

FABIAN TOMPSETT

## 1606 and all that: the Virginian conquest

*The Columbian quincentenary is not so much a remembrance of times past as a reconstruction of times present. For, whereas Europe's medieval kings took legitimacy and authority from God's ordinance, the mesh of supra-national and super powers and transnational conglomerates who arrange our destinies today, needs a more sophisticated array of techniques to proclaim the inevitability of current hierarchies of power and the rightfulness of its versions of progress.<sup>1</sup>*

In 1992, attempts to celebrate the quincentenary of Columbus and his 'sailing of the ocean blue' were met by widespread opposition. In the US, an official commission was set up but foundered amid charges of corruption. Sponsors backed out when faced with the alternative Columbus movement in which various individuals, groups and coalitions emerged to turn the original meanings of the official celebrations inside out and reveal 500 years of resistance. While the official celebrations were sponsored to the tune of \$87 million, thousands of people throughout the US came together to protest about Columbus Day. The celebrations were seen as a not-so-veiled proclamation of white supremacist thinking. This was not only challenged on the streets, but also served to stimulate a reappraisal of the Columbus legacy – which was shown to be rooted in slavery, religious oppression and the genesis of racism.

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By rights, we should not be troubled by centenaries celebrating the 1606 voyage of the Virginia invaders until 2006. However, with the Millennium Dome in Greenwich just over the Thames from their departure point, Blackwall Stairs, it should come as little surprise that ‘Virginia fever’ is creeping across Blackwall. Here it becomes the selling point for a new estate of Barratt’s houses. There it becomes integrated into a historic tableau proposed for the walls of Stoneyard Lane sports centre. The Millennium has served to accelerate a process which seems to have learnt nothing from the Columbus experience. As much as these icons of white supremacy are promoted, so they stimulate a more reasoned response which challenges an orthodoxy that restricts non-Europeans to the passive acceptance of the so-called ‘inevitability’ of European civilisation, religion and progress. The Disney film *Pocohontas* offers a romanticised account of the kidnapping of a Native American girl. She becomes a Christian and marries an Englishman, only to meet a tragic early death before the consequences of her action could be realised. Yet what was this marriage in the face of the mercantile zeal of the London Virginia Company in depriving the Native Americans of their land as it set up its tobacco plantations? The romance has no substance. It merely provides a sugar coating to the shocking history of the Virginia invaders.

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But what was the nature of the enterprise? As its name indicates, it was born of the City of London (with connections in Plymouth and Bristol). Its goal was to start a colony in North America. The first charter of 10 April 1606 specified its aim as the ‘propagating of Christian religion to such people as yet live in darknesse and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worshippe of God’ so that it ‘may in tyme bring the infidels and salvages living in those parts to humane civilitie and to a settled and quiet government’.<sup>2</sup> In the *Articles, Instructions and Orders* issued on 20 November 1606, a month before departure, this religious zeal and the forcible nature of the propagation was underlined by James I:

whereby they may be the sooner drawne to the true knowledge of God and the obedience of us, our heirs and successors under such paines and punishments as shal be inflicted by the severall presidents and councils of the said severall colonists, or the most part of them, within their precincts on such as shall offend therein or doe the contrary.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than simply offering Christianity as a possibility to be considered by the Native Americans, the founding charter shows that the exercise was as much about the political subordination of the Native

Americans as about enrolling them in the Anglican church – if, indeed, there was any difference.

We can see this piety more in perspective if we turn the pages of Richard Hakluyt's book *The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1589). Here Hakluyt, a founder member of the Virginia Company, collated a mass of information for Queen Elizabeth so that she could 'by God's assistance, in short space, work many great and unlooked for effects, increase her dominions, enrich her coffers, and reduce many Pagans to the faith of Christ'.<sup>4</sup> It was a very practical piety. The benefits were to be reaped in this world rather than deferred to a celestial experience in the after-life. Hakluyt had been an enthusiastic supporter of Raleigh's earlier settlement in Virginia. However, his stress was on the possibilities for establishing plantations which could produce oils, wines, spices, sugar etc., rather than the search for gold which, for Raleigh, supplanted any need to seek out other commodities.

