

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 1: John Smith (1580-1631)

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Primary Works

A True Relation of . . . Virginia, 1608; *A Map of Virginia with a Description of the Country*, 1612; *A Description of New England*, 1616; *New Englands Trials*, 1620; 1622; *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, 1624; *The True Travels, Adventures, and Ohservations of Captaine John Smith*, 1630; *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Plant-ers of New England, or Anywhere*, 1631; *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith (1580&emdash; 1631)*, 3 vols., ed. P.L. Barbour, 1986.

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A Student Project by Jaime Ohlsson

John Smith may sound like the name of a very ordinary man, but in truth he was one of the more colorful characters in early American history. Without the contributions he made to the birthing of the nation, the world would not be the same. Fascination over Smith's life is shared by both literary critics and historians alike. Most historians do not regard him as a great man, morally or ethically, but without question, he played a significant role in the written records of the early colonization of America.

Smith was born into a Yeoman (farming) family in Willoughby, Lincolnshire, England in 1580. He went to public school in Willoughby, Alford and Louth, nearby towns. Shortly before his father's death, Smith became an apprentice to Thomas Sendall, a merchant. His father, George Smith, died in 1596 and left him his farm.

With the inheritance his father left him, Smith was able to begin a lifetime of adventuring at an early age (Leary 289). In 1598, he fought in the Dutch war of independence against Spain in the Netherlands. He returned home and studied Niccolo Machiavelli's of War, which would prove to help him a great deal in later battles (Leary 290). In 1600, Smith joined the Austrian army to fight against the Ottoman Turks. On the way to Italy, Smith was thrown overboard in a storm and was rescued by a French merchant. The two worked together in attacking and looting rival vessels, giving Smith even more money to spend on his adventures. In action, Smith helped defeat much of the Turkish army, himself beheading three of the Turks. He was permitted to decorate his shield with a picture of the three heads in 1602, right before he was captured as a slave.

As a slave in Constantinople, Smith's owner, Charatza Tragabigzanda took a liking to him. She sent him to her brother so that her mother could not sell him. Smith wound up killing the brother in order to escape. After returning to the Holy Roman Empire, he presented money and a document citing his achievements.

In 1604, Smith traveled all over Europe: to Germany, France, Spain, and Morocco. He was involved in a sea fight off the coast of Morocco before returning home to England. Once back home, he became interested in settling on some land in Virginia. He set out with 144 other colonists and arrived in the New World in 1606. Once again, troubles were not far behind, as "During the voyage, for lack of tact in explaining to another seasoned adventurer how this venture should be managed, Smith was placed under arrest" (Leary 290). Soon after, the colonists arrived at an area now known as Jamestown. As a result of colonists' poor planning, many people starved there, and there were fights with the Indians. Due to their desperate straits, Smith spent his time trying to get corn in any way possible from the Indians. He was thus made the supply officer for the group.

Because of his unethical behavior, the Powhatan Indians kidnapped Smith and almost executed him. According to The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles, Pocahontas put her head on top of his so that he would not be executed. This is the third time Smith was saved by a woman: "The beauteous Lady Tragabigzanda aided him when he was captured by the Turks; the Lady Callamata gave him succor after he arrived half dead from his fearful flight from Turkish captivity; and Pocahontas saved his life in the New World

whence he had gone to add new deeds to the brave adventures already accomplished in the old" (Rozwenc 30).

Many historians and literary scholars question the veracity of the Pocahontas story. As Thomas P. Slaughter states in The General Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles, "Smith transformed the famous story of his brief captivity by Indians from a tale of tribal nobility to an adventure-romance in which he was delivered from imminent decapitation through the direct intercession of Pocahontas. After years of recounting his experience founding Virginia, Smith suddenly included the Indian maiden in the story, *after* she had become an English celebrity of sorts. *after* her death and the demise of all others who might prove the lie to his revised version" (Slaughter 220). Robert S. Tarr in his review of the book, Did Pocahontas Save John Smith?, that it is nearly impossible to know whether or not Smith's story is true. It is a question that will be left hanging forever.

Smith's writings have received much criticism over the years because of its inconsistency. According to David Read in Philology, The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles "is full of internal contradictions, second-hand information, jarring juxtapositions of tone, and passages of uncertain authorship" (Read 429). However, Read goes on to say that perhaps his writing is incoherent because colonization itself is not coherent.

Smith returned to England in 1608 and published A True Relation. He did more exploring in the United States and was made a member of the colony of Jamestown.

He then went back to England again and worked on A Map of Virginia.

In 1609 Smith was burnt very badly by his gun powder bag exploding while he was in America. He returned once again to England to work on more literature. He explored New England in 1614 and was named Admiral. While traveling back to America in 1615, he was captured by pirates. He worked on A Description of New England before returning to England. Smith

requested a financial grant to start a colony in New England in 1618. New England Trials was published in 1620. In 1622, Historie of Virginia, New England, and the Summer Isles was published.

Smith published several other works before his death in 1631. Many people gleaned advice from his writings on how to start colonies. Although the Puritans rejected him because of their religious bias, they made good use of his maps. Unfortunately, Smith died in poverty.

Although John Smith may seem vainglorious in his writings, he contributed a great deal to the growth of the new colonies. He helped get the New World started and influenced future writers for years. Not only was John Smith a writer, he was an expert on new lands (Leary 291). Despite the suspicions of scholars, the historical value of his works is something that cannot be denied. Without the hard work he put into his recordings and maps, the colonists to follow would have had little to go by. He perhaps lacked a vision for the new world's promise: "He sang of himself but also of the bounty and beauty of the land, its rugged shores, its fertile fields, sweet brooks and crystal springs, and of possibilities there for people bound in Europe by persecution and poverty" (Leary 292). His influence on American literature lasts until today.

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MLA Style Citation of this Web Page

Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 1: John Smith." *PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide*. WWW URL: <http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap1/smith.html> (provide page number or date of your login).