It is no coincidence that Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Silver Professor of History at New York University and a leading scholar of colonial America, would publish a book entitled The Jamestown Project in 2007, the four hundredth anniversary of the colony’s establishment. However, despite the presidential celebrations and royal visits of this year, Kupperman’s book is no heroic re-telling of the origins of Virginia and the United States. In fact, she does not address the actual founding of the settlement on the James River until the final three chapters. Instead, her goal is to place Jamestown in the much larger context of sixteenth and seventeenth century Atlantic history. Jamestown was as much a conclusion as it was a beginning, and it was one colonial venture among many, a thread in the complex tapestry of the early modern Atlantic world.

That is not to say that Kupperman is unconcerned with creation myths. She stresses the importance of Jamestown to American historical memory, even though “the portrait that has come down to us depicts greedy, grasping English colonists in America and their arrogant backers in England” (p. 1). Plymouth, with its themes of religious freedom and Puritan values, might make for a more comfortable story of national origin. However, although Jamestown might seem “the creation story from hell,” Kupperman argues that it “was not only the earliest English colony to survive; its true priority lies in its inventing the archetype of English colonization. All other successful English colonies followed the Jamestown model” (p. 1, 3). Moreover, part of Jamestown’s bad reputation stems from the fact that the record is somewhat distorted by the large number of complaints, pleas, and excuses sent back to England.

Chapter one places Elizabethan England in the wider religious and political context of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Kupperman includes not only Spain, but also the Ottoman empire and Africa in her analysis of the colonial, imperial, and national power struggles of the period. The second chapter focuses on the explorers, entrepreneurs, and adventurers who often pioneered colonial projects. Unsurprisingly, the colorful exploits of John Smith feature prominently in this section, especially his time as a mercenary and captive in the Ottoman empire. Chapter three addresses pre-Jamestown encounters between Native Americans and Europeans, including the experiences of Native Americans brought to Europe. Kupperman stresses that Chesapeake Indians were hardly surprised by the arrival of Europeans in 1607: “European ships continued to enter Chesapeake Bay during the decades before Jamestown was founded, and their encounters left few or no traces in the records.” (p. 106)

The fourth chapter examines the fascination with all things new, foreign, and exotic in English culture during the period. Kupperman draws not only on obvious works such as Thomas Harriot’s A Briefe and True Report of the new found land of Virginia, but also commonplace books, dramas, and cabinets of curiosities. Again, a wider context is stressed: English readers were equally fascinated with the Ottoman empire and the orient in general. Chapter five is concerned with cartography, the naming of places, geography in general, and climate in particular. One of the chief obstacles to colonization was that climates in Europe and North America differ greatly even on similar latitudes. Furthermore, both Europeans and Native Americans suffered from an exceptional dry and cold period at the beginning of the seventeenth century. “A Welter of Colonial Projects,” chapter six, juxtaposes Jamestown against the many English colonial efforts of the time, including the East India Company, Charles Leigh’s Guiana colony, Sagadahoc, and Roanoke. Kupperman also includes a substantial subsection on English colonialism in Ireland.

Chapters seven through nine deal with the history of the Jamestown settlement proper. “Jamestown’s Uncertain Beginnings” addresses the specific plans made for the colony and the first year of settlement 1607-08, including politics, survival, and Indian relations. Inevitably, John Smith’s “rescue” by Pocahontas is mentioned briefly, but Kupperman is actually more interested in the general role of youth in the intercultural encounters of Virginia. The eighth chapter examines the years 1608-16, focusing not only on the great starving time but especially the flurry of political reforms and new settlements designed to help the colony survive. Kupperman looks in detail at the more interesting part of the Pocahontas story: her travel to
(and death in) England as well as the fate of those Chesapeake Indians who accompanied her. The final chapter, “James Cittie in Virginia,” follows the maturation of the colony from the mid-1610s through the 1620s. Tobacco, indentured servitude, the headright system, and the arrival of the first African servants receive attention, as do military conflicts with the Native Americans. Kupperman examines the influence of the Thirty Years War on colonization in America, as well as the impact of the second permanent English settlement, Plymouth. She concludes that while Jamestown faced immense problems, this project revealed the basic physical and psychological challenges of colonization in North America, and thus became the model for all later efforts.

It is obvious that Kupperman is treading on familiar ground in this book. Her earlier works include Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of His Writings (Chapel Hill, 1988), Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony (Totowa, 1984, 1991), Settling With the Indians: The Meeting of English and Indian Cultures in America, 1580-1640 (London and Totowa, 1980), and America in European Consciousness (Chapel Hill, 1995), which examine themes similar to those in this book. In terms of sources, Kupperman relies mainly on contemporary publications, documentary editions, and secondary literature. The book draws its strength from the diversity of its sources, which go beyond English texts to include Spanish, French, Turkish and Native American perspectives.

Kupperman’s gripping prose, with its attention to detail and choice of fascinating, even adventurous topics makes The Jamestown Project a worthwhile read for those seeking to learn more about England’s oldest surviving North American colony four hundred years after its founding. However, the true strength of the book lies in its ability to put the Jamestown colony, its protagonists, their motives, their challenges, successes, and failures into an enlarged perspective. For Kupperman, Jamestown represents much more than a story of national origin (for the United States) or of a nearly failed but ultimately successful step towards imperial greatness (for England). With a far-reaching gaze worthy of a Captain John Smith, Kupperman shows us Jamestown as a project of the rich and complex Atlantic, European, and American history of the early modern period.

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