

A Man Most Driven



An apocryphal tale? *John Smith Saved by Pocahontas*,
painted by Alonzo Chappel, circa 1865

Prologue

*Yet God made Pocahontas the Kings daughter
the meanes to deliver me: and thereby taught me
to know their trecheries to preserve the rest*

John Smith, New England Trials (1622)

On December 30, 1607, an Englishman was dragged before the paramount chief of the native Powhatan tribes of Virginia. His abductors brought out two large rocks, and placed him with his head resting on the boulders. He lay prostrate, waiting for a mercifully swift execution. It was dark inside the longhouse, and as the prisoner's eyes adjusted slowly to the gloom, he became aware that around him, about two hundred people were looking on in fascination. For most, it was their first sight of a European.

The prisoner was strong but not tall, standing only as high as his guards' shoulders. His thick beard mainly covered the ruddy complexion of someone who had spent most of his life in the open. The man was a few days short of his twenty-eighth birthday, an anniversary he did not expect to celebrate. As he lay on the ground, the guards raised their war clubs above his head, waiting for the command from their chief to execute the prisoner in their traditional manner – by beating the brains out of his skull.

From the shadows of the smoke-filled longhouse, a young girl of perhaps ten or twelve emerged, naked from the waist up, and with only a wisp of black hair hanging down from the back of her shaved head. She turned to the great man presiding over the ceremony, with a familiarity and self-confidence that suggested she knew the chief well. She did, for he was her father. The girl pleaded for the stranger's life to be spared. The Englishman

understood little about what was being said, for his comprehension of the Algonquian language was still rudimentary.

The chief considered his daughter's appeal carefully. He was an old man, perhaps sixty or seventy years, broad-shouldered, fit and powerfully built for his age. He wore a robe of raccoon skins with the tails still attached, and around his neck a chain of pearls. He was clearly held in awe by all those present, and "at the least frowne of his brow, their greatest will tremble with feare".¹ The chief was dispassionate as he considered the young girl's request, his face showing "such a grave and Majesticall countenance".²

The Englishman had no option but to await the judgement that would soon enough seal his fate.



The rescue of Captain John Smith, English soldier and adventurer, by the "Indian princess" Pocahontas is one of the oldest and most enduring legends to come out of the colonization of America. Smith wrote that "at the minute of my execution, she hazarded [risked] the beating out of her owne braines to save mine".³ Since that bitterly cold afternoon in late December 1607, the story has been celebrated worldwide in books, paintings, feature films and animated cartoons.

The only European witness to the event was Smith himself, and his account has been questioned ever since it was first published in 1624. If the only debatable episode in Smith's extraordinary life was this encounter with Pocahontas, then his version of events might not have attracted quite so much attention – or derision. But this was not the case.

Smith's autobiography, *The True Travels, Adventures and Observations of Captain John Smith*, is packed full of the most incredible incidents: that he fought, defeated and beheaded three enemy commanders in duels; that he was sold into slavery, only to murder his master and escape; that he was captured by pirates, survived shipwrecks and marched up to the gallows to be hanged – only to be reprieved at the last moment. All this happened, or so John Smith claimed, even before he met Pocahontas and her father.

Prologue

Some of Smith's achievements are beyond dispute, most especially his success in saving the Jamestown settlement in Virginia during its first two brutal winters. The surviving settlers recognized that Smith had exercised his skill and experience to help them survive. But he was also a difficult and argumentative man, and he clashed constantly with his fellow colonists. One leader of the colony called Smith "an ambitious, unworthy, and vainglorious fellow".⁴

Centuries later, this reputation lived on. Rather than being universally lauded for saving England's first permanent settlement in the Americas – which ultimately led to North America becoming part of the English-speaking world – Smith was vilified, maligned and pilloried. Was he really such a villain? Or might he be the victim of envy, internal division and misrepresentation, both in his own day and in the historical record?

Indeed, Smith never lost his capacity to stir indignation among his detractors, or to arouse great loyalty in his supporters. He combined admirable strengths with great weaknesses: he was authoritarian and autocratic, yet also vulnerable and insecure. His life was a catalogue of defiance and confrontation, disorder and contradiction. It is these flawed and very human characteristics that make him such a fascinating character.

In his own writings, Smith did little to endear himself to a sceptical reader, or to an assiduous historian. He frequently claimed he was in the right, and that others were grossly incompetent. His spelling was chaotic, his grammar confused, and his dates and timelines an embarrassment to any self-respecting chronicler. In his defence, Smith neither claimed to be an historian, nor would have expected scholars or writers to be poring over his memoirs more than four hundred years after his birth. Nevertheless, given his inflated ego, he would most certainly have taken great satisfaction from knowing that one day this would be the case.

Smith left many diaries and memoirs of his astonishing exploits, but which of his more fanciful claims are the writings of a deceitful self-publicist – and which are anchored in the historical record?

This new evaluation of John Smith combines an appraisal of his life with a detective story, as we follow in his footsteps, constantly challenging and assessing his claims. In doing so, we can test his writings against the local history and geography, about which he wrote so much.

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In every sense, Smith was a true Renaissance man: a soldier of fortune, captain of cavalry, colonist, adventurer, diplomat, surveyor and mapmaker; he was also a pirate, a mercenary and a self-confessed murderer. Unravelling the facts from the fiction is complex, but the truth is more revealing and intriguing than you might ever have imagined.

So what can we make of this man? Is he villain or victim? Even making exception for his archaic writing style, it remains to be seen whether Captain John Smith deserves such redemption.