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American Historiography in the Making: Three Eighteenth-Century Narratives of Colonial Virginia

The history of writing history is as exciting to the practitioners of the trade as the study and knowledge of the past itself. It has become the subject of particular interest among American historians and historical theorists after Hayden White electrified their traditionally positivist world by comparing the status of historiography to that of literature as, he argued, the works of both make use of verbal structures in the form of a narrative prose discourse (White *Metahistory*, "The Question of Narrative"; Somekawa and Smith; Cohen; Domańska 82-100). Among early Americanists, the debates about the relationship between history and literature excite the interest of those involved in Atlantic history: they acknowledge the practical necessity of cross-disciplinary dialogue to enrich their methodologies and refine the skills of textual analysis (Slauter; Games; Waterman; Gould; Maddock Dillon). Distinguished literary scholars and historians of early modern Britain in the English-speaking academic world have also responded to the rapprochement between history and literary theory by exploring the common roots of *ars historica* and *ars poetica*, the boundaries between history and fiction, and the convergence of the two genres (Kelly and Harris Sacks). Their colleagues studying the Spanish American colonies followed suit by exploring, for instance, the historiographical epistemologies and concepts in the colonial histories produced in eighteenth-century Spain and in her American empire (Cañizares-Esguerra). In this broader intellectual context, the present study analyzes three well-known historical narratives of eighteenth-century Virginia in order to demonstrate how "history" and "story" meet, interact, and sometimes compete in them. The ultimate goal is to search for the development of colonial historiography as a distinct mode of writing and for the emergence of the historian's professional identity.

The examined texts include *History and the Present State of Virginia, In Four Parts* by Robert Beverley (1705), *The Present State of Virginia* by Hugh Jones (1724), and *The History of the First Discovery and Settlement of Virginia* by William Stith (1747)—a promising selection for a number of reasons. First, originally published in the first half of the eighteenth century, about 25 years apart, they may offer some evidence of change

in the type of narrative they employ. Second, they were all written by Virginians. Two of them were natives of the colony: Robert Beverley Jr., a wealthy landowner and burgess from Jamestown, and William Stith, a Church of England clergyman and master of the grammar-school of William and Mary College. The third one, Hugh Jones, was a creolized Virginian residing in the Chesapeake area for sixty-four years as a professor of mathematics at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg and then as rector of various parishes in Virginia and Maryland. Thus, their narratives are insiders' stories combining historical sources with personal and family experience, a quality unlikely to be achieved by an arm-chair historian working from England. Thirdly, all three authors, self-appointed spokesmen and apologists for Virginia, were educated in England (Jones held the master's degree from Jesus College, of Oxford University, and Stith studied theology at Queen's College of the same institution), where they had a chance to get at least some understanding and first-hand experience of the prevailing metropolitan intellectual and literary fashions of their times. Finally, all three histories were texts of trans-Atlantic circulation, as they were printed in London (the first editions of Beverley and Jones, and the second edition of Stith) for the English reading public and subsequently "travelled" to Virginia to be available on the colonial book market. Beverley's *History* was republished in French at Paris in 1707, and in the same year an edition was issued at Amsterdam.

The basic method used here is close reading in search of compositional, narrative and rhetorical strategies employed by the authors. With the help of this essentially literary analytical tool, I intend to demonstrate how historiographic writing was beginning to crystallize at the intersection of certain early eighteenth-century genres of both popular and scholarly writing, and to indicate the presence and the convergences of these generic conventions in the three texts under scrutiny.

