

Humanism and America: An Intellectual History of English Colonisation, 1500–1625. By ANDREW FITZMAURICE. Ideas in Context. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. x, 216, \$55.00.)

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Arguing that humanism, the dominant intellectual force in Renaissance Europe, exerted a profound influence on the early English attempts to establish a foothold on American shores, Andrew Fitzmaurice adds to the large body of scholarly work exploring the intellectual impulses that shaped English colonization in America. In making this case, Fitzmaurice has attempted to revise a number of long-held assumptions about early English colonization. The Elizabethan and Jacobean colonial projects, he argues, were not motivated primarily by desires for trade, plunder, and settlement or for the conquest of native peoples and their lands. Rather, humanists saw their colonial projects as “a means for the citizen to employ his virtue in the pursuit of the active life” (p. 20). Promoters sought honor and glory and “consistently argued that expedience, and profit, should be subordinated to honour and the common good” (p. 57). Colonization would rest on a solid foundation of virtue. Accordingly, Fitzmaurice argues that historians should not view the Virginia Company of London primarily as a commercial enterprise. The company attracted the support of many leading English humanists. Colonization, to them, would result in the “foundation of a new commonwealth” (pp. 71–72), where virtuous colonists would set aside their acquisitive desires and promote general welfare. In this sense, Fitzmaurice argues, the Virginia Company “walked in the footsteps of the Italian republics” (p. 101).

These colonial promoters were anxious imperialists. Fearful of the dangers idleness and luxury could pose for their new American commonwealths, Elizabethan and Jacobean humanists embraced a civic tradition hostile to commerce. Conquest, the resulting possession of native lands,

and the harvesting of New World riches could produce idleness and a desire for luxury that easily could distract colonists from virtuous public service.

Only with the adoption of a humanism inspired by Tacitus and Machiavelli, Fitzmaurice asserts, could Jacobean colonial promoters set aside their concerns regarding the justice and consequences of possessing American lands. Finding examples of this Tacitean/Machiavellian strain of humanism in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and in the writings of Captain John Smith, Fitzmaurice believes that humanists began to find "reasons of state" and "expediency" sufficient to justify American colonies. Both Shakespeare and Smith "adopted a Machiavellian critique of the prevailing Ciceronian model of colonisation supported by the Virginia Company" (p. 168). They believed that subjects must "adopt the behavior of dissimulation, deceit, flattery, and trickery because this was the only means of survival in a corrupt world" (p. 171).

Fitzmaurice has read closely the promotional tracts affiliated with the colonial ventures of Gilbert, Raleigh, and the Virginia Company of London, and there is no doubt that humanist thinking influenced metropolitans interested in establishing a new world empire. Still, there are significant problems with Fitzmaurice's argument. The description of English humanists as anxious imperialists is seldom convincing. For example, in the Theodor deBry edition of Thomas Hariot's *A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1590), which included a series of engravings depicting both Carolina Algonquians and ancient Britons, Fitzmaurice finds evidence of humanist anxiety over the consequences of colonization. Ignoring any substantive discussion of deBry's own claim that he included these images "to shewe how that the Inhabitants of the great Britannie have bin in times past as Savage as those of Virginia" (p. 158), Fitzmaurice argues that the engravings reflect a fear that the English had declined from the truly virtuous past that Tacitus had chronicled. He also locates in these engravings a humanist fear that the English would corrupt the Indians. Surely Hariot, the Hakluyts, and deBry drew from a number of intellectual traditions as they considered the

role Indians would play in Raleigh's new world empire. Unquestionably, humanism was part of their conceptual equation. But as a number of historians have pointed out, other intellectual influences encouraged would-be colonizers to view Indians in a context broader than that framed by the exigencies of securing survival along England's Atlantic frontier.

A lack of specific historical context also hampers the analysis. Fitzmaurice sees additional evidence of humanist anxiety about the justice of possessing Indian lands in the famous Virginia Company essay Francis Bacon published in 1625. Bacon wanted the English to plant "in a Pure soile, that is, where People are not *Displanted*" (p. 166). This may be an expression of "Ciceronian" humanist anxiety about the corruption that possessing colonies could produce, but it should also be understood as pragmatic advice for a colony that had suffered for its aggressive appropriation of Indian land. Fitzmaurice seems unaware that, just three short years before Bacon published his sermon, the Powhatan Indians had struck out at the English in a devastatingly successful surprise attack that had wiped out a third of the colony's population in a matter of hours.

"Humanism" alone simply seems inadequate for understanding the intellectual history of English colonization. Even the distinction Fitzmaurice draws between "Ciceronian" and "Tacitean/Machiavellian" humanism tends to fade under closer scrutiny. Humphrey Gilbert, for instance, may have been known "for his passion for the *studia humanitatis*" (p. 39), but he also was known for his scorched-earth tactics in Ireland. There, according to his chronicler, Gilbert chopped the heads off the bodies of dead Irish men, women, and children to line the pathways in his camp. At nearly the same time, the elder Richard Hakluyt, another humanist, believed that a settlement "without crueltie and tyrannie" would "best answereth the profession of a Christian, best planteth Christian religion; maketh our seating most void of blood, most profitable in trade of merchandise . .

. and least subject to remoove by practice of enemies.”¹ Later, John Smith, a humanist of the Tacitean/Machiavellian stripe, would learn from hard experience on the early American frontier that the best way to keep a colony from starving was by forcing local Indians to feed his men, an aggressive policy that resulted in England’s first Indian war. Many other humanists, beginning with Thomas Hariot, disagreed with these brutal tactics and believed ²that well-treated Indians would willingly join the English in creating an Anglo-American, Christian, New World empire. If all these men are humanists, how useful, really, is humanism as a concept for understanding English New World imperialism?

No intellectual history is worth its weight if it cannot convincingly explain the connection between thought and action. Colonial promoters may have employed humanist language in their efforts to justify and mobilize support for American settlements, but Andrew Fitzmaurice’s humanism is an amorphous and shapeless thing. He offers no plausible explanation for the enormous chasm between humanist rhetoric and colonial experience. Part of Cambridge’s “Ideas in Context” series, *Humanism and America* ultimately fails to place humanist thought in a broader context and to explain why, in the end, humanism really mattered.

¹ E.G.R. Taylor, ed., *The Original Writings and Correspondence of the Two Richard Hakluyts* (London, 1935), 334.