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## **CAPTAIN JOHN SMITH: AMERICAN(?)\***

**J. A. LEO LEMAY**

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Three major criteria for nationality formed the basis for inclusion in the *Dictionary of National Biography*-1, historical importance to the country; 2. British birth and background (therefore Smith and other founders of the English colonies are in the *DNB*); and 3. loyalties. Since the meaning of the last criterion may not be apparent, I'll point out that Benjamin Franklin and George Washington are not in the *DNB*. But Cadwallader Colden, Thomas Hutchinson, and William Franklin are. In short, the American loyalists are in the *DNB*, the patriots (as we call them) are not. Of course Captain John Smith is an American author because of his historically important role in founding the first permanent English colony of the New World (and incidentally, I will elsewhere make the new argument that Smith is responsible for the headright system of land grants—and the headright system peopled America). But I will argue here that Smith is an American writer for literary and intellectual reasons; and I take comfort from the fact that Sir Sidney Lee and the other compilers of the *DNB* thought that ideas and ideals, like historical importance and birth and background, are important criteria of nationality.

Four arguments support my thesis. 1, Of any known early colonist, Smith had the grandest—and the most radical—secular vision of the meaning of America. 2, Smith was the best promotion writer during the crucial period of American colonization, 1607 to 1631. 3, Smith first tried to define what it meant to be an American and first claimed that American identity was distinctive and desirable. And 4, Smith thoroughly identified with America.

#### **1. SMITH AND THE MEANING OF AMERICA**

Smith believed that America offered the individual the opportunity to create himself. By 1616, when he wrote his great promotion tract *The Description of New England*, his American experiences had validated his incipient social philosophy. In the post-feudal society of Renaissance England and Europe, most farmers worked for the local gentry in a state of semi-vassalage with little hope of controlling their own labor or owning their own land. But America, Smith wrote,

afforded “vs that freely, which in *England* we want.”<sup>1</sup> In America “every man may be master and owner of his owne labour and land” (196). Smith’s contemporaries disagreed. The Virginia Company intended to create a neo-feudal society in America where the aristocrats would own thousands of acres of land and where the mass of the colonists would work for the few great baronial landowners. Smith defied the Virginia Company with his first publication, and he repeatedly advocated ideals repulsive to the leaders of the Company—and repulsive later, to leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Company.<sup>2</sup>

Captain John Smith advocated a radical democratic philosophy. Other early Virginia governors naturally reserved the best food and choicest dainties for themselves and their favorites, but when Smith became governor, he shared the very worst with the colonists, reserving the choice foods for the sick (112, 126, 156, 392). When George Percy succeeded Smith, Percy naturally reverted to the old aristocratic forms. In a letter to his brother Henry, the ninth Earl of Northumberland, Percy wrote on 17 August 1611: “the place which I hold in this Colonie (the store affording no other means than a pound of meale a day and a little Oatemeale) cannot be defraied with smale expence, it standing upon my reputation (being Governour of James Towne) to keep a continuall and dayly Table for Gentlemen of fashion aboute me.”<sup>3</sup> Just over two years earlier, Smith chose II Thessalonians 3: 10 as the text of his speech to the colonists: “We commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.” As Christopher Hill has shown, this biblical text was a rallying call of social unrest during the Interregnum.<sup>4</sup> Certainly its anti-aristocratic implications were the same during Smith’s day. Smith proclaimed that “he that will not worke, shall not eat” (149). That speech announced (what his contemporaries surely knew before then) Smith’s identification with and support of English radical traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Smith thought that in America, people should be as free as possible. In a single sentence in the 1616 *Description of New England*, Smith encapsulated the meaning of America. The availability of nearly limitless land, the abundance of fish, fowl, and game, the incredible supply of lumber, and the lack of an existing social order—all created the possibility of making a new society where achievement rather than one’s inherited social position would determine one’s standing. “Heer” in America, “nature and liberty affords vs that freely, which in *England* we want” 212-213). Those two factors—*nature*, by which Smith meant the total natural environment, and

liberty, by which he meant the social, political and institutional forces—freed the common man from the remnants of his feudal condition and allowed him to create *ab origine* his own role in the New World. Smith's new American Adam would live in a democratic society—a society completely unlike any existing in the Western world. Smith claimed that “those can the best distinguish content that have escaped most honorable dangers, as if, out of every extremity, he found himself now born to a new life” (963).

