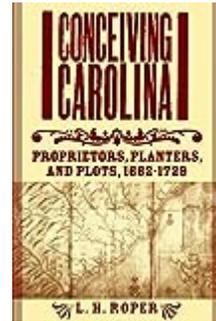




**L. H. Roper.** *Conceiving Carolina: Proprietors, Planters, and Plots, 1662-1729.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. viii + 214 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6479-3.



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## Plotting Carolina on Anglo-American Axes

In this dense and intense account of shifting political sands in proprietary Carolina, L. H. Roper challenges a number of commonly held assumptions about the colony in its infancy. South Carolinian settlement was dominated by Barbadians, who inexorably dragged with them a model of plantation slavery which they looked to recreate just as soon as they hit on a suitable staple crop. The Goose Creek Men, a handful of fractious settlers who dominated the region around Charles Town and thus the provincial assembly, sought at every possible juncture to thwart the inept Lords Proprietor and their antiquated schemes to establish feudal baronies that might bolster their incomes. Obstreperous settlers refused to submit to executive power, shunned the constitutional system favored by the proprietors, stifled religious toleration in favor of a taut Anglicanism, and inevitably brought down the proprietary regime in a coup in 1719. This narrative (albeit rather caricatured here), and the assumptions which underlie it, is the adversary against which Roper launches a flurry of assaults.

Roper's challenges are based on extensive and impressive archival research, as is evidenced in the 575

endnotes. These meticulous findings, in conjunction with a number of critical gaps in the historical record, lead readers of *Conceiving Carolina* down a number of unexpected avenues. Roper focuses almost relentlessly upon the expectations, motivations, and behavior of the leading metropolitan Lords Proprietor and their principal provincial agents and provocateurs. Unsurprisingly, such scrutiny tends to complicate attempts to separate and categorize them into consistent factions: proprietary vs. non-proprietary, planter vs. Indian trader, or Anglican vs. dissenter.

The Lords Proprietor, Roper argues in chapter 1, were motivated as much by public service as by private interest: "it does not appear ... that the Lords primarily regarded Carolina as an opportunity to make money neither did they hold out any particular expectations for their American estates" (p. 26). His analysis of the *Fundamental Constitutions*, an organizational framework for Carolina famously co-authored by John Locke, also leads him to be less skeptical than other historians about the proprietors and their plans. The critical factor here, which differentiates Roper from others, such as Meaghan

Duff, is the amount of emphasis and credibility he places on the processes of deputization and delegation that were written into the contract.[1] Roper's proprietors are less meddlesome in theory as well as in practice.

In subsequent chapters, Roper turns to other purported weaknesses in his adversary, the "customary view of early South Carolina's development" (p. 52), relating to the settlers themselves. He contends that Barbadian influence, especially among the Goose Creek Men, has been overstated, observing that a substantial proportion of their leaders arrived directly from England, and had no prior experience of slavery. The characterization of the Barbadian party as Anglican is also challenged, on the basis that there is no record of a clergyman in the colony prior to 1695. Finally, Roper disputes that the Goose Creek Men formed a consistent "anti-proprietary" faction at all in Carolina, or that they repudiated Lord Ashley's vision of a colony with a hereditary aristocracy and entailed estates because it restricted their activities. Roper stresses that Maurice Mathews and his Goose Creek co-conspirators never objected to the *Constitutions* on philosophical grounds, and that they viewed themselves as clients who "still had a regard for the duty they owed their masters" (p. 53). More persuasively, he traces their voluble recourse to the original socio-political framework every time proprietors tried to amend regulations in the 1670s and 1680s.

*Conceiving Carolina* is a story of contention and competition, of shifting allegiances and erupting factionalism—just not necessarily along the fault lines that other historians have described. Roper's pugilistic style, unlike that of his Indian-raiding historical subjects, takes few prisoners, and in places vehemently opposes the syntheses of Eugene Sirmans, Robert M. Weir, and Verner Crane.[2] But if much of this is rather negative, *Conceiving Carolina* does make some important positive contributions to our understanding of the evolution of the province. The central deterministic feature outlined in the book is the trade in Indian slaves. Almost all of the structural aftershocks that Roper documents in Carolina's political evolution were generated by this fault line and its consistent volcanic activity between the colony's founding and the cataclysmic Yamasse War of 1715, which helped bring about the anti-proprietary rebellion.

