

Notes and Documents

The Rehabilitation of Captain John Smith

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SINCE *Captain John Smith: His Life and Legend* WAS PUBLISHED nine years ago,¹ re-establishing on documentary evidence a reputation tarnished by several generations of faulty scholarship, enough additional work has been done to prove Smith's veracity beyond any likelihood of being again upset. Taken together, the findings make an interesting story of rehabilitation.

The attack on Smith had begun about a hundred years ago when John Gorham Palfrey urged on by Charles Deane doubted the truth of Smith's exploits and said so in his *History of New England*. In the bitter aftermath of the Civil War Henry Adams, desiring to attract attention to himself, let go a full broadside against Smith, using Smith's own works as the means of proving him a liar. His method—that of comparing parallel passages from two of Smith's writings on Virginia—was impressive as a trick but really added nothing to scholarship.²

Edward D. Neill next asserted that Smith's writings "are those of a gascon and beggar. He seemed to be always in the attitude of one craving recognition or remuneration for alleged services." Alexander Brown found him "certainly incapable of writing correct history where he was personally interested" and "in no way properly equipped, for writing a disinterested and accurate history of the great movement." Then in 1890 came the Hungarian Lewis Kropf with evidence allegedly from Hungarian sources to prove that everything Smith said about his travels and battles in

¹ Bradford Smith, *Captain John Smith: His Life and Legend* (Philadelphia, 1953), with an appendix by Laura Polanyi Striker, "Captain John Smith's Hungary and Transylvania."

² John G. Palfrey, *History of New England* (5 vols., Boston, 1858-1890), I, 89; Henry Adams, "Captain John Smith," *North American Review*, CIV (January 1867), 1-30, reprinted in Charles F. Adams, Jr., and Henry Adams, *Chapters of Erie, and Other Essays* (Boston, 1871), 192-224.

that country were fabrications.³ American scholars, unable to challenge Kropf when it came to Magyar sources, mostly concluded that the Captain was a vain and boastful liar.

A quiet reaction set in when reputable scholars like Charles M. Andrews and Wesley Frank Craven used Smith as a reliable source in their own works,⁴ concluding that on the whole his statements were supported by the new evidence provided by the publication of the Virginia Company Records.⁵ Smith's views on Virginia, then, appeared to be vindicated. But how about Smith on Smith?

To assess his career one biography after another had been written, from the moralistic Peter Parley (1829) to that of the poet John Gould Fletcher a hundred years later.⁶ None added much to what John Smith had told of himself in his own books. Would a trip to England, to search the great collection of documents there, be worth while? In 1952 it hardly appeared so. For generations American scholars had been ransacking English archives for significant material. But there was only one way to find out whether John Smith was a lying braggart or a reliable historian, and that was to test every statement he made against whatever contemporary evidence could be found.

Despite many disappointments, the number of original documents which corroborated Smith's own accounts or added to them turned out to be surprising. The Lincolnshire Archives, housed in the great stone Exchequer Gate in front of Lincoln cathedral, divulged the greatest prize of all—a parchment inventory of the household goods of George Smith, John's father. From this we could readily reconstruct the Smith home down to the meanest dish. From it we also learned what Smith had never revealed—that his mother had remarried very soon after his father's death,

³ Edward D. Neill, *History of the Virginia Company of London* (Albany, 1869), 211n; Alexander Brown, *The Genesis of the United States* (Boston, 1890), 1010; Lewis L. Kropf, "Captain John Smith of Virginia," *Notes and Queries*, s. 7, IX (January 4, 18, February 8, March 1, 22, April 12, 1890), 1-2, 41-43, 102-104, 161-62, 223-24, 281-82.

⁴ See Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (4 vols., New Haven, 1934-1938), I; and Wesley Frank Craven, *Dissolution of the Virginia Company; the Failure of a Colonial Experience* (New York, 1932) and *The Southern Colonies in the Seventeenth Century, 1607-1689* (Baton Rouge, 1949).

⁵ Susan M. Kingsbury (ed.), *The Records of the Virginia Company of London* (4 vols., Washington, 1906-1935).

