

A Little Parliament: The Virginia General Assembly in the Seventeenth Century. By WARREN M. BILLINGS.
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The newest addition to Warren M. Billings's impressive collection of scholarship on seventeenth-century Virginia examines the evolution of England's law and political practices in one of its colonies, a question he has addressed before and that has commanded considerable interest recently. Explaining how Virginia lawmakers and politicians adapted their inherited political and legal tradition to a colonial setting, *A Little Parliament* emphasizes the institutional and procedural aspects of this question, examining how the functions and responsibilities of the Virginia General Assembly developed over the course of the seventeenth century and how its roles in Virginia compared with those of Parliament and other legal bodies (judicial and legislative) in England.

Billings's command of seventeenth-century Virginia sources and his familiarity with individuals, political factions, and laws allows him to consider with confidence how personalities intersected with changes in political policy to affect the workings of the General Assembly, the Virginia governing body composed of the governor, his councillors, and the representative House of Burgesses. Billings's main argument is that despite minimal legal training, Virginia Assemblymen quickly became "sophisticated lawmakers" (xix) who built the General Assembly into a professional lawmaking body. This conclusion, though building on his earlier work, reflects a refreshing willingness to reconsider his previous belief in a more disorganized political scene.

The book's organization stresses the structure and process of the assembly and the form of law rather than exploring the meaning of structural and procedural change or legal content. Part I, "Patterns of Growth," outlines the growth of the assembly from an administrative body for the Virginia Company of London in 1619 into a "Little Parliament" with considerable powers by the 1640s, by which point burgesses had become increasingly aware of their role as voters' representatives. The assembly had reached the height of its power on the eve of Bacon's Rebellion, with a cooperative governor and minimal imperial intervention. In the rebellion's aftermath, however, it faced governors and imperial policies intent on making Virginia's interests secondary to the goals of London. For the remainder of the century, a chastised assembly continued to conduct itself as a professional governing body, but one that had to adapt to serious limitations on its power. Part II, "Membership," describes the offices and personalities of governors, councillors, burgesses, clerks, and speakers, noting where they paralleled English Parliament and where they did not. This section is especially convincing in its examination of the effects of the personalities of governors, as well as their political opinions, on their ability or inability to work with their councillors and burgesses. Part III, "Assemblymen at Work," explores the functions of the General Assembly, the lawmaking and judicial processes, and concludes with a final chapter on the law itself, arguing that successive revisions of Virginia's laws made the legal codes increasingly efficient. They became more like English law in form, at the same time speaking more to conditions in Virginia.

The political factions dividing seventeenth-century Virginia lawmakers are central to the developments Billings describes. Readers unfamiliar with those factions might find it useful to read the descriptions of them on pages 51 and 52 before beginning the book. The most basic division was between those irreconcilables unwilling to abide English intervention into Virginia politics and the trimmers, or imperialists, who followed London's lead to place themselves well, adjusting their views to suit the changing goals of Crown and Parliament. Between those two extremes were the moderates. At the end of the century, after the post-Bacon's Rebellion interventions of the Crown and the terms of governors intent on subjecting the General Assembly to London, the irreconcilables declined in number and became increasingly irrelevant in part because the new generation of politicians had

grown up expecting imperial intervention in Virginia politics. Billings's ability to untangle complicated alliances and place individuals politically is impressive, especially given how unclear such alliances appear in the available records.

Many readers will wish for more explicit and more detailed analysis, especially given the depth of Billings's knowledge of seventeenth-century Virginia politics. His argument does not go far beyond the thesis that the Virginia General Assembly took on many of the trappings and powers of the English Parliament over the course of the seventeenth century, only to find its prerogatives limited by governors' tightening of imperial control during the century's final decades. Billings consciously opts not to make any comparisons with other colonies because there is no evidence suggesting either that Virginia General Assembly members looked elsewhere for examples to emulate or that their actions influenced the politics of other colonies. Broad comparisons, however, would allow readers to put the evolution of Virginia's General Assembly into a context that might help explain the significance of the developments in that colony. Alternatively, he might have given greater explicit attention to the effect of improved legal abilities of members and increased confidence in the content of the legislation the General Assembly passed.

A "Note on Sources" will be invaluable for those new to the study of Virginia history and, moreover, contains references that will likely be unfamiliar to many who have already done extensive research in Virginia sources. *A Little Parliament* is a useful introduction to anyone interested in Virginia government and will prove an indispensable resource for scholars working in Virginia history.