The three narratives were evidently intended for publication and circulation, yet among different audiences. Beverley wrote and first published his *History* when on a two-year visit to England and dedicated it specifically "To the Right Honourable Robert Harley, Speaker of the H. of Commons, and One of Her Majesty's Principal Secretaries of State" (ii) responsible for "the Plantations," with the intention to win his support for the colony in the shape of a wiser imperial policy and the appointment of better governors. Yet in the preface, he also shows awareness of a larger reading public by making references to "the gentle Reader" whom he wants to "settle his Credit with" (vii). Jones also completed his work in England, where he spent four years before returning permanently to Virginia. His primary addressees were "pious and learned bishops; to whose consideration the following sheets are in the most submissive manner offered" (47), but he also offered his book "with the greatest submission" to the general reader, hoping for his "kind acceptance" (48). His target readers were those in England, as he observed that

"few people in England (even many concerned in publick affair of this kind) have correct notions of the true state of the Plantations" (45). Stith addresses "the Reader" directly on several occasions in the main text, saying for instance: "I here present the Reader with the first Part of my History of our own country" (iii), or "I hope therefore, the courteous Reader will be satisfied with this short Caution (112-3), yet the readers he seems to have in mind were Virginians, to whom he offers a "History of *our own country*" (iii, emphasis added). Thus, these were works not only intended for a narrow group of intellectuals and for the government officials but for general reading and for "tolerable Entertainment" (Beverley xi). It is only logical to assume that attracting wider readership required from the authors at least some adherence to the prevailing modes of discourse and artistic expression in piecing together factual evidence at their disposal about Virginia's past and present.

The three texts differ considerably in the actual amount of Virginia's history in each of them, history understood as a narrative about the past built around a thesis on the basis of evidence, or at least as a narrative giving information about the past in chronological order. In Beverley, only "Book I" entitled "The History of the First Settlement of Virginia, and the Government thereof, to the present time" qualifies as a historiographic text in the modern sense and covers the most important events from the first expedition of Sir Walter Raleigh to the area of future Virginia almost up to the year 1705. Yet Beverley's writing style changes in the course of his account of the colony's past according to the period he describes. When relating more distant times on the basis of printed and surviving manuscript documents, he uses relatively dry and factual language, free from flowery additions. Yet as he passes to the times he knew better from the stories of older fellow-Virginians and later from his own experience, he notoriously inserts personal opinions and biting comments, especially on the Virginia governors and their policies. One such malicious fragment concerns Lord Culpepper, the governor of the colony in 1680-1683, who happened to persecute and imprison Beverley's father for instigating tobacco plant-cutting riots when Beverley Jr. was at school in England, and is marked by heavy sarcasm:

> This Noble Lord was skilful in all the Ways of getting Money, and never let slip any Opportunity of doing it. To this End he seem'd to lament the unhappy State of the Country, in relation to their Coin. He was tenderly concern'd that all their Cash should be drain'd away by the Neighbouring Colonies, which had not set so low an Estimate upon it as Virginia; and therefore he proposed the Raising of it. (I/82-83)

The final six pages of (I/98-104), devoted to governor Francis Nicholson, whom Beverley truly despised and under whose governorship he lost his property case, resemble

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a sharp political pamphlet in its own right; that is, a small essay dealing with topical controversies, a form of political writing flourishing in England under Queen Anne. Beverley consistently attacks Nicholson's character, personal integrity, political actions and manner of performing his duties. He condemns his political decisions as "opposite to all Reason" (98), dismisses his religiousness as a mere "pompous Shew of Zeal for the Church" (98), and his language as "most abusive... against those that presume to oppose his Arbitrary Proceedings" (100). In his opinion, Nicholson "takes away all Freedom of Debate, and makes the Council of no other Use, than to palliate his Arbitrary Practices" (101) and operates "by his own absolute Will and Pleasure." To give his tirade factual support, he enumerates examples of Nicholson's jealousy, fits of temper, abuse of power and misjudged decisions. The moral bias, reductiveness and abundant irony in the description of the governor strongly suggest the deployment of the character sketch genre known in European historical writing since the sixteenth century, prominent in the work of seventeenth-century English historians and continued well into the eighteenth century (Watson Brownley).

