

Review Essay

The Multicultural Origins of British America

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ALBION'S SEED: Four British Folkways in America. By David Hackett Fischer. New York. Oxford University Press. 1989. pp. xxi, 946. \$39.95 cloth; \$18.95 paper.

STRANGERS WITHIN THE REALM: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire. By Bernard Bailyn and Philip D. Morgan, eds. Chapel Hill. University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture. 1991. pp. 456. \$39.95 cloth; \$14.95 paper.

Few debates in higher education in recent years have taken on more importance than the struggle over the ethnic origins of the American past. The editors of *Time* chose to make the debate the cover story in their issue timed to coincide with the Fourth of July, a holiday when the bombastic patriotism of many Americans is usually most raucous. Those promoting the new perspective insist that history texts and courses have for too long paid scant attention to the majority of the American people, especially the contributions of women and ethnic and racial minority groups. Yet arrayed against what appears, on the surface, a reasonable request to include more variety in history courses are prominent academics and others who fear some of the proposed changes. The "cult of ethnicity," to use the title of the eminent historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s essay in *Time*, will, according to some, undermine the intellectual bonds that maintain an extremely heterogeneous population. And the debate goes well

beyond the discussion of what or who should appear in American history textbooks. Critics of the established academic order have also at times attempted to modify Western Civilization courses, an effort deemed by some conservative critics of higher education to be an assault on the basic values that Americans have historically held to and fought for.

Yet if the debate over multiculturalism is the stuff of headlines and popular magazine articles, professional historians have demonstrated quite clearly that North America has been for centuries a multicultural place. Though a few, such as Nicholas Canny and K.R. Andrews, have earlier critically described the expansion of the British Empire,¹ such concern for the cultural consequences of imperial growth is recent. Important new studies focus quite directly on the cultural aspects of empire-building, and in the process they reveal a more complex past than earlier historians reconstructed for their readers.

Not all of the new works directly assess the divergent cultures meeting in the early modern period. Some treat the process of imperialism by looking at the poetics of empire-building and the myths upon which Europeans acted. For example, those in the business of furthering the aims of the British Empire—in particular, officeholders on both sides of the Atlantic, merchants and military officers—held to a more or less coherent agenda. Though there were splits at times over specific policies, empire builders sought to create an *imperium pelagi*—"an empire of the seas"—as David Shields effectively argues in *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690-1750*. Underlying the desire to expand the empire was a seemingly unquenchable thirst for commerce. "Solomon shew'd more wisdom and acquir'd more Glory by sending his Ships to Ophir than his father David did by all his conquests," Thomas Walduck wrote in 1710 in a passage quoted by Shields, "and the Citys and inhabitants of Tyre & Sydon are by the prophet call'd the crowning Cities whose merchants are princes & whose traffickers are the honourable of the earth, only in respect of their trade."² In an age when politicians wrote verse to advance their causes, William Penn and James Oglethorpe, each vital to the advancing colonial settlements in Pennsylvania and Georgia, respectively, "synthesized religious and economic imagery to create compelling visions of philanthropy," Shields writes (37). Others, celebrating agricultural production, prophesied future grandeur for the colonies, particularly the staple-producing regions. It was a time, Shields argues, when "politicians believed (as many Englishmen did during the reign of Queen Anne), that ability with the pen constituted a form of power" (138), and they employed that power against foes who disagreed with them; many a writer enlisted in the imperial cause to denounce the "Black legend" of Spanish colonization and the perfidious intent of French colonizers.

Although tensions existed within the empire, the writings of those promoting empire-building tended to emphasize the common goals of people sharing certain culturally defined values. And it was not the English alone who had a shared set of values about early America. The Spanish too had both empire and clear imperialist goals, as Paul Hoffman argues in *A New Andalusia and a Way to the*

