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978-0-521-29723-3 - Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia

Bernard W. Sheehan

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

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The discovery and colonization of the New World afforded Europeans an extraordinary opportunity to expand their knowledge of the human condition. Explorers, traders, and colonists encountered new peoples with distinctive physiognomies and curious ways of organizing their lives, who provided a vast new field for ethnological investigation. Of course few Europeans reached America bent on a dispassionate examination of its population and resources. They sought practical ends—trade, settlement, proselytization—and their vision of the new continent tended to be subordinated to those ends. Moreover, virtually every observer in some sense aped medieval travelers by noticing the curious and exotic aspects of native life. Despite the imperatives of practicality and a taste for the bizarre, the age of discovery accumulated a substantial body of accurate information about the continent and its inhabitants. But this rich display of knowledge added very little to the European conception of man's place in the universe,<sup>1</sup> mainly because throughout the early years of exploration and settlement European thinking and feeling about the native people of America occurred within the limits of the customary division between civility and savagism. Until the nineteenth century few serious European thinkers transcended this limitation.

The idea of the savage derived from the primal myth in European culture. It defined a condition antecedent to the formation of society and the inception of history in which men lived free of the complexities and limitations that have since become part of human existence. Genesis gave the conception vital support by describing the passage of man's ancestors from the bliss of the Garden to the tribulations of life on earth. Psychologi-

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cally, savagism rested on the atavistic longings of human beings to abandon the world of adversity and drift into the comforting realm of nothingness; or, conversely, it drew on the fear that human life hovered on the edge of the abyss and might at any time slip into a state of unrelieved violence and insecurity. Thus savagism elucidated human origins and explained contemporary peoples who, by remaining attached to the simple existence of the primal age, failed to replicate the European mode of life, but it left open the nature of that presocial condition. Savages might be either noble or ignoble, either the guardians of pristine virtue or the agents of violent disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Savagism assumed meaning only in the sense that it inverted the civil condition. Civil men labored for their bread, pacified their sexual urges in marriage, and formed a complex pattern of social arrangements. They lived in a world of order and discipline that was defined by political authority, a system of law, and the requirements of religious morality. Depending on one's point of view, a savage either lacked these advantages or enjoyed a state of enviable innocence by being free of them. In either case, as an ignoble or noble savage, his mode of life was clearly demarcated from the civility that Europeans believed characterized their own manner of living. Although the barrier between the civil and savage conditions seemed impenetrable, most commentators allowed for movement between the two. In one mood Europeans sought a return to original innocence. In another they were convinced that they had once been mired in savagism and had managed by dint of hard work and the blessings of Providence to reach the civil stage of life. Ignoble savagism conveyed the impression of childishness and immaturity, of stunted growth; civility assured European society that it had achieved adulthood. This assurance, however, did not obviate the possibility of a slide back into the savage state. The ignoble savage always loomed as an external threat to Europeans and as an internal danger because he represented primal urges that, although subdued, remained part of the human condition. In the eighteenth century this relationship between savagism and civility would be transformed into a formal theory of staged development. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it served as a way of categorizing disparate cultures and explain-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

ing to Europeans how their own world had come to be and why it was different from the world inhabited by American Indians.<sup>3</sup>

The myth, of course, preceded the experience. Europeans knew what they would find in the New World long before experience had an opportunity to intrude on their convictions. They encountered savages in America because their minds and their senses had been molded by a powerful mythic formula that equated societies less elaborately organized than their own with the primal condition. This myth enabled Europeans to make sense out of America, to reach an accommodation between the new continent and a venerable abstraction basic to European beliefs. Unfortunately, the American native as savage bore little resemblance to the real Indian. As a consequence Europeans went to the New World ill-equipped to understand or deal with the societies they met there. Tension arose immediately between what Europeans thought they saw and what actually existed, but no means were available to reconcile anthropology with myth. Once classified as a savage, the Indian could be expected to play out his role in relation to the civil order. Either he would make the transition to civility or he would resist the influence of European society and face destruction.