While the historical part of the book constitutes a relatively coherent chronological narrative of Virginia's past, despite the author's tendency to switch to the political pamphlet mode at times to air his personal grievances, "Book II" devoted to "The Natural Productions and Conveniencies of the Country, suited to Trade and Improvement" breaks with the story completely and becomes a combination of travel account and natural history. As in many natural histories published in early modern England, chronology disappears completely from Beverley's narrative. He now describes the natural phenomena of Virginia as he knew them in the moment of writing (Bushnell 179-180). Beverley abandons the grammatical past tense for the present and offers a long catalogue of plant and animal descriptions, following the pattern used by numerous sixteenth-and seventeenth-century commentators on American flora and fauna: assessment of the fertility of the soil, of its mineral deposits, and the emphasis on the abundance and diversity of local plant and animal life, often with a comment on the practical use of various species for human comfort, pleasure and health (Armstrong 85; chap. 4 and 5 *passim*). Yet because Beverley was not a European traveler to Virginia but its native inhabitant, he transforms creatively the travel narrative format by inserting frequent personal comments, observations and information about the colonists' experiments with various plants that go beyond standard botanical and zoological descriptions. For instance, he devotes a whole page to explaining why the colonial experiments with growing grapevines failed (II/19).

Beverley experiments with another travel account convention beginning to form in the eighteenth-century, which was "a generic blending of factual information and literary

art" to make the account instructive and entertaining at the same time (Batten 5-6). In order to break the somewhat monotonous flow of factual fauna and flora descriptions, he often includes anecdotes related to the discussed species. Thus, when writing about the variety and beauty of flowers in Virginia, he reports a naughty prank he played to embarrass a serious gentleman by handing him a flower that "resembled the Pudenda of a Man and Woman lovingly join'd in one" (II/25). In the section devoted to the local fish, he entertains the reader with an amusing anecdote about getting a big fish first caught by a hawk, which dropped it when attacked by an eagle (II/36). All the anecdotal insertions are autobiographical, as they relate Beverley's own adventures and experiences. While this was probably still acceptable in English travel writing at the beginning of the century, a new generic convention adopted a few decades later treated the writer's talking about himself as "conceited egotism" to be avoided in favor of impersonal detachment (Batten 38-41).

Beverley's narrative indebtedness to popular travel literature, a genre firmly established in the centuries of geographical discoveries, exploration and colonization preceding the publication of his *History*, becomes even more evident in "Book III", devoted to the Virginia Indians. Some motifs found in his description of the Indians correspond to those most frequently present in the accounts of exotic peoples by European travel authors since the sixteenth century: skin color and other aspects of human physical appearance, clothing, sexual and procreative behavior, religion and the forms of worship (Cole 64-67). While several descriptive passages on various aspects of the Indian culture are freely borrowed from earlier such accounts, most often from John Smith's *Generall Historie of Virginia*, Beverley's own first-hand experience of the Indians in his native Virginia enriched the narrative with other extensively covered aspects of their culture described in a manner resembling today's anthropological fieldwork and its methods of participant observation (the Indian house of religious worship, III/28-30) and ethnographic interviewing (conversation with an old Indian about his notion of God, III/32-33).

Elements of contemporary writing genres in Hugh Jones' narrative are somewhat less discernible. First of all, as suggested by the title of the work—*The Present State of Virginia From Whence Is Inferred a Short View of Maryland and North Carolina*—he did not intend to write another history of the colony. He makes his purpose clear in the "Introduction." Having acknowledged the availability of several books upon the history of Virginia, he observes that "none descends to the present state and circumstance of this colony"; therefore he "composed this [work] as a supplement to those other books; treating herein for the most part of such heads, as are altogether omitted, or but slightly accounted for, or described by others" (47). For this purpose, he adopted the overall

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framework of the travel account, organizing the book around the standard topics of such texts: the native inhabitants, the natural environment, the plant and animal world, etc. Yet he frequently departs from that generic convention. Firstly, such a departure is signaled by the presence of historiographic fragments dealing with various events and processes in the distant past of the colony. One chapter in particular, the four-page long "Of the English Settlements in Virginia," resembles a chronologically organized historical narrative, albeit sketchy, selective, incomplete and at times incoherent. Not only does Jones stop at the moment of the Restoration, ignoring the subsequent 40 years of Virginia history, but also switches quite abruptly in the final paragraphs to the presentation of the religious mosaic and tolerance in neighboring Maryland. Other bits of historical information are dispersed throughout the remaining chapters devoted to various aspects of life in Virginia in Jones's times. For instance, in the middle of the chapter on the American Indians, one finds three paragraphs on the mountain expedition organized in 1716 by governor Spotswood to discover a passage through the Appalachians (60). Similarly, in the chapter about the contemporary economic engagements of Virginians, Jones inserts a short passage about the history of tobacco legislation in Virginia (88-89). It is only by extrapolation that the reader can reconstruct a certain chronology of the randomly evoked past developments.

