

A BYRD IN THE HAND

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Kenneth A. Lockridge. *The Diary, and Life, of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1674–1744.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1987. xiv + 201 pp., Illustrations, notes and index. \$19.95.

Probably the most anthologized writer of the colonial South, William Byrd II long has fascinated students of American history and literature, particularly after the early 1940s, when substantial parts of his “secret” diaries were first made available. Yet even as he fascinates, so he resists facile incorporation into our understanding of early American culture. Is his the first distinctive southern voice in American letters? Do his writings allow us to postulate a “Southern Mind” to balance Perry Miller’s “New England Mind”? Is he the best example we have of a transatlantic gentleman in the early eighteenth century, someone as comfortable in the coffee houses of London as in the tobacco fields of Virginia? Until now his only book-length treatment has been Pierre Marambaud’s *William Byrd of Westover, 1674–1744* (1971), which remains the standard biography, although some find Louis Wright’s introduction to the *London Diary* of considerable value. But no one has yet fit Byrd satisfactorily into the jigsawed portrait of colonial British North America.¹

Now Kenneth Lockridge, like many other early Americanists who started their careers on New England subjects, has fallen under the spell of the Chesapeake and attempts to crack the code of Byrd’s life and culture through his diaries, reading them as the ciphers to Byrd’s proper place in American history. As Lockridge puts it early in the book, his is “an attempt to suggest how early Virginia’s culture shaped Byrd’s personality, and how that personality in turn found expression in the genres available to him in the transatlantic world of the early eighteenth century” (p. vii). Lockridge believes that Byrd has “triply encoded” the story of this cultural dialogue in his secret diaries—“once in a literal code,” the “rare shorthand” he used in his notebooks; once in that these diaries themselves describe “chiefly the expected behaviors of an eighteenth century gentleman, repeated and obsessively reviewed”; and once again in that all its “entries are rendered in terms of that emotional mod-

eration, balance, and acceptance which, with learning and right behavior, defined that era's gentleman" (pp. 7–8). To the astute and dedicated reader, the diary reveals the "remarkable" way that "personality and genre, life and text, interacted through time in Byrd's life" (pp. 150–51).

Such propositions are of some interest to historians and literary critics alike, for Lockridge explores, although he does not use the term, another example of the "self-fashioning" that Stephen Greenblatt has so brilliantly explored in the Renaissance and that Mitchell Breitwieser has written about in his recent study of Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin.² Although Lockridge does not cite Greenblatt's seminal work, he points us in this direction when he writes that "the 'old criticism' of texts as historical creations may have much to teach historical anthropologists about the inner and outer limits for individuals of that realm of expression loosely known as culture" (pp. 153–54). Thus, in the text of Byrd's diaries he glimpses a man creating himself—fashioning his "self"—within the constraints of his culture at a critical time in its history. To know the diary, even in its very terseness and repetition, is to watch Byrd declare who he is and what he wants to be, and to see him become by the end of his life a "Virginia variant of the wider gentry culture of eighteenth century Anglo-America" (p. 154).

Lockridge thus presents a detailed case study of one of the early and most prominent Virginians in the "tobacco culture" that T. H. Breen recently has described and evaluated in his provocative study by that title (1985) and, further, places Byrd in the elaborately woven tapestry of Rhys Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia* (1982). The book attempts for its subject what Edmund Morgan accomplished for John Winthrop in *The Puritan Dilemma* (1958): *The Diary and Life of William Byrd* is a brief work in which the larger dimensions of culture are explored through intensive study of an individual's relation to it. But the difference, and to some readers it may be an important one, is that Lockridge, unlike Morgan, relies heavily, particularly in the first half of the book, on a psychoanalytical discussion of Byrd's attempts to establish himself among Virginia's gentry.

Further, Lockridge suggests that Byrd's desire "to equal and surpass his father's ambitions for him" was inextricably tangled with his "inability to decide if he was a colonial or an Englishman" (p. 31). The diary's tedious reports of his daily rituals, for example, became ways "to reassure himself as well as the targets of his ambition that he was a gentleman" (p. 27). More speculatively, Lockridge links such ambitions to Byrd's sex life, innuendos about which frequently are found in the diaries. "Passion," Lockridge writes, "seemed to Byrd to explain his failures, and this suggests a deep-seated fear of his own emotional and sexual impulses," those "often found," the author adds, "in personalities haunted by the fear of rejection" (p. 29). No one denies

that one's private life has something to do with the public or social self, but Lockridge presents Byrd's experience through 1720 virtually as one Oedipal battle with the presence, and the specter, of the elder Byrd. So powerful was his father's influence over him that in 1710, at a time of particularly acute emotional turmoil, his son opened his grave, only to find, as Lockridge puts it a bit melodramatically, that "there was no message in his dead father's countenance." The younger Byrd found himself "alone in Virginia" (p. 44).