Orient. Tracing imperial aims through the minutiae generated by these empire-builders, Hoffman's Spanish initially shared the belief that the goals of the empire were, as his title suggests, twofold: to find territory that they believed would satisfy their every desire, a sylvan paradise brimming with potentially profitable resources; and to find, somewhere in what is now the southeastern part of the United States, a direct water route to the Pacific and the great Asian market on the other side. Those pursuing these aims, Hoffman argues, drew inspiration from a tale about *Chicora* originally spread by Lucas Vázquez de Ayllón in Spain in the early 1520s and from the ideas of Giovanni de Verrazzano, dating from the same decade, which describe, as Hoffman notes, "what in the end turned out to be a false sea."³ Experience in America, however, taught enterprising potential colonizers that the myths were in essence erroneous. This realization dampened Spanish ardor for the southeast by the end of the sixteenth century, though the Spanish persisted elsewhere in spite of the hostilities they engendered among Indians, an aspect of imperial history carefully reconstructed by Ramón Gutiérrez in *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away*.⁴

These recent studies of imperial dreams form the logical background to other works that have examined in great detail the diverse peoples inhabiting the British world. Perhaps the most sensational of the recent contributions is David Hackett Fischer's *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. The book is immense; it runs to more than 900 pages, is crammed with references to both primary and secondary sources, and seems, on the surface, to exhaust the available materials relating to the cultural history of those who migrated from Britain to America before the American Revolution. It is also perhaps the most controversial book of early American history published in the past few years.

Fischer's thesis is that there was not one but four distinct migrations of English-speaking peoples to early America. The first consisted of "an exodus of Puritans from the east of England to Massachusetts" from 1629 to 1640. Next came "the migration of a small Royalist elite and large numbers of indentured servants from the south of England into Virginia" from approximately 1642 to 1675. The third movement was of people from "the North Midlands of England and Wales" who ventured to the Delaware Valley from approximately 1675 to 1725. A final English-speaking group came "from the borders of North Britain and northern Ireland" and went "to the Appalachian backcountry," with most making their move between 1718 and 1775 (6).

These groups, Fischer contends, not only dominated early American history but, more significant, their descendants also have retained a privileged position in American society—responsible for all but two presidents, for example—even though less than one-fifth of the modern American population derives directly from British stock. "[I]n a cultural sense most Americans are Albion's seed, no matter who their own forebears may have been." Further, the influence of these groups continues to exist in the ways that Americans speak to one another, the ways that they have historically arranged their political system, and the ways that they conceive "freedom." "The interplay of four 'freedom ways' has created an

expansive pluralism which is more libertarian than any unitary culture could be," Fischer writes. "That is the central thesis of this book: the legacy of four British folkways in early America remains the most powerful determinant of a voluntary society in the United States today" (6-7).

Fischer goes on to lay out the twenty-four different "folkways" of these groups' lives that he will describe in the book. They include, in addition to issues relating to dialect, politics and liberty, such diverse matters as "Building ways" (architecture, both vernacular and high); "Gender ways" (defined as "customs that regulate social relations between men and women"); "Sex ways" (to describe "conventional sexual attitudes and acts, and the treatment of sexual deviance"); and folkways concerned with age, death, religion, food, magic, family, wealth, rank and power (8-9).

To grasp Fischer's method it is necessary to explore his treatment of a particular topic. Take the material on sex folkways, for example, an area of historical inquiry that (for early America at least) has received little sustained attention from modern scholars. Fischer is certainly not the first scholar to have probed the subject; Edmund Morgan almost fifty years earlier wrote about Puritan sexuality, which was certainly not the oxymoron latter day moralists would have many believe.⁵ But Fischer is perhaps the first to have explored in such depth the cultural and regional aspects of sexuality in early America and to relate these to a larger interpretation of American culture. Thus we discover that though a number of women in Puritan New England wed while already pregnant, the "sexual discipline" of these people kept rates of bridal pregnancy lower than in other regions. Further, Puritans disdained contraception and at times made bestiality and masturbation capital crimes (90-91). These attitudes were not English in some general sense, but were, according to *Albion's Seed*, similar to those of East Anglia, and not like those practiced elsewhere in British America.

Migrants to Virginia from the south of England had different guidelines in mind when they created their sex ways. Bastardy, for example, received severe punishment "not because it was a sexual transgression, but because it threatened to place a burden of support on the parish poor rolls, and to deprive a master of work that was thought due to him" (299). Yet within this culture men could escape censure and act out their fantasies with available women, a situation the planter William Byrd and his associates took advantage of whenever possible. Thus Byrd wrote in his diary in October, 1719: "...to the play where I saw nobody I liked so went to Will's and stayed about an hour and then went to Mrs. Smith's where I met a very tall woman and rogered her three times..." (302).

