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*A Tale both Old and New: Jamestown at
400. Rev. of The Jamestown Project, by
Karen Ordahl Kupperman...*

Reviewed by Laura Mielke

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A Tale Both Old and New: Jamestown at 400

Laura L. Mielke

The Jamestown Project. By Karen Ordahl Kupperman. New York: Harvard/Belknap, 2007. 388 pages. \$29.95 (cloth).

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). \$15.95 (paper).

Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Start of a New Nation. By David A. Price. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. Rpt., New York: Vintage, 2005. 305 pages. \$14.95 (paper).

Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat. By Paula Gunn Allen. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003. 366 pages. \$26.95 (cloth). \$15.95 (paper).

Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma. By Camilla Townsend. American Portraits. New York: Hill and Wang, 2004. 234 pages. \$25.00 (cloth). \$14.00 (paper).

Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown. By Helen C. Rountree. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005. 304 pages. \$29.95 (cloth). \$16.95 (paper).

Virginia's Jamestown 2007 agency has promoted the quadricentennial of Jamestown as "America's Anniversary" and embraced a goal of "showcas[ing] Virginia's unique role as the birthplace of modern America and the cradle of American democratic traditions, cultures,

ideologies and principles.” Most scholars of American Indian Studies and of early American history and culture are likely to ask whether we can or should describe the arrival of a small band of disputatious leaders and often inept colonists in the Chesapeake Bay as the advent of a modern democracy, especially considering the bloody history of those first few decades of colonization. A quick perusal of Jamestown 2007’s Web site shows that organizers have complicated the triumphal rhetoric surrounding the quadricentennial by sponsoring such “Signature Events” as an “American Indian Intertribal Festival,” an academic panel on the “African American Imprint on America,” and a “Forum on the Future of Democracy.” Even as the space shuttle Atlantis carried Jamestown mementoes on a recent trip to the International Space Station, more earthbound observers of the anniversary have reminded us that the Jamestown project spurred decades of violent warfare between Anglo colonists and Indian peoples and saw the arrival of captive Africans in 1619.¹

Publishers have responded to the Jamestown anniversary with a long list of titles, six of which I will review here.² These volumes, like this year’s events in Virginia, weave a complex tale both old and new. David A. Price, James Horn, and Karen Ordahl Kupperman identify Jamestown as a turning point for the British colonial project and as a point of origin for the United States of America. Such claims are not new and have never been made without controversy: beginning in the nineteenth century, the veneration of Jamestown—more specifically, the relationship between Pocahontas and John Smith—was forwarded by southerners as a corrective to the Yankee insistence that the United States was built upon Plymouth Rock. Paula Gunn Allen, Camilla Townsend, and Helen C. Rountree explicitly revisit the Jamestown experience from the standpoint of the Powhatan people. However cutting edge this emphasis on the Indian perspective may seem, the power of the Jamestown story has been

tied to the fascinating involvement of American Indians—especially Wahunsenacawh (a.k.a. Powhatan) and Matoaka (a.k.a. Pocahontas)—ever since Captain John Smith’s first publication on the colony in 1608.

The two approaches in these four-hundredth-anniversary volumes do not establish either of the “cockeyed, anachronistic, and overblown” narratives Jill Lepore identifies in other Jamestown anniversary books: the colony as either the source of the “American Dream” or the “American nightmare.” Authors attempting to reconstruct a seventeenth-century Powhatan viewpoint are nonetheless concerned with revising rather than erasing the description of Jamestown as an American point of origin. And those who analyze the innovations and eventual success of the colony call attention to the contributions of American Indians and of indentured Anglos and Africans. As Queen Elizabeth II noted during her May visit to Virginia, in 2007 we are able to “reflect more candidly on the Jamestown legacy.”³

Allen, Townsend, and Rountree all attempt to capture a Powhatan perspective in their works, but they settle on very different methods of doing so, as the style and tone, as well as scholarly apparatuses, of their books indicate. Allen, Professor Emerita of English and American Indian studies at UCLA, highlights Pocahontas’s “mixed-culture identity” and develops a narrative blending European with American Indian traditions, and biography with fiction (14). From the start, Allen reminds us that “Pocahontas” was a nickname the mischievous young woman earned; her given name was Matoaka; her medicine name was Amonute; and her English name, acquired through baptism and marriage to John Rolfe, was Rebecca Rolfe. As the book’s title indicates, these four monikers coexist with her four roles (four being a sacred number): Beloved Woman, or “shaman-priestess”; diplomat to the English settlers and leaders; a Powhatan spy among the same; and a trailblazing tobacco cultivator. Allen’s most important use of the

Powhatan perspective comes in her claim that Pocahontas was keenly aware of her position within the manito aki, or spirit realm, and that as a Beloved Woman, she experienced a Dream Vision that guided her people's response to the English colonists. According to Allen, the source of her authority was spiritual rather than hereditary, for Wahunsenacawh was only her metaphorical "father," her leader.

