the river, and for another five days they explored the river up to the fall. Then they turned and sailed down river, trading with the natives and making peace where possible. They reached Stingray Point on the 27th on their way back to Jamestown.

The story of the time Smith and his party spent along the shores of what is now called Essex County is part of one of the earliest written accounts of the newfound land. In 1624 Smith described this trip in detail in his *General History of Virginia*, and thus the area and its people were present at the beginnings of American literature. Today John Smith is rightly recognized as explorer, map maker, and leader. Had he not, however, turned writer and recorded the histories

¹ Sailors call the boat a shallop, but Smith, a military man, called it a barge.

² The exact location of this battle remains controversial. Smith does not name the creek, and it could have been Hoskins Creek, or even Cat Point Creek or Totuskey Creek on the other side of the river. The narrative here follows the conclusions in Rountree, Clark, and Mountford, *John Smith's Chesapeake Voyages*.

of his voyages, he probably would have been little more than a footnote in someone else's record of the early days of the new colony. Fortunately for us he wanted to write—and he was a good storyteller.

The Major Virginia Writings of John Smith

In 1608, after the struggles to survive the long first winter in Virginia, Smith hurriedly wrote a letter to a friend in London, describing the first months. He was frank in his appraisal of the personnel and of the difficulties of colonization, but he was favorable about the future of the effort. The letter was roughly written and not intended for public viewing, but the friend, whose name is lost, edited it to exclude thoughts he deemed potentially negative to the Virginia Company. Then he published it with the title *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Noate as Hath Hapned in Virginia* (London, 1608). Expurgated, ungrammatical, and unedited for writing problems, *A True Relation* is difficult to read, but as Dorothy and Thomas Hoobler have written, "The literature of the United States begins with this work."

Smith returned to England in 1609 and had only begun to write about Virginia. First, he found an engraver who made a copy of Smith's map of Virginia, which they published at Oxford in 1612. This was accompanied with a book of *Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia since their First Beginning from England in the Yeare of Our Lord 1606*. This was an anthology of writings by several men who had first-hand knowledge of the colony, but Smith was the major author. The map and the *Proceedings* remain valuable sources for information about Indian life at the time when the Clash of Cultures began.

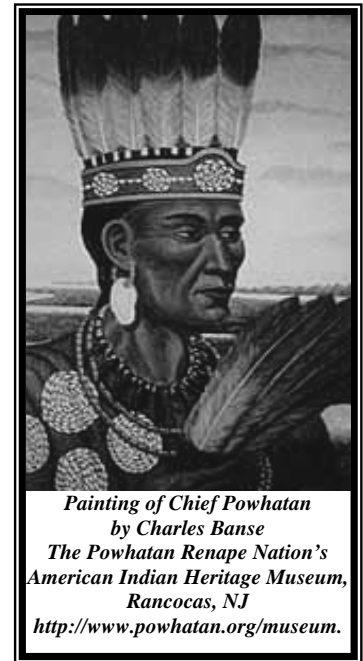
Once Smith had time and leisure to reflect on his adventures in the New World, the result was his major literary effort. His *General History of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (London, 1624) became a comprehensive history of the Jamestown colony. Now freed financially from the control of the Virginia Company, Smith was liberated to tell the story as he believed it happened. He portrayed the Indians as both friend and foe. The Indian uprising in 1622 was well known in London, and there was no need for subterfuge or prevarication about relations with

the natives. He enlarged on earlier versions of the story to give a more honest (as he saw it) picture of life in the colony. He was now at large to describe the Powhatans as useful allies at times and powerful and effective opponents at other times. In this context his capture by the Powhatans and his ultimate friendship with the chief takes on additional significance.

