

**Virginia Bernhard. 2011. *A Tale of Two Colonies: What Really Happened in Virginia and Bermuda?* Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press. 220 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8262-1951-0.0**

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For anyone interested in the social, economic, ideological, and political factors that gave rise to racialized plantation slavery in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas on the one hand, and to the emergence of the United States of America as well as many of the other nations of the western hemisphere on the other, Virginia Bernhard's detailed and revealing historical study titled, *A Tale of Two Colonies: What Really Happened in Virginia and Bermuda?* is essential reading. This insightful and reader-friendly account of the initial English attempts to colonize Virginia and Bermuda between the 1580s and the 1620s provides us with a careful and brutally honest reconstruction of the naked plunder, unbridled greed, festering corruption, unabashed hypocrisy, and systematic disrespect for human life and welfare which not only characterized the founding of the first two permanent English colonies in the Americas, but which in countless ways have also come to define much of the rest of the historical trajectories of the current and former English colonies in the region, especially that of the USA.

Bernhard is not by any means the first historian to have demonstrated that the bulk of existing archival, archaeological, and other evidence roundly contradicts almost every aspect of the grand narratives of valor, enlightened humanity, and moral rectitude that have been promoted by too many other historians who have studied the founding of colonial societies in the Caribbean and the United States. What makes this volume special, however, is the systematic, straightforward and non-polemical manner in which it configures this evidence. In a disarmingly convincing way, Bernhard effectively unmasks the anti-working class biases and alarming lack of accountability to the facts that typify the army of historians who have lent their legitimizing voices to the construction of the dominant discourses concerning the 'glorious' establishment of European Empires, of the 'enlightened' development of Virginia and the other Thirteen Colonies which eventually became the USA, and of the 'heroic' conquest of the American Frontier, all of which have saturated history textbooks and the popular media worldwide.

It is too often overlooked that during the century that followed

Columbus' first arrival in the Americas, the entire English colonial enterprise worldwide was a pitiful parody of the prevailing narrative of Anglo-Saxon political and moral superiority projected in the history books. Before the establishment of Virginia and Bermuda in the early 1600s, numerous attempts had been made by the English to found colonies in North and South America as well as in the Caribbean, but each and every one failed miserably, so that their activities were limited to the parasitic and pitiless pilfering of Spanish settlements and shipping in precious metals and slaves.

Although these points could have been made more explicitly and effectively by Bernhard in this volume, her meticulously collected evidence on the life histories of the leaders of the various expeditions to Virginia and Bermuda and of the first administrators of these colonies reveals that virtually all had spent the previous decades mobilized against the Spanish as pirates ('privateers') on the high seas and/or as mercenaries in the Netherlands. Bernhard also mentions in passing the disastrously abortive attempt by the English to establish a colony in Roanoke just south of Jamestown in 1587, and demonstrates beyond the shadow of a doubt that at several junctures between 1607 and 1623, Virginia came extremely close to sharing the fate of Roanoke and so many of the other English fiascos, had it not been for what she in her final analysis can only characterize as an amazing series of providential lucky breaks.

What Bernhard does not challenge in this instance, however, is the prevailing mythology concerning the 'mysterious disappearance' of the Roanoke settlers by 1590. Linebaugh & Rediker (2000) and other historians have convincingly demonstrated that the colonists in Roanoke actually ran off to live in abundance and freedom with the local indigenous people, rather than face the scarcity and forced labor imposed upon them by the English colonial authorities. Bernhard's unfortunate silence on Roanoke is repeated to some extent in her accounts of what happened in Bermuda and especially Virginia, where those European and African descended people who did manage to survive, more often than not did so by going renegade and adopting an indigenous American subsistence lifestyle (58-59).

