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John Smith and His Critics: A Chapter In Colonial Historiography

By JARVIS M. MORSE

Nearly eighty years ago John Gorham Palfrey confessed that he was haunted by incredulity respecting some of the adventures of Captain John Smith. Inasmuch as the most remarkable of these occurrences, divers skirmishes, shipwrecks, and duels with Turks, had taken place in the eastern hemisphere, the eminent New England historian did not examine them at length.¹ He raised questions for others to answer, and by so doing stimulated an academic controversy which has extended to every event in Smith's life and to most of his writings. Commentaries on the latter, indeed, now bulk larger than the originals, so that the pathway to a fresh appraisal must be hewn through a forest of criticism. The ascertainable and the credible facts in the captain's career have recently been set forth with understanding and discrimination,² but much remains to be said in regard to Smith as a historian.

Unfortunately a good deal of the early criticism was confined to petty details like the Pocahontas story, so that more important considerations became obscured. The historical writings of Captain John Smith were conceived in an expansive spirit, for the purpose of presenting a broad view of British achievements in the western hemisphere. Smith undertook for America what Hakluyt and Purchas had projected for the world at large, the compilation of a complete account of exploration and colonial settlement. It was a noble ambition, under the quickening influence of which he wrote untiringly to the year of his death. If the finished product was marred by inaccuracies and lacked literary merit, it nevertheless stood as an accomplishment not to be sur-

¹ J. G. Palfrey, *History of New England* (Boston, 1858), I, 89-92.

² J. G. Fletcher, *John Smith—Also Pocahontas* (New York, 1928).

passed for many years.³ Seventeenth century British America produced a host of *Briefe Relations*, small tracts describing limited geographical areas or narrating events over a period of a few years, but very little history written in the grand manner. No English or colonial work as comprehensive as Smith's appeared until John Ogilby's *America* of 1671.⁴ This consideration has been overlooked by most of his defenders as well as his critics.

At least two of Smith's most earnest partisans, William Wirt Henry and Charles Poindexter, were Virginians whose defense of their hero both as a historian and a colonizer was animated in part by a conviction that certain New Englanders had framed a conspiracy to discredit the founder of the Old Dominion. There was some justification for this belief, although the wrong man was held to be the instigator of the plot. Both Henry and Poindexter felt that Charles Deane was chiefly responsible for this northern assault on southern honor, because of the notes accompanying his edition of Edward Maria Wingfield's *A Discourse of Virginia*, and of Smith's *True Relation*.⁵ These notes, however, representing the unbiased judgment of an experienced antiquarian, should have been regarded as but a petty skirmish compared to the frontal attack made by Henry Adams through an article in the *North American Review* for January, 1867.⁶

Adams assaulted Smith at two or three especially vulnerable points around which, consequently, most of the following

³ Smith's historical works listed according to the chronology of the events treated are as follows: *The True Travels* (1629), chs. I-XX of which deal with the author's life before 1606; *The Generall Historie Of Virginia, New England, etc.* (1624), in which was included, with some revision, *A Map of Virginia* (1612) and its companion piece of the same year, *The Proceedings Of The English Colonie in Virginia, A Description of New-England* (1616) and *New Englands Trials* (1620 and 1622); then the latter part of *The True Travels*, chs. XXI-XXVIII continuing the *Generall Historie* to 1629; and *Advertisements For The Unexperienced Planters of New-England* (1631). *A True Relation of . . . Virginia* (1608), stands by itself, not having been incorporated into any of the later works.

⁴ Continentals were more forward in the writing of general American history; note for instance *L'Histoire du Nouveau Monde* (Dutch edition 1625, Latin 1633, and French 1640) by Jean de Laet, the *Description Générale de L'Amérique* (1643) by Pierre D'Avity, and the earlier works on Spanish America by Acosta, Las Casas, Gomara, Oviedo, etc.

⁵ Deane's edition of Wingfield's *Discourse* appeared in 1860, and of the *True Relation* in 1866. His mildly critical comments on Smith, with particular reference to the Pocahontas story, may be found in the prefaces to both publications and in the footnotes to pp. 38-40 of the latter.

