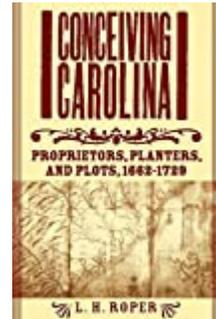




L. H. Roper. *Conceiving Carolina: Proprietors, Planters, and Plots, 1662-1729.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. viii + 214 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4039-6479-3.



Reviewed by Catherine A. Cardno (Department of History, Johns Hopkins University)

Published on H-South (February, 2006)

South Carolina's Atlantic World Context

L. H. Roper's study offers a proposal for reconfiguring our approach to the study of colonial British America by setting the founding of Carolina squarely within its Atlantic context. This is an increasingly popular trend, and monographs focusing on the broader Atlantic picture are appearing steadily, and in conjunction with university courses on Atlantic history where once Colonial America was taught.[1]

Conceiving Carolina offers an Atlantic perspective on the formation of South Carolina, from the Proprietorship that founded the colony in 1662 to its eventual demise and the crown take-over in 1729. And so we follow along, from the beginning as the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina constituted the centerpiece of the proprietary plan after 1669 (chapter 2), to the rise of the Goose Creek men, that wealthy cohort who dominated the assembly and council of Carolina in its early years (chapter 4), and the growing pains experienced by the colony as it began to establish itself amidst Goose Creek-Proprietor tension and other European efforts in North America (chapters 6-8). The book ends with the eventual demise of the Goose Creek men, continued political strife amidst Indian at-

tacks, and the eventual assumption of crown control of the colony (chapters 8-9).

As we are told by the title, this is a volume about proprietors, planters, and plots in late-seventeenth-century Carolina. Roper tackles the classic Carolina settlement narrative, revising it with the argument that previous historiography has overstated West Indian influence in Carolina's settlement, and that the Goose Creek men were true "Anglo-Atlantic" inhabitants who were not anti-proprietary across the board (pp. 6-7).

Roper's first point, that "the well-publicized connection between the West Indies, especially Barbados, and South Carolina, while certainly significant, has been overstated," challenges long-held assumptions about early Carolina. Believers in the "colony of a colony" label beware: Roper argues that most of the leading Goose Creek men came from England, not the West Indies, and identifying early Carolinians as "Barbadian" or "American," as distinct from "English" is misleading in this context (p. 6). Leading men in Carolina "held political and commercial interests in and had familiarity with places on both sides of the ocean, physically and men-

tally,” and Roper argues that “we should regard them (as they did themselves) more as inhabitants of an Anglo-Atlantic world rather than as denizens of an “Old World” or a “New” (p. 7).

Roper’s re-situation of West Indians in South Carolina’s early history, he points out, revises our understanding of proprietary-era politics. “Although conflict did predominate the political scene, the Goose Creek men did not constitute an anti-proprietary faction,” Roper writes. These were men who involved themselves in the Indian Trade, disposed successfully of all of their colonial and European rivals over a number of decades, and who, throughout the entire history of early Carolina, “continually opposed constitutional government and reforms that might have placed their activities under unbearable scrutiny” (p. 7). The Goose Creek men’s continual defense of their trading interest disrupted the Carolina political scene, significantly impacted European migration (adversely), and ultimately provoked war (p. 8). But these factional convulsions were not unique to Carolina, Roper points out—rebellions occurred in Maryland, Virginia, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the Leeward Islands (p. 10).

Carolina’s proprietors could not do much to bring the Goose Creek men in line. Thus, Roper argues, “the Carolina proprietors sought to govern their province in ways that made sense to themselves and made sense with respect to the general understanding of politics and society as it existed in the England of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.” Placing proprietary (and colonial) actions and interactions within this context, Roper points out, allows us to see that over the seventy-year history of their government, the proprietors were not ignorant, inept, or impotent (p. 9). Roper concludes that the rise and fall of the proprietary in Carolina ultimately reveals the fundamental weakness of the early modern British Empire in its enduring reluctance to assume a direct role in “empire-building” or imperial policy well into the 1720s (p. 157).

Roper’s study is a rich source of information on the first sixty-seven years of Carolina’s history. His narrative approach allows the reader to see his various themes and sub-themes within their chronological context: English political interests intertwining with Carolina history, hostile colonial interactions with the French and Spanish over their North American claims, difficulties enticing Anglo-European migrants to Carolina, and the trade in Indian laborers and eventual transition to African slavery are all part of Carolina’s early history, and the even-

tual collapse of the proprietary regime.

What Roper does, he does very well: his situation of Carolina within its broader Atlantic World context is meticulously researched and documented, and his prose conveys the richness of the well-to-do white male experiences in the contentious Anglo-Atlantic political world of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. I find extremely interesting his examination of the transplantation of English political ideals and the concurrent failure of English social values to successfully take root.

My reservations are few. Roper seems, at times, to be uncertain of the legitimacy of his framing argument, or of what he wants his labels to mean. He describes the “Atlantic” perspective that his book revolves around as both “fashionable” (p. 1) and “faddish” (p. 2). He would have also been well served by clarifying his labels in the introduction. Just where does he consider European, African, and Indian worlds to lie? The “Old World” is referred to as “European and African” (p. 1), or generically European (p. 4), while the “New” is simultaneously limited to landscape and Indians (p. 1), and as a world created by Europeans for Indians and Africans combined (p. 3). I do a disservice by pulling his references out of context, but by not providing clear points of reference on which readers can ground their understanding of his approach to the topic, Roper leaves readers unnecessarily confused by what he is trying to say.

With ten chapters in a mere 157 pages of text, Roper’s study is driven by chronology. By giving primacy to a time-line rather than using a more argument-driven approach in exploring Carolina’s Atlantic world context, *Conceiving Carolina* is a dense read, a fact belied by its slim appearance. His chronological approach does not allow him to fully explore the similarities between other colonies’ political experiences with conflict and strife, although he takes pains to mention the universality of certain experiences. Readers would also do well to have a firm understanding of current historiographical arguments regarding the founding of Carolina, and the events that transpired in its first sixty-seven years, to fully understand the impact of Roper’s findings.

This is not a book for people looking for an introduction to early Carolina history, but it is a book that will become required reference material for historians writing on Carolina history or the development of New World societies, and should prove especially useful for those interested in the central role of politics, and the negotiations for power between periphery and center.

Notes

[1]. A recent collection that bridges the gap between student-friendly texts and the narrowly-focused monographs on Atlantic history is the extremely useful and thought-provoking David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

[2]. The three classic syntheses that Roper takes a stand against are: 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).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Catherine A. Cardno. Review of Roper, L. H., *Conceiving Carolina: Proprietors, Planters, and Plots, 1662-1729*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11394>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.