Allen's focus on the manito aki necessitates a mixed-culture narrative readily apparent in the chapter titles such as "Apowa / Dream Vision," "Manito Aki / Faerie," and "Apook / The Esteemed Weed"; the second half of each is not simply a translation of a Powhatan concept but the name for the Western equivalent. The English also recognized a manito aki: for them, it was the faerie realm. Allen includes an extended treatment of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight alongside multiple Algonquin oral traditions to illustrate the presence of a spirit world in the mythologies of the "Old" and the "New" worlds and to describe Pocahontas's sojourn to London as a Gawain-esque quest to faerie land. Allen's use of these oral traditions to document the "implicate order," by which she means "the subreality of energies before they take on shape or form as we recognize them" (94), literally requires a leap of faith on the part of the reader.⁴ It is a shame, then, that a few errors in her portrayal of the "explicate order"—references to John Winthrop preaching to the Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower, to Francis Crick as developing the double-helix DNA model, and to President Andrew Jackson ordering the forced removal of the Cherokee in 1824—might justify reader resistance to such an alternative history.

Allen's most important point—the one most likely to secure critics as well as fans of this innovative work—is that Pocahontas should not be viewed as either a traitor to her people or a victim of British colonial power. This Beloved Woman was always in charge, always aware of her spiritual role in a cosmic transformation time (accordingly, she knew she would be abducted

by Captain Samuel Argall and held for ransom, and she understood her death in England—which Allen claims was an assassination—as necessary). Through her relationship with Smith, her marriage to Rolfe, and their shared cultivation of sacred tobacco, Pocahontas “worked her powa . . . in a sacred act of world renewal” (212). And because the Beloved Woman “implant[ed] in their subconscious the spirit, the manito” (95), Americans should revere Jamestown as “the sacred center of the United States” (6). Here the quadricentennial becomes an occasion for celebrating what might best be described as the nation’s spiritual foundation.

In the bibliographic essay of her equally enchanting yet more traditional biography of Pocahontas, Camilla Townsend, associate professor of history at Rutgers, admits that the historical record on Pocahontas and Wahunsenacawh is rather slim and that historians “must therefore make judicious use of what we have, neither extrapolating too much from too little, nor giving up entirely on the project of hearing the Native American voice” (211). Townsend consults all existing seventeenth-century texts on Jamestown and English-Powhatan relations and then crafts a narrative intended to transport the reader across the historical and cultural divide. The opening sentences of Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma demonstrate Townsend’s movement between imagining Pocahontas’s perspective and reminding the reader of the limits of historical sources:

As it turned out, England was gray. Everything about it was gray—the stonework, the weathered wood, the filthy water slapping the docks. Pocahontas had long wondered what this country would be like. In Virginia she had seen beautiful books bound in red leather, her British husband’s embroidered doublets, weapons with bejeweled handles—all from England. But now from the deck of the ship she saw that the town of Plymouth

was simply gray. Whether she had time or energy to be disappointed, we will never know. (ix)

What we do know, according to Townsend, comes from existing documents and from historians and ethnohistorians' reconstruction of daily life in the period. For this reason her first two chapters provide such information as a Powhatan women's daily chores, Pocahontas's relative unimportance as one of Wahunsenacawh's many children by his many wives, and the long history of European colonial endeavors along the coast of North America prior to Jamestown.

Townsend couples her focus on cultural context with an attempt to answer a difficult question: Why didn't Wahunsenacawh wipe out the English in those early years when the colony suffered from the effects of drought, illness, and inept leadership? (Hence the Powhatan dilemma.) Rather than portray Wahunsenacawh as a leader of extraordinary power who, Hamlet-like, simply failed to act, Townsend envisions him as a skilled strategist only too aware of the technological advantage his enemy enjoyed. The events between 1607 and 1618 demonstrate his creativity and flexibility in countering the growing power of the English colony. Townsend also reassesses Pocahontas's conversion and marriage as complex acts of cultural accommodation. In this portrait, Pocahontas returns Rolfe's love while also observing the Algonquin practice of constructing alliances through marriage, and she accepts Christianity as complementing her Algonquin religious worldview. This focus on Pocahontas's assertive nature and cultural flexibility contributes to Townsend's rich account of Pocahontas's experiences in London in 1616–17. In her description of Ben Jonson's masque, The Vision of Delight, which Pocahontas watched at the English court in January, Townsend manages to align the reader with the Powhatan visitors; such images as dancers issuing from the belly of a monster and an allegorical Wonder reciting a poem remind us of the imaginative act it takes to understand seventeenth-

century England. Over the course of the biography, Townsend compels the reader to reimagine seventeenth-century life in Jamestown, London, and Werowocomoco alike.