Some historical episodes appear in a few one- or two-paragraph narrative passages serving as illustrations of the author's current argument. Three instances of such mini-narratives pertaining to the history of Anglo-Indian relations in Virginia are found in the chapter on the Indians: one about the escape of a Catawba Indian chief from Fort Christanna in 1716 (Jones 57), another about the arrival of a group of tributary Indians who intend to leave their children at the fort to be educated in the English way (59), and a third reporting a pseudo-theological dispute between Virginia Governor Spotswood and the chief of the Tuscaroras about God and land ownership (61). The last one in particular resembles a form used in European historiography long before Jones, that of the historical anecdote, characterized by its brevity, description of individual human behavior and independence of spirit, and reported snatches of conversation (Patterson 165).

In his extensive introduction to the 1956 edition of Jones' *The Present State of Virginia*, Richard Morton observed that scattered throughout it "are concise thumbnail sketches of the people from slaves to 'gentlemen of distinction'" (10). Three remarkable ones involve the Indians (57-58), the black slaves in the colony (75-76) and Virginia planters (80-81). They seem to be modelled on Theophrastan type characters, brief generalizations on groups without depicting particular individuals. Written in a self-conscious literary style, they contain a dose of humor and irony, and show considerable reductiveness typical of the genre, as in the fragments characterizing Virginia planters:

> for the most part they are much civilized, and wear the best cloaths (*sic*) according to their station; nay, sometimes too good for their circumstances, being for the generality comely handsom (*sic*) persons, of good features and fine complexions (if they take care) of good manners and address. The climate makes them bright, and of excellent sense, and sharp in trade, an ideot, or deformed native being almost a miracle.…
> They are more inclinable to read men by business and conversation, than to dive into books, and are for the most part only desirous of learning what is absolutely necessary, in the shortest and best method. (80-81)

Like Beverley before him, Jones could have been influenced by two related traditions. One was the collections of characters greatly popular in seventeenth-century England and well into the eighteenth century, when he worked on his book. Another very likely source of inspiration were the early eighteenth-century essayists—Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, along with Samuel Johnson—who popularized the expanded character sketches as a journalistic genre in *The Spectator* and *The Tatler,* and whose collected papers appeared in numerous editions throughout the century (Ross 52-54).

The History of the First Discovery and Settlement of Virginia by William Stith (1747), the third and the latest piece of eighteenth-century historiography of colonial Virginia, must be appreciated as a leap towards a coherent and homogeneous modern historical narrative. It constitutes a single sparsely paragraphed text without division into parts or chapters. To help the reader follow the timeline of his narrative, Stith provides crucial dates and names of colonial governors in the margins, in the manner of today's college textbooks. While it is the longest of the three histories under consideration (331 pages in the Williamsburg edition and a documentary Appendix of an additional 34 pages), it covers the shortest span of time—only about 45 years between the first colonial experiments of Humphrey Gilbert in 1578 and Walter Raleigh in 1584 to the dissolution of the Virginia Company and making Virginia a royal colony in 1624. As a result, the book is full of minute details, delightful perhaps to a modern professional historian of early America but evidently not to Stith's subscribers, who found it unreadable and did not sponsor the preparation of the intended second part.

