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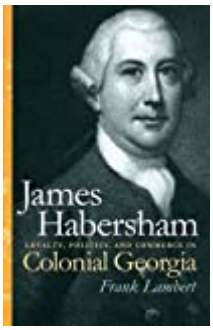

Frank Lambert. *James Habersham: Loyalty, Politics, and Commerce in Colonial Georgia.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005. x + 198 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2539-2.

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James of All Trades

In recent years, political historians of early America–at once informed by social and cultural histories and incensed at their usurpation of the academic center ground–have busily been reinvestigating the activities of the white male elite at the local and national level. In spite of all of the huff and puff of disputes over "Founders chic," or debates about the explanatory superiority of social versus political history, this refashioning of grand figures has often proved a welcome opportunity to identify salient junctures and continuities, to revitalize worn out questions with a new vocabulary, and to synthesize old narratives with new findings. The prominent men of colonial Georgia–governors, military officers, Indian traders, merchants, and planters of substance–have lately received considerable attention from a number of scholars.[1] At their finest, such studies avoid an insular focus and construct not just a narrative of their subject's life, but explain their actions and significance by locating them in the context of their changing historical environment, providing a prosopographical analysis. Frank Lambert's study of the life of the successful entrepreneur James Habersham (c.1715-75), a founding father of Georgia, is a valuable addition to this field, and shares many of the strengths and a few of the weaknesses of the genre.

James Habersham was Georgia's Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Hutchinson all rolled into one. The son of a middle-class dyer from the East Riding of Yorkshire, his was the kind of "early American success" story that was only possible in the frontier colonial South (p. 1). Driven by an entrepreneurial acumen that was fashioned during his merchant apprenticeship in London, Habersham was "ideally suited for life in a frontier colony" and enmeshed himself in short time in the commercial and political networks of early Georgia (p. 32). Making judicious use of both social and economic capital, he soon became an affluent merchant, a prominent politician (as secretary, councilor, and deputy governor), and of course a planter and slaveholder, amassing around ten thousand acres in the low country and exploiting the labor of hundreds of bondspeople. Though sympathetic to colonial grievances during the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s, Habersham remained steadfastly loyal to the British constitution and the British Crown, attempting to fulfill his official duties in the face of growing dissent and deteriorating health,

until he abandoned the province in 1775 for New Jersey, where he died.

Lambert's account of Habersham's life is based on a meticulous, comprehensive reading and cross-indexing of primary sources, largely trawled from published but somewhat unwieldy compilations: the *Colonial Records of Georgia* series and the Georgia Historical Society's *Collections*. As with most biographies, the structure (for the most part) is straightforwardly narrative, but Lambert's compartmentalization of Habersham's life experiences is deft and unobtrusive, and draws effectively upon Habersham's diverse range of interests. The seven chapters sequentially address peculiar fads and phases in Habersham's life: his English background and likely surroundings as a child in Yorkshire and as a merchant apprentice in London; his conversion to Methodism and his initial tribulations as a missionary and orphanage superintendent in the Georgia wilderness; his metamorphosis into a successful retailer in Savannah; his graduation into politics and administration as one of the colony's most valued (and literate) residents during the 1750s and beyond; his assumption of proslavery rhetoric and practice, and accretion of plantation holdings; his socio-cultural transformation into a "Georgia Gentleman"; and finally his political behavior in both public and private domains during the imperial crisis, when his various loyalties to family, friends, province, and country pulled him in painfully divergent directions.

Lambert's discussion of Habersham's early life is necessarily somewhat improvisational, since Habersham himself left few records until he crossed the Atlantic. Nonetheless, Lambert paints a vivid picture of life in Yorkshire and London, drawing principally on familiar contemporary commentators such as Daniel Defoe and Arthur Young, and interjecting some of Habersham's later recollections. Indeed, stylistic devices throughout the book are intelligently deployed to facilitate points of creative speculation: how Habersham might have experienced nostalgia when he wandered around the flourishing streets and markets of late colonial Savannah; or what the act of commissioning a self-portrait revealed about the man and his self image. It is testament to a well-written biography when one comes away feeling that one knows the subject intimately rather than knowing about the person, and Lambert is protective but not overprotective about a man who, at his very worst, may have been a self-serving, vain, intolerant, corpulent racist, but who displayed a surprising number of more appealing traits for an early modern elite Atlantic male–including honesty, optimism, diligence, determination, and loyalty.