Smith most fully and clearly expressed his hostility to the social hierarchy in his last work, the 1631 *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters*. Human psychology, he said, dictated that men should be free. People worked harder when they worked for themselves than for others, and they were discontented when they were not entirely free. Flatly contradicting the Renaissance commonplace that social hierarchy was based upon the Providential system of degree in all nature (the *locus classicus*, of course, is *Troilus and Cressida* I, iii, 84-141),<sup>6</sup> Smith stated that the very idea of servitude was “odious to God.” “Let all men have as much freedome in reason as may be, and true dealing; for it is the greatest comfort you can give them, where the very name of servitude will breed much of ill bloud, and become odious to God and man” (948). Smith's statement of egalitarianism and freedom is extraordinary in its day. It is the first and one of the noblest statements of belief in the possibilities of a new American order. In the New World, humanity will enjoy greater democracy, greater freedom, and greater liberty than ever existed before.

## 2. SMITH AS PROMOTION WRITER

Smith was the most effective promotion writer of the early seventeenth century. Some scholars have actually said that he wrote *demonstrational* rather than *promotional* literature.<sup>7</sup> Typically, other promotion writers claimed that colonization could be “attained without any great danger or difficulty.”<sup>8</sup> Such pie-in-the-sky exaggerations had become stereotypes long before the Virginia Colony was founded. George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston lampooned the promotional propaganda in their 1605 play *Eastward Hoe!*<sup>9</sup> Smith was a realist. He said an emigrant must “hazard” his life (208). Everyone who actually thought of committing himself to America knew that colonization was risky. Most emigrants died. Virginia seemed cursed. All but thirty-eight of the first one hundred and five people in

Virginia died within six months of settlement (488, 531, 611, 912). Smith left five hundred colonists in Virginia when he returned to England in the fall of 1609. But after that winter of 1609-10 ("the starving time"), only a few "more then 60. most miserable and poore creatures" were left alive (170).<sup>10</sup> The situation did not soon improve. An observer reported in 1613 that every year more than half the Virginia colonists died.<sup>11</sup>

Other promotion writers ignored or glossed over these ghastly statistics. Smith gives the facts, explains how so many people could perish, emphasizes that colonization entails risks, and tells what kind of people will live and succeed in America—hard workers. Although everyone knew that Eastern North America had no great flourishing Indian cities filled with gold and silver and no great mines comparable to those in Mexico and South America, only Smith at this date emphasizes that hard manual labor is the key to survival and success in America. Prospective emigrants knew the unsavory reputation of America and the anti-American ballads and satires. They wanted the facts. Those scholars who do not realize that Smith was the greatest promotion writer of his day ignore both his audience and human nature. Like the second-rate promotion writers, those scholars must believe that most prospective emigrants were susceptible fools, ignorant of the deaths in America, of satires on it, and of the common rumors about it.

Smith combined a realistic practicality with visionary ideals. Although he appealed to honor, virtue, fame, and magnanimity, and although he envisioned a utopian social world in America, he tempered these ideals with common sense and brusque practicality, saying that only the hope of wealth would make most people become colonists, not "Religion, Charity, and the Common good." "I am not so simple as to thinke, that euer any other motiue then wealth, will euer erect there a Commonweale; or draw companie from their ease and humours at home, to stay in *New England* to effect my purposes" (212).