⁶ Samuel Griswold Goodrich (Peter Parley, *pseud.*), *Stories About Captain John Smith of Virginia . . .* (Hartford, 1829); John Gould Fletcher, *John Smith—Also Pocahontas* (New York, 1928).

a point which had something to do with John's wanderings from home at so early an age.

The court rolls and the Willoughby Parish register transcript, both in the Exchequer Gate, provided further traces of George Smith which enabled us to see what manner of man he was; and a study of the Ancaster Collection papers there led us back to the Historical Manuscript Commission's *Report on the Manuscripts of the Earl of Ancaster* (Dublin, 1907) which contains a precious reference to Smith's going to France with young Peregrine Bertie, son of Lord Willoughby, lord of the manor in that part of Lincolnshire. The Essex Record Office at Chelmsford supplied a survey of Danbury Place where John Smith had stayed in 1630 while writing his *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New-England* in the home of Sir Humphrey Mildmay.

In London, the vast collection of wills in Somerset House produced not only John Smith's will, which has long been known, but a protest of the will by the widow of John's brother which had never been discovered. In the Public Record Office Smith's letter of appeal to Sir Francis Bacon turned up as expected, but also unexpectedly a whole list of New England places in Smith's own hand. The London Guildhall provided records of the many seventeenth-century guilds to whom John Smith vainly appealed for aid in mounting a successful expedition to his beloved New England which he had explored and named and, but for the hard luck that dogged him, might have been the first to settle. The bound records of the Goldsmiths contained interesting information about the assay master John Reynolds whom Smith remembered in his will. It was easy to find traces of the substantial family of Saltonstalls, in whose home John slipped out of life at the age of fifty-one. But nowhere could we get on the track of Thomas Parker, except to confirm that he was a clerk of the Privy Seal. To him John left that coat of arms which Kropf called "an exceedingly clumsy piece of forgery."⁷

Then there was the Latin life by Henry Wharton which had to be rediscovered in the Lambeth Palace Library where it had slept unnoticed under the index entry of *Johannis Fabricius*. At King's Lynn we had the pleasure of discovering a good deal of documentary evidence on Thomas Sendall, the man Smith says he was apprenticed to in his teens. Sendall was three times Lord Mayor of King's Lynn—truly, as John Smith said, "the greatest merchant of all those parts."⁸

⁷ Kropf, "Captain John Smith of Virginia," 282.

⁸ Edward Arber (ed.), *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith* (2 vols.,

By slow accretion, all of these documents and many more fragments began to build the picture of a man whose word was the truth wherever it could be tested, but there still remained a large gap—the Hungarian adventures, so fully and romantically told in Smith's own *True Travels*. With their account of single combat, near death on the battlefield, and a life of slavery in Turkey, these pages had raised scholarly eyebrows for many a year. Only a thoroughly competent Hungarian scholar, willing to go at them with a clear mind, could dare confront them.

This task too was accomplished.⁹ When all the evidence was in, it became clear that Smith was not only telling the truth about his adventures in Hungary, but that he could not possibly have described events there as he did from any reading or poring over maps. The contest in Hungary was so complicated—Turk against Christian, Catholic against Protestant, leaders changing sides, and areas rapidly changing hands—that John Smith would have been hopelessly entangled had he tried to fake an account of military adventures there. Not only does Hungarian history corroborate Smith wherever he can be checked, but his own account clarifies an area of Hungarian history that is full of obscurity in the Hungarian sources. His writings make him an authority on Hungarian history!

When these things had been determined, the book went to press. But the evidence continued to come in.