Stith maintains chronology by the systematic use of temporal conjunctions, either in the form of precise dates (11th of October 1492; 11th of June 1578), or other phrases—"Two Years after," "The same year 1603," "The following Year," "The beginning of the next Year," "Soon after," etc., consistently placing them at the beginning of relevant paragraphs, where they cannot be overlooked. This was an improvement on Beverley, who used dates (mostly years—"Anno 1663") more sparingly and did not care about maintaining a smooth flow of the narrative, chopping it into numbered paragraphs, often only one or two sentences long. Jones, it seems, was least concerned with maintaining

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chronology. While he included a few early dates (1584—the first landing of Englishmen on the Roanoke Island; 1620—the formation of the colonial Assembly, 1626 (*sic*)—the dissolution of the Virginia Company), he preferred less precise phrases, such as "in the late queen's time" (Jones 62); unspecified formulations: "one thousand three hundred people have gone over *in one year* to settle there [in Va.]" (64, emphasis added); or timeless generalizations: "In this happy constitution, the colony of Virginia has prosperously encreased gradually and wonderfully, to its present most flourishing condition" (64).

Despite his remarkable achievement in maintaining a coherent flow of dynamic, chronologically ordered narrative, Stith still makes frequent use of static and moralizing character sketches of specific historical individuals, typically presenting their subjects as models of their kind rather than as realistic human beings. Apart from brief ones, like that of king James I (vii), of Powhatan (154-155), and of Sir Walter Raleigh (155-156), he also interrupts his narrative with a lengthy biographical passage on Captain John Smith (108-112), the final part of which demonstrates Stith's mastery of the convention:

> …and I shall finish his [Smith's] Character, with the Testimonies of some of his Soldiers and Fellow-Adventurers.… That he was ever fruitful in Expeditions, to provide for the People under his Command, whom he would never suffer to want anything, he either had, or could procure: That he rather chose to lead, than send his Soldiers into Danger; and upon all hazardous or fatiguing Expeditions, always shared every thing equally with his Company, and never desired any of them, to do or undergo any thing, that he was not ready, to do or undergo himself: that he hated Baseness, Sloth, Pride, and Indignity, more than any Danger: That he would suffer Want, rather than borrow; and starve, sooner than not pay: That he loved Action, more than Words; and hated Falshood and Covetousness, worse than Death…. (111-112)

Even if Stith himself thought of his story within a story about Smith as a character sketch, it contains sufficient evidence justifying its reading as an example of generic cross-fertilization between the older travel account and the new fictional "novel" observed in eighteenth-century popular literature. John Smith's life story is real, yet at the same time fits the model of the eighteenth-century fictional hero-traveller embodying the modern ethos of movement, change and conquest (Richetti 60-64). His exotic travels, adventures, and bizarre turns of fortune as a vagabond-soldier in Mediterranean Europe, Morocco, Turkey, Siberia, and America provide a perfect plot line for the travel story. Smith himself was a real-life *picaro*: orphaned at thirteen, he soon escaped the custody of his guardians and, driven by his "roving and romantic Fancy," lived the life of restless travel abounding in romantic and military adventures (Nowicki 23). Ultimately, as in a picaresque novel, his life of "a Soldier of Fortune" had a noble purpose as "his Adventures gave Life and Subsistency to the Colony [of Virginia]," where he arrived as the

servant of the Virginia Company and where "by the mere Force of his Virtue and Courage, he awed the *Indian* Kings, and made them submit, and bring Presents" (Stith 112). By recognizing the novelistic potential of Smith's biography and incorporating it into his otherwise disciplined chronological account of Virginia's difficult beginnings, Stith showed that, by the mid-eighteenth century, history writers did not distance themselves from popular entertaining genres and that historiography continued to borrow from literature as much as in previous decades.

If, however, a study of the evolution of early American history writing is to be valid and complete, looking at the narrative and the imaginative side of the considered texts has to be supplemented by probing into their empirical side, into the demands of the discipline's methodology and practices reflected in the types of evidence used by the authors, their citations, quotations, and references. The declared commitment of the studied authors to the truth and credibility of their narratives as a reflection of their professional identity is also a part of this historiographic "infrastructure."

