



John Smith (1580-1631)

Alan J. Silva (Hamline University)

Colonialist; Explorer; Pamphleteer; Soldier; Travel writer; Autobiographer; Historian / Chronicler; Letter-writer/ Diarist.

Active 1596-1630 in England; United States

As an explorer and statesman in an era of tremendous exploration and colonial expansion, John Smith traveled the world and helped to establish the Virginia Colony of North America. As writer and historian, Smith also provided insight into the peoples and places of North America, enabling later generations to explore and colonize New England. Yet Smith is most remembered today not for his extensive travels nor for his descriptions of the New World. He is most known for his encounter with the Native American girl Pocahontas and the ensuing, some would say infamous, story told by Smith and re-told in various forms and media by generations to follow. His tale of romantic rescue by the young daughter of an Indian chief continues to be the centerpiece of Smith's life and work, amidst all of his legendary deeds and a body of writing on history, geography, and colonial expansion in the seventeenth century.

Born to an upwardly mobile Lincolnshire farmer in 1580, Smith did his schooling in neighboring towns, and showed an early interest in going to the sea. His father did not approve and apprenticed him instead to a nearby wealthy merchant. After his father died in 1596, the sixteen-year old Smith left his apprenticeship and enlisted in the military, serving with English troops in the Low Countries (primarily in the Netherlands) of northwestern Europe. Along with other English volunteers, Smith fought in the Dutch war for independence from Spain for more than three years. In 1599, he returned to Lincolnshire, apparently to recuperate from wounds suffered in battle. Not one to stay still for long, Smith ventured to France as a servant of Peregrine Bertie, the son of Lord Willoughby. In the following year, he visited Scotland briefly, then returned to England where he spent his time reading, most notably Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Art of War* (1521), and practicing horsemanship. These early adventures and educational experiences prepared him for a storied life as soldier and statesman.

From 1601 to 1615, Smith experienced a series of harrowing adventures in Europe, the Middle East, and North America, all of which were chronicled in narratives published after his traveling days came to an end in 1616. The exception is an early forty-four page pamphlet, *A True Relation*, published in 1608, based on a letter Smith wrote to a friend in England earlier in the year. As is characteristic of all of Smith's work, *A True Relation* contains detailed botanical descriptions of the region along the James River, where Smith searched for food and supplies for his fellow colonists, and a cartographic specificity regarding the locations of marshes, rivers, and tributaries. Smith's keen understanding of the area's resources were of crucial importance for the Virginia Company, a group of 105 men who had received a patent for a colonial settlement, and who had struggled to survive in the first year there. Smith's knowledge, coupled with his leadership skills, gained him the position of

supply officer of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America. Smith would expand upon his descriptions of the Virginia colony in 1612, publishing *A Map of Virginia, with a Description of the Countrey, the Commodities, People, Government and Religion*.

Smith's descriptions of the Virginia colony were expanded upon further in what is now considered to be his most significant work, *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, published in London in 1624. *The Generall Historie* includes his descriptions of a new region that he named "New England", and which he described in a relatively brief 1616 publication, *A Description of New England*. As with his earlier work, *The Generall Historie* provides vivid descriptions of the New World, but includes as well several of Smith's military feats, dramatic rescues and escapes. Smith's writing style is also more flamboyant, especially when he describes the now famous "rescue" by the "Indian princess" Pocahontas, daughter of chief Powhatan, an event he did not include in *A True Relation*. Smith tells the tale in the third person, as if to indicate that he is a character in a larger-than-life drama:

A long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and begin ready with their clubs, to beate out his brains, Pocahontas, the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should live to make him hatches, and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him aswell of all occupations as themselves.

The Generall Historie is Smith's most comprehensive discussion of conquest and exploration and stands today as an exemplary text in the exploration literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If at times it praises its author too much for his knowledge of the colonies and his valiant efforts to sustain the Virginia Company, it also paints a portrait of the relationship between exploration and settlement in the New World. Smith's skillful, often manipulative, handling of the natives in the region, and his work policy of "he who does not work does not eat" decreased the mortality rate among the settlers, but did not win him any favor with his fellow colonists who had come to Virginia for commercial gain not manual labor. As a result, Smith's later life was spent trying to finance expeditions to the New World, but when the Puritans refused his guidance in 1620, Smith settled into the life of a writer until his death in London in 1631. His later work, most notably *The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine John Smith* (1630), is less focused, but just as flamboyant as his earlier *Generall Historie*. Part of *The True Travels* describe Smith's military feats as a soldier of fortune in the Austrian army in battles against the Ottoman Turks in 1601. In one instance, Smith claims to have killed on the open field, in three successive days, three high-ranking Turks. Not long afterward, as Smith says, he was taken prisoner by Turkish forces and sent to Istanbul to be the slave of Princess Charatz Tragabigzanda. According to Smith, the Princess protected him from mistreatment and eventually sent him to safety to live with her brother north of the Black Sea because she found him so physically appealing and had begun to fall in love with him.

Scholars have applied a variety of labels to John Smith: explorer, opportunist, soldier, historian, self-promoter. Many have questioned his account of Pocahontas' rescue, largely because his tale did not appear in his earlier 1608 description of the colony. Some argue the story is true, but that he may have suppressed the tale initially because it would have injured his reputation as a brave captain who was saved by a teenage "Indian" girl. Others feel he may have entirely invented the story to construct an element of risk to his adventures or to promote the superiority of English culture. Still others have felt that the event may have occurred, but might represent Smith's misunderstanding of a cultural initiation ritual, and not the beginning of an execution. For us today, it is difficult to determine how much of Smith's adventures and rescues were embellished, even invented. As one of his biographers Alden T. Vaughan explains in *American Genesis: Captain John Smith and the Founding of Virginia* (1975), Smith was "bold, energetic, and optimistic; at the same time, brash, intolerant, overly proud of his achievements and overly solicitous of approval." But the legacy of Smith remains clear: his stories of adventure, most especially of his rescue by Pocahontas, have provided generations with an enduring

romantic myth of bravery and courage and the prototype of the nascent American hero.

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