Smith is the greatest promotion writer because he best understands the aspirations of the ordinary person of his day and because he wholeheartedly believed in America. Smith saw America as possibility. He appeals to a sense of adventure. He knows that the common people want to better themselves. He believes that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary determination and hard work. He inspires his audience with a belief in the importance of colonization and with

their possibly heroic contribution to it. Smith grandly appeals to the imagination and ideals of the common man. Although his classic expression of the American Dream repeats a number of the hackneyed motifs of promotion literature (such as the conversion of the Indians and the winning of *lebensraum* for England's supposed overpopulation), Smith's personal characteristics distinguished his version of the dream. The marginal gloss by his grandest promotional statement calls for "*men that have great spirits and smal meanes.*" Who does not want to think of himself as possessing "great spirits"? The heading alone, with its contrast of *great* and *small*, makes those with "*small means*" discontented. Emigration is the answer. Smith, an extraordinary leader who inspired fierce loyalty (167, 181, 184, 185-186, 230, and 231), believes that "great spirits" exist in common men. And of course the belief creates and inspires the reality. Here is his pitch:

Who can desire more content, that hath small meanes; or but only his merit to aduance his fortune, than to tread, and plant that ground hee hath purchased by the hazard of his life? If he haue but the taste of virtue and magnanimitie, what to such a minde can bee more pleasant, than planting and building a foundation for his Posteritie, gotte from the rude earth, by Gods blessing and his owne industrie, without prejudice to any? If hee have any graine of faith or zeale in Religion, what can hee doe lesse hurtful to any: or more agreeable to God, then to seeke to conuert those poore Saluages to know Christ, and humanitie, whose labors with discretion will triple requite thy charge and paines? What so truely su[i]tles with honour and honestie, as the discovering things vnknowne? erecting Townes, peopling Countries, informing the ignorant, reforming things vniust, teaching virtue; and gaine to our Natiue mother-countrie a kingdom to attend her: finde employment for those that are idle, because they know not what to doe: so farre from wronging any, as to cause Posteritie to remember thee; and remembering thee, euer honour that remembrance with praise? (208-209)

### 3. SMITH AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

In the early seventeenth century, even proponents of English plantations in America admitted that colonists were the outcasts and undesirables of society. In "Of Plantations" (1625), Francis Bacon wrote: "It is a shameful and unblessed thing to take the scum of people, and wicked men, to be the people with whom you plant; and not only so, but it spoileth the plantation; for they will ever live like rogues, and not fall to work, but be lazy, and do mischief, and spend victuals,

and be quickly weary, and then certify over to their country to the discredit of the plantation.”<sup>12</sup> In 1630, John Winthrop called previous emigrants to America “unfit instruments, a multitude of rude and misgoverned persons—the very scum of the Land.”<sup>13</sup> Philip Massinger’s *The City Madam* (acted in 1632) castigates Virginians as “Condemned wretches, forfeited to the Law...Strumpets and bawds, for the abomination of their life, spewed out of their own country.”<sup>14</sup> But Captain John Smith, despite criticizing gentlemen, lazy colonists, and Virginia Company policies, constantly refutes the aspersions on America and Americans (82-83, 103-04, 378-79, 516, 605-606, 610-14, 681, 689). Smith reminds us that “Every thing of worth is found full of difficulties.” He states that “nothing” is as “difficult” as establishing “a common wealth so farre remote from men and meanes,” and he thereby implies that colonization is the greatest possible achievement a man could undertake (96; cf. 228).

Although numerous writers promoted American colonies before Smith, he first celebrated the American. He disgustedly labeled those who attacked colonists as “Spanolized English” (944)—that is, Englishmen who betrayed England’s interest to the Spanish. Smith claimed the early colonists were heroes. He said that the primary purpose of the *General History* was to eternalize “the memory of those that effected” the settlement of Virginia (385). He compared colonists to the greatest figures in history and in the Bible. As farmers, they follow the model of Adam and Eve, who first began “this innocent worke, To plant the earth to remain to posteritie, but not without labour, trouble, and industrie.” As bringers of civilization, the colonists succeed Noah and his family who “planted new Countries” and who gradually brought “the world” to its present estate. As teachers of Christianity, they imitate the model of Abraham, Christ, and the Apostles. Smith reminds his English readers that if such past evangelists had not “exposed themselves...to teach the Gospel...euen wee our selues, had at this present beene as Salvage, and as miserable as the most barbarous Salvage yet vnciuilized.” Further, as the founders of a future empire, American colonists enact the roles of “the greatest Princes of the earth” whose very best achievements were “planting of countries, and ciuilizing barbarous and inhumane Nations, to ciuilitie and humanitie.” Just as those “eternall actions” of the greatest princes “fill our histories,” so the deeds of the earliest Americans will fill future histories (228-229). Smith’s vision of American identity inverted the commonplace negative images of his time. No one before