From France came identification of the "Earle of Ployer" whom Smith claims to have stayed with when, stripped by robbers, he was left without a sou in a strange country. Ployer, says Smith, had been brought up in England during the war in France (1590-1596), together with his brothers "Viscount Poomory and Baron d'Mercy." The whole puzzle was unraveled with the discovery that Amaury de Gouyon, comte de Plouer, was also viscomte de Tonquedec (Smith speaks of his fair castle of Tuncadeck) et de Pommerith, and baron de Marce. He did indeed have a brother who was called Gouyon de Marce, and it is therefore quite possible, even likely, that there was another brother who used the name of Pommerith—Smith's Poomory. Plouer, a zealous Calvinist, might well have been sent to England by Protestant parents who felt that their children were in real danger. And indeed family tradition affirms this. If Smith had been trying to tell a plausible lie, he would have used names he could copy correctly from

Edinburgh, 1910), II, 822. The writings of Smith referred to in this paper may be found in these volumes.

⁹ See the Striker appendix in Smith, *Captain John Smith*, 311-42.

a book. That he relied on his own memory and his own orthography is doubly convincing.¹⁰

Meanwhile the Hungarian research continued. Dr. Franz Pichler, archivist of the Central Archive of Styria at Graz in Austria, examined not only his own materials but also archives in Vienna, Munich, Rome, Budapest, Eisenstadt, and Maribor (Yugoslavia). He was able to supply military details of the time and place which strongly fortify Smith's account. Pichler identifies Smith's "Earl Von Sulch" more accurately as Karl Ludwig, Count of Sultz, who was chief of artillery in the Imperial Army. As for the battle at a place Smith calls "Olumpagh," Pichler concluded that it was more likely Unter Limbach (which Smith might have heard in the Hungarian form Al Limbach) than the Oberlimbach we had fixed upon. He also found strong evidence of such military activity in that area as Smith describes.

To test the practicability of the message Smith claims to have sent by a prearranged torch code, Pichler engaged the co-operation of the Boy Scouts of Graz. Using Smith's method, they succeeded in sending a message seven kilometers from mountaintop to mountaintop, deciphering perfectly the message Smith had sent in that neighborhood more than 350 years before.¹¹

Pichler's conclusions appeared in 1957, the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of John Smith's landing in Virginia, a year that brought two other important studies.

Philip Barbour, a specialist in East European history, subjected John Smith's account of his travels through Turkey and Russia to a close examination. He concluded that while Smith occasionally refreshed his memory by reference to some contemporary book, he himself usually supplied the first, or almost the first, authentic information about these little-known regions.

In that part of Smith's *True Travels* which describes the route he took from Constantinople into eastern Turkey, and then through Russia after escaping from slavery, more than thirty place names are mentioned, none of which appears on maps available to Smith. As usual, the spellings are Smith's own. By clever detective work, Barbour identifies most of them. Smith's Panassa is Pinarhisar, Musa is Musat (now Kirilovo), Lastilla is Lascillo, Taur is the old name for Crimea, and his Straight of Niger derives from Mare

¹⁰ Bradford Smith, "Captain Smith's Earl of Ployer," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXII (July 1954), 348-49.

¹¹ J. Franz Pichler, "Captain John Smith in the Light of Styrian Sources," *ibid.*, LXV (July 1957), 332-54.

Nigrum, the old name for the Black Sea. Smith's Sea of Dissabacca comes from Mar delle Sabacche, while Nalbrits where he was a slave was Nalbars or Naubaris. In Russia he visited Caragnaw, identified as Chernava, Letch which is Yelets, and Donka which is Dankov. His Berniske is Bryansk, his Newgrod in Seberia is Novgorod-Severski, his Rezechica is Rechitsa. Then came Coroski which would be Korosten, Drohobus or Dorogobuzh, and two places called Duberesko and Duzihell which Barbour ingeniously identifies as Barashi and Zvyahel with the Russian preposition *do* (up to) prefixed—the way John Smith probably heard them. Perhaps Barbour's most interesting speculation is on the name of the lady to whom Smith was a slave—Charatza Tragabigzanda, as Smith calls her. Barbour believes Smith heard her referred to as Koratsa Trapedzoondia—"a girl from Trebizond"—and mistook this for a name.¹²