⁶ Reprinted in H. Adams, *Historical Essays* (New York, 1891).

encounters were waged. In brief, Adams reinforced Deane's criticism regarding the famous Pocahontas story—that charming little incident explaining Smith's release from the Indians in January, 1608—an account of which appears in the *Generall Historie* but not in the *True Relation*. He overstepped the bounds of accuracy, however, in holding that the rescue was contrary to Indian customs and to the known facts of colonial history. The releasing of captives was common among some native tribes, especially in connection with adoption practices, and similar commutations of the death sentence can be found to have occurred both before and after the one in question.⁷ Adams also made two broad charges, that Smith was incurably vain as witnessed by the whole character of his writings, and that he was incompetent as an official, since after his recall from Virginia in 1609 he was not given further employment in America by the London Company nor long entrusted with responsibility by any other body of men interested in settling the New World. Largely around these three propositions, the precise statement of which has varied from time to time, has the Smith controversy been waged to the present. With the captain's merits as a colonial founder we are not here concerned, but rather with his quality as a historian.

It is regrettable that the value of a historical work be assumed to depend, as in Smith's case, on such an irrelevant factor as egotism, for a vain author may be capable of recording facts with considerable accuracy. In this respect it must be said that Henry Adams was a worse offender than the subject of his criticism, for Smith had accomplished much to be proud of whereas his attacker set out, with malice of forethought, to expose him solely for the purpose of gaining notoriety. The article which Adams contributed to the *North American Review* was his first venture in the field of historical criticism, and one which he made at the suggestion of Palfrey, who is reputed to have said, furthermore, that a stone thrown at Smith would be as likely to break as much glass as a missile heaved in any other direction.⁸ The belief

⁷ See F. W. Hodge, *Handbook of American Indians* (Washington, 1907-1910), I, 863, and Fletcher, *John Smith*, 127-128.

⁸ *The Education of Henry Adams* (Boston, 1927), 222; J. T. Adams *Henry Adams* (New York, 1923), 103, 110.

in a New England conspiracy against the Virginia captain is hence explained by the appearance in the lists at about the same time of Palfrey, Deane, and Adams, and whatever the motives of Palfrey and Deane, it seems clear that Adam's at least were selfish and ignoble.⁹

But it would be misleading to press further this sectional alignment; after 1867 increasing numbers of Smith critics appeared without regard to geography. The next to make an attack was Edward D. Neill who brought out in 1869 his *History of the Virginia Company of London*, an admirable study for its time though it has been superseded by the work of Susan M. Kingsbury. His investigation of the London Company led him to endorse a charge which had been voiced in Smith's lifetime—that the doughty captain had written too much and done too little. Most of the official records which Neill used, however, were for the late years of the company, 1619 to 1624, and whereas Smith's share in the business of the concern during those years was not an important one, his earlier activities should not have been judged from that point of view.¹⁰ Neill did not give sufficiently thorough proof, either in this publication or a subsequent one, *The English Colonization of America*, for his general statement that Smith had done little in Virginia; he ventured instead broad assertions, that the captain wrote as a gascon and a beggar, and always appeared in the attitude of one craving recognition and remuneration for alleged services.¹¹ He was apparently fond of sweeping and condemnatory adjectives, the use of which somewhat glossed over a lack of organization and interpretation. To him Captain Argall was bold and unscrupulous, Governor Harvey was rough, and Smith was quick-witted, bold and unscrupulous.¹² He also asserted that the *Generall Histoire* contradicted the *True Relation* in regard to the Pocahontas story, but this is an inaccurate use of terms.

⁹ In his subsequent literary career Adams took considerable pleasure in publishing criticisms. See W. C. Ford, *Letters of Henry Adams* (New York, 1930), 194, 210, 220, 260, 286, 301.

¹⁰ Smith's minor activities may be followed in S. M. Kingsburg, *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (Washington, 1906-), I, 460, 472-474, 477, 489-490, 535, 616; II, 27, 112, 233, 362.

¹¹ E. D. Neill, *Virginia Company of London* (Albany, 1869), 211 n.

