John Smith, born 1580
Fact or Fiction: John Smith’s Historical Legacy

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The colonial settler and governor John Smith is a character of fascination for historians across the board. Whether it is his adventures in the East, or his fateful encounter with Pocahontas in the West, John Smith seems to be almost larger than life. However, to remember him just by his adventurous exploits would be doing him an injustice, for John Smith was much more than the most interesting man in North America; he was a historian. His writings about Colonial America have been monumental in painting the picture we have today of the challenges early settlers went through and overcame. There has been, however, some debate over the years of how useful, how informative, and even how accurate, his histories actually are. While some claim him as the premier historian of early America, some assert him as egotistical and delusionary. In truth, there are three general camps of opinion concerning John Smith’s histories. These camps include, one: his critics of the early 19th century, two: his defenders of the late 19th century, and three: those who are neither openly hostile, nor staunch advocates, but thought he was a good man, with flaws, these historians being primarily in the 20th century and onwards.
The background of John Smith reads almost like a fantasy novel. Smith was born in England, but when his father died at a young age, Smith left home at the age of sixteen and served as a mercenary in Henry IV of France’s regiment against Spain. He also fought for Dutch independence from their Spanish lord, sailed to the East to fight against the Ottomans where he was rumored to have been quite a champion in one-on-one combat. He was then captured and sold as a slave, and through another series of misadventures returned to England in 1604. He then became involved in the Virginia Company’s plan to settle North America and arrived in Jamestown in 1607. He was nearly executed for mutiny by the captain, Davenport, but a letter from England spared him from execution and made a leader of the colony. As one of the leaders, he proved adept at governing, some even attributing the survival of the colony to Smith and his “no work, no food” policies. He was also valuable as a diplomat between natives and colonists, proving himself skilled in dealing with Native Americans, as the Pocahontas story seems to illustrate. Smith is also famous for his trek around the Chesapeake region in search of food; however, during this trek he was injured in a gunpowder explosion and had to return to England. He returned to America in the New England region, but when he departed, he never made it back again. Smith died in England at age 51 on June 21, 1631.1

All the while he was doing these things, he was writing his histories tirelessly until the year of his death. These histories, once circulated, were initially received warmly and with high praise. This was not without good reason; his works were quite

extensive and no other historian would be able to match the expanse of material covered until 50 years later with John Ogilby’s *America.* It was not until the 1800’s, that historians started to question seriously some of Smith’s claims. Charles Deane is usually attributed with the start of Smith criticism. Though it was only a footnote in Maria Wingfield’s *A Discourse of Virginia,* Deane was one of the first to question the Pocahontas story, citing several cultural differences that may have confused Smith.²

The biggest attack on Smith, however, would come from Henry Adams in an article in the *North American Review* in 1867.³ He would be the first of many to attack Smith on three fronts. One, he would reinforce the criticism made by Deane on the Pocahontas story. He, however, would go further, saying the story must have been completely false due to it being contradictory to traditional Indian practices. This claim has been proven to be not entirely accurate; though there may have been some misconceptions about the rescue of Smith, it may still have happened and would have been within the bounds of believability with Native American customs. Natives and colonists regularly traded captives. Did Pocahontas “save” Smith out of feelings? That is debatable, but what John Smith saw could have been accurate.⁴ That is not all Adams had to say, however, for he also criticized Smith for being vain, which caused him to re-write history to put him in a good light, and also for being an incompetent official. He claims the third point on the basis that after Smith’s return to England, the Virginia Company

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did not give him further employment for any other colonial ventures; therefore he must have been ineffec
tual.

Some historians have attributed Adams’ harsh criticism of Smith as an attempt to undermine Southern honor in an age where the country was just coming back together after a bitter Civil War. This prompted Southern historians to come to the Virginian’s rescue to refute these accusations. William Henry and Charles Poindexter are two of the most famous defenders of Smith during this era. Though unable to refute completely the claims made by Adams, they chalked up the criticism to nothing more than a Yankee conspiracy to bring down a great southern hero. They also asserted that while Smith may have been vain or slightly egotistical, that does not mean he recorded facts inaccurately, only that he had a character flaw like most humans.5

The sectional conspiracy argument would not work on Smith’s next critic. Edward D. Neil in 1869 wrote History of the Virginia Company, and in it he attacks, much like Adams, Smith’s work as a leader and official. His charge, through his research of the company, was that Smith talked too much and did too little. He also accused Smith of contradicting himself between his two works, Generall Histoire and True Relation, in regards to the story of Pocahontas.6 Neil’s view of Smith was that he was a “gascon and a begger” and always wanting recognition for services not even done by him. With this characterization, Smith was attacked on the same three fronts as before, this time with a little more legitimacy in the claims.