Among the Quaker-dominated settlers of the Delaware Valley, such acts would have received condemnation. They were, according to *Albion's Seed*, perhaps the most sexless of the migrants, punishing acts of sex outside of marriage severely, and even limiting connubial relations between spouses. The result of their ways—which resembled in outward form aspects of medieval Christian orthopraxis⁶—was perhaps predictable: "Quakers became the first people in

Anglo-America who succeeded in controlling fertility within marriage" (501).

Fischer's fourth group, migrating from the borderlands of the home country, a region Fischer terms "North Britain," held yet different views, seemingly the opposite of the Quakers. To the backcountry settlers, sex outside of marriage was less serious, in part an adaptation to the lack of clerics to perform marriages (681). Yet attitudes about sexual matters were of another order, and not entirely based on the settlers' distance from churches. In the backcountry, rituals surrounding marriage included a mock abduction of the bride and revelry bordering on anarchy; residents' vocabulary included a number of what some might now consider vulgar motifs, such as adults referring to small children as "little shits" and places with names like "Fucking Creek" (653-654). Whatever might be said for these settlers' earthy ways, it is clear in retrospect that they possessed views of sex different from those of New England Puritans, Virginia Anglicans and Pennsylvania Quakers. And, like those other groups, backcountry settlers in America acted and spoke as they did, Fischer argues, because they derived from a distinctive culture within the British Isles.

Fischer has not been without his critics. Indeed, it is rare that a book of early American history becomes the focus of a panel at the American Historical Association, as happened with *Albion's Seed* in December 1990. Further, the *William and Mary Quarterly*, the preeminent journal of early American history, devoted 85 pages of a recent issue to the book, allowing Fischer's critics to assess aspects of his argument and then giving him spacious room for his response.

The critics have at times been severe, focusing particularly on Fischer's regional definitions and his theory of cultural transplantation. Peter Clark, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, notes that there was "something of a self-service, pick-and-choose approach" employed at times, and that Fischer's "seed-bed regions lack coherence and plausibility."⁷ Edmund Morgan, in the context of a largely favorable review in the *New York Review of Books*, notes that "the difficulty with a thesis that explains so much is that it explains too much," and that though Fischer largely succeeds in delineating the four cultures, "when description becomes a basis for explaining every major development in American history, it is in danger of explaining too much."⁸ Roger Thompson writes that "One would be more confident of this ambitious study if it were less hidebound by its thesis and more familiar with the English background."⁹ Alan Taylor notes that "historians will marvel at the neatness with which Fischer can box his subject," and that he "distills every culture to a homogenous essence defined by its ruling elite." In the end Fischer's insistence on treating migrants from these cultures as "passing like so many ships in the night," becomes, to Taylor, "self-defeating."¹⁰

The most sustained criticisms appeared in the April 1991 *William and Mary Quarterly*. There Jack Greene writes that "Fischer's application of his theory" betrays "a worrisome insensitivity to temporal variations" and that "[p]roblems arising out of this heedlessness of time are compounded by a similar disregard for the spatial origins of evidence." Further, Fischer's "cultural determinism,"

Greene argues, “inhibits development of a more refined understanding of the intricate process of cultural reformulation that went on in the immigrant societies of early modern America.”¹¹ In the same issue Virginia DeJohn Anderson notes that Fischer’s thesis deprives historical actors, particularly the Puritans, of asserting their own desires. “[C]ultures are not seeds,” she argues, “and people are not simply the carriers of folkways from one place to another.”¹² And James Horn, in perhaps the most critical account of Fischer’s work, believes that Fischer has greatly misinterpreted developments in Virginia, terming parts of it “fiction” that “has no place in a historical work.”¹³ Fischer, to be sure, had ample opportunity to respond to the articles in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, and his rebuttal contains (for those intimidated by the sheer size of *Albion’s Seed*) a brief synopsis of the book’s argument.¹⁴ And readers can rest assured that Fischer will not present only the origins of these folkways; *Albion’s Seed* is but the first of a projected five-volume work that will treat American cultural history through the Civil War.