¹² *Ibid.*, 85; *English Colonization of America* (London, 1871), 17, 70, 318.

Neill's major criticism, that Smith wrote too much about himself, is justifiable to some extent but it lacks weight because it was founded in part on records not pertinent to the question and in part on contemporary accounts of Jamestown written by Smith's enemies. A few years later Moses Coit Tyler restated Neill's general conclusions. This capable literary historian was bothered by the seventeenth century adventurer's vain and blustering nature, yet he subscribed to a favorable opinion on some points, holding that in spite of irascibility and egotism Smith had a real perception of the significance of colonial enterprise, and a grasp of the means necessary to attain success.¹³

A more elaborate study of this controversial subject was undertaken by Charles Dudley Warner, the Connecticut newspaper editor and novelist, for his full length biography of Smith which appeared in 1881. Though marred in spots by an air of forced levity this work still ranks as one of the best in the field. Some of Warner's strictures, when lifted from their context, appear to be sharply condemnatory, but the biography as a whole presents a fair picture of a great man who had many faults. Warner was amused rather than annoyed by Smith's frequent exaggerations, and particularly by the fact that he seemed to have a peculiar memory which grew stronger and more minute in detail the further he was removed in point of time from the events described.¹⁴ There is some merit in the charge, and if most of Warner's other criticisms seem to have been phrased with a view to the sale of an entertaining biography, the author may be pardoned; he was essentially a literary man, hence the temperateness of his historical judgment is the more praiseworthy. Smith, he concluded, "had a habit of accurate observation, as his maps show, and this trait gives to his statements and descriptions, when his own reputation is not concerned, a value beyond that of most contemporary travelers."¹⁵ Warner and Tyler, literati, had a more realistic conception of Smith's career than had Adams or Neill, historians, of either his career or his writings.

The piling up of unfavorable criticism naturally led to a reaction, in which the leading part was taken by William

¹³ M. C. Tyler, *A History of American Literature* (New York, 1878), I, 37-38.

¹⁴ C. D. Warner, *Captain John Smith*, in the 1904 edition of *Warner's Works*, VI, 284, 310, 353.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, VI, 477.

Wirt Henry. This self-trained historian, a grandson of Patrick Henry, delivered in 1882 an address on Smith, which was published the same year by the Virginia Historical Society.¹⁶ He went over the familiar ground of the Pocahontas story, emphasizing the point that the *True Relation*, in which the tale does not appear, was an abridged account taken from a manuscript since lost, and in reconciling this work with the *Generall Historie* he added a distinctive feature to the historical criticism of Smith's writings. In comparing parallel passages in the publications of 1608, 1612, and 1624, he demonstrated with considerable ingenuity that the surplus material in the last work could have been in the manuscripts from which the earlier editions were taken, and was perhaps omitted by the printer or some editor other than Smith. Or conversely stated, the new passages in the *Generall Historie* could be reinserted in either the *Proceedings* or the *True Relation* without destroying either their sense or textual continuity. Though not convincing in every case the arguments were plausible, and they cannot be refuted without the manuscripts, which were probably discarded by the printers.

Henry also stressed the fact that much of the prevailing criticism was founded on a false premise—an implicit assumption that Smith's accounts were unreliable whereas the other contemporary narratives of the early days at Jamestown might be accepted at face value. It should have been evident from the beginning, he remarked, that whereas Smith had reasons for censuring Wingfield the latter had fully as much cause to malign Smith. The effect of this wholesome corrective was unfortunately lessened by the conclusion of Henry's address, a eulogy of Smith and Pocahontas savoring too much of localism and hero worship.¹⁷

Two years after the publication of Henry's spirited defense appeared the Edward Arber edition of Smith's complete works, an eleven-hundred page book revealing its compiler as an enthusiastic partisan. "Inasmuch, therefore," he declared in the preface, "as wherever we can check Smith, we find him both modest and accurate; we are led to think him so, where no check is possible."¹⁸ This statement would have

¹⁶ W. W. Henry, "The Early Settlement of Virginia," *Virginia Historical Society Proceedings* (1882), 10-63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46-63.