But Hakluyt's more sophisticated imperialist conception was not immediately shared by the collection of gentlemen, soldiers and artisans who formed the first group of 105 invaders. Rather than preparing for the future by growing food, priority was given to the search for gold. Indeed, when Captain Newport sailed back to London in August 1607, he took back seven barrels of ore – which proved to be valueless. In 1608, he returned to Virginia with 115 more invaders, including two goldsmiths, two refiners and a jeweller. Most of these settlers' heads were filled with 'golden inventions' rather than an understanding of the conditions which were developing in the colony. There was no gold or silver to be found in Virginia. Death was to be the more likely reward for their endeavours.

Things had not been going well. The settlers had not discovered the rich pickings they had hoped for. They felt stranded, with inadequate provisions and subject to all manner of disease. 'There were never Englishmen left in a forreigne cuntry in such miserie as wee were in this new discovered Virginia', wrote George Percy of that first year.<sup>5</sup> The colony only survived thanks to the help of the Powhatans, the Native Americans who inhabited that part of North America. Even so, during the first two decades of the colony at least 6,000 invaders, four-fifths of the colonists, died.

This extraordinary death rate has attracted the attention of historians. There was a prevailing inertia, a reluctance to grow food which, despite the military discipline of John Smith who had assumed command of the colony, paved the way for the starving time. In *The Conquest of Paradise*, Kirkpatrick Sale has suggested that this can only be understood as a consequence of transplanting urbanised Europeans into the American wilderness, producing 'bewilderment, dislocation, and disorientation, a sense of being out of place,

imprisoned in a hostile environment full of hostile strangers with none of the promised wealth or ease, where none of the familiar rules and assumptions obtain, where none of the attributes by which one has achieved self-definition – matters of one's birth, trade, learning, experience or competence – seem to apply'.<sup>6</sup> He supports this argument with research done by Karen Ordahl Kupperman who compared the reported symptoms of the early Jamestown colonists with those of American prisoners of war held in Korea and Japan.

But it is necessary to put this psychological process in the context of the economic and social realities of the colony: it was set up as a profit-making business. Although gold-fever may have been what induced many invaders to make the trip, long-term occupation was what the company hoped to achieve. When John Smith assumed command from the ineffective Edward Wingfield, it was as much to protect the investment of the company as to save the lives of his fellow men. The brutality of his regime attests to this. As the settlers were committed to working for the company for seven years, Smith's job was to keep them alive as a human resource. In effect, he turned the settlement into a labour camp.

The system of indentured servitude was taken from the cities of Europe, where apprentices agreed to work for their master for seven years before being admitted to the master's trade. In the colonial setting, however, there were none of the social forces which kept abuse of the system in check. As James C. Ballagh has pointed out, the system deteriorated and 'tended to pass into a property relation which asserted a control of varying extent over the bodies and liberties of their person during service as if they were things'.<sup>7</sup> In this, it paved the way for slavery. Indeed, one of the complaints emerging from the colony was that those running the company were trying to reduce the settlers to slaves, by keeping them in bondage beyond the stipulated term.

Labour conditions were draconian, the settlers were driven to work in gangs with severe punishment for minor infractions: for missing Sunday service in church, the punishment was to 'lye neck and heels that night' and be a 'slave' for a week. On the third offence, the culprit was to be a slave for a year and a day. Should an invader try to leave the colony to join the Native Americans, the sentence was death. This, however, did not prevent John Smith from selling Henry Spelman as a slave to the Native Americans in exchange for some real estate.

Yet, at the same time, the working week was not excessive. Edmund Morgan has pointed out that the bulk of the invaders were either gentlemen, their servants or soldiers (there were no women).<sup>8</sup> They were not used to agricultural labour. The Virginia Company had advised the colonists to prevent the Native Americans from

seeing any of their number who became sick, and only to let the colonists' crack shots fire guns in the presence of Native Americans. This all supports Morgan's thesis that the colonists had originally naively hoped that the Native Americans would regard them as gods stepped down from heaven, as in stories of the Spanish conquests further south. Failing that, the Native Americans were at least expected to sell the colonists corn, once they had established a market. But the Native Americans were little interested in a commodity economy. While they might be prepared to sell land, which involved no effort, they were disinclined to expend their working day on producing a surplus to sell to the Europeans. The terrible conditions of the colony stemmed from the colonists' disinclination to support themselves by their own efforts.