Smith celebrates American identity.<sup>15</sup> No other early seventeenth-century colonist had as grand a secular view of what it meant to be an American.

#### 4. SMITH'S IDENTIFICATION WITH AMERICA

From age twenty-five to his death twenty-seven later, Smith devoted his life to exploring, mapping, reading, thinking, and writing about America. He was born the son of yeoman George Smith,<sup>16</sup> but his ideal ancestors were those persons who, like himself, had "aduanced...from poore Souldiers to great Captaines" (191)—not the "great Captaines" of war (although some, like Smith, achieved success in war as well) but of exploration and discovery. His ideal genealogy appears repeatedly in his writings: Christopher Columbus, Hernando Cortez, Francisco Pizarro, Hernando de Soto, and Ferdinand Magellan (191, 228, 705, 965). Smith had, in some ways, a less glamorous role than his predecessors, but the challenge of the unknown lands still existed. Just as "all the *Romanes* were not *Scipioes*: nor all the *Geneuses*, *Colombuses*: nor all the *Spanyards*, *Cortes*" (288)—so he knew that not all the English were Captain John Smiths. Disappointed that he had not achieved more, Smith nevertheless in 1622 claimed that all existing English colonies in America were "but pigs of my owne sowe" (265). In 1624, he called them his "children; for they haue bin my wife, my hawks, my hounds, my cards, my dice, and in total my best content, as indifferent to my heart as my left hand to my right" (265; cf. 893). And in 1631, the year of his death, he called the colonies in Virginia and New England his posterity, his "heirs, executors, administrators and assignees" (946).

#### NOTES

\*This lecture was delivered at a meeting of the Society for the Study of Southern Literature at the Modern Language Association Convention in Chicago, 28 December 1985.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Arber and A. G. Bradley, eds. *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1910), 212. Future references to Smith's writings are to this edition and will be given in the text. Since the volumes are pagged continuously, just the page number will be cited.

<sup>2</sup> David B. Quinn, in "Prelude to Maryland" and "Why They Came," *Early Maryland in a Wider World* (Detroit, 1982), 11-29, 119-148, expertly surveys the various reasons for emigration and emphasizes the London Company's leaders' desire for baronial holdings in America. Bernard Bai-



lyn, in "Politics and Social Structure in Virginia," *Seventeenth-Century America: Essays in Colonial History* (1959; rpr. New York, 1972), 90-115, has pointed out that the other early leaders of Virginia and the Massachusetts Bay Colony retained the conservative social philosophy typical of England. Sigmund Diamond, "From Organization to Society: Virginia in the Seventeenth Century," *American Journal of Sociology* 63 (1958), 457-475, and in "Values as an Obstacle to Economic Growth: The American Colonies," *Journal of Economic History* 27 (1967), 651-675, has shown how the conditions in colonial Virginia gradually forced the leaders of the Virginia Company to adopt a more democratic philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> John W. Shirley, "George Percy at Jamestown, 1607-1612," *VMHB*, 57 (1949), 227-243, at 239.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, 1972), 31; and Hill, "From Lollards to Levellers," *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honor of A. L. Morton*, ed. Maurice Cornforth (Atlantic Highlands, N. J., 1979) 49-67, at 53.