Bernhard's reluctance to confront certain particularly sensitive issues in the fabrication of American mythology, however, is more than compensated for by her careful reconstruction of the facts on the ground, which graphically illustrate the mind-boggling greed, self-righteousness, mean-spiritedness, pettiness, and ineptitude that formed the basis for the transition to a racialized capitalist agro-industrial plantation economy in the Atlantic, which was ushered in by the Calvinists of the Netherlands and England over the course of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. That this transition involved levels of violence, exploitation, deception and delusion that

were without precedent in human history is amply confirmed by the catalog of human-made disasters that constitute the founding of Virginia and what was to become the United States of America. Bernhard carefully documents the seemingly endless and gruesome cycles of decimation of the settler population through starvation resulting from the deliberate negligence of the colony's leaders, the imposition of pitiless regimes of military law and hard labor by the propertied few on the working majority, the flight of settlers who went renegade to live in the abundance of subsistence with the indigenous peoples, attacks from these same indigenous peoples after being recklessly insulted and provoked by the colonial authorities, the torturing and execution of the many colonists who dared to resist and organize against the elites, and disease.

Despite the copious archival evidence for cannibalism among the early Virginia colonists that she cites in the text, Bernhard remains cautiously agnostic concerning this phenomenon (110-111). In fact, archaeological evidence uncovered since the publication of her book has incontrovertibly demonstrated that the marks found on the bones of deceased Jamestown settlers during the 'Starving Time' from 1609 to 1610 and beyond could only have been made by the butchering knives of hungry colonists. This reluctance on her part to confront the dominant narratives that systematically demonize any indigenous peoples of the Americas who have dared to challenge colonization as 'Caribs', 'Caliban' and 'Cannibal' and which simultaneously justify that same colonization in the name of European 'civilization' does much to render Bernhard's portrayal of both indigenous and European descended peoples in Virginia far more limited and shallow than it need be.

Bernhard concludes this book with a discussion of the beginnings of the enslavement of Africans in Bermuda and Virginia before 1620, showing how the leaders and the captains in charge of both colonies were deeply involved in the pirating and trading of slaves, with the active support and encouragement of their Calvinist counterparts in the Netherlands. Once again, the facts that Bernhard so carefully gathers and presents cry out for an analysis that she cannot or will not provide. As Linebaugh & Rediker point out, the eventual exclusive reliance of Virginia and other English colonies on plantation labor by enslaved people of African descent was, in the final analysis, due to what she so successfully illustrates, but so vexingly fails to interpret in this volume: 1) the failure of the colonial ruling classes to effectively enclose and harness European labor and Indigenous land and 2) the successful cohabitation of peoples of European, Indigenous, and African descent in renegade subsistence societies which were effectively outside of the control of the colonial authorities.

The solution to this conundrum was the racialization of society

in such a way that non-propertied European descended peoples were mobilized in both the imposition of forced labor on African descended peoples and in the invasion of Indigenous land. Working class people of European descent were eventually exempted from hard plantation labor, which was to become the lot of African descended slaves instead. The colonial elites then issued these European descended people with firearms and small holder titles to as yet unconquered Indigenous land. With this, the much celebrated phenomenon of the 'American Frontier' emerged, with poor Europeans using their guns to systematically massacre Indigenous people and invade their lands, as well as to mercilessly hunt down runaway slaves and return them to their plantation masters. Thus, the enclosure of African plantation labor and Indigenous land was assured, as well as the suppression of 'inter-racial' cohabitation of renegades and runaways in subsistence societies.

Once poorer European descended people had seized their small plots of frontier land from the Indigenous peoples and had done the arduous work of clearing it and cultivating it, they were soon so far in debt to the colonial elites and their banks that they were forced to sell their plots to the rich for a pittance, and then were dispatched to the next frontier with more firearms and more bogus land titles to start all over again. This is how 'the West was won' in a continuing cycle of genocide against Indigenous peoples, invasion and cultivation of Indigenous land, bounty hunting to enforce the enslavement of African descended peoples, and boom-and-bust consolidation of small holdings into the estates of the European descended oligarchs. The evidence that Bernhard so skillfully uncovers and presents graphically portrays how Virginia played a key role in the emergence of this paradigm of racialized domination and plunder that eventually became the dominant one throughout the Americas. Unfortunately, she leaves it to other historians such as Linebaugh & Rediker to convert her inventory of facts into a cohesive analysis.

### References

Linebaugh, Peter and Marcus Rediker. 2000. *The Many-Headed Hydra*. Boston: Beacon Press.