In these circumstances it may come as no surprise that the Native Americans were not exactly queuing up to join the Anglican church and to share such miseries. But, rather than abandon its arrogance, the London Virginia Company drew up a new set of instructions for Sir Thomas Gates who was dispatched in 1609 to take charge of the colony. Section 7 confirmed the conversion of the natives as 'the most pious and noble end of the plantation'. To this end, he was instructed to kidnap 'some convenient number of their children to be brought up in your language and manners'.<sup>9</sup> It was also suggested that he might

remove from them their Iniocasockes or priests by a suspence of them all and taking them prisoners for they are so wrapped up in the fogge and miserie of their iniquity and so tirrified with their continuall tirrany, chained under the bond of deathe unto the divell that while they live amoung them to poison and infecte their mindes, you shall never make any progres into this glorious worke, nor have any civil peace or concurre with them. And in case of necessity or conveniency, we pronounce it not crueltie nor breach of charity to deale more sharply with them and to proceed even to dache with these murtherers of soules and sacrificers of God's images to the devill.<sup>10</sup>

The twentieth century edition suggests that 'dache' should be read as 'death'. Perhaps when the original copy was drafted, there was reluctance to express such an outrageous order unequivocally.

Section 19 instructed Gates to demand tribute from the Native Americans who should acknowledge no other lord but King James, and suggested that they be put to work in the deforestation of the land, 'reducing them to labore and trade seinge for the rest onely they shall enjoy their houses, and the rest of their travell quietly and many other commodities and blessings of which they are yet insensible'. Section 21 was more devious: 'If you make friendship

with any of these nations, as you must doe, choose to doe it with those that are farthest from you and enemies unto those amonge whom you dwell, for you shall have least occasion to have differences with them and by that means a suerer league of amity.’

Despite these instructions, Gates hardly found himself in a position to wage a total war on the Native Americans. Rather, he thought it more appropriate to evacuate the remnants of the colony. Indeed, they had already embarked on board ship when Thomas De La Warr unfortunately arrived, so they returned together to the Jamestown settlement. The Virginia invaders were now ready to institute a genocidal war against the Native Americans. Kirkpatrick Sale calls this the first Anglo-Powhatan war. The invaders attacked a series of Powhatan towns, Kecoughan, Waraskoyak, Nansamund, Chickahominy, Appomatumk and Paspahugh, wreaking havoc. In 1611, De La Warr was replaced by Sir Thomas Dale, who brought more men and weapons and took the invasion further upstream, attacking what was probably the headquarters of Wahunseneka, the Powhatan chief. The war ended in 1614. During the war, one of the children taken captive was Pocohontas, and John Rolfe’s petition to Dale to permit the marriage reflects the attitude of the invaders, for he describes his bride as ‘one whose education hath been so rude, her manners barbarous, her generation cursed’.

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Despite Rolfe’s marriage and the parading of Pocohontas in London, the overall stance of the colonists and the London Virginia Company was one of unremitting racism. This fact is perhaps best illustrated in Robert A. Williams’s *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought*. Williams identifies Sir Edward Coke and Sir John Popham as authors of the 1606 charter. He then discusses the Virginia Council’s debate about whether ‘some form of writing that in way of justification of our plantation might be conceived and pass into many hands’.<sup>11</sup> The debate centred on whether a pre-emptive rebuttal of potential criticism of the colonising enterprise were required, whether such criticism was to come from those who supported the so-called Alexander Donation, under which the Pope gave jurisdiction of North America to the Spanish Crown, or from those who might question the whole enterprise in principle. The Council decided not to issue any justification.