¹⁸ E. Arber, *Capt. John Smith . . . Works, 1608-1631* (Birmingham, 1884), xi-xii.

been more convincing to an impartial student had the editor frankly disclosed the extent to which Smith cannot be checked, and had he then within the limits of possible corroboration applied more exacting tests. In general, Arber collated Smith's various publications with each other but not to any great degree with independent accounts, either contemporary or modern.

Arber must also be held responsible for a misapprehension, still current, concerning the authenticity of Smith's adventures in southeastern Europe. Arber realized that some of these happenings seemed to be verified by a narrative attributed to Francisco Ferneza, an Italian secretary to Sigismund Bathor, Prince of Transylvania. At least there was in the 1625 edition of Purchas' *Pilgrimes* a short account of the adventures of Captain Smith as "written in a Book intituled, The Warres of *Transilvania*, *Wallachi*, and *Moldavia*, written by *Francisco Ferneza*."¹⁹ Unhappily for this bit of independent authority it seems to depend wholly on Smith. No one has ever found the book in question, nor uncovered any other reference to its author. But Arber was not troubled by any doubt in the matter. Whatever question there may be about the manuscript from which this account was taken, he asserted, Purchas had it in his hands about 1623 or 1624.²⁰ Here again we have only Smith as the authority. Purchas did not state that he had used the manuscript or translated it from Italian into English; he merely noted that the events included in the *Pilgrimes* were written in a book. We may never learn whether he saw the original or whether the information derived from such a work, if it ever existed, was passed on to him by an interested party. In any event the supposition that Purchas once had such an account in hand, and that he personally translated it, rests solely on a marginal reference in Smith's *True Travels*.²¹

In this connection Arber further averred that a Spanish scholar, Pascual Gayangos, had discovered a Spanish translation of Ferneza, but if the Señor actually saw such a publication he did not reveal its hiding place, hence there has not yet been made available to scholars, vague claims to the con-

¹⁹ S. Purchas, *His Pilgrimes* (London, 1625), pt. 2, bk. 8, ch. XI, p. 1363.

²⁰ Arber, *Smith's Works*, xxii-xxlii.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 852.

trary notwithstanding, an independent source on this part of the *True Travels*.²² Speculation as to the veracity of the latter presents an interesting problem in itself, but one that is beside the point for those concerned with Smith's writings on America. If the Transylvania adventures are partly fictitious, as seems to be the case, the truthfulness of the captain's colonial works is not necessarily impugned thereby. It does not follow that because a witness garbles evidence regarding one set of facts that his testimony respecting another must hence be deemed false.²³ Pending the discovery of an independent authority, American scholars may well suspend judgment on the Rumanian phase of Smith's life, and they should in particular refuse to permit those geographically remote and bizarre episodes to influence their opinion on his other writings.²⁴

The most caustic review of Smith's career at Jamestown appeared in 1890 by way of trenchant comments scattered through both volumes of Alexander Brown's monumental work, *The Genesis of the United States*. This authority on the first two decades of Virginian history did not disguise the fact that he disliked Smith and that he considered the captain's writings incorrect, unjust and ungenerous. At the same time he disarmed charges of bias by making the *Genesis* a most scholarly appearing work, fully documented and annotated. No objection can be raised against his stressing the fact that very little information about Smith's life can be found outside of the latter's own writings, and that the captain was apparently incapable of presenting an accurate account of events in which his personal reputation was involved.

²² *Ibid.*, xxiii. Pascual Gayangos y Arce (1809-1897), was an authority on oriental languages and Mohammedan history, once connected with the British Museum as a bibliographer.

²³ J. H. Wigmore, *The Principles of Judicial Proof* (Boston, 1913), 91.

²⁴ The fiction of this independent source was perpetuated by John Fiske, the popular lecturer, who gave the Arber suggestion as if it were his own in *Old Virginia and Her Neighbors* (Boston, 1900), I, 90 and n. Smith's account of the Transylvanian war had been exhaustively reviewed in 1890 by a Hungarian scholar, Lewis L. Kropf, in the London literary and antiquarian journal, *Notes and Queries*, 1-2, 41-43, 102-104, 161-162, 223-224, 281-282 (Volume for January-June 1890). Fiske paid no regard to this article though attention was called to it in the review of the first (1897) edition of *Old Virginia* in the *American Historical Review*, III, 737-738 (July, 1898). Kropf concluded that the Rumanian adventure was a pseudo-historical romance, and that Smith probably had not been at all to the Southeast of Europe. The present writer is of the opinion that Smith did visit the region but that his experiences there were embroidered when published from memory some twenty years after the event.