Of particular interest and value is the recurrence of a theme that Lambert has explored elsewhere (and presumably that drew him to Habersham in the first place): the interaction between commercial forces and religious expansionism in the mid-eighteenth-century Atlantic world.[2] The twin influences of the market and the church are carefully highlighted, from Habersham's murky origins in the town of Beverley to his more influential activities in Georgia as an indispensable–if occasionally frustrated–wingman to Methodist missionary George Whitefield, and, later, as a merchant-benefactor of their educational project at Bethesda. Chapter 3 offers substantial insight into the commercial climate of Georgia within an important historical timeframe (c.1745-55) that often suffers inadequate attention because of conventional periodization according to the colony's political organization. Lambert highlights not only how Habersham's fortunes underwent a massive transformation, but how the commercial infrastructure of the colony was affected by its proximity to Charlestown, the difficulties of trans-Atlantic trading, and the nature of myriad connections across "the Atlantic marketplace" (p. 59). Equally intriguing and novel is Lambert's explication of Habersham's conversion to slaveholding, and proslavery lobbying, in Chapter 5. Although unfamiliar with the institution of slavery, Habersham had no moral qualms about investing in African labor, and his religious and commercial background inspired a fairly distinctive amalgam of paternalism and capitalism in his plantation management. A proponent of both slave education and direct importation, "he saw himself primarily as a businessman rather than as a planter" (p. 114).

For this reader, the weaknesses of *James Habersham* reside not in what is offered–which is rich, absorbing, and significant–but in what is omitted. While Lambert's analysis of primary sources shows vision and breadth, there is little overt engagement with a growing body of pertinent secondary literature. There is a tendency to rely upon a slightly dated historiography, for instance, in chapter 4, in the use of W. W. Abbot's 1959 *The Royal Governors of Georgia* or Trevor Reese's 1963 *Colonial Georgia*, rather than more recent work on British imperial policy and the transformation of the colony.[3] Chapter 2 is focused on the Bethesda orphanage, but no mention is made of Ed Cashin's comprehensive history of the institution, and there is little discussion of the significance of Habersham's involvement in the Indian trade (which others have emphasized).[4] In what respects did James Habersham differ in his loyalties and behavior from other Georgia gentlemen about whom we have substantial in-

formation: Lachlan McIntosh, Jonathan Bryan, Henry Ellis, Lachlan McGillivray, Button Gwinnett, and so on? Points of divergence and convergence might also have been profitably explored in regard to the substantial earlier work of W. Calvin Smith on the Habersham family, which is cursorily described as "fine" (p. 179).[5] Gauging where Habersham (or Lambert) fits into broader historiographical debates might have been facilitated by the inclusion of a bibliography, or of fuller bibliographical references in the endnotes.

None of these concerns undermine what remains a concise and engaging overview of Habersham's life and times, which will provide scholars with valuable ammunition for further debating. In teaching terms it would probably read well as an in-depth case study in eighteenth-century Atlantic migration and self-improvement alongside a broader survey (such as Bernard Bailyn's *Voyagers to the West*).[6] Lambert convincingly and dexterously drags to the historical foreground a man who has too often been consigned to the background, and sheds new light on his role as a founder and a father in Georgia. Had James Habersham's weary metabolism struggled on for a few more years beyond 1775, Lambert's assertion that "political opposition did not sever the bonds of family ties" (p. 177) might have been put to a more rigorous test, but as he has already shown us, Habersham always had a knack for punctual timing.

Notes

[1]. See for instance, Harvey H. Jackson, *Lachlan McIntosh and the Politics of Revolutionary Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979); Alan Gallay, *The Formation of a Planter Elite: Jonathan Bryan and the Southern Colonial Frontier* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989); and Edward J. Cashin, *Lachlan McGillivray, Indian Trader: The Shaping of the Southern Colonial Frontier* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

[2]. Frank Lambert, *"Pedlar in Divinity": George Whitefield and the Transatlantic Revivals, 1737-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[3]. W. W. Abbot, *The Royal Governors of Georgia, 1754-1775* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959); and Trevor Reese, *Colonial Georgia: A Study in British Imperial Policy in the Eighteenth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1963). More recent scholarship containing sections specific to Georgia includes Edward J. Cashin, *Governor Henry Ellis and the Transformation of British North America* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

[4]. Edward J. Cashin, *Beloved Bethesda: A History of George Whitefield's Home for Boys, 1740-2000* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001).

[5]. W. Calvin Smith, "Georgia Gentlemen: The Habershams of Eighteenth-Century Savannah" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1971); "The Habershams: The Merchant Experience in Georgia," in *Forty Years of Diversity: Essays on Colonial Georgia*, ed. Harvey H. Jackson and Phinizy Spalding (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); "Utopia's Last Chance? The Georgia Silk Boomlet of 1751," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 59 (1975); and W. B. Stephens, "A Sketch of the Life of James Habersham," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 3 (1919).

[6]. Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: A Passage in the Peopling of America on the Eve of the Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

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