

Book Review

Edited by Tom Costa

Ronald L. Heinemann, John G. Kolp, Anthony S. Parent, Jr., William G. Shade, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth: A History of Virginia, 1607–2007* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2007; 432 pp., \$30.00, ISBN 978-0-8139-2609-4).

Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007; 476 pp., \$29.95, ISBN 978-0-7006-1507-0).

After years of waiting for an updated survey of Virginia history to replace the elegantly written but very dated Virginius Dabney volume, *Virginia, the New Dominion*, we suddenly have these two outstanding narratives.

With Ronald Heinemann's work a quartet of established historians have produced a well-written, academic narrative history of the Commonwealth. Each scholar has covered his area of expertise. The work is heavy on the political side of things, with perhaps some overemphasis within each historian's specialty. For example, Anthony Parent describes the emergence of an elite in late seventeenth-century Virginia society as a great land rush — "grab, grab, grab" (p. 48). This is an argument familiar to readers of Parent's book on seventeenth-century Virginia, *Foul Means: The Formation of a Slave Society in Virginia, 1660–1740*. Also prompting raised eyebrows is Parent's analysis of the relationship between racism and the development of slavery (or vice versa). Parent, I believe, misreads Winthrop Jordan's groundbreaking study, *White Over Black*, with his assertion that the literary evidence adduced by Jordan to indicate a general attitude of inferior-

ity of Africans on the part of Englishmen during Shakespearean times shows “a deep-seated racism that viewed anything black as dirty and evil” (p. 51). Surely Jordan’s argument is much more nuanced.

Heinemann’s book might have profited from a more unified approach, particularly in the way it deals with the role of the political, social, and economic elite that for so long dominated the state. Thus by the beginning of the eighteenth century we learn that “a hierarchy of place — a patriarchy — was now growing more permanent through control of land and tobacco production in the hands of a small elite” (p. 61). Then after the Revolution, during the nineteenth century, while elite dominance lasted longer in Virginia than in any other state except South Carolina, new political alignments would “challenge the political order . . . democratizing the Old Dominion” (p. 171). Yet by the end of the chapter we learn that while the 1851 constitution liberalized the electorate, “Old Virginia had adjusted to the democratic changes, and its traditional leadership was as powerful as ever” (p. 191).

I think that the authors of the Heinemann volume missed a chance to provide readers with a unified thesis that might be sustained throughout the work and tie it together. That thesis, hinted at above, would emphasize the continuing ability of Virginia’s elite to adapt to challenges and changes in their society to maintain their stranglehold on power within the Commonwealth. And racism provided the most important tool in that dominance. Thus the emergence of the tobacco gentry and its consolidation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries might be compared to the continuation of the elite’s control up to and beyond the Civil War, carrying us into the twentieth century with the emergence of the Byrd Machine. It has only been very recently, with the collapse of the latter and the political re-alignments of the 1960s and ’70s, that Virginia’s rulers have given way to a more representative and responsive political structure. These criticisms do not detract from the overall value of the book as a well-written, academic survey of Virginia’s history.

Wallenstein’s book is more ambitious and perhaps more relevant to readers of this review. As a professor of history at Virginia Tech, whose students helped in the production of this book, Wallenstein pays much more attention to the western part of the state; indeed, the sectional conflicts and compromises between Virginia’s leaders

form one of the major themes of his work. He includes an entire chapter on western Virginia during the colonial period, as well as one entitled “Collision of Three Virginias” (easterners, westerners, and slaves) for the antebellum period. There are sections on the Pattons, Prestons, Drapers, and Ingles. “If the 1600s belonged to eastern Virginia, western Virginia claimed a share of the 1700s” (p. 52).

Eschewing much discussion of pre-contact societies, Wallenstein’s text begins with the Europeans who colonized the region beginning in the sixteenth century. Like Heinemann, he synthesizes much recent scholarship and includes an expanded discussion of the Spanish incursion into Virginia and properly emphasizes the crucial role of European national rivalries (especially English-Spanish) in the European settlement of North America.

Employing an occasionally breathless style, Wallenstein and students jump from topic to topic, highlighting specific episodes in ways that the Heinemann collaboration does not. Although this sometimes detracts from the overall synthesis, it does emphasize discrete topics for further study that offer opportunities for using the book effectively in a classroom. Indeed, Wallenstein’s writing, perhaps because of the participation of his students in the making of the book, seems pitched more to an undergraduate audience than is the Heinemann book. I used this work in my recent Virginia History class for undergraduates where it met with a favorable reception. Particularly useful in a text are Wallenstein’s insertion of selections from important primary documents in the margins. Careful reading of these selections provides readers with valuable insight into the laws relating to the emergence of African slavery and racial definitions, as well as the important gender dimension to Virginia’s history.

Also helpful is Wallenstein’s emphasis on significant Virginians throughout the text. We learn about such historical personages as John Rolfe and Pocahontas, Henry Box Brown, Charles Fenton Mercer, Thornton Stringfellow, and a parade of other important Virginians through vignettes that flow throughout the book. These folks, including the Pattons and Prestons, may not be as well known as the panoply of Virginia greats, Jefferson, Madison, Robert E. Lee, but they — as well as Rebecca Lee, the first woman of African descent to earn a medical degree, L. Marian Fleming Poe, the first African-Virginian

woman to become a lawyer — illustrate the important contributions made by Virginians of both genders and races.

Another theme is perhaps more idiosyncratic. Wallenstein pays as much if not more attention to Virginia's efforts to provide services for its inhabitants, including most significantly education. He devotes significant portions of the post-Civil War section of his book to the important changes in public and private education in Virginia, black and white, male and female, including much discussion of institutions of higher learning, such as his own Virginia Tech, the transformation of the College of William and Mary from a moribund classical school to a vibrant public university, and the establishment of the community college system in the 1960s.

Paradoxically, despite the way Wallenstein jumps around, his work presents a more unified theme than the four-way collaboration of Heinemann's book. His view from the western part of the state enables him to see that east-west relations determined much of Virginia's political development, particularly in the critical nineteenth century.

Each of these books often reads like a standard history of the United States, especially in chapters dealing with the early national period, when Virginia's statesmen dominated the national government. Thus these books emphasize the importance of Virginia's history to an understanding the history of the nation as a whole. Each book also includes a helpful list of other works to consult: Heinemann's placed at the end of each chapter, Wallenstein's at the end of the book and divided into reference (including websites and films) and further reading sections. Numerous illustrations and maps complement the text.

Which to buy? Readers of both will benefit enormously. The Heinemann book offers a well-written scholarly synthesis of the course of Virginia history, while Wallenstein presents a more detailed flow of the Commonwealth's history, including excerpts from primary documents and containing numerous offshoots and branches that a reader might well investigate further.

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