But a demurrer may be entered against one or two other charges.

Brown noted that when Smith revised the *Proceedings of the English Colonie in Virginia* of 1612 for inclusion in his *Generall Historie* of 1624, he omitted three thousand words from the earlier work and added sixteen thousand new ones. These extensive alterations, further averred the author of the *Genesis*, were made for the purpose of magnifying the captain's importance.²⁵ Brown supported the latter conclusion by a single illustration relating to the capture of a certain Indian chieftain, thus conveying an impression that all the other editorial changes were of the same sort. Such is not the case. A more detailed statement of the results obtained by collating the *Proceedings* with Book III of the *Generall Historie* will invalidate Brown's conclusion. Omitting stanzas of poetry, which were evidently introduced into the later work to lend a philosophic tone to the rude tale of pioneering in the American wilderness, and minor variations in adjectives and adverbs, there come to light about seventy editorial changes of some consequences. Fully half of these do not in any way affect Smith's reputation. Some are alterations in descriptive detail, having to do with the navigability of rivers, the size of Indian towns, and the equipment used on exploring trips.²⁶ Several changes give more credit to the work of other men in the colony, and others directly lessen the claims previously made for Smith's accomplishments.²⁷ When editing the *Proceedings*, in short, Smith made some changes which glorified himself, some which detracted from his renown, and many others which concerned his personal career not at all.

Alexander Brown's definition of history rather than his personal dislike of Smith was the cause of another stricture on the latter's work. He dismissed in a sentence the *Map of*

²⁵ A. Brown, *The Genesis of the United States* (New York, 1890), II, 599-600.

²⁶ For example: greater detail on use of blue beads, 406; size of barge for exploring trips increased, 413; width of Potomac given more accurately, 417; additional place names given, 423-424.

²⁷ More credit given a surgeon, 392; less criticism against Capt. Martin, 408, 411; nearness of South Sea questioned, 420; larger force went with Smith to brave the Indians, 454; pigs did not increase as fast as previously claimed, 471; starving time more severe, 472; praise for Percy, 476; less ground ready for planting, 483. These citations are to passages in the *Generall Historie*; the corresponding paragraphs in the *Proceedings* can easily be found from Arber's marginal references.

Virginia, which was published with the *Proceedings* of 1612, saying that it was chiefly description and hence needed no review.²⁸ This judgment should be brought into harmony with the changing concept of history which has recently led scholars to pay greater attention to economic and social factors. Smith's account of the physiography of eastern Virginia, of the rivers, forests, products of the soil, of the Indian tribes and their customs, forms a record which is valuable now, and was essential to seventeenth century statesmen, for an understanding of colonial development. Dr. J. Franklin Jameson emphasized the customary distinction between history and historical material when he declared that Smith wrote but two strictly historical works, the *True Relation* and the *Generall Historie*, his other productions being mostly of a descriptive character, and that in the latter work what was historical was not Smith's and what was his was not historical.²⁹ This limitation likewise proceeds from the school of thought which regards history as past politics, and it should be modified by the consideration suggested above.

An interesting apologia built largely around the Pocahontas incident appeared in 1893 from the pen of Charles Poindexter, of the Virginia State Library staff. He maintained, with reason, that Smith's release from the Indians in 1608 is not only easily explicable on the basis of the traditional story but is hardly understandable on any other ground.³⁰ He also maintained that the episode does not support the charge of vanity frequently made against the captain, inasmuch as it was told very briefly, in six lines at the most, and that it was moreover an event of such a character as in no way to magnify his reputation for prowess.³¹ Some of the librarian's other comments were less well founded, especially his assumption that the *Generall Historie* must be accurate because it was dedicated to a court lady, the Duchess of Richmond. He also submerged intelligent criticism in a eulogy of Captain Smith as the founder of Virginia.