Nevertheless, in 1608 in his capacity as Lord Chief Justice, Coke presided over *Calvin’s Case* in the court of common pleas. It concerned whether a Scotsman could take a case to an English court and was most germane to debates which had been going on in parliament, to which both Coke and Francis Bacon had made major contributions

in favour of unionism. However, in his discussion of the case, Coke distinguished between aliens who were friends and those who were enemies. The latter might be either temporary, where a state of war existed with their mother country, or perpetual:

All infidels are in law *perpetui inimici*, perpetual enemies (for the law presumes not that they will be converted, that being *remota potentia*, a remote possibility) for between them, as with devils, whose subjects they be, and the Christian, there is perpetual hostility, and can be no peace.<sup>12</sup>

By placing this judgement on record, Coke achieved two things. He created a legal basis on which the London Virginia Company could protect itself from accusations of mass murder, since it was engaged in a 'just war'. At the same time, it revealed that the whole project would have set out with the conscious intention of subjugating the Native American population, and that the charter of the London Virginia Company, authored by Coke and Popham, was nothing short of a warrant for genocide. The origins of the first Anglo-Powhatan war are thus located in an act of institutional racism, rooted in religious bigotry acted out in an English court, rather than in some unfortunate inability of the Virginia invaders to 'get on' with the Native Americans. When the first group of invaders set sail, they were the advance guard. With the departure of Gates, open war was declared.

As befits warfare, propaganda was required. Here Alderman Robert Johnson helped by writing *Nova Britannia*, a pamphlet advertising the colony, published in 1609.<sup>13</sup> It described Powhatan territory as 'inhabited with wild and savage people that live and lie up and down in troupes like heardes of deere in a forest' living with no law but nature. They are described as being 'generally very loving and gentle, and doe entertaine and relieve our people with great kinnesse'. The same pamphlet was defensive against those who saw simple self-enrichment lying behind the veneer of religious conversion: 'As far as supplanting the savages, we have no such intention: our intrusion into their possessions shall tend to their greater good and no way their hurt, unlesse as unbridled beastes, they prove it to themselves.' In other words, unless the Powhatan resisted the erasure of their culture and their assimilation as third-class subjects of King James. Indeed, the pamphlet took on apocalyptic proportions:

To which purpose we may verily beleeeve that God hath reserved in this last age of the world, an infinite number of these lost and scattered sheepe, to be wonne and recovered by our means: of whom so many as obstinately refuse to unite themselves to us, or shall maligne or disturbe our plantation, our chattell or whatever

belonging to us, they shall be held and reputed recusant withstanding their own good: and shall be dealt with as enemies of the commonwealth of their country.<sup>14</sup>

The Powhatan resistance to such English arrogance sparked off more denunciations. In *Good Newes from Virginia* (1613), the protestant minister Alexander Whittaker accepted that the Native Americans acknowledged a 'great good God' but then suggested that they feared the devil and were slaves to their priests, whom he compared to English witches. Between 100,000 and 200,000 people (over 80 per cent of them women) were brought to trial as witches in the protestant states of northern Europe between 1500 and 1700. Most were tortured into confession and the great majority were burnt to death. By drawing this parallel, Whittaker linked the zealous imposition of religious conformity in Europe with the genocide in North America.

In 1622 came the second Anglo-Powhatan war, usually presented as commencing with a surprise Powhatan attack on the Virginia invaders. Indeed, if we accept the stereotype of the Native American as an unthinking savage predisposed to indulge in violence, we can accept this version. However, Robert A. Williams presents facts which suggest that the new Powhatan monarch, Opechanacanough, had become all too well aware of what was in store for the Powhatan, and chose to make a pre-emptive strike against the invaders before their reinforcements arrived. Williams uncovers the way in which Opechanacanough persuaded the new governor, George Yeardley, that any future land grants had to be ratified by Opechanacanough. This ran counter to what Coke had stipulated in *Calvin's Case*, that, upon the invasion of an infidel country by a Christian power, all previous laws and jurisdictions were abrogated. This came to the attention of the London Virginia Company in *Barkham's Case*.<sup>15</sup> In Williams's words:

The company sat as a court in *Barkham's case*, exercising Crown-created jurisdictional powers over lands within its royal grant. Barkham's petition for confirmation of his deed presented, in essence, the first significant legal case that directly addressed the legal question of the American Indian's rights and status in the lands of America under English colonial Law.<sup>16</sup>

