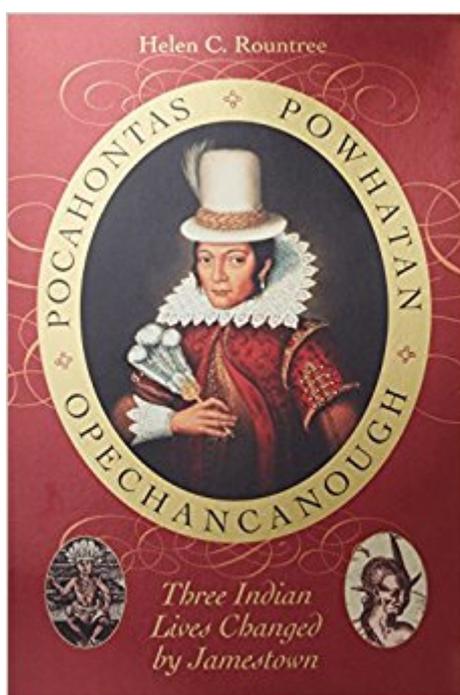


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Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed By Jamestown



Synopsis

Pocahontas may be the most famous Native American who ever lived, but during the settlement of Jamestown, and for two centuries afterward, the great chiefs Powhatan and Opechancanough were the subjects of considerably more interest and historical documentation than the young woman. It was Opechancanough who captured the foreign captain "Chawnzmit" — John Smith. Smith gave Opechancanough a compass, described to him a spherical earth that revolved around the sun, and wondered if his captor was a cannibal. Opechancanough, who was no cannibal and knew the world was flat, presented Smith to his elder brother, the paramount chief Powhatan. The chief, who took the name of his tribe as his throne name (his personal name was Wahunsenacawh), negotiated with Smith over a lavish feast and opened the town to him, leading Smith to meet, among others, Powhatan's daughter Pocahontas. Thinking he had made an ally, the chief finally released Smith. Within a few decades, and against their will, his people would be subjects of the British Crown. Despite their roles as senior politicians in these watershed events, no biography of either Powhatan or Opechancanough exists. And while there are other "biographies" of Pocahontas, they have for the most part elaborated on her legend more than they have addressed the known facts of her remarkable life. As the 400th anniversary of Jamestown's founding approaches, nationally renowned scholar of Native Americans, Helen Rountree, provides in a single book the definitive biographies of these three important figures. In their lives we see the whole arc of Indian experience with the English settlers — from the wary initial encounters presided over by Powhatan, to the uneasy diplomacy characterized by the marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, to the warfare and eventual loss of native sovereignty that came during Opechancanough's reign. Writing from an ethnohistorical perspective that looks as much to anthropology as the written records, Rountree draws a rich portrait of Powhatan life in which the land and the seasons governed life and the English were seen not as heroes but as Tassantassas (strangers), as invaders, even as squatters. The Powhatans were a nonliterate people, so we have had to rely until now on the white settlers for our conceptions of the Jamestown experiment. This important book at last reconstructs the other side of the story.

Book Information

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: University of Virginia Press (July 5, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0813925967

ISBN-13: 978-0813925967

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 8.9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 15 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #408,003 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #169 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Ethnic & National > Native American](#) #199 in [Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Latin America](#) #681 in [Books > History > Americas > United States > Colonial Period](#)

Customer Reviews

"This is an extremely valuable book that will appeal to a wide audience of general readers and scholars.... It is written in a lively style and really makes good on the promise to tell the story of early seventeenth-century Virginia from the Native Americans' point of view. (Karen O. Kupperman Silver Professor of History New York University, author of *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America*) Highly recommended. All levels/libraries. (Choice)

Helen C. Rountree, Professor Emerita of Anthropology at Old Dominion University, is the author and editor of numerous works on the Native Americans of the East Coast, including *Powhatan Foreign Relations, 1500-1722* and, with Thomas E. Davidson, *Eastern Shore Indians of Virginia and Maryland (both Virginia)*.

Roundtree's narrative does something truly remarkable; it uses her extensive understanding of the Powhatan culture of the 17th century to reconstruct their point of view. Always conscious of the limitations of such an act, she nonetheless succeeds brilliantly at her task. Her reconstruction is utterly faithful to everything I have ever read about Algonquian cultural practice. Moreover, she places the story of Pocahontas in context with the larger political struggles of the tribe, as represented through the lives of her father and uncle. What I admire most about her account is its clear depth of knowledge about the various sources she uses, and particularly, her understanding of the complexity of John Smith's accounts (there are more than one, and they all vary) and grasp of the lifeways of the Powhatans of that era. Her approach is informed, balanced, and fair-minded. However, what my students respond to is her engaging, complex story telling. I frequently assign her chapter on the first encounter between the Powhatans and John Smith; it is one of the best texts I have ever found for throwing college students into the conflicting world views

in play in the 17th century contact between North American and European peoples. In sum, I recommend this book in the highest terms to anyone interested in a fuller understanding of the conflicts between Algonquian peoples and Europeans in the early phase of colonization, not just to those interested in Pocahontas. It is a fine piece of ethnohistory, and one that demonstrates how much anthropology has evolved from its early attempts to 'speak for the native.'

Author is very knowledgeable on the subject. If you like early American history you will like this book.

This book is the story of Jamestown from the Native American point of view. It covers lots of the political and social misunderstandings that proved disastrous for both cultures. This is not a light read, but I find it well-written and engaging. I also enjoy the sprinkles of humor the author adds throughout. A good read.

Great and well written and researched and much needed account of the histories of Powhatan and his people including Pocahontas. Very enjoyable read.

Excellent history.

Well written. Found out through Ancestry.com that Pocahontas was a very distant Aunt of mine with her father being my Grandfather. Still reading it.

I purchased this book for my college history class. With that being said it was an eye opener to the true history and life of Pocahontas. Not something I would normally read but I did enjoy it.

Although I did not get the information I was looking for about this trio on American Indians, I got a lot of interesting information.

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