Since Poindexter's time a more judicial atmosphere has surrounded the Smithiana, few critics having approached

²⁸ A. Brown, *Genesis*, II, 597.

²⁹ J. F. Jameson, *The History of Historical Writing in America* (New York, 1891), 7, 11.

³⁰ C. Poindexter, *Captain John Smith and His Critics* (Richmond, 1893), 38.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

the subject in an attitude either openly hostile or unreservedly apologetic. Justin Winsor's work, though it antedates Poin-dexter's, is an excellent case in point. This indefatigable collector of documents bearing on early American history had no particular axe to grind, but in bibliographical notes accompanying essays on Virginia and New England he pointed out specific virtues in Smith's writings. He noted, for instance, that the latter's account of voyages to New England between 1611 and 1614 was more accurate than that found in some other contemporary works, for example in the anonymous *Briefe Relation* of 1622, and that the captain's writings on Virginia, in spite of minor defects, were not surpassed for nearly a century.⁸²

In 1910 an English scholar, Mr. Arthur G. Bradley, re-edited Arber's valuable collection of Smith's works. He did not go beyond his predecessor in the matter of textual criticism, but he did pronounce a summary opinion which can hardly be improved upon. "Considering the period, however, at which Smith lived," he wrote, "the nations against or with whom he served, there is little or nothing on the face of his narrative to strain the credulity of anyone with a tolerable grasp of history and social progress."⁸³ This statement suggests the most tenable position that can be taken on Smith as a historian, that is, he accurately portrayed the spirit of his times though he often erred in conveying the exact letter.

The biography by Mr. E. K. Chatterton, which alone of recent works merits the label of apologia, adds little to the subject which could not have been written before the days of Palfrey and Deane.⁸⁴ A vastly superior book is that by Mr. John G. Fletcher, one written in popular style yet based on careful research, critical in tone but not iconoclastic.⁸⁵ In 1930 Mr. Fletcher supplied introductory notes for the Rivington & Hooper reprint of the *True Travels*, wherein he emphasized the opinion previously expressed by Bradley.

⁸² J. Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America* (Boston, 1884), III, 164-165, 193. The next comprehensive history of Virginia was Robert Beverley's which appeared in 1705.

⁸³ A. G. Bradley, *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith* (Edinburgh, 1910), iii. This opinion coincided with the views expressed more at length in his biography, *Captain John Smith* (London, 1905), written for the *English Men of Action* series.

⁸⁴ E. K. Chatterton, *Captain John Smith* (New York, 1927).

⁸⁵ J. G. Fletcher, *John Smith—Also Pocahontas* (New York, 1928). It is to be regretted that Mr. Fletcher did not write more fully on the latter part of Smith's life, from 1609 to his death.

It may be taken for granted, he declared, that Smith experienced all he said he did, the only question being whether he experienced it in exactly the same manner as he later set down. People of his type and training, he added, do not generally recite adventures for the mere sake of telling them; at most they modify or suppress some part of what has been a true experience.³⁶

In striving to answer this crucial question, as to whether Smith reported true experiences with sufficient fidelity to entitle his work to rank as history, most commentators have scrutinized his narrative to the neglect of his exposition. Too much effort has been expended trying to prove whether the Pocahontas incident did or did not occur,³⁷ whether Smith was prisoner in the winter of 1607-1608 only a month or six weeks, and whether from a certain foraging expedition he

³⁶ *The True Travels* (New York, 1930), vii-viii. In bibliographical notes to the same work, 74-79, Professor Lawrence C. Wroth, of the John Carter Brown Library, also took up the question of Smith's veracity. With refreshing frankness he called attention to the damaging evidence unearthed by Kropf, but he concluded in spite thereof that the events chronicled in the *Travels* were not inherently improbable. He reminded us that the latter narrative was not challenged in the seventeenth century except for the unproved doubt raised by Thomas Fuller in his *Worthies of England* (London, 1662). Professor Wroth also threw new light on contemporary opinion of Smith by showing that many of the persons who contributed complimentary verses to his publications were men of good standing in seventeenth century society.