Though Allen's and Townsend's books appeared in the two years prior to the publication of Helen C. Rountree's Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, in the opening pages Rountree states that "no one—including anyone from the modern Indian people—is trying to write about Jamestown from the native perspective" and that if she does not attempt to do just that "the 2007 commemoration literature might be overwhelmingly about 'heroes' who were also squatters" (xi, 6). Rountree, Professor Emerita of Anthropology at Old Dominion University, asserts in the final paragraph of her book that to write about Jamestown from an American Indian perspective, one must be an ethnohistorian trained in anthropology and history. Such pointed comments clarify Rountree's methodological approach but also serve as her response to Allen, who in Pocahontas declares that "Helen Rountree and [Pocahontas biographer] Frances Mossiker, who are impeccable in their documentation and solid academic grounding, unfortunately miss the basic worldview that characterizes Native thought and that distinguishes it from scholarly and popular modern thought" (173). Rountree upholds scholarly thought and method and appears to scold Allen: "It would be fascinating—to an anthropologist, at least—to know what went on behind the scenes in the Indian towns on the days when no European visitors came to call. But only so much of that behavior can be reconstructed without resorting to fiction. And this book is empathically not a work of fiction, as the endnotes prove" (xii). Importantly, Rountree solicited commentary on her scholarly manuscript from representatives of the Rappahannock and Nansemond Indian Tribes and dedicates the volume to "The Modern Indian Tribes of Virginia."

Rountree's ethnohistorical methodology does not preclude speculation about the Indians' motives or encourage readers to view Jamestown from the English perspective. Her use of

language to these very ends is one of the most noteworthy aspects of the book. She refers to Virginia as Tsenacomoco, the Powhatans as the “Real People” (a translation of their name for themselves), and the English as Tassantassas (the Powhatan word for “strangers”), Squatters, and other disparaging names. John Smith becomes Chawnzmit, an approximation of the Powhatan pronunciation of the Jamestown leader’s name. Throughout the text, Rountree refers by name to the seasonal periods of labor by which Powhatan life was structured (popanow, cattapeuk, cohattayough, nepinough, and taquitock), defining these periods in an appendix. Rountree does not use the word massacre when writing about Opechancanough’s 1622 coordinated assault on the various English settlements, though she does use it to describe one of the Squatters’ retributive attacks. Finally, Rountree peppers her narrative with interjections emphasizing the perspective of her Powhatan subjects: a passage on the unrealistic demands of the English includes Wahunsenacawh’s response—“The gall of these pipsqueaks!” (150)—and a section detailing English women’s fashion and domestic roles Pocahontas would take up during her captivity includes the remark “What a different world!” (160). This commentary, along with frequent references to the horrendous body odor of the Tassantassas (Powhatans bathed daily while the English did not), has a jarring effect on the reader. Rountree appears to use exclamation marks to call attention to—or perhaps to bracket—the imaginative leap the methodical ethnohistorian and her readers ultimately must take.

Less concerned with re-creating a Powhatan outlook than with tracing the impact of Jamestown on global politics and economics, Price, Horn, and Kupperman all identify the eventual success of the settlement as essential to the future of English colonialism. All three also praise John Smith as a visionary who best understand what would make Jamestown solvent. Love and Hate in Jamestown has the most narrative zip of the books reviewed here perhaps

because Price, a journalist, relies to a great extent on accounts of Jamestown by another talented storyteller, Smith, and most certainly because of the grandness of his claim that Jamestown “change[d] the course of history” and only survived because of “two extraordinary people, one a commoner and one a royal”: Smith and Pocahontas (3, 4). What Townsend portrays as Wahunsenacawh’s dilemma—whether or not to eradicate English settlements in the region—Price depicts as Wahunsenacawh’s folly: he simply did not recognize his ability to eradicate the annoying squatters. And the scavenging raids Smith led against local communities, criticized by Rountree as behavior that contradicted agreements between the Powhatans and the English, Price labels the actions of “not an inhumane man” (81). Price composes a portrait of the captain as a Machiavellian pragmatist who, surrounded by the inept and snobbish colonial leaders, emerges as the savior of the North American colonial project, the establishment of private property, and the appearance of representative government. Price does not provide a parallel portrait of Pocahontas or anything approaching a detailed or sympathetic account of the Powhatan people.