After this traumatic experience Byrd single-mindedly turned his energies to the Virginia governorship, but this quest for power in the colony almost destroyed him personally and politically. In pursuit of his goals, for example, he returned to England in an attempt to depose Governor Alexander Spotswood. Failing that, he played the rake—and the fool—in futile attempts to remarry (his first wife had died in 1716 while visiting him) into the kind of money that would command instant respect at home and abroad. The diary of 1717–1719 records "Byrd's empty pursuit of misplaced ambitions gone wrong on the scene of his own previous failures," an allusion to his earlier attempts to secure both an office and an heiress (p. 84). Then, in 1720, after Byrd had passed through what Lockridge, following Victor Turner and others, terms a period of "liminality" as "debt, a failed courtship, and political bankruptcy had taken from William Byrd all his other dreams," he finally took charge of his life as he never had before. "Having lost all, he was free of his father's voice," Lockridge writes. "He was free to set out to win it all back" (pp. 102–103).

And win he did, as he subsequently became "a major figure in Virginia's life" and "a Virginia man of letters," in part through his marriage to Maria Taylor, twenty-five years his junior, who offered him, if not great wealth, then social stability and three more children; in part through his attainment of a major position on the governor's council at a critical period in Virginia's history (p. 99). These were the years for which we most remember Byrd. In the 1730s, for example, he wrote *A History of the Dividing Line*, which secured his fame (albeit posthumously) as a colonial writer. In this work and other of the travel narratives he prepared into his fifty-fifth year, Byrd discovered "that a mundane New World surveying party could be a vehicle for extending in subtle ways his myth of himself-as-Virginian, and of Virginia as biblical paradise" (p. 130). And as he realized these visions in prose, he concomitantly set himself to their attainment in reality by manipulating the tangled knots of colonial politics as he accrued more power and respect in the Council.

Lockridge has many valuable things to say about Byrd's last fifteen years of life. He reminds us, for example, that Byrd's various histories of the dividing line between North Carolina and Virginia were firmly grounded in his political vision, on "the arguments for the hierarchical society he sought to

buttress," for he knew that "in the New World men could choose between running like hogs through limitless woods, or serving under a man they loved" (p. 141). And comparing Byrd to his fellow colonist Landon Carter, Lockridge speaks of the ways in which both men were emotionally crippled by the provincial expectations of them, with a "resultant brittleness" that made them, like other gentry of the day, continually feel threatened by English culture (pp. 156–57).

But such conclusions about Byrd's relationship to Virginia as a whole do not flow smoothly from the psychological analyses that occupy Lockridge through much of the book, primarily because he does not strike and hold the balance between culture and psychology that he implies he will. For pages we read about Byrd's struggles with personal demons that, for all we know, might owe their existence as much to our late twentieth-century imagination as with anything that was his "reality." Lockridge simply has not brought to bear with any power a definition of culture—in its largest, most ideological sense—of the sort that recently has informed the work of other scholars of the Chesapeake.³ Where in this essay, for example, is an adequate depiction of the *English* cultural moment in which Byrd participated during his many years in the home country? And what, beyond the dimensions of politics, do we learn about his relationship to the emergent "tobacco culture" in Virginia? Failing to find such discussions, we finally best remember Lockridge's psychological, not his cultural, analyses.