³⁷ So much has been made of this incident, unimportant though it is, that the evidence in the case should be summarized. The traditional story is so familiar as to need little explanation. In the first week of January, 1608, Smith was about to be put to death by the Indians when Powhatan's daughter intervened to save his life. (Arber, *Smith's Works*, 400). As the tale comes to us it is a one witness story. Smith was the only white man present, and the Indians, even Pocahontas, left no account. Smith alone gives the evidence. Was anyone else, though not present at Werowocomoco on that occasion, in a position to know the facts? For the first years of Jamestown we have three important records other than Smith's, those by Wingfield, Ralph Hamor, and William Strachey. None of these mention the story, thus opposing an argument of silence against the incident. None of these writers, however, could have known of it unless enlightened by Smith or some Indian. If the latter was not done the omission needs no further comment. If the story did reach any of the Jamestown colonists at first hand, does the absence of any reference to it constitute a strong point against Smith? Probably not. Ralph Hamor, who wrote much about the later life of Pocahontas, began his discourse in 1610 and hence had no occasion to include the story except as a digression. Strachey, likewise, was not an actual observer of events in the colony until the spring of 1610. Hence only Wingfield's silence appears to be of moment, and it also is explicable. Wingfield had been deposed from the presidency of the Jamestown council, Smith had taken his place, and on another occasion he had been sued by Smith for slander, and fined heavily. If he knew of the story Wingfield had good personal reasons for omitting a tale which would have cast a romantic glamor around his rival. His discourse, furthermore, was composed from memory, so that it cannot be considered infallible in general, and can be shown to be inaccurate in some details. Thus the argument of silence does not overturn the positive evidence given by Smith. Whatever mental reservations one may have as to the probability of the incident, by no sound application of the laws of historical testimony can it be disproved, save by the appearance of contrary evidence yet undiscovered.

brought back to Jamestown only two hundred and seventy-nine bushels of corn or four hundred and seventy-nine bushels and also two hundred pounds of deer suet.³⁸ The *Generall Historie* contains a good deal of material similar to the Pocahontas story, consisting of additional detail on Indian encounters of 1608-1609.³⁹ As these episodes seem to come into being only after their narrator was many years removed from the field of action, he has been ridiculed for possessing a "progressive memory." Psychologically speaking, however, such incidents can readily be brought to mind a long time after the event since they are based on visual recollection, sight being the most reliable of the senses.⁴⁰ Furthermore, some of the apparent additions, according to W. W. Henry's theory, may be replacements of material omitted from earlier publications.

Although it would be possible to test John Smith's narratives by a careful collation with every other known source, his value as an American historian can be estimated by a much less exhaustive procedure. Had he written nothing but the brief descriptive treatises on Virginia and New England his fame would be secure. The former work is superior in some respects to Thomas Hariot's *Briefe and True Report* (London, 1588), which has been accepted as a classic account of the region a little to the south of Jamestown. Smith was as objective as Hariot in evaluating natural resources, and he wrote more fully than the latter concerning the Indians, their numbers, homes, customs and government. In remarking on the presence of valuable metals he was discreet, not holding out promise of great wealth to be gained from mines as did most writers of tracts promoting colonization. The map which accompanied his prose description found its way into several compilations on the New World, notably those by Purchas and Theodore De Bry, and was superseded as the best available chart only in the second quarter of the following century.⁴¹

³⁸ Arber, *Smith's Works*, 395, 463.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 424-436, 430-432, 446.

⁴⁰ Wigmore, *Judicial Proof*, 435, 465.

⁴¹ It is immaterial whether Smith himself drew the map or not. His explorations made the chart possible, and his publications brought it to the attention of others. See W. C. Ford's article in the *Geographical Review*, July, 1924, for the probable draughtsman.