Yet whatever one ultimately makes of *Albion’s Seed*, few early American historians now doubt the idea that British America contained a variety of different peoples. The essays in *Strangers Within the Realm: Cultural Margins of the First British Empire*, edited by Bernard Bailyn and Philip Morgan, also share the belief that early America, or the entire British Empire for that matter, cannot be understood without first coming to terms with its many cultures. The volume brings together the work of already well-established scholars who set about to portray different groups within the empire. The essays describe, in the words of the editors, “the expansion of the European world outward into a number of alien peripheries, or marchlands. There, complex societies emerged, shaped by the engagement of the controlling people with the natives or with other peoples who were imported or who freely migrated to these developing worlds.” These “peripheral worlds” soon became complex themselves, and thus soon had an influence on the colonizers (1). The approach suggests at the outset a vastly different way of conceptualizing the early American past than that presented in *Albion’s Seed*.

The essays in the volume reveal the myriad ways in which the British empire spread outward into the rest of the so-called British Isles, the West Indies and North America. Nicholas Canny shows that English expansion into Ireland was not a simple conquest but rather a highly complex series of negotiations that fell into three distinct patterns. The first was evident in the migration to Munster of perhaps 20,000 people from southwest England, with subsequent displacement of the native population; this expansion was arguably the most successful (to the English) area of colonization in Ireland. The second possible outcome of expansion emerged in the entrenchment of English economic power in Queens County, though with the continued presence of substantial numbers of Irish tenants and subtenants who retained animosity towards the colonizers. These pent-up hostilities found release in the uprising of 1641 in a series of assaults that convinced the English that the native Irish remained a barbarous people. A third

type of settlement, in County Fermanagh, developed differently still. It included migrant Scots as well as Britons, and led to an even more complex ethnic composition of the population.

Other parts of the islands offered no simpler story. The Union with Scotland in 1707 did not cause a simple integration of Scots with Britons into a single nation. The Scots remained a people apart yet a people, according to Eric Richards, who embraced the larger British world in all of its complexities, from mercantile affairs to intellectual developments. Rather than being absorbed into the more powerful English nation, as many supposed would be the case in the early eighteenth century, Scots actually spread their ways outward to other parts of the empire. "The greatest visible impact of the Union was to open [in Daniel Defoe's words] 'the door to the Scots in our American colonies,'" Richards writes. Following the lead of Glasgow merchants, Scots migrated in such large numbers, Defoe wrote, as Richards notes, that if the migration continued "'for many years more, Virginia may be rather called a Scots than an English plantation'" (68). And Maldwyn Jones reveals that those who ended up in America after a two-stage migration—first to Ireland and then across the Atlantic—were neither Scots nor Irish but were a cultural amalgamation, Scotch-Irish. They possessed a unique sense of themselves, engendered in no small part by their peculiar religious history of being Presbyterians in an Ulster torn between powerful Anglicans and numerous Catholics.

One of the strengths of *Strangers Within the Realm* is its inclusion, along with the stories of various European groups, of excellent essays on Indians and African-Americans. These pieces, by James Merrell and Philip Morgan, respectively, are perhaps the strongest in the volume, and they make a point too long ignored by other historians: it is impossible to understand cultural developments within North America without grasping the histories of the peoples who were not colonizers. Merrell's essay does not include the Indian victims who still too often appear in accounts of early America. Though he takes account of the impact of disease, war and the expansion of colonial settlement—the "three horsemen of the Indian apocalypse" to use his apt phrase (125)—Merrell's account describes a shifting border between Indian country and colonial America. Indians and colonists alike had to adapt to their surroundings, to grasp which side of this unmarked border they were on and act accordingly. Or, as a Wicomiss Indian informed Leonard Calvert, the Governor of Maryland in 1634, since colonists "are heere strangers, and come into our Countrey, you should rather conforme your selves to the Customes of our Countrey, then impose yours upon us" (117). For Indians, survival in the eastern part of the continent in the wake of British expansion—to live, that is, in the ever-receding marchlands of Indian country—entailed learning colonial ways and combining them with Indian ways.

Morgan's essay describes the close, at times intimate, relations between African-Americans and European-Americans. He shows that attitudes among the British towards those of African descent differed throughout the empire, and that views changed dramatically over time, a fact he illustrates by comparing the

famous narrative of Olaudah Equiano (or Gustava Vassa), a slave-turned-abolitionist leader, with the less-known story of Billy Blue, a creole African-American who was sentenced to transportation to Australia in 1796, his odyssey linking him “to the death of one empire and to the establishment of another” (217). Blue eventually became famous in Australia, a mark of his ability to adapt to his new surroundings while retaining his old habits and becoming known as an “outspoken jester.” “Apparently,” Morgan concludes, “Billy Blue was a trickster, mocking and mimicking whites, playing out a role performed by countless other Africans and African-Americans. Even in a far-off land, Billy Blue remained true to his cultural heritage” (218-219).