Textual evidence concerning the development of the authors' awareness of their empirical base is plentiful, the best direct statements on the point predictably found in the authorial introductions. Beverley justifies his endeavor by stating that "[n]othing of that kind has yet appear'd" and that among the existing publications concerning Virginia "there's none of 'em either true, or so much as well invented." He is especially censorious about travel books that, in his opinion, are "stuff'd with Poetical Stories" and their authors—travelers—are "most suspected of Insincerity" (Beverley vi-viii). He himself was careful not to mention anything he could not "make good by very Authentique Testimony" (viii), and not to insert anything he could not justify by his "own Knowledge, or by credible Information" (x). Yet he hardly refers to any specific documents except John Smith's *Generall Historie,* making it difficult to verify the quality of his sources.

A modern historian does nor begin a single project without first learning what other historians have said about the topic and how they said it. Hugh Jones anticipates this convention by performing a very general review of contemporary works on Virginia in the introduction to his work: "There are several books upon this subject [history of Virginia], but none descends to the present state and circumstances of this colony, nor proposes what methods may seem most conducive to the promotion of its best interests in all respects" (47). A comment he subsequently makes on his narrative style testifies to his conviction that the main purpose of writing history is reporting truth, and that truth requires plain language: "I have industriously avoided the ornamental dress of rhetorical flourishes, esteeming the unfit for the naked truth of historical relations, and improper for the purpose of general propositions" (48).

Jones most often acknowledges his sources when writing about Virginia during his lifetime. These are essentially ethnographic sources: his own observations introduced by phrases such as "I have seen," "I observed," "I know" (*passim*), and oral reports obtained from other people. At one point he evokes "the worthy Mr. Charles Griffin; from whom [he has] been informed of most of the Indian customs and principles" (59); elsewhere he mentions "the traders" and "Mr. Andrews, missionary to the northern Indians" (62) as his informants. Yet whenever he writes about a more distant past of the colony, his historical method leaves much to be desired. He freely copies information from the available historical narratives of early Virginia without making references to any such texts. Nevertheless, he lines himself up with the best known historians of the colony before him—Captain John Smith, John Clayton, and Robert Beverley—and states that his work "may be an abridgment and appendix to them all" (102). As a clergyman-historian, he treats the Bible and the Old Testament story of Noah's three sons therein as the ultimate source in explaining the racial mosaic of the people in Virginia (49-53).

Stith surpassed his predecessors in understanding the importance of the sources to a historian with professional aspirations. In "The Preface" he distances himself from his "Brother Writers" whose works on the history of Virginia brought about his "Vexation and Disappointment" (iii). He declares his strong commitment to printed documents and assures the reader that "there is not one Article, scarce a Word, in my Relation, which is not founded on the express Testimony, and the incontestible Authority, of our Records in the Capitol, and the [Virginia] Company's Journal" (v). The main text contains numerous lengthy extracts from archival texts as well as the author's occasional complaints about lack of access to important documents and about the unreliability of some extant ones. In his archivist's zeal, he attached an appendix to the main volume of the *History* containing a collection of the charters and letters patent of the colony. He laboriously transcribed them from the "much mangled and defaced" copies at the Clerk's Office of the Virginia House of Burgesses.

The small sample of texts included in the present analysis is insufficient to support big generalizations about the development of historiographic writing in eighteenth-century British colonial America. Yet even this limited analytical exercise demonstrates that historical writing did not extricate itself from fictive forms of the period and that in colonial Virginia it intermingled in many ways with protonovelistic, novelistic and journalistic forms of the time. These narrative forms were the primary carrier of historical content. How successful the generic eclecticism was in bringing amateur colonial historians closer to distinctive standards of modern professional history writing depended very much on the educational background, writing skills, intellectual ability, imagination and personal agendas of individual writers. At the same time, the historical narratives

were transformed by the growing epistemological awareness of their authors, increasingly preoccupied with chronological presentation, causal explanation of events and processes, the interpretation of their significance, and the need to search for new types of reliable evidence. In the eighteenth-century historical narratives of colonial Virginia, the old struggle between the rational claims on truth and the desire for the sheer pleasure of storytelling persisted.

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