For Englishmen of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the doctrine of savagism served deeply felt social needs. They lived with an intense fear that the coherence of life might disintegrate. Shakespeare encapsulated the danger brilliantly in the discourse on order in *Troilus and Cressida*: “Untune that string,” and “discord follows.” And no wonder: It was a tumultuous age. The breakup of the old religion and the international conflict that ensued threw Englishmen on guard against internal and external enemies. As English religious opinion edged closer to Continental Protestantism, millennial stirrings sparked expectations of profound social change. Neoplatonism took hold in the universities and stimulated a new interest in mystical thinking. In the intellectual underground, Hermetic philosophy, the Judaic Cabala, and alchemy gained numerous adherents who sought a simple insight into the mystery of life. Although the new cosmography did not dethrone man from the center of the universe, it seriously under-

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Bernard W. Sheehan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

#### 4 *SAVAGISM AND CIVILITY*

mined traditional certainties and initiated a drastic transformation in the postmedieval conception of the physical world. In politics the influence of Machiavelli shattered the moral underpinnings that had supported the Christian state. Simultaneously the Elizabethan age experienced economic changes that impaired the integrity of village life, caused substantial shifts in population, and convinced the aristocracy that it had entered a period of crisis. Hence the turn of the sixteenth century was a time of deep melancholy. Even the expansive optimism and dreams of chivalric romance that haunted the generations of Sidney and Essex ended in death and betrayal. Transported to the New World, the threat of disorder became more acute when the English confronted a native people who represented for them the antithesis of humane social arrangements.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest impressions transmitted from America were paradisaic. The new continent stimulated prelapsarian yearnings for a haven from the insecurities and distractions of European life. Although the English entered the field of colonization late, long after the European experience should have yielded more realistic evidence, they were no less inclined than the Spaniards and French to see the New World and its inhabitants through the rose tints of paradisaic innocence. Even the wealth expected from the new continent, largely gold and precious metals, was translated into a mythic remedy for Europe's ills. Treatment of the Indians through the paradisaic formula turned them into an ideal to which Europeans appealed in their chagrin at the shortcomings of their own way of life. The paradisaic formula left the Indians in a curiously insubstantial state. Not only was their way of life seen from the perspective of the white man's world, but it lacked the particularities of a real social order. And yet native Americans were real enough to make a distinctive mark on the history of English colonization in the New World. When they resisted the invasion of their territory or asserted the strength and integrity of their society, Englishmen tended to stress the ignoble side of the doctrine of savagism.

The English vision of the natives had been split from the outset and remained divided throughout the history of the

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*INTRODUCTION*

5

relationship between the two peoples. But with the establishment of the Virginia colony English opinion made a discernible shift toward ignoble savagism. The images were ready-made, available for use in appropriate circumstances. Once the English began the hapless ordeal of building a civil order in America and became entangled in a delicate relationship of dependence and antipathy with the Powhatans, they were much quicker to seize on the negative portrayal of native life.<sup>5</sup>

In the ignoble savage Englishmen perceived a creature devoid of social discipline, violent by nature, inclined to devour even his own, and repulsive in his personal habits. He was a servant of the devil, a threat not only to English interests in the New World but also to the welfare of mankind. This extreme depiction of the ignoble savage came close to depriving the Indian of his humanity. Although never stated explicitly, the language of savagism disclosed that doubts about the Indian's right to membership in the human family lurked in the imagination of many Englishmen. Images of the Indian as beast drew on legends of monsters, wild men, and quasi-human creatures that had long been part of the European tradition. Thus ignoble savagism incorporated the American native within the bounds of European sensibility and offered Englishmen a plausible explanation for the resistance that Indians presented to colonization.

In fact savagism merely fed the white man's internal needs. It provided no realistic interpretation of the relationship Indians and Englishmen constructed in the New World. It did not, for example, explain the dependence of the English colonists on the native society. As savages, Indians were expected to draw sustenance from the bounty of nature or to survive meagerly on the fruits of hunting and gathering. The native people of Virginia derived a major portion of their food from farming, a practice quickly noted and exploited by the English. John Smith brought the Jamestown settlement through its first two years by confiscating and wheedling corn from the Indians, and the colony continued to depend on the native farmers until the early 1620s. Although they occasionally acknowledged and regretted their dependence, the English failed utterly to see the incompatibility between reality and their conception of Indi-

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Bernard W. Sheehan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 *SAVAGISM AND CIVILITY*

ans as savage people. Even while subsisting on Indian corn, they stressed the scarcity that they believed inevitably afflicted those unable to transcend the savage condition.