Having identified Smith as the hero of Jamestown, Price necessarily highlights Smith’s connection to the colonial project even after he left the shores of Virginia for good. In 1609, Smith was badly injured when his gunpowder bag ignited on his lap, and he returned to England for necessary medical treatment. That winter came “the Starving Time,” when the colonists, trapped in their fortifications with scant provisions, were driven to eating such delicacies as laundry starch and each other. Price calculates the mortality rate that winter as approximately 80 percent and declares, “it could have been avoided with astute leadership”—namely, Smith’s (129). Likewise, he stresses that “it was only now, with Smith absent from the scene, that English massacres of native civilians would begin,” further destabilizing the delicate confederacy Smith had forged with Wahunsenacawh (141). Back in London, Smith was the only one to

protest Argall's abduction of Pocahontas, a reaction Price labels "predictable" (152), and while his publications on North America won him recognition, his efforts to return to Virginia were unsuccessful. According to Price, Smith presciently promoted North America as a site of potential social mobility and unprecedented liberty, both of which would lead to economic success.

James Horn, O'Neill Director of the John D. Rockefeller Jr. Library at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, is less concerned with one individual's remarkable foresight (or lack thereof) than with the matrix of personalities in Jamestown and in London that determined the course of the colonial project. As a result, A Land as God Made It proves much more forgiving of tactical mistakes made by Smith's compatriots; for example, Horn explains that President Edward Wingfield and Christopher Newport were charged by the Virginia Company with exploring the vicinity for resources before expending much effort in fortification; that Jamestown was attacked while Newport was on such a mission and barely survived was neither the result of Wingfield's naïveté nor a vindication of Smith (as Price asserts) but a testimony to Wahunsenacawh's successful subterfuge and to the Virginia Company's evolving understanding of the project. In other words, the Smith of Horn's account is fallible. When he publicly manhandled Opechancanough in front of his people during a negotiation in 1609, Smith sacrificed what influence he had with Wahunsenacawh and Opechancanough and consequently his own authority within Jamestown. More significantly, Horn concludes that the foolish action "cast a bloody shadow over the colony for years to come" (125), as Opechancanough's memory of his mistreatment would lead to his efforts to eradicate the colony in the early 1620s.

Horn bookends A Land as God Made It with violent conflict in the Chesapeake area, reminding the reader that Opechancanough's coordinated attack on the Anglo colonists in the

Jamestown area in 1622 had historical precedent. In 1561, a Spanish group exploring the Chesapeake Bay took on board two Indians and returned to Spain with them. One of them, who took the name Don Luís de Velasco, traveled to Madrid and Mexico but always insisted on returning to his people to establish a Christian mission. Once there, however, Don Luís abandoned the Jesuit mission for a relative's village and eventually led an assault on the mission, killing all of the inhabitants save for one boy. The violent response of the Spanish, Horn notes, may have inspired the extension of the Powhatan kingdom under Wahunsenacawh in the interest of defense—a kingdom from which the Virginia Company hoped to “liberate” the local Indians. Certainly the mystery of the Lost Colony informed the English approach to the region (of the volumes reviewed here, Horn's provides the most extensive treatment of the influence the Lost Colony had on the Jamestown project). When the English and the Powhatans converged, both groups were well aware of the violence that colonial negotiation and exchange could inspire.

While Price and Horn identify Jamestown as an economic and political point of origin for the United States as we know it, they also note the cost of wide-scale agricultural production to indigenous inhabitants and to enslaved and indentured workers, plus the fact that the “representative democracy” that took root in Virginia did not serve these groups. Price specifically thanks Tim Hashaw, whose *The Birth of Black America* appeared earlier in 2007, for his work on the arrival of Africans in Jamestown in 1609. Horn briefly turns the spotlight on the adult servants who died at an astounding rate in the late 1610s and early 1620s and on the hundreds of destitute children who were forcibly transported from London to the colony in this period that they might serve as laborers. Having underscored these sacrifices, Horn concludes his account not with praise for Smith but with a tentative celebration of Jamestown's far-reaching effects. “At Jamestown,” he writes, “the peoples of America, Europe, and Africa first

encountered one another, lived and worked alongside each other, traded with and fought one another, survived and persisted, and in so doing began the long process—often contentious, sometimes tragic, but ultimately successful—by which together they shaped a new world and forged a new people” (290).