Michael Craton too reveals the complexities of race relations in the early modern period. He describes the world of British planters in the West Indies, a part of the empire so desirable that Barbados, covered with sugar plantations, became known as the “jewel in the British crown” in the late 1660s (338). The Caribbean islands became curious bastions of English ways at the same time that they became the scenes of the most horrendous treatment of enslaved laborers anywhere in the empire. Thus planters in Barbados, always wishing that they could make a fortune and return to England to enjoy the prestige they would have earned through this increase in their wealth, created a printing press and newspaper on the island by the early 1730s, and amused themselves in clubs, in a theater, and on two bowling greens (339). But beneath this veneer of culture lay tension, magnified by the high rate of absenteeism among the wealthiest planters on the island and the high rate of miscegenation and the creation of a substantial mixed race population “in reverse proportion to the ratio of whites in each colonial population” (355).

Other essays in the book similarly reveal the multifaceted cultural universe of the British world. A.G. Roeber, treating Dutch-speaking and German-speaking peoples in America, reveals how they took different cultural paths in their efforts to adapt to British ways. Canada too contained peoples of disparate cultures, a situation J.M. Bumsted describes in much detail; the incorporation of Canada into the British world in the eighteenth century did not allow it to create a homogenous culture, a fact twentieth-century Canadians of French, Indian and English descent know only too well when they face off on issues of cultural superiority. Finally, Jacob Price shows how aspects of colonial life in the periphery influenced life in the metropolis of the empire. His use of subscription lists and materials relating to people owed money at the time of the Revolution and who wanted the government to assist them in making sure their creditors paid their debts provides intriguing estimates of British interest in American affairs.

What, in the end, can we make of these recent studies? Some British historians have become rather perplexed about how to study their imperial past in a world where their *imperium pelagi* has disintegrated. Thus G.R. Elton, in a question quoted in the introduction to *Strangers Within the Realm*, asks: “What virtue can there be in studying the muddled history of a small offshore island whose supposed achievements have turned out illusory?” (30). For those who

inhabit territory that shifted from Indian country to the marchlands of the empire to profit-making colonies to an independent republic, the answer is sufficiently clear. History of the British empire, as well as the Spanish, tells us not simply about the winners who came to dominate American culture but about the many peoples who adapted to each other and laid the foundations for one of the most important facets of American history: its multicultural composition.

Notes

1. See in particular Nicholas Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established, 1565-76* (Nobel, New York, 1976), and K. R. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630* (Cambridge, England, 1984).
2. David Shields, *Oracles of Empire: Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690-1750* (Chicago, 1990), 3, 11.
3. Paul E. Hoffman, *A New Andalusia and a Way to the Orient: The American Southeast During the Sixteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, 1990); quotation on p. x.
4. Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford, 1991).
5. Edmund Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," *New England Quarterly* 15 (1942), 591-607. For more recent accounts of the sexual ways of early Americans see Roger Thompson, *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649-1699* (Amherst, 1986) and John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York, 1988), 3-52.
6. See James Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago, 1987), 82-84, 92-93, 108, 138.
7. Peter Clark, "Forever England?" *Times Literary Supplement* June 29-July 5, 1990, 698.
8. Edmund Morgan, "Mothers of Us All," *New York Review of Books* February 1, 1990, 19.
9. Roger Thompson, "State of the Art: Early Modern Migration," *Journal of American Studies* 25 (1991), 68.
10. Alan Taylor, "An Atlantic People," *Journal of British Studies* 29 (1990), 403-404.
11. Jack Greene, "Transplanting Moments: Inheritance in the Formation of Early American Culture," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991), 228, 227.
12. Virginia DeJohn Anderson, "The Origins of New England Culture," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991), 237.
13. James Horn, "Cavalier Culture? The Social Development of Colonial Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991), 244.
14. David Hackett Fischer, "Albion and the Critics: Further Evidence and Reflection," *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (1991), 260-308.