The company voided Yeardley's concession to Opechanacanough as dishonourable and prejudicial, in that it acknowledged a sovereignty in that 'heathen infidel'. As Williams points out: 'The presumption of a lack of sovereignty in the infidel emperor thus contained its own imperatives for conquest, for conquest was the only method left for effectuating the king's sovereignty over a savage who



would not yield his dominion.<sup>17</sup> Shortly after these deliberations, news arrived in London that, on 22 March 1622, Opechanacanough had launched a surprise attack on the invaders, killing 350 out of 1,240 colonists. The Virginia Company was quick to publish an account of this ‘massacre’, an invidious racist attack upon the Powhatan which was steeped in the Calvinist theology of predestination and of a spiritual elect. The ‘massacre’ was greeted as being for the good of the plantation, as now the Virginia Company had an excuse for wiping out the Powhatan and building its towns on grounds already cleared for Powhatan villages.<sup>18</sup>

The London Virginia Company issued orders to step up the genocide, calling for ‘a perpetuall warre without peace or truce’ to ‘roote out from being any longer a people, so cursed a nation, ungratefull to all benefitte, and incapable of all goodnesse’. Four expeditionary forces were sent out under governor Yeardley, which proceeded to kill all Native Americans of whatever age or sex. More Native Americans were killed in that year than in all previous years put together.

The result of the war was that the London Virginia Company could seize more land to cater for its expanding drug industry: tobacco. Nevertheless, this did the company little good. Back in London, it was already in the grip of a three-way dispute. Sir Thomas Smith, a city businessman, was supplanted as treasurer by Edwin Sandys, when his faction fell out with rivals grouped around Robert Rich, the Earl of Warwick. Sir Thomas Smith was a man of great influence, having also been governor of the East India Company for a number of years. The Earl of Warwick was a pioneer of piracy and the slave trade; indeed, it was on one of his ships, the *Treasurer*, that one of the first Africans arrived in Virginia, taken as booty from a Portugese vessel. Both Smith’s and Rich’s factions were court factions, whereas Sandys, who ousted Smith, was a noted parliamentarian and headed a group of smaller investors.

Sandys was assisted by Nicholas Ferrar who wrote a pamphlet, unpublished until 1990, which vigorously attacked Sir Thomas Smith.<sup>19</sup> Ferrar claimed that, rather than allowing the indentured servants their freedom after the allotted period, usually seven years, Smith wanted to keep them in perpetual servitude. He further maintained that Smith had instituted martial laws from which came ‘moast horrid cruelties’. He particularly referred to the enslavement of Pollanders (Poles) who, instead of being freed after indenture, were sold to Woodall, the surgeon of the East India Company, who likewise ‘as if they had been beasts turned them over to Lord de La Warr’. Ferrar also charged that a separate company had been set up to trade with the settlement, with Smith and his son-in-law Robert Johnson, author of *Nova Britannia*, splitting the proceeds.

The dispute ended with the closing of the London Virginia Company. Some Anglo-American writers have looked back to it as one of the origins of American democracy. Others have championed the royalist cause of Smith and the Earl of Warwick, building a mythology around cavaliers who sought refuge in Virginia during the Commonwealth and were the first to welcome Charles II back at the restoration. But the company had been a resounding failure, despite the installation of a lottery to revive its flagging fortunes.

Yet the war of genocide, coupled with the cultivation of tobacco, ushered in a new economic period for the fledgling community. Tobacco required land and labour. The former had been bought with the blood of the Powhatan but, having extinguished them from their territory, labour was now a problem. When the period of indenture had elapsed, the servant became 'free' and could claim a portion of land to work on his own account. Not only were more workers needed to replace the freed indentured labourers, but, as these former servants became established, their profits from growing tobacco and their desire to expand production created a new market: for slaves. During the 1620s, more English colonies were opening up, both on the mainland and among the Caribbean islands. They were all hungry for labour.

At first, white servants were brought from across Europe. Christian demi-slaves, they were largely recruited through fraud and violence. There were hired agents called 'Spirits' in England and 'Newlanders' in Germany. Children were enticed with sweets, adults with rum. The gullible were told stories of pots of gold waiting for them in Virginia, Maryland or Pennsylvania. There were depots where the servants were held captive in such places as Bristol and Wapping. The agents visited correctional institutions and orphanages in their search for recruits. Prisoners of war were also sent into servitude – the survivors of the Cromwellian massacre of Drogheda, the defeated at the battles of Sedgemoor and Dunbar. 50,000 indentured servants were shipped to the American colonies in this period, with the bulk going to Virginia and Maryland.