In The Jamestown Project, Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Julius Silver Professor of History at New York University, argues for Jamestown’s global significance as “the archetype of English colonization” (3). “This book,” she explains, “is an examination of the various kinds of experiences and backgrounds that came together in the Jamestown project to make this improbable survival—and the evolution of a successful archetype—possible” (11). For this reason, the first six of the book’s nine chapters detail the prehistory of the project, including England’s conflicts with Catholic Spain; Captain John Smith and other European adventurers’ forays into the Ottoman Empire; American Indians’ parallel travels eastward to Europe; the English commodification and consumption of the Americas; Europeans’ difficulties in mapping the New World and coping with extreme cold and drought in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; and preceding English colonial undertakings from Guiana to Newfoundland. Through this fascinating and meticulously researched contextualization of the Virginia Company’s venture, Kupperman confirms Price’s identification of Smith as having “[drawn] the true lessons of the Jamestown experience”: that success would come only as power was transferred to colonies and participants were allowed to labor for themselves as well as for the company and the crown (325). The Jamestown Project does not simply celebrate Smith as the Father of America, however; Kupperman’s Smith is also a representative sixteenth- and seventeenth-century border-crosser. The three groups Price and Horn locate in and around Jamestown—Europeans, Indians, and Africans—Kupperman follows back and forth across the

Atlantic. Smith's shrewd assessment of the Powhatans' power and his ability to negotiate with Wahunsenacawh were the result, in part, of his experience as a Turkish captive who adapted out of necessity. Just as Europeans' experience in the Ottoman Empire shaped their responses to the indigenes they encountered in North America, so too American Indians' meetings with Europeans and Africans on both sides of the Atlantic influenced their interactions with Anglo colonists.

The first decades of Jamestown's existence were indeed disastrous for the English, especially when measured in the loss of lives. Simply consider that in the 1619–21 period—long after the infamous winter of 1609–10 and just prior to the “massacre” orchestrated by Opechancanough—approximately three thousand Jamestown residents died. But in these decades, argues Kupperman, the Virginia Company identified the successful model for North American colonization: that of the plantation (as established in Ireland) rather than the factory (as established in the Ottoman Empire). That is, colonists would produce commodities through agricultural labor rather than through trade with Indians. In the innovations of the 1609 Virginia Company charter, especially the increased number of shares offered to the public, and in the company's slow transference of power to the colonists beginning in 1619, Kupperman sees the application of lessons learned in those deadly years and the establishment of Virginia as “a truly national venture” (243). Of course the crown would dissolve the company in 1624 in the aftermath of the 1622 attack and of subsequent charges that the colony had been mismanaged. But, Kupperman contends, Opechancanough sought to eradicate the colony because he recognized it was beginning to thrive. Price, Horn, and Kupperman detail for us the ways in which those involved in the Jamestown colony blundered, bled, and killed their way to economic and political stability. If one finds little to simply celebrate in this complicated narrative, surely

one does find much worth remembering—and as Allen, Townsend, and Rountree demonstrate in their own ways, remembering a complex history requires one to transform traditional scholarship through sympathetic acts of imagination.

Notes

¹ Jamestown 2007, “About Jamestown 2007” and “Signature Events,” America’s 400th Anniversary, <http://www.americasanniversary.com> (accessed September 23, 2007). On the NASA mission, see National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “A Piece of the Past Hitches a Ride on the Next Space Shuttle Mission,” NASA Newsroom, http://www.nasa.gov/home/hqnews/2007/jun/HQ_07131_Jamestown_artifact.html (accessed September 23, 2007).

² The extent of the quadricentennial bibliography can be illustrated by the fact that, as I was preparing this review, I became aware of three other relevant titles, including Tim Hashaw’s The Birth of Black America: The First African Americans and the Pursuit of Freedom at Jamestown (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2007).

³ Jill Lepore, “Our Town,” The New Yorker, April 2, 2007, 42. Queen Elizabeth II, “Text of The Queen’s Speech at the State Capitol in Richmond, Virginia, United States of America, 3 May 2007,” British Monarchy Media Centre, <http://www.qmmemorial.gov.uk/output/page5961.asp> (accessed September 23, 2007).

⁴ Allen continues, “[The implicate order] contrasts with what [physicist David] Bohm termed the explicate order, in which events, people, objects, even planets and galaxies, take on the guise human brains recognize and consciously interact with. In Algonquin terms, the implicate order Bohm details is hugely analogous to the world of the manito, the mystery that can be both force and being, wave-form or particle, identity or surmise. The explicate order, on the other hand, is rigid ‘reality,’ which defines objects large and small as fixed in nature or essential being” (94).