*Conceiving Carolina* also neatly draws parallels between the metropolitan political machinations of the proprietors and the provincial ambitions of settlers. Roper boldly ventures linkages between the disruptions in late-

seventeenth-century Carolina and the upheavals of Stuart Britain. His Anglo-Carolinians were not far-flung independent pioneers holding revolutionary machinations or proslavery expectations, but were intricately connected to political currents in the metropolis, both practical and theoretical. While much of this comparative tracking is impressive and persuasive, it suffers from a couple of limitations, particularly in chapter 1.

Firstly, some of the generalizations that are made about the nature of early modern English/British society are excessively broad, or rather unclear. For instance, some may question the rather sweeping assertion, or the worth of the assertion, that "discontent, often violent, simmered throughout the period from the 'Henrician Reformation' of the 1530s (and, of course, earlier) through the Reform Bill of 1832." Why stop at the Reform Bill? Equally, though I undoubtedly do an injustice to the author by taking quotes out of context, the meaning is sometimes rather obfuscated. "The manorial court provided a key mechanism to ensure that everybody did what they were supposed to do in early modern England and consequently manifested the social character of reality at this time. It, then, provided a means for resolving the local concerns of those who inhabited the wider end of the society of orders" (p. 22).

Secondly, despite the author's manifest appreciation and clear chronicling of the centrality of Indian slaving to the twisting and turning of factional fortunes in early Carolina, the "Atlantic" approach adopted is essentially bipolar and rather ethnocentric. To belabor the pugilistic analogy to excess, while Roper undoubtedly lands plenty of notable blows on the "customary view" of early Carolinian history, his ducking and weaving is also significant: "the present study, then, makes no attempt to discuss Africans and Indians per se" (p. 3). There is little doubt that the handful of salacious white men discussed here in engrossing detail played a significant short-term role in dictating the socio-political development of early Carolina, and that their life cycles (migrations, imprisonments, and deaths) affected the nature of life in the colony and kept it closely tied to events elsewhere. And to be fair, as Roper points out, there is scant source material with which to assess the influence of subaltern groups. But given his ingenuity in positing counterfactuals elsewhere, perhaps he might have dealt more fully with the potential agency of southeastern Indians, or the potential impact of the increasing number of African slaves, upon Anglo-Carolinian political evolution. Neither the notion of "tragic pragmatism" nor the process of the "plantation substituting for the manor" that are

referred to, tantalizingly, in the penultimate page have received sufficient attention in the manuscript.

Those looking for a comprehensive history of the early Carolinas are likely to find themselves dissatisfied with *Conceiving Carolina* as a stand-alone piece (it hardly touches on the Albemarle Sound settlement and spends little time on the economy or the Yamassee War, for instance). But it brings to the table a well-researched and provocative account of the exhilarating characters—whether proprietors or provincials—who fought for socio-political authority and leadership in early Carolina, emphasizing their common “Anglo-Atlantic” worldview. Some readers may feel that Roper has administered knockout blows to the orthodoxies he challenges, others that he has merely landed minor

bruises. Either way, it is an enjoyable tussle.

#### Notes

[1]. Meaghan Duff, “Creating a Plantation Province: Proprietary Land Policies and Early Settlement Patterns,” in *Money, Trade, and Power: The Evolution of Colonial South Carolina’s Plantation Society*, ed. Jack P. Greene, Rosemary Brana-Shute, and Randy J. Sparks (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 1-25.

[2]. Eugene M. Sirmans, *Colonial South Carolina: A Political History, 1663-1763* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); Robert M. Weir, *Colonial South Carolina: A History* (New York: KTO Press, 1983); and Verner W. Crane, *The Southern Frontier: 1670-1732* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1928).

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