But this constant supply of labour had limitations. The period of indenture was set at seven years by biblical precedent, and reducing Europeans to perpetual slavery could well have had unacceptable political consequences both in the colonies and in England. Another source of labour was needed. So, the protestant English resorted to African slavery, copying the Spanish and Portuguese model which they professed to despise. With twenty African slaves for the price of one English servant, religious and humanitarian scruples could easily wither and die. Like the Poles before them, the Africans were, above all, vulnerable. Given that an industry was already set up trading in European servants, it was easy to adjust this to the far more profitable

triangular trade, exporting finished goods (including guns and alcohol) to Africa, slaves from there to the Americas, whence tobacco, spices and then sugar to Europe.

Thus, perpetual African slavery developed in the colonies. In 1661, Virginia extended African servitude to life and, in 1670, the legislature decreed: 'All servants not being Christians imported into this country by shipping shall be slaves for life.' In 1682, this was extended to refer also to those 'who and whose parentage and native country are not Christian at the time of their first purchase', whether or not they subsequently converted to Christianity.

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There has been a long standing discussion of how the institution of African slavery emerged in the New World setting. Some writers, such as Winthrop D. Jordan, have striven to develop a dialectical approach towards slavery and racial prejudice. Rather than locating one as the cause of the other, he has suggested that 'both may have been equally cause and effect, constantly reacting upon each other, dynamically joining hands to hustle the Negro down the road to complete degradation'.<sup>20</sup> This is also the viewpoint espoused by Lerone Bennett in his *The Shaping of Black America*. However, Williams's extensive work, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought* requires that this view be somewhat modified. Williams locates the discourses of the Virginia Company in the context of an evolving western European legal discourse that emerged from the Church in the middle ages. Here the centrality of Christianity went unchallenged, although there were disputes over the extent to which Christian authority derived from the Pope, the Church or could be exercised by king or emperor.

As the first European power to colonise the Americas, Catholic Spain had been the centre for debate on the moral and legal implications of imperialism and enslaving the Native Americans. The cruelties of Spanish slavery had been fuel for anti-Spanish propaganda while England was at war with Spain. The readiness of Sir Francis Drake to participate in the slave trade, on the one hand, and then, on the other, to ally himself during the 1570s with the Cimarron community of Panama, largely composed of African slaves who had liberated themselves, indicates that, although he may have had few scruples, he had not internalised a view of Africans as inferior.

Racism was not and is not a 'natural' attitude. It has its genesis in a process whereby the religious bigotry of Elizabethan England was converted into Anglo-American racism. The Virginia invaders provided the social crucible for this transformation. But this was not an accidental transformation: it was consciously espoused and

institutionalised by the businessmen who ran the London Virginia Company. Originally it had been hoped to enslave the Native Americans. When this proved impossible, attempts to reduce European indentured servants to the state of perpetual slaves created problems in London. However, Coke's dictum that 'All infidels are in law *perpetui inimici*, perpetual enemies' created a legal premise for the transformation of African indentured servitude into perpetual slavery.

It is disturbing when a local 'community group' wants to express its pride in the very enterprise with which English racism was launched to invade North America. Yet this is what has happened in Blackwall. Blackwall is one of the two wards in the Isle of Dogs in East London. The other, Millwall, attracted international notoriety in 1993 with the election of Derek Beackon as the first British National Party councillor. Now *The Islander*, a local 'community' newspaper in Millwall, has 'revealed' that the Jamaican slave-owner Robert Milligan is 'Father of the Isle of Dogs' because of his role in building the West India Docks, now the site of Canary Wharf. It wants to celebrate its bicentenary on 12 July 2000. Like the Columbian quincentenary, the Millennium provides a focus for reactionary and Eurocentric supremacist historicisation. But that, in turn, will lead also to a reassertion of the centuries of resistance against the 'progress' that the Millennium is being used to celebrate.

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