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

Bernard W. Sheehan

Frontmatter

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SAVAGISM AND CIVILITY

*INDIANS AND ENGLISHMEN IN
COLONIAL VIRGINIA*

BERNARD W. SHEEHAN

Indiana University

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To my mother and father

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PREFACE

This book inquires into the failure of white men to understand the nature of native societies in America. In a sense it is the history of a misperception, of the distance in the early years of colonization between what Europeans had been taught to expect in the New World and what greeted them when they arrived. I have avoided the temptation to draw a direct causal connection between the content of the white man's intellect, or even his emotions, and the collapse of native society. Europeans lacked the power to wish the Indians dead or, in the first stages of settlement, to effect their demise. The relations between the two societies were more complex, and the process of disintegration more prolonged and tentative, than can be explained by the European vision of native society. Besides, colonization introduced into the new continent forces far more destructive than ideas. Yet ideas were important. The story of cultural conflict in America cannot be told without attention to the conception of the Indian held by white men, if only because so many Europeans seemed determined to treat him as an abstraction. Hence this book concentrates on the tension between idea and reality in Anglo-Indian relations in Virginia.

I have been struck most forcefully not by the power of ideas to stimulate certain kinds of activity, as for example ignoble savagism to generate violence or noble savagism to tempt Europeans to abandon familiar ways, but by the profound inability of the reigning European ideas to offer even a glimmer of truth about the meeting of white and Indian in America. Englishmen certainly behaved toward Indians in certain ways because they believed them to be savages, but more important was the irony that they continued to believe them savage even when circum-

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PREFACE

stances inspired an utterly different sort of relationship. Because the English were trapped by the disjunction between savagism and civility, they could never grasp the reality of their dealings with the native inhabitants of America. They could never perceive that they had found a people as deeply loyal to their own ways as the English were to theirs; or that they had come upon a capable people who had much to offer concerning the secrets of survival in America. Of course we have no reason to believe that the results would have been any different in the long run even if the English had suddenly stumbled on a bonanza of anthropological wisdom. As it turned out, the English proved incapable, despite the evidence, of transcending the limitations of their conventional way of interpreting alien people.

The meaning of the story can be found in the tendency of societies to reconcile the curious with the familiar. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Englishmen, after all, were as dependent as other human beings on conventional definitions of reality. Discomforted by the intrusion into their world of a new continent and an unknown people, they reached for the formula that had long satisfied their needs. They assimilated this new intelligence through a process of abstraction that condensed complexities and conformed enigmatic and obscure information to a time-honored prescription. Many abstractions prove useful in adjusting the tensions and easing the trials of life. But some, savagism for one, raise a barrier against understanding, set men at odds with reality, and in the end nurture tragedy.

I have incurred the usual debts in writing this book. My colleagues in the profession have been free with their time and generous in giving advice. Only the author can know how the book would have turned out without their help. The entire manuscript benefited from readings by Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., Herbert H. Kaplan, Walter T. K. Nugent, Martin Ridge, and Alden T. Vaughan. The chapter entitled "Bestiality" endured the criticism of a departmental seminar whose membership included Maurice G. Baxter, Richard M. Dorson, Robert H. Ferrell, William H. Harris, Richard S. Kirkendall, David M. Pletcher, Gerald Strauss, and John E. Wiltz. At a critical moment in the making of the manuscript Thad Tate rendered valuable counsel.

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A major portion of the research was completed at the Huntington Library, where I enjoyed generous support, one of the world's great collections of rare books, stimulating conversation, sybaritic surroundings, and unflagging cooperation from the staff. I am indebted to Charles S. Hyneman, R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., and John Von Kannon for their help, and to the Earhart Foundation for two summer fellowships. From Indiana University I received a sabbatical leave, aid from the Office of Research and Graduate Development, prompt service from the library, and efficient typing in the history department. I owe Anne Richards thanks for a lesson in the art of copyediting.

This book is dedicated to my mother and father in gratitude for years of trust and patient encouragement.

Bloomington, Indiana
September 1979

B. W. S.