

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown. By Helen C. Rountree.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0ff9g2gc>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 29(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Heuvel, Lisa L.

Publication Date

2005-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

to one of the thorniest dilemmas in the study of Native American expressive culture: how to acknowledge individual expression within certain collectivist social contexts without insisting on the individualistic values so prized in the history of Western art.

Faculty appraising next year's textbook orders may wonder specifically how *North American Indian Art* stacks up against its very successful rival from Oxford University Press. Even in paperback, *Native North American Art* is a sumptuous volume with superb illustrations, many reproduced in color and at a scale that enhances their visual impact. The Thames and Hudson volume lacks some of the Oxford book's perks, which include an eight-page timeline printed in color, excellent diagrams, full-color maps of each region, and text sidebars in every chapter. A distinct advantage of the Berlo and Phillips handbook is its extensive introduction that considers an array of issues: Native American social structures and ethnic identities, cosmology and ontological concepts, spiritual practices, the roles of performance and display, and gender and individuality in historical and modern Native American art. Their text, written in a lyrical style, is illuminating in its interpretive depth. That said, Penney's *North American Indian Art* has merits uniquely its own. The most important of these is the fluid, dynamic approach to cultural systems of aesthetics described above; another is its shift of focus from broadly defined cultures to the nuances of individual expression within culture. One of the most notable differences between the Penney and the Berlo and Phillips texts is the handling of religion, worldviews, and spiritual beliefs. Whereas *Native North American Art* devotes much of the introduction and many subsequent discussions to religious dimensions of art, Penney's low-key approach distributes references to cosmology, shamanism, and spiritual beliefs throughout the text, explaining them in relation to specific works or traditions as required. He devotes equal or greater discussion in many instances to their social contexts and purposes. Many who are wary of the popular fascination with American Indian spirituality that students bring to the classroom, and conscious of the discomfort many Indian people feel about the dissemination of religious knowledge, may find Penney's restrained treatment of the subject the preferable choice.

Elizabeth A. Newsome

University of California, San Diego

Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown. By Helen C. Rountree. Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2005. 294 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

Cultural anthropologist Helen C. Rountree ranks as one of the foremost scholars of Virginia Indian history and culture, and her latest book, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown*, is dedicated to the modern Indian tribes of Virginia as "survivors descended from survivors." Written in anticipation of the four hundredth anniversary of the

first permanent English settlement in America, Rountree guides her readers toward a non-English perspective on that 1607 event and its implications. She constructs a cultural bridge based on thirty-five years of working with Virginia's Indian tribes and studying their past from an ethnohistorical perspective.

More than a triple biography of Virginia's most famous Powhatan Indians, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough* advances recent scholarship focused on the thriving "New" World Native cultures forever changed by European colonization. Professor emerita of anthropology at Old Dominion University, Rountree has thoroughly studied the existing colonial records of the Commonwealth, infusing that research with information on archaeology and ethnobotany in a series of books and publications. Her familiarity with Virginia Indian material culture and history enables Rountree to lay the groundwork for examining the Powhatan world within the twenty-first-century context of Native American studies.

Traditional Virginia history has been written by the privileged; however, new approaches to multiculturalism, nationhood, and the Atlantic World are altering the dominant culture's historical narrative for both scholars and general audiences. Recent publications focusing attention on Native perspectives include Sandra F. Waugaman and Danielle Moretti-Langholz's *We're Still Here: Contemporary Virginia Indians Tell Their Stories* (2000), Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (2002), David A. Price's *Love and Hate in Jamestown: John Smith, Pocahontas, and the Heart of a New Nation* (2003), Margaret Holmes Williamson's *Powhatan Lords of Life and Death: Command and Consent in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (2003), and Camilla Townsend's *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (2004).

Rountree herself has produced a series of seminal works on Virginia Indian tribes over the last twenty years, including *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture* (1989); *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries* (1990); *Powhatan Foreign Relations, 1500–1722*, which she edited (1993); *Eastern Shore Indians of Virginia and Maryland*, with Thomas E. Davidson (1997); and *Before and After Jamestown: Virginia's Powhatans and Their Predecessors*, with E. Randolph Turner III (2002).

In *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, Rountree deconstructs the historical narrative of early colonial Virginia: she deliberately avoids primary sources focusing on English motivations and cultural logic. Her supporting documentation reflects what Powhatans could have known and understood culturally about the strangers spreading over their homeland of Tsenacomoco, and how this knowledge could have motivated Native responses. As Rountree shows, the Powhatan world was eclipsed during the first half of the seventeenth century, a period within the life spans of three major Native figures: the paramount chief Wahunsenacawh (whose throne name "Powhatan" became a designation for tribes he ruled), his favorite daughter (best known as Pocahontas and later Rebecca Rolfe), and Pocahontas's uncle Opechancanough, who led his people through two unsuccessful but significant attempts to reclaim their homeland.