The role of Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas—as his savior, as friend to the colonists, and as

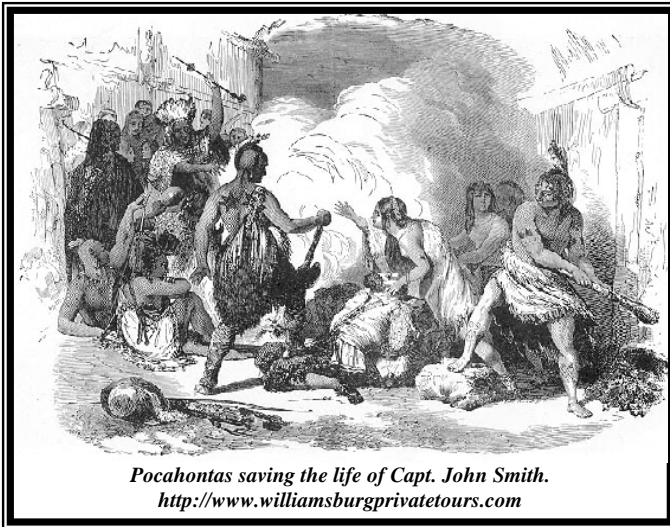
English celebrity—becomes an enticing, but important, element of the story. He included as well description of the adventures along the Rappahannock River and the Chesapeake Bay.

Any critique of the writings of the first author in American literature would be mixed. On one hand, Smith is often difficult to read. His sentences tend to run on; he has no sense of how a paragraph should work. His punctuation is erratic and he has little appreciation for the value of a period. His spelling is creative, to put it mildly. This means that the reader makes slow progress through his prose. All this, however, needs to be placed in perspective. There were few models of English prose for him to follow, and no standardization of spelling, grammar, and punctuation to serve as guides. For most of us Smith's writings would be among the earliest English prose we have read. Up to this time, most important documents would have been written in Latin or French. The English language had produced wonderful poetry—Chaucer and Shakespeare immediately leap to mind—but we are hard pressed to name even a minor writer of English prose prior to John Smith. There were a few, of course, and contemporaneously with Smith a committee of good men under the leadership of King James I was producing memorable prose in their translation of the Bible.



Nevertheless, Smith had few models for his writing. His education—what there was of it—had ill prepared him for the role as chronicler of the beginnings of a new nation.

On the other hand, however, Smith was a wonderful storyteller, a skill probably honed through many long nights around campfires with his companions. His tale of his rescue by Pocahontas, whether fanciful or factual, is now part of American mythology.



Pocahontas saving the life of Capt. John Smith.
<http://www.williamsburgprivatetours.com>

And, while not as well known, the several pages describing the exploration of the Rappahannock River are a gripping good yarn.³ Every good story must engage us with interesting characters; Mosco the Indian guide is one of the more intriguing obscure figures in early American history. The story contains life-threatening conflict, battle scenes, sex, an ingenious solution to the conflict, and a happy ending—all the ingredients of an exceptional story that once fleshed out into a full novel would sell well today on the bookshelves of Wal-Mart.

Additionally, Smith's humor, though often ignored by his critics, should be remarked, as it sometimes took the edge off of tense situations. On the voyage over, the ships stopped at an island and the men disembarked. Smith's bitter enemy, Edward Maria Wingfield, and his followers cornered Smith, convicted him of mutiny, and built a gallows to hang him. Smith's friends arrived in a timely manner to save him,

but Smith later was to dismiss the incident in his autobiography with the line, "A paire of gallows was made, but Captaine Smith, for whom they were intended, could not be perswaded to use them." On another occasion, Smith found no humor when his own powder bag exploded, nearly killing him. Later, however, when an Indian foolishly exposed himself to powder, killing himself and one or two other men and scorching others, Smith ironically remarked with English understated humor, "They had little pleasure to meddle any more with powder." And yet again, Smith had the good grace to acknowledge Powhatan's sense of humor during serious negotiations over Smith's request for Indian food. According to Smith, Powhatan relieved the tension with the comment that he "valued a basket of corn more pretious then a basket of copper, saying he could eate his corne, but not his copper."

One more stylistic element of Smith's prose should be considered: his critics often comment that John Smith wrote in order to heighten and perpetuate his image and fame. James Horn calls it Smith's "self-propagandizing" and "self-memorializing." Smith wrote in the third person and refers to himself as "Captain" and "President" as if to create the impression that another author were celebrating the exploits of this great man. He exaggerated his domination over Powhatan. He elaborated on Pocahontas' role in his life after she had traveled to England and had been received by London society as a princess. These claims of vanity probably hold some validity, but they hardly seem to matter much. Every point in Smith's writings that can be verified with outside sources has shown him to be truthful. He makes himself the hero of his own story, but in truth he was a remarkable man. In our age, when movie actors, politicians, and sports figures write superficial tell-all books and hire publicity agents to promote their image, what Smith did to advance his reputation seems both mild and entertaining. At least he did significant things with his life and deserves his fame.

