

3-1998

## Review of Gleach's "Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures"

Paul Otto

George Fox University, [potto@georgefox.edu](mailto:potto@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac)

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Published in *Journal of American History* 84(4), March 1998, pp. 1488-1489 [jah.oah.org/](http://jah.oah.org/)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History, Politics, and International Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of History, Politics, and International Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolf@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolf@georgefox.edu).

*Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia: A Conflict of Cultures.* By Frederic W. Gleach. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. xii, 241 pp. \$55.00, ISBN 0-8032-2166-5.)

Due to scarcity of sources, the early history of Virginia has been shrouded in the mists of the past. Further, surviving records are colored by the seventeenth-century European perspective of the original scribes. Such factors make the study of contact between the English and their Powhatan Indian neighbors especially difficult. In *Powhatan's World and Colonial Virginia*, the anthropologist Frederic W. Gleach surmounts those problems by bringing an ethno-historical methodology to bear on the available sources, illuminating for his readers the early relations between the Indians and the colonists.

Gleach argues that the interaction between Europeans and Native Americans in colonial Virginia, including significant events such as the capture of John Smith by the Powhatans and his subsequent "rescue" by Pocahontas, or the "massacre" of 1622, has been greatly misunderstood by previous scholars as well as by the English participants themselves. To rectify such confusion, Gleach offers a reevaluation of these events based upon his understanding of the two cultures involved. After addressing questions of theoretical perspective and methodology in his introduction, Gleach surveys the intellectual and cultural worlds of the Powhatans and the English. Within this context, he examines contact between the English and Indians of Virginia that preceded the Jamestown experiment, carefully discusses Powhatan and European contact until 1644, and

offers some comments concerning the years following 1644.

Implementing an ethnohistorical methodology, Gleach discovers that, while the English consistently saw the Indians as an uncivilized people needing English culture and religion, the Powhatans themselves long interpreted the English as an inferior people intruding upon their domain. Thus many of the actions of the Powhatans and their leaders must be understood in terms of rituals performed in order to incorporate the English into their world and to remind the English of their proper place, both socially and geographically, in that world. Gleach also stresses that, while the colonists consistently failed to understand the actions and behavior of the Indians, the Powhatan people succeeded in properly understanding the Europeans and their intentions.

While some historians may be troubled by the anthropological style of this work, it nevertheless provides some useful insight into the Powhatan people and their reception of the English. Yet a few questions about the book arise. One wonders, for example, why Gleach does not refer to Bernard W. Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility* (1980), in his discussion of European culture and attitudes, or why he does not cite Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony* (1984), during his analysis of early colonization attempts by the English, when at other times he makes extensive reference to scholars of conflicting or coinciding opinions. Further, while the author goes to great pains to provide a clear cultural context for the actions of native people, his comments about the Europeans seem less informed at times. Even so, such criticisms do not weaken the main strength of the book, and those interested in Indian affairs in the Chesapeake would do well to add this volume to their study of the region. Whether readers agree with his analysis or not, they should come away from his book with a greater appreciation for the complexities of intercultural relations in early America.

Paul Otto  
*Dordt College*  
*Sioux Center, Iowa*