Rountree orients readers to the Virginia Algonquin landscape of four hundred years ago by using Powhatan Indian names and seasonal timelines

for her narrative and by eliminating markers that reflect English dominance. She doesn't identify the English as such, using a Powhatan word for *stranger* to describe the "Tassantassas" along with other designations (i.e., aliens or foreigners) that keep the focus on the Native world and do not ascribe cultural superiority. These perceptual and linguistic shifts are both informative and deliberately disorienting; they provide the groundwork for an essentially Powhatan history of the first half of the seventeenth century. Using only facts and events that Natives could possibly have been aware of, she supports her findings with extensive endnotes from the contemporary writings of colonists John Smith, William Strachey, and other observers who experienced the Powhatan world firsthand. As another refinement, Rountree prioritizes those accounts written soon after events they described, on the basis that early narratives are more accurate than those of a later period.

Determining what and how the leading Native rulers understood and how they could use that information in a Native context would be a daunting task for a scholar less versed in linguistics, existing records, and archaeological evidence. For Rountree, these are not limitations but a conceptual framework for situating readers in a non-stereotypical Powhatan world, where true cultural wars were waged four hundred years ago. Among the familiar assumptions she explores is the extent of the diplomatic role that a Powhatan girl-child—even the ruler's favorite—would have realistically been assigned; in the process she explodes the mythologization of Pocahontas as the savior of the English colony that began in the 1830s. Rountree introduces a more genuine Powhatan world orientation by assigning Native values and norms to historical events and major personages. John Smith is referred to as "Chawnzmit," a likely Powhatan pronunciation of his name. To Rountree, Smith's actions were probably viewed by Powhatan and the Real People as sometimes friendly, but often arrogant: Powhatan Indian conflicts with early colonial leaders foreshadowed intrigues and warfare that escalated to the Great Assaults of 1622 and 1644 against the English. Led by Opechancanough, the 1644 attack incurred both reprisals and his capture. Then about a century old, he was later shot in the back as a Jamestown prisoner, and the last massive Native resistance ended with him. By the mid-seventeenth century, fewer and fewer of the younger Powhatan generations remembered the "golden age" predating colonization.

Through Rountree's accessible writing style, readers may see the Powhatans as flesh-and-blood people whose leaders Powhatan and Opechancanough deserve serious attention as senior diplomats and military commanders facing a growing threat to their people's way of life. Like Pocahontas, they represent the depth and complexity of Powhatan culture in ways that have often been neglected or misunderstood. Rountree's expertise in Native studies expands Virginia colonial history and the Powhatan world of Tsenacomoco, and her use of linguistics demonstrates that field's significance as a valid portal to the past, along with archaeology. However, *Pocahontas*, *Powhatan*, *Opechancanough's* greater value lies in showing how different history might appear to be from the perspective of Virginia's original inhabitants and how a non-Native scholar approaches that interpretive challenge, including prior review of her

manuscript by representatives of Virginia's Rappahannock and Nansemond Indian tribes. Building on multicultural collaborations may be the next stage of scholarship for the early American narrative, reaching past time-honored legends and ideologies to bring our national creation story into balance.

Lisa L. Hewel

The College of William and Mary

Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park. By Peter Nabokov and Lawrence Loendorf. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. 400 pages. \$39.95 cloth.

Try as they might, neither the National Park Service (NPS) nor American Indian tribes can avoid working with one another. Bound together by peculiar historical circumstances and varying commitments to the same prominent places, the NPS and many American Indian tribes have formed myriad relationships—frequently, challenging and complex relationships—all over the American West. To understand this history, one must first recognize that national parks usually were carved out of Indian Country with little or no acknowledgment of an enduring tribal presence. In the West, the NPS typically claimed places of especial grandeur, environmental distinctiveness, and power—some of the very same places that loomed large in the worlds and worldviews of American Indian communities, places like the Grand Canyon, Yosemite Valley, Chaco Canyon, Glacier National Park, Crater Lake, Mount Rainier, and many others. Early park boosters, guided by romanticist notions of primordial nature that were fundamentally inextricable from the larger colonial project, sought to carve out strictly natural spaces from inhabited places. From the first moments of park creation, these places became playgrounds of privilege, federally managed in such a way that they might cater to the predilections of America's urban elites. While such management nominally "protected" tribal lands and resources in museum-like stasis, Indian access eroded proportionately. Residence on these lands was typically curtailed or prohibited. Religious and ceremonial uses, plant-gathering traditions, and other place-bound practices often persisted clandestinely, or with unprecedented scrutiny and regulation, if they persisted at all. In recent years, a wave of federal laws and policies have emerged—the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and others—and tribes are now able to reassert historical claims on park lands and resources, albeit in ways that tend to be symbolic and commemorative but do relatively little to tangibly "restore a presence." Nonetheless, tribes have gained modest leverage as America continues its long-standing debate regarding the roles of its national parks and the nature of these parks' relationships with resident peoples.

As eminent ethnohistorian Peter Nabokov and seasoned archaeologist Lawrence Loendorf attest in their book, *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park*, Yellowstone National Park stands out