<sup>5</sup> During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, radical thought is hard to document except during the Interregnum, but we do have evidence of democratic ideas in the Tudor and early Elizabethan drama, in popular proverbs, and in some religious groups. Altogether, these furnish a background for the radical ideas of the English Revolution and prove that a continuous tradition of radicalism existed as an underlying current of popular thought throughout Captain John Smith's life. For the drama, see *Gentleness and Nobility* in Richard Axton, ed. *Three Rastell Plays* (Cambridge, England, 1979); Kenneth Walter Cameron, *The Authorship and Sources of Gentleness and Nobility* (Raleigh, N. C., 1941); William Wager's *Enough is as good as a Feast* (1565?); David Bevington's discussion of social themes in these two plays and others in *Tudor Drama and Politics* (Cambridge, Ma., 1968); and Margot Heinemann, *Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts* (Cambridge, England, 1980), esp. "From Popular Drama to Leveller Style; a Postscript," 237-257. For one popular proverb, see Albert B. Friedman, "When Adam Delted...": Contexts of an Historical Proverb," *The Learned and the Lewed*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, Ma., 1974), 213-230. For social themes in religious writings, see Helen C. White, *Social Criticism in Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1944); and T. Wilson Hayes, "John Everard and the Familist Tradition," *The Origins of Anglo-American Radicalism*, ed. Margaret Jacob and James Jacob (London, 1984), 60-69.

<sup>6</sup> In the Shakespeare Variorum *Troilus and Cressida* (Philadelphia, 1953), editors Harold Newcomb Hillebrand and T. W. Baldwin supply numerous analogues, 389-410.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh T. Lefler, "Promotional Literature of the Southern Colonies," *Journal of Southern History* 33 (1967), 3-25, at 10; Loren E. Pennington, "The Amerindian in English Promotional Literature," *The Westward Enterprise: English Activities in Ireland, America*, ed. K. R. Andrews et al (Detroit, 1979), 175-194, at 192, n.8.

<sup>8</sup> *The Voyages and Colonizing Enterprises of Sir Humphrey Gilbert*, ed.

David B. Quinn, 2 vols. (London, 1940), 450.

<sup>9</sup> *The Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Hereford and Percy and Evelyn M. Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, England, 1925-52) 4: 569-570, 9: 663-664.

<sup>10</sup> Carville V. Earle argues that less than two-thirds of the white population died that winter: "Environment, Disease, and Mortality in Early Virginia," *The Chesapeake in the Seventeenth Century: Essays on Anglo-American Society*, eds. Thad W. Tate and Daniel L. Ammerman (Chapel Hill, 1979), 96-125. But of course we are not here concerned with the reality (although it was dreadful indeed) but with what English people of the early seventeenth century believed to be the truth.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Brown, *The Genesis of the United States*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1890), 648.

<sup>12</sup> *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. John M. Robertson (London, 1905), 776.

<sup>13</sup> *Winthrop Papers*, ed. Stewart Mitchell, Allyn Bailey Forbes, et al., 5 vols. (Boston, 1929-47), 2: 143.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in R[obert] R[alston] Cawley, *The Voyagers and Elizabethan Drama* (1938; rpr. New York, 1966), 296-297.

<sup>15</sup> The only study of American identity in the first half of the seventeenth century is Chapter 3, "The Earliest American Identities" in my *New England's Annoyances: America's First Folk Song* (Newark, Del., 1985), 50-65. Pertinent too are the studies of expressions of affection for early America by Bridenbaugh and by Eisinger; but Bridenbaugh ignores Smith and the seventeenth-century South; and although Eisinger has a few pertinent comments on Smith and the South, he concentrates on the pre-Revolutionary period. Carl Bridenbaugh, *The Spirit of '76: The Growth of American Patriotism before Independence* (New York, 1975). Chester E. Eisinger, "Land and Loyalty: Literary Expressions of Agrarian Nationalism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century American Letters," *AL*, 21 (1949-50), 160-178.

<sup>16</sup> Ian Beckwith's investigation of Smith's background suggests that Smith's education prepared him to transcend his yeoman background and that his father intended Smith to—as Hawthorne says of Major Molineux's kinsman—"rise in the world." Ian Beckwith, "Captain John Smith: The Yeoman Background," *History Today* 26 (1976), 444-451.