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5 Charles Poindexter, Captain John Smith and His Critics. A Lecture before the Society for Geographical and Historical Study of Richmond College. (Richmond: [J.L. Hill Printing Company], 1893).
Defenders for Smith also attacked Neil in the same way they attacked Adams, albeit from a slightly more scholarly angle. Of the first criticism, that Smith was a lazy official, the defenders pointed out Neil used only the later years of the Virginia Company for his research, namely 1619-1624, whereas most of Smith’s most brilliant work was done before this time. So to characterize his entire career by what the Virginia Company said about him in later years would be a misrepresentation. On the contradiction point, the defenders claimed that the criticism is based on inaccurate use of terms, and that Smith did not contradict himself, just used different language between histories.⁷

A few years later, Charles Dudley Warner wrote a full-length biography on Smith. Though not out-right condemnatory, he did have some critiques of Smith. First and foremost, he also thinks Smith was a very vain writer, giving too much time of his book to himself, and not enough time on other aspects. Warner’s other critiques are seen through a lens of humor. Instead of chastising Smith for his frequent exaggerations, Warner gives off an air of amusement. Warner also points to the fact that it seems “Smith had a peculiar memory which grew stronger and more minute in detail the further he was removed in point of time from the events described.”⁸ As to Smith’s historical accuracy, Warner commented he had “a habit of accurate observation, as his maps show, and this trait gives to his statements and descriptions, when his own reputation is not concerned, a value beyond that of most contemporary travelers.”⁹ While Warner certainly deserves his place in Smith historiography, some discount his observations on the basis that his work

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⁹ Ibid., 34.
was of a more literary vein than it was of a historical nature. It is true that his biography of Smith has entertainment tendencies, but his analysis is sound.

With the onslaught of criticism leveled against Smith, the reaction was inevitable. The first of these revisionist writers was William Wirt Henry, a self-trained historian and direct descendant of Patrick Henry. His defense of Smith lies in his analysis of the manuscripts of his writings. To address the Pocahontas story and the seeming contradiction, Henry raises the point that in the original *True Relation* writing, the story of their encounter does not appear. It was only added in later by editors because of the story’s popularity from his other writings. Along that same track, Henry argues that the surplus of material in his writings were most likely added by editors other than Smith, so contradictions and inaccuracies could be attributed to those editors.

While addressing the supposed inaccuracies in Smith’s writings, Henry argues that Smith’s writings have been criticized on a false assumption, this assumption being that “Smith’s accounts were unreliable, whereas other contemporary narratives were to be accepted on face value.”¹⁰ These “contemporary narratives” that Henry speaks of are mostly attributed to Wingfield, whom he writes had reasons to malign Smith, just as Smith would want to malign Wingfield. Though these arguments are not invalid, they are slightly lessened by the fact that at the end of his article, he seems to delve into hero worship and try to convince the world of Smith’s near perfection.

Two years later, another ardent defender rose to Smith’s aid, writing yet another biography of Smith, this time in a much more positive light than Warner. This historian

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was Edward Arber, and his eleven hundred page book compiled all of Smith’s work with commentary. In the preface Arber states, “Inasmuch, therefore, as wherever we can check Smith, we find him both modest and accurate; we are led to think him so, where no check is possible.” This is a bold statement, and not backed up with much evidence. Arber is also to blame for a misconception that still plagues historians today. It concerns Smith’s eastern adventures and a mysterious journal attributed to Francisco Ferneza. This book was mentioned by Smith, which would supposedly verify all the events he wrote about; however, no one has ever found this book, and no other mention of this book is found anywhere in other writings. Arber’s belief in Smith’s honesty strains reliability, but unfortunately others took Arber’s assertions as readily as Arber took Smith’s and the assertion is still viewed as nearly factual.

Though the late 1800’s seemed to be a period of reactions for the defense of Smith, there was a sort of “reaction to the reaction” and another critic produced an extensive work in 1890 about the first two decades of Virginia history. In The Genesis of the United States, Alexander Brown does not hide his distaste for Smith. He repeatedly accuses him of being incorrect, unjust, and ungenerous. Brown stressed the fact that little about Smith’s life can be verified from outside sources, and the captain seemed to be unable to write accurate information when it concerned himself. He also thought Smith added unnecessary information in his works to increase his own importance. He credited this point with the evidence of an illustration Smith used when relating the capture of an

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11 John Smith and Edward Arber, Travels and Works of Captain John Smith: President of Virginia and Admiral of New England, 1580-1631, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910), xi-xii.
Indian chieftain, blowing his part in it out of proportion. Brown also criticized Smith for the type of history he wrote. Brown, it seems, was more interested in social and economic history, rather than Smith’s physiological history.