Lockridge's book also raises other methodological questions, particularly those that deal with textuality itself, which, in the form of Byrd's diaries and, to a lesser extent, his other writings, are purportedly the focus of the study. Near the end of the book, for example, the author argues that "In Byrd's case at least, personality encountered its culture often in the form not of interactions with other individuals . . . but in the form of the available literary genres" (p. 153). As a member of a department of literature as well as an intellectual historian, I take this as true. But this study does not provide any profound sense of how Lockridge understands "genres" nor of how they were "available" to Byrd, subjects on which Greenblatt and other practitioners of the New Historicism in literary studies could offer him a sharper focus.⁴ Consider, for example, the author's virtual neglect of Byrd's literary output apart from the way it verifies his reading of Byrd's tortured psyche. He circumvents such criticism by saying, in a note, that Marambaud already has given us a portrait of Byrd in his literary and cultural milieu. If this is so, what of novelty has Lockridge in fact to say about Byrd's "culture"? And if the author is to grind in his psychological mill a piece like "Inamorato L'Oiseau," surely he owes us readings of other such occasional pieces—"The Female Creed," say, or Byrd's translations of Petronius—that might add depth to the portrait he

sketches. Surely, what a man writes in banter or what he chooses to translate is as important as any other of his writings. If Lockridge truly believes that "culture" was a cage for William Byrd, "a large and flexible cage in which he eventually learned to fly," he should provide more of a sense of that cage's dimensions, from London to the Peninsula (p. 151).

All this leads me to a final reflection, on Lockridge as a member of a remarkable group of historians who in the *annus mirabilis* of 1970 helped change the direction of studies of colonial America through their demographic work. Like Philip Greven and John Demos, Lockridge now has seen fit to write a psychological study, albeit not of the same breadth as *The Protestant Temperament* (1977) or *Entertaining Satan* (1982). What in their personal experience has made these historians turn to Freud and his cohorts is anybody's guess and nobody's business. But it is worth comparing the kinds of portraits demographers are able to limn from their sources, to those, say, in a work like *Entertaining Satan*, whose subjects are so much more alive and complex. Could it be frustration with a field that teaches us so much about the economic existence of peoples' lives yet fails to allow us fully to understand their motivations that finally sends demographers into the psychohistorical camps?

Lockridge's book does precisely what he says it should. It convinces us that Byrd's tale "should be retold, endlessly, as it is an especially moving story of the intersection of the timeless with a time we little understand" (p. 150). Byrd remains a tantalizing figure who, as Lockridge rightly concludes (in speaking about his subject's accomplishment in his histories), "appears to have been taking one of the first explicit steps toward adapting the English model of a gentleman's role to the lesser scale and more democratic conditions of American life" (p. 161). I doubt, however, that his story will best be told, as David Stannard has put it, by "shrinking history."⁵ Sources like Byrd's diary, letters, and other writings can indeed bring us closer to understanding the transition from English colonist to American citizen, but only if they are read, say, with the same sensitivity and restraint that David Hall recently has shown in treating that other great colonial American diary, by Samuel Sewall.⁶ To the best of my knowledge, Hall never has been a demographer per se. Perhaps like other intellectual historians, he always has realized that scholars will have to amplify any historical explanation that, consciously or not, subordinates culture to psychology.

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1. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling, eds., *William Byrd of Virginia: The London Diary (1717-1721) and Other Writings* (1958), pp. 3-46. See also Richard Beale Davis, "William Byrd:

Taste and Tolerance," in Everett Emerson, ed., *Major Writers of Early American Literature* (1972), pp. 151–77; Lewis P. Simpson, "William Byrd and the South," *Early American Literature* 7 (1972): 187–95; David Smith, "William Byrd Surveys America," *Early American Literature* 9 (1976–1977): 296–310; and Willie T. Weathers, "William Byrd, Satirist," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser., 4 (1947): 27–41.

2. Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980); Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representative Personality* (1984).

3. The closest Lockridge comes to espousing a theory of culture is in his footnote 25, in which he cites the importance to his work of George Herbert Mead's *On Social Psychology*, Anselm Strauss, ed. (1964), and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). But the work of these individuals is quite different from that of cultural anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, James A. Boon, and Marshall Sahlins on whose insights many of the most important recent studies of the interaction of text and culture have been based.

4. Of particular importance to the question of an individual's relation to genre is Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in Josué V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structural Criticism* (1979), pp. 141–160; but see also Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981); Edward Pechter, "The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama," *PMLA* 102 (1987): 292–303; and, more generally, Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983).

5. David Stannard, *Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory* (1980).

6. David Hall, "The Mental World of Samuel Sewall," in David D. Hall, John M. Murrin, and Thad W. Tate, eds., *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History* (1984), pp. 75–98. Another example of a highly successful study that relates an individual to his culture is Christopher M. Jedrey's *The World of John Cleaveland* (1979), in which demography is in fact used alongside Cleaveland's private papers to render a detailed and convincing portrait.