

A Land As God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America. By JAMES HORN. New York: Basic Books, 2005. 349 pages. \$26.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Camilla Townsend, *Rutgers University*

In a grand effort, James Horn brings together the perspectives of recent generations of scholars in this relatively brief and highly readable book. Horn argues that America was born not in a city upon a hill but in grit, both literal and figurative. It was born in the unkempt and sometimes depressing Jamestown settlement and in the stubborn refusal of the settlement to die, even after the Virginia Company fell. He looks for the heroic, the prosaic, and the downright evil elements of the story, arguing that America's genesis came of that complex totality. In these pages readers follow the actions of the colonizers and also come face-to-face with the choices of the indigenous. The English take center stage, but the Spanish are also present. It is not only a profoundly political story but also a social and economic one.

In an effort to break away from old molds, Horn opens the prologue and the first chapter with Indians. Don Lu's de Velasco (who was kidnapped from the Chesapeake and taken to Spain) and Wahunsonacock (who was later called Powhatan) are, albeit briefly, central characters. Readers are reminded in a meaningful way that the land was theirs before there was a Jamestown. The English colonists are introduced without fanfare: "On a raw December day, three small ships slipped quietly down the Thames on the ebb tide, their departure unnoticed except perhaps by a few friends, relatives, and curious onlookers" (39). John Smith does not appear a moment before he should. After Bartholomew Gosnold and Edward Maria Wingfield have been introduced as the "first movers" (34) of the proposed plantation. And though Horn relies heavily on Smith's writings, as all scholars do, he often takes Smith's assertions with a grain of salt, even acknowledging when his text indicates he suffered from delusions of grandeur, noting, for example, "that Smith should talk up the exploration of the Bay in such grandiose terms is hardly surprising. But there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Indians had an entirely different view of their encounters with the English. Smith's own account reveals how dependent the expedition was on local peoples for provisions and information" (96).

The Englishmen of the day come alive in ways that are rare in the current historiographical milieu. One learns of the colonists' battles with each other in excruciating detail; figurative descendants of the colonists cannot help but be discomfited by their all-too-human mean-spiritedness in their dealings with each other. Horn even asserts that the famous gunpowder accident suffered by Smith certainly was not, after all, an accident. The best chapter of the book is "Virginea Britannia," which crosses the Atlantic to look at events unfolding in London. Horn knows the seventeenth-century city and its men well. Readers can still smell the stink of damp clothes drying in taverns as men come in out of the snow and rain. Real men walk the streets. Horn proposes, for example, that "it is unlikely that Sir Thomas Smythe gave much thought to the plight of the poor as he left his house in Philpot Lane, in the heart of London's commercial district, and walked over to the old Royal Exchange, although he might very well have been pondering the fate of the colonists in Virginia" (132). Later, back in Jamestown, Horn offers an illuminating empathy for the settlers. It has been too easy for many scholars to assume that the English were as cheered as the Indians were devastated by Lord De La Warr's seemingly providential arrival, which prevented the colony from being abandoned and ending its English colonial chapter. Horn, however, sees the matter in a more realistic light, understanding clearly how much the colonists simply wanted to go home by that point. "Gates [who had just started out] was ordered to return to Jamestown forthwith and immediately headed back upriver to the utter dismay of his company, who dearly wished they had burnt the place down" (180). Horn makes the excellent point that the disastrous news coming

back to London from the colony may well have been what saved its life. The Spanish, always considering a quick raid to destroy the interlopers, learned what everyone in London learned about events there. It was therefore easy for them to decide not to bother.

The only discordant notes in the book are found in the treatment of certain subjects related to the indigenous, where the author is perhaps stretching too far. The further scholars are removed from their subjects in terms of time, culture, and intellectual habit, the easier it becomes to make assumptions and assertions. For example Horn brings up the old idea that Powhatan's brother (or cousin) Opechancanough may actually have been Don Lu's himself, and, though he acknowledges that most serious historians of Native America no longer give credence to the idea, he implies that he is inclined to believe it. Yet Horn then says that Powhatan was relieved when Captain Newport and some of the Englishmen sailed away, since the threat against his people was thereby reduced. If Opechancanough and Don Lu's were really one and the same, Opechancanough would have known that at all costs they must prevent the Europeans from leaving the site with their navigational knowledge and ability to bring untold numbers of others back to the same place. He would have known that Newport's plan to leave some settlers and then depart for a distant metropolis spelled disaster for the Indians.

The treatment of Pocahontas is likewise riddled with inconsistencies. Horn is loath to give up some old ideas regarding Indians, yet he knows that the scholarly literature quarrels with many of these same notions. He demonstrates remarkable patience for Smith's 1622 narrative of events involving the young Indian girl and offers his readers little critique of Smith's story. Later he accepts what is essentially Thomas Dale's story of her marriage as being unrelated to the political peace that was achieved in 1614. John Rolfe is sent to bargain with Powhatan and then, as if in an unconnected event, he asks for Pocahontas's hand in marriage. My own work is cited in connection with the assertion that "by the time Dale [and Rolfe] made the journey to confront Wahunsonacock, it seems that Pocahontas had made up her mind to live with the English 'who loved her,' to renounce her 'Country Idolatry,' and to marry Rolfe" (217). In fact I believe I proved that Rolfe's proposal to marry Pocahontas occurred at the peak of hostilities, when he himself acknowledged she was an unrepentant pagan. The offer's acceptance by Powhatan ended the war, and the following week Pocahontas converted, sealing the deal. The Indians were political players, not naive actors whose personal stories add spice to the narrative but little more.

Still, it little behooves those who may have approached these events and the evidence about them somewhat differently to insist on criticizing what is in essence an excellent work. Horn is trying to take an old historical tale and change it in ways that are in keeping with modern scholarship yet do not divorce it from the traditional telling. *A Land As God Made It* will reach many readers who have not previously been exposed to other scholarship on Native Americans, and Horn will carry many of them further than they otherwise would have gone. He is in effect trying to learn and teach a new language, one unknown to the vast majority of Americans, at the same time as he performs flawlessly in the language that he has already mastered. Such an effort is only to be praised.