As mentioned before, Charles Poindexter was a defender of Smith, but other than attributing the sectional criticism to Adams, he also responded to Brown. Poindexter wrote an interesting defense of the Pocahontas story as it stood in Smith’s writings. He says the release is easily explicable in light of Indian customs of the time. Not only is it understandable, he argues, but it hardly makes sense in any other way! He also charges that it does not show vanity on the side of the captain, because the story was told in 6 lines or less, and the story itself did not exactly lend to Smith’s reputation. He also argues that Smith’s writings must be accurate, since they were dedicated to a court lady, the Duchess of Richmond. His stance on the Pocahontas story was welcome to defenders of Smith, but his accuracy argument lacked merit.

Poindexter was the last overtly biased historian to make waves about John Smith. The next generation of historians would be more judicial in their criticisms, none openly hostile or overly apologetic. Justin Winsor was one of the first of these next generation historians, commenting that Poindexter had a good point on the Pocahontas story, and that Smith’s writings were actually more accurate than most of his contemporaries. The word more accurate, however, implies that Winsor still thought Smith’s works had plenty

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13 Charles Poindexter, *Captain John Smith and His Critics A Lecture before the Society for Geographical and Historical Study of Richmond College* (Richmond: [J.L. Hill Printing Company], 1893).
of flaws. Winsor also pointed out that Smith’s histories, though not perfect, were not surpassed for more than a century.\footnote{Justin Winsor, \textit{Narrative and Critical History of America} (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1884).}

In 1910, the English historian Arthur G. Bradley embodied the opinion of these new age historians with his review of Arber’s works. He did not criticize the text per se, but he did state “Considering the period, however, at which Smith lived, the nations against or with whom he served, there is little or nothing on the face of his narrative to strain the credulity of anyone with a tolerable grasp of history and social progress.”\footnote{Arthur Bradley, \textit{Travels and Works of Captain John Smith.} (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1910).} This would suggest that Bradley thought Smith embodied the spirit of the times with his works, even if his accuracy erred in areas.

The only historian to break the mold of this more judicial way of thinking was E.K. Chatterton, who did not add much to Smith’s defense other than what that had already been said by more reputable historians like Deane.\footnote{E.K. Chatterton, \textit{Captain John Smith} (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1927).} However, after Chatterton, came John G. Fletcher, who wrote in a more popular, entertaining style, but based his history on careful research. The idea of his critique could be summarized in his quote:

> It may be taken for granted that Smith experienced all he said he did, the only question being whether he experienced it in exactly the same manner as he later set down. People of his type and training do not generally recite adventures for the mere sake of telling them; at most they modify or suppress some part of what has been a true experience.\footnote{John Gould Fletcher, \textit{John Smith - Also Pocahontas.} (New York: Brentano's, 1928).}
Thus, Fletcher asserts that historians can strive to answer the question of whether or not Smith did what he writes that he did, but those historians miss the point. Though his works are ranked as history, they miss the exposition of them as well. In his words,

Too much effort has been expended trying to prove whether the Pocahontas incident did or did not occur, whether Smith was prisoner in the winter of 1607-1608 only a month or six weeks, and whether from a certain foraging expedition he brought back to Jamestown only two hundred and seventy-nine bushels of corn or four hundred and seventy-nine bushels and also two hundred pounds of deer suet.\(^{18}\)

Fletcher was one of the first historians to put such an indictment on his colleagues. Indeed, some historians did not agree with his position, but his attitude would prevail throughout the 20\(^{th}\) century, in regards to Captain Smith.

John Smith will always be a curious figure in history. From his almost unreal adventures to his renowned leadership abilities, he will always be an interesting character. His critics call him arrogant and long-winded, trying to puff himself up to secure his place in history. However, if he had stopped his histories at what he had done in Virginia, left out the adventure with Pocahontas, his past in the East, and his other doings in America, his fame would have still been secure, but the people of today would have a much less full picture of life in colonial America. In short, the historiography of John Smith reads like a battleground of historians. First his attackers taking him down for arrogance and inaccuracies, his defenders raising him up to near god-like status, and the new age historians bringing him down to a man who was not perfect, but wrote down a history that is invaluable today.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., vii-viii.