John Smith and the American Dream

In many ways the life of John Smith exemplified the American Dream, a concept of which he had never heard. A young man of

³ An excellent version of the adventures on the Rappahannock, as well as Smith's other writings, can be found in Haile, *Jamestown Narratives*, edited by a friend of the ECMHS.

modest means and informal education, he came to America and made both his reputation and a comfortable living through hard work and courage. His writings which described this life initiated a phenomenon that has become one of the defining traits of our country and a dominant theme of American literature. The American Dream is a sociological and historical development; but without the literary statements of it, it would be hardly observable. To Smith, America was a land of opportunity where a person with energy and hard work could fulfill his dreams. He railed against the gentlemen who had come on the first ships and expected an easy life in which their needs were provided as if they remained on the manor in England. These men were parasites who drained resources from the few good men who worked for their keep. Smith's dictate "that he that will not worke shall not eate" established one of the first principles of the American Dream: this is a land of opportunity which can be achieved through honest labor.

As the Hooblers explain it, "John Smith's dream, that on that vast continent a new kind of society would arise where men of 'great spirits and small meanes' could prosper and, yes, grow rich, inspired millions who never knew his name ...Smith founded more than a colony. He gave birth to the American dream." Smith initiated a literary tradition that has continued to our own day. Writers as disparate as Mark Twain, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dan Rather have demonstrated the impact of the Dream on the American character. And the millions of immigrants who cross America's borders today are living testaments to the power of the Dream.

John Smith and American Myth

In a literary sense, myths are stories that shape and define a people. We use these stories to project truths so deeply ingrained in our being that only through story can we articulate them. These stories—or myths—capture our essences and externalize our ideals. They become true at some unfathomable level. Great literature rises to the level of myth when it transcends its own time and place and reveals truths for all generations. For example, the tragic hero of Shakespeare, the romantic hero of Walter Scott, or the existential hero of Ernest Hemingway all in their own way

speak to our need for heroic models and behavior, one sure ingredient of myth.

John Smith gave us the first American myths. The story of Pocahontas has become central to American culture. In some parts of the world she is more famous than George Washington (another icon of American myth). According to the legend—and there is no need here to argue the historical accuracy of the legend—she was, as the story opens, the Noble Savage, the innocent girl romping naked through villages and forest. Next she became the hero thrusting herself between John Smith and Indian clubs. Later she fell in love with John Rolfe, converted to Christianity, married the Englishman, had a baby, and made a triumphant tour of England. One of the joys of myth is that it often works on several levels at the same time.

One interpretation of this myth celebrates her progress from savagery to culture, a major theme of European America. Another version, however, observes the loss of innocence—a myth that now helps to explain much of what has happened to America since 9/11/2001.

Yet, another interpretation of the myth regrets deeply the exchange of one's cultural roots for those of an alien culture, a myth that still today resonates with



American Indians as well as immigrants coming to these shores. These are different ways of looking at the same story, different ways of extracting essential truths from the same set of events.

Without knowing what he had done, Smith introduced into American culture myths that continue to shape our ideas of who and what we are. As late as 1995 the Disney studios produced a movie giving a 20th century slant to the

Pocahontas story, a slant that generated its own controversy. The beauty of a great myth is that it speaks to each generation in its own way.

John Smith and the Clash of Cultures

There is a legend that during the surrender at Yorktown, a British band played a piece entitled "The World Turned Upside Down." How appropriate it would have been had musicians on board the *Susan Constant* played the same piece as the first European adventurers disembarked onto the banks of the James River. At that moment an advanced society of some fifteen-thousand people, with their own culture, societal systems, and religion, already lived in the area. The world of these people would never be the same, and they knew it. John Smith also knew it, although he and the natives disagreed as to whether this was a good or bad thing.