Savagism placed no permanent impediment in the way of progress. Even when the Indian was portrayed in bestial terms, there was still hope for his salvation. He participated to some degree in the common human inheritance which, in Christian terms, meant that he would benefit from the preaching of the Gospel. Englishmen lacked the missionary zeal of Spaniards and Frenchmen. Moreover their relations with the Indians were never quite conducive to successful proselytization. Still, they accepted the obligation to teach the Indians Christianity and to raise them from the primitive habits of the savage state. As civil men they could do no less. They made only a feeble effort, but the main reason for their failure was the refusal of the Indians to respond. The native people found many of the white man's artifacts attractive, but they would not abandon their children to English teachers or give up the gods that had served them well. Few Indians went over to the colonists, though more colonists than the English wished to remember threw in with the Indians. In the sense that the doctrine of savagism harbored the beginnings of a theory of development, it predicted the conversion of the native people. When the conversion failed to occur, it served as well to explain the incorrigibility of the Indians. In neither case did it offer an intelligible solution to the problem of Anglo-Indian relations.

Above all, ignoble savagism argued persuasively for the inevitability of violence between Englishmen and Indians. The English clearly expected conflict to erupt. Spaniards' accounts of their experiences in the New World described orgies of violence between conquistadores and native warriors. Although the English generally dissociated themselves from Spanish brutality, they obtained their first insights into the native societies from Spanish sources. In addition, explorers, fishermen, traders, and would-be colonists who plied the Atlantic coast during the sixteenth century counseled caution in dealing with the Indians. The English took the advice and arrived in the New World armed and prepared for a hostile reception. In fact the reception was as often friendly as it was hostile. Indians sought

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*INTRODUCTION*

7

ends similar to those that motivated European policy. They wished to trade, and they hoped for allies against local enemies. Each side attempted to manipulate the other, and both were prepared for violence. It came because both societies ranked war as an important human activity, because their interests diverged, and because the English envisioned the Indians as a savage menace to civil order.

The uprising of 1622, the culminating event in Anglo-Powhatan relations, occurred when the Indians became convinced that the integrity of their society demanded an all-out assault on the English. Peace of a sort had reigned for some eight years. Actually the peace was more a period of armed tension in which the English drifted into the interior, established a firm economic base, and imposed political order on their new colony, while the Indians were required to serve English purposes and gradually declined in strength. Under Powhatan and Opechancanough the native people had resisted conversion by the English, but through the process of acculturation their society, by 1622, had reached a point of crisis. Opechancanough and the war leader Nemattanew apparently sought to inflict vengeance on the English and assuage the tensions of native life by annihilating the colony in one blow. For the English the attack cleared the air. It settled whatever doubts may have remained concerning the implications of savagism, and they proceeded to the systematic conquest and dispersal of the Powhatan people.

The English decision to subjugate the Indians rested on the experience of over a century. They had known about the native people at least since the early years of the sixteenth century, and beginning with the publications of Richard Eden in the 1550s a substantial literature had developed dealing with the New World and its native inhabitants. What Waldseemüller, Ramusio, and de Bry did for the Continent, anthologizers such as Eden, Richard Hakluyt, and Samuel Purchas did for England. The major writings dealing with Spanish, Portuguese, and French exploration and colonization were collected, translated, and widely circulated. There can be little doubt that great numbers of literate Englishmen found the subject fascinating, though perhaps not quite fascinating enough to please

