Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown
HELEN C. ROUNTREE
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The upcoming 400th anniversary of the settlement of Jamestown will likely coincide with a plethora of books, magazine articles, and other publications commemorating the first permanent English colony in the New World. Archaeologists, historians, and anthropologists will write countless scholarly and popular works aspiring to correct the myths and legends that have obscured the “real story” of the founding fathers and the birth of democracy in America. At the same time, a handful of these authors will address this tumultuous time from the perspective of those who were already living in southeastern Virginia, the Powhatan Indians. Taking on this difficult task, as she has done for more than 35 years, Helen Rountree has produced an inspiring book that challenges the reader to imagine a different world, one from a Powhatan perspective.

Rountree’s work focuses on the lives of three remarkable individuals. Wahunsenacawh, the mamanatowick (or great king) known today as Chief Powhatan, is the most prominent of the three, befitting his role in the early-17th century. His story dominates the first half of the book. It is through his eyes that Rountree establishes the strong and proud tone of her work, albeit with a touch of humor, a lesser-known aspect of Powhatan’s personality. Readers are carefully guided through the myths and legends that have obscured many of the facts surrounding the early cultural exchanges between two very different groups with very different ways of life. From the initial capture of John Smith and his adoption by Powhatan in 1608, through the difficult winters and droughts of the following years, and concluding with Powhatan’s retirement from the political world prior to the great assault of 1622, Rountree reconstructs the history of a fascinating man whose life was every bit as prominent as his legend.

Powhatan commands center stage for much of the book, but the other characters are never very far away, making their presence known from time to time until the spotlight focuses on them after Powhatan’s death. An extremely popular historical figure in her own right, Amunute, the favorite daughter of Powhatan who went by the nickname Pocahontas, provides the unique perspective of both a girl and, later, a young woman. She experiences the invaders’ world, learns their language, and converts to their religion before marrying into their culture and voyaging to England in 1616. Her untimely death there and the relatively few references to her actions throughout her life highlight how just a handful of recorded events can grow into an uncontrollable legend.

Rountree’s third subject of study, Opechancanough, Powhatan’s younger brother, was an influential political force throughout his life. He was forced to wait until both of his older brothers, Powhatan and the lesser-known Opitchapam, died before becoming paramount chief. Nonetheless, he was prominent in the organization of great assaults in 1622 and 1644. His death soon after the second assault marks the end of the story, but Rountree is careful to note that it was not the final chapter in the history of the Powhatan Indians. They survive to this day among the eight state-recognized tribes of Virginia, law-abiding citizens who have contributed as much to this country’s history as any group, keeping their culture alive and vibrant into the 21st century.

The connection between the present and the past is a recurring theme throughout the book. Primarily through her unique approach, Rountree is careful to avoid the pitfall of focusing too much on the legends that constitute much of what the public understands of this period. Her history, written from the Powhatan Indian perspective and coupled with a reliance solely on the primary documents, easily dispatches the convoluted stories such as Pocahontas


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saving John Smith’s life and Chanco warning Jamestown of the impending “massacre” in 1622. She focuses on what was recorded at the time and distances herself and the reader from the pride-filled times and ego-driven creators of these myths and legends. The result effectively breaks down common understanding of the past and rebuilds it in a new, far more accurate light.

One of the most delightful aspects of the book is the way Rountree integrates the larger story of the Powhatan Indians while never losing focus on the three main characters. Rountree complements a careful reading of primary documents with the most recent archaeological findings to place the characters within the larger Chesapeake world. From the flora and fauna, to the seasonal approaches to everyday life, and even to the roles of each member of Powhatan society, whether male or female, old or young, elite or commoner, Rountree presents a universe that is very different from that of the European invaders but is also one that is ultimately knowable to the present and understandable within the context of its time.

The book is easily readable and perfectly written for a public audience, while also highly useful to students at the undergraduate level. Rountree acknowledges her position as a “non-Indian” writing from the native perspective, hoping that one day there will be a similar history written by the modern Indian people of Virginia. She is an accomplished scholar and truly embraces both her support of the modern Virginia Indian community and its struggle for federal recognition as well as her love for interdisciplinary research. While the former may lead readers to question some of her interpretations in the book, the latter is a true inspiration to all scholars. As an ethnohistorian, Rountree is both an anthropologist and an historian. Couple this with her broad knowledge of archaeological methods and her treatment of archaeological data as essential to her interpretations, she has created what many people advocate but few practice: a truly interdisciplinary work.

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