This clash has been documented in literature over the centuries, and the documentation began with John Smith. The clash between the Europeans and the natives is easily seen in the physical events of Smith's narratives: the battles, kidnappings and hostage taking, arguments, even trials. These events well illustrate the clash, but Smith also used a centuries-old literary technique to allow us to enter into the minds of the participants at this critical moment of history. The literary use of dialogue to present opposing

points of view was as old as the ancient Greeks (Plato, for example). Through dialogues between Smith and the Indian chief we learn just how aware Powhatan was that his world had changed for ever. The old chief (he was about 67) confessed in conversation with Smith that he feared the English had come to destroy his county: "I can neither rest, eat, nor sleepe ... and if a twig but break everie one crie there comes Captiane Smith, then I must flie I know not whether, and thus with miserable feare eande my miserable life...." Smith responded with the English position, and so the dialogue continued until peace was reached and trade could commence. Some of the most beautiful and moving passages of early American literature can be found in these dialogues.

Summary

John Smith stands at the headwaters of a grand tradition of American letters. His stories of exploration helped to mold the dreams and myths that shaped and defined some of the major themes of American culture. We pay tribute to the fine characters he created for us, to the descriptions of the people he visited, and to the adventures he recorded. This man, who never fathered children of his own, became the father of a tradition of American literature that has endured for four centuries.

For further Reading

Haile, E. W., *Jamestown Narratives: Eyewitness Accounts of the Virginia Colony* (2007)

Hoobler, D. and T., *Captain John Smith: Jamestown and the Birth of the American Dream* (2006)

Horn, J., *A Land as God Made it: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (2005)

Rountree, H., Clark, W., Mountford, K., *John Smith's Chesapeake Voyages, 1607-1609* (2007)

Bob Armour is Professor Emeritus of English from Virginia Commonwealth University. He has been a Fulbright professor in Egypt and visiting professor at the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland. Currently he is Adjunct Professor of English in the Honors Program at Tennessee Tech University. He is author of three books and editor of three more. At this time he is writing a book on the scholarly life of C.S. Lewis. He and his wife Leandra have summered near Dunnsville since 1969. We wish to thank him for this most interesting and enlightening study of one of the best known most popular historical figures in the history of our country. We look forward to continuing contributions from Bob in future Bulletins.

Editor's Note: *The historic pictures reproduced in this edition of the Bulletin were gathered from the various websites noted in the caption of each. We encourage our readers to go to these interesting and informative sites, as well as the many others that are available online. The search is fun and the facts and myths revealed are remarkable, shedding new light on wonderful 'old' subjects.*

Capital Campaign Update

\$30,000 has been contributed in cash and pledges. Phase I expansion is near completion as volunteers are painting the new area. Fund raising continues with a **golf cart raffle**. Minter's Golf Carts located in Tappahannock has graciously donated the golf cart. Tickets are one (1) for \$5 or three (3) for \$10, and can be purchased at the Museum, Bank of Essex, EVB, Northern Neck State Bank and Minter's Golf Cart Sales. The drawing will be held the weekend of October 19th at the opening reception for the new exhibit gallery at the Museum. Donations can be mailed to ECMHS, POB 404, Tappahannock, VA 22560. For more information, contact the ECMHS at 804-443-2406, or e-mail staff@ecmhs.org

**Essex County Museum hours are:
10 am-3 pm on M, T, Th, F, S and 1-3 pm on Sun
Admission is always free**

Visit our website, www.ecmhs.org for additional information on all of the activities, board meetings, exhibits and exciting historic information opportunities about Essex County.

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Upcoming Events

Brick Restoration Workshop - Sep 13 thru 16: The chimneys at the recently relocated historic "Woodfarm" home will be reconstructed during this workshop, which will provide instruction and hands-on experience for both the professional brick layer and the interested novice. The workshop weekend experience will include an Essex County Historic Homes tour, as well as a reception at the Museum. For more information, go to www.historicproperties.com, or call the Museum at 804-443-4690.

New Exhibit Gallery Opening - Weekend of Oct 19: Our new Exhibit Gallery, the result of Phase I of the Museum expansion effort, will officially open. The expanded gallery will include "**Jamestown and Beyond: The World in 1607**" (on loan to us from the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts), the history of baseball in Essex County and more! Details coming soon.

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