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Bernard W. Sheehan

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *SAVAGISM AND CIVILITY*

a promoter like Hakluyt. Strange peoples were inherently interesting and the travel literature contained great amounts of reasonably accurate and usable information. In addition, the literature confirmed the English predisposition to conceive of the native people as savages. Thus the material almost never came through for its own sake. Eden, Hakluyt, and Purchas, among others, pursued a variety of ends other than the precise portrayal of the people of America. They were concerned with empire, economic improvement, the defense of Protestantism, and proselytization, and only marginally with the indigenous cultures of America. The Indian figured in their accounts because he could not be avoided in the New World and might serve the white man's purposes. He might people an empire, form a market for European goods, aid the English in their contest with Catholic Spain, or abandon devil worship for the truth of Christianity. Inevitably Englishmen reconciled the presence and character of the native people with their own interests. This requirement was the major function of savagism. It allowed the English colonizer to incorporate the Indians into the primal myth of Western Christendom, and to subject the Indians to the fundamental needs of English thinking and feeling. No amount of contrary evidence concerning the savage concept could release the native people from subjection to a universal idea. For the Powhatans it offered no consolation, though to Englishmen it explained the natives' demise.



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[More information](#)

## 1

*PARADISE*

The search for the terrestrial paradise assumed a special urgency in the Elizabethan period. International turmoil and internal tension made the anticipation of some chiliastic fulfillment unusually comforting. Yet the Elizabethan explorers and colonists invented nothing new. Western European travelers and writers about distant lands had sought paradise for a millennium. That the New World should eventually have served their purposes was inevitable. When the English began exploration and colonization in the late sixteenth century, they showed the same proclivity for engaging in paradisaic fantasy as other European peoples. Indeed, the tendency was so pervasive as to lead one to suppose some deep-seated psychic or mythic origins that urged Europeans to see virtually any strange land as the repository of prelapsarian virtue.<sup>1</sup>

Although few doubted the existence of the terrestrial paradise, its actual location and the route to it remained obscure. Besides Scripture, one of the principal sources of information on the earthly paradise was the adventures of Sir John Mandeville, a popular writer who traveled largely in his own imagination. His *Travels* had already swept the Continent by the time that the first English version appeared in 1496. A number of later editions came out in the sixteenth century, and Hakluyt included a Latin selection in his *Principall Navigations* in 1589. Mandeville admitted that he had never seen paradise but gave the traditional medieval description of its location.<sup>2</sup> “Men say that Paradise terrestre is the highest lande in all the worlde, and it is so high that it toucheth nere to the cycle of the Mone, for it is so high y<sup>t</sup> Noes floude might not come thereto which covered all the earth about.” Paradise lay beyond the land of

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Prester John, separated from the world by a wilderness of "hils great rocks and other myrke land, where no man may see a day or night . . ." A wall of moss surrounded it, and from it flowed the four great rivers of the world. One of these rivers fed what "some call the well of youth, for they that drinke thereof seme to be yong alway, and live without great sicknesse, and they say this well, cometh from Paradise terrestre, for it is so vertuous . . ." <sup>3</sup> Great obstacles stood in the way, but Mandeville left little doubt of the rewards awaiting those who attained paradise.

Scarcely a spot touched by European explorers did not yield evidence of paradise. Sebastian Munster found it in Calicut. There the harmony of the birds' singing was so ravishing that "the inhabitantes lyue in greate pleasure, as though they were an earthly paradise . . ." They "lyue as it were in continual springe tyme." Stephen Batman thought the Fortunate Isles possessed the right attributes, though he knew well enough that the earthly paradise was in the East. Henry Hawkes favored the Philippines. He reported in 1572 "that sitting vnder a tree, you shall have such sweete smels, with such great content and pleasure, that you shall remember nothing, neither wife, nor children, nor haue any kinde of appetite to eate or drinke, the oderferous smels will be so sweete." One of Richard Eden's travelers found it in Ethiopia, on a high mountain, closer to its traditional location. <sup>4</sup>

But no region could compete with America as the location of the earthly paradise, or at least as the segment of the world most endowed with the virtues of paradise. Although the continent seemed to devour explorers and settlers with startling regularity, reports from the New World remained strongly paradisaic until the English became entangled in the business of building colonies. Then the land resisted exploitation and the native people made life uncomfortable for expectant colonizers. The Puritans who came on the New World scene in the second and third decades of the seventeenth century preferred the image of the perilous wilderness to the conception of the earthly paradise. <sup>5</sup> Even after colonizing commenced, propaganda sustained the tendency to magnify the richness of the land. In order to protect investments, agents of the Virginia Company persisted in exaggerating its potentiality. Colonies al-