The *Description of New England* is an even more notable work than its Virginia counterpart. It was composed in a most cautious spirit, the author keeping well within his self-imposed limitation to recount only what he had seen or done.⁴² He did not pretend to have learned too much from his brief sojourn on the New England coast, and especially did he refrain from guessing at whatever lay inland beyond the sight of a coastal visitor. He also paid tribute to his predecessors in the field, Bartholomew Gosnold, George Waymouth and Henry Hudson.⁴³ If one be inclined to classify this tract as a bit of propaganda for promoting colonization, it must be observed that Smith was an honest salesman. He spoke encouragingly of profits to be obtained from fish, furs and timber, and he commended the fertility of the soil in some places, but he did not unduly praise the harbors, especially those of Maine which was a "Countrie rather to affright, than delight one."⁴⁴ His disparaging estimate of Cape Cod as "only a headland of high hills of sand overgrown with shrubby pines, hurts, and such trash,"⁴⁵ is likewise at variance with the supposition that he eulogized New England in the hope of gaining employment there. The map accompanying this description was also brought to the attention of the European world by De Bry; it was a better map than any made before Smith's time, and one superior to several published later.⁴⁶

In his subsequent works dealing with the northeastern coast of America he gave further evidence of possessing a historical point of view, a quality often lacking in those who write of current happenings. The second edition of *New Englands Trials* contains a description of the founding of Plymouth in a paragraph which is so terse and illuminating as to merit quotation in full:

Upon these inducements some few well disposed Gentlemen and Merchants of *London* and other places provided two ships, the one of

⁴² Arber, *Smith's Works*, 178.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 189-191.

⁴⁴ Arber, *Smith's Works*, 193, 198, 200, 203, 204, 207. In editing *Mourt's Relation* in 1865, H. M. Dexter criticized Smith for giving too favorable a picture of the harbor of Agawam, the modern Ipswich (40 and n.). He misrepresented Smith's description by quoting the favorable section to the exclusion of a more critical passage.

⁴⁵ Arber, *Smith's Works*, 205.

⁴⁶ Notably that published in William Alexander, *An Encouragement to Colonies* (London, 1624).

160 Tunnes, the other of 70; they left the coast of *England* the 23 of August, with about 120 persons: but the next day the lesser ship sprung a leake, that forced their returne to *Plimmoth* where discharging her and 20 passengers, with the great ship and a hundred persons besides sailers, they set saile againe the sixt of September, and the ninth of November fell with *Cape James*; but being pestred nine weeks in this leaking unwholesome ship, lying wet in their cabbins, most of them grew very weake, and weary of the sea; then for want of experience ranging to and again, six weeks before they found a place they liked to dwell on, forced to lie on the bare ground without coverture in the extremitie of Winter; fortie of them died: and 60 were left in very weake estate at the ships coming away, about the fift of April following, and arived in England the sixt of May.⁴⁷

No modern historian could more accurately express the light in which the Pilgrim experiment was viewed by worldly-wise observers of seventeenth century England. A similar commentary on the founding of Massachusetts Bay appeared in Smith's last work, the *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters* of 1631. The Puritan emigrants, he declared, were gentlemen of good estate and good credit, many of them well beloved in their own land, and men of art and occupation more fit for the business of colonization than any others that had gone out to America.⁴⁸

Trenchant comments like these transcend in value mechanical accuracy of detail. Present day scholars can recreate from official records and other documents a precise narrative of events in the early American colonies, but they cannot easily recapture the contemporary point of view on those occurrences. The unique advantage to be obtained from a study of colonial historiography rests primarily in the discovery of what reliable observers thought about events which had transpired within their range of vision. Measured in these terms Captain John Smith ranks as one of the few great historians of the seventeenth century. His only American rivals, Edward Johnson, Nathaniel Morton, William Hubbard and Increase Mather, occasionally surpassed him in accuracy of detail but never equalled him in breadth of interest or comprehension.

⁴⁷ Arber, *Smith's Works*, 259-260.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 926. It should be added that Smith's comments on the early history of Bermuda, in the fifth book of the *Generall Historie*, were found useful by the recent historian of those islands, Mr. Henry Wilkinson. See his monograph, *The Adventurers of Bermuda* (Oxford, 1933), 59, 60, 64, 115-117, 125, 135, 165, 214, 218. Smith, of course, had never been to Bermuda but he made discriminating use of the narratives supplied by others.