Also published in 1957 was Henry Wharton's *The Life of John Smith, English Soldier*, rediscovered at Lambeth and for the first time translated from Latin into English, two hundred and seventy-two years after it was written. Since Wharton wrote it only fifty-four years after Smith's death, it is the earliest of all Smith biographies. He believed that Smith's achievements were equal to those of the most celebrated heroes of antiquity. Since Wharton was one of the greatest scholars of his day, we can not take lightly his words, "I pledge my honor that this entire story is true," even though he claims more for his hero than would a cautious biographer today.¹³

Next, the Hungarian writer Lewis Kropf was thoroughly studied and his shortcomings made clear. A review of all the evidence showed that Kropf had only a superficial knowledge of the history of those years when John Smith was in Hungary and that Smith's account of those years helps clarify that history itself, especially the three separate campaigns waged in 1602. Careful research in original sources had finally demolished Kropf, cornerstone of the detractors of Smith, and furnished further evidence of Smith's reliability.¹⁴

¹² Philip L. Barbour, "Captain John Smith's Route Through Turkey and Russia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, s. 3, XIV (July 1957), 358-69. See also Philip L. Barbour, "Captain John Smith's Observations on Life in Tartary," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXVIII (July 1960), 271-83.

¹³ Henry Wharton, *The Life of John Smith, English Soldier*, Laura Polanyi Striker, trans. (Chapel Hill, 1957).

¹⁴ Laura Polanyi Striker, "The Hungarian Historian, Lewis L. Kropf, on Captain John Smith's *True Travels*," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, LXVI (January 1958), 22-43.

As the archives in Hungary and Austria were further explored, Smith's accuracy and reliability continued to gain ground. The Esterhazy and Batthyany Archives; the Central Archive; War Historical Archive and National Museum in Budapest; and the War, State, and Court Archives in Vienna all contributed valuable nuggets. They confirm the position of Smith's Baron Khisl (Kissell), provide further evidence of the fighting Smith described, call for a rallying of forces at Radkersburg in July 1601, stress the danger from Turks in early 1601, and report on the battle of Szekesfehervar, describing the work of Smith's Count Schulz, field master of artillery, who brought his pieces from Komorn, where Smith had demonstrated his "fiery Dragons" to him, to Szekesfehervar where Smith routed the Turks with his pyrotechnical trick.¹⁵

Meanwhile Philip Barbour, continuing his investigation of Smith's eastern adventures, has come up with a new solution to what Smith meant by the "Plaines of Regall" and is planning a new biography which will incorporate his findings. He has identified Theodora Polaloga, the riding master at Tattershall, and has discovered the origin of Smith's *ulgries*, *stroggs*, and *cavatina*. His book will also include a hypothesis to explain Smith's association with the Virginia venturers.

There are many things we would still like to discover. The "little booke" Smith says he wrote to Queen Anne, for instance, when Pocahontas was in England, telling the Queen how valuable Pocahontas had been to the colony and suggesting how valuable it would be if Pocahontas were royally welcomed. Or the lists of persons authorized to travel overseas—those for the years that would interest us are now lost. Or some of the books John Smith left in his will. Or documentary evidence of John Smith's presence in Hungary.

At about the time of the Civil War, Smith, once scorned as a fellow without gentle birth, now ironically became the symbol of Southern honor. Northern historians attacked him as a way of

¹⁵ See John Smith, *The True Travels, Adventures and Observations . . .* (London, 1630). Of the many archival items collected, the most pertinent are Batthyany 20699-20702; Archduke Ferdinand to Michael Deschauer, May 15, 1601 (War Archives Register, Vienna); and report of Archduke Matthias on Szekesfehervar and Schulz, November 17, 1601 (War Archives, Vienna and Budapest). Laura Polanyi Striker, coauthor of the present article, was in the midst of drawing together her latest researches in European archives at the time of her death in December 1959. While the main lines of this work are known to us, and many of the documents are preserved, it is impossible for the surviving author to complete her work, characterized by untiring and often inspired research and by her devotion to John Smith.

undermining the South's symbol of itself. Southern historians defended him. For nearly a century the Northerners appeared to have won the contest, but in recent years careful research has at last replaced brilliant conjecture and clever argument. And as the documentary evidence piles up, the scale tips more and more to John Smith's side.