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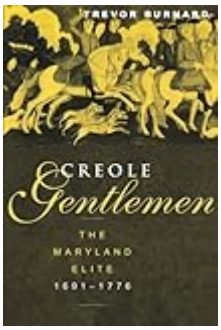

Trevor Burnard. *Creole Gentlemen: The Maryland Elite, 1691-1776.* New York and London: Routledge, 2002. ix + 278 pp. $23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-93174-8.

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Reconsidering Colonial Elites

At one time, scholarship on rich and influential white men stood at the apex of the historical world. Charles Andrews, Arthur Schlesinger, Charles Beard, and a host of others sought to understand the colonial and revolutionary eras in North America by focusing on imperial administrators, Anglo-American merchants and planters, and constitutional framers. For the last forty years, however, historians have been engaged in a vigorous and enlightening effort to expand that focus to include historical actors and groups who had been traditionally neglected: free and enslaved Africans and African-Americans, women, Native Americans, and the laboring classes. That effort, hopefully, has not yet run its course, but it seems to be broadening to include again many of the questions uppermost in the minds of Andrews, Schlesinger, and Beard. It is now time, Trevor Burnard argues in *Creole Gentlemen: The Maryland Elite, 1691-1776*, to "look afresh" at the history of elite male Euro-Americans (p. 1).

Although many would argue that historians have been doing just that (for instance, Edmund Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom*, or Bernhard Sheehan's *Savagism and Civility*), the elite perspective certainly deserves attention in its own right. *Creole Gentlemen* continues this work by taking an inspiringly broad view of colonial Maryland's upper crust from the mid-seventeenth-century until the early 1760s (never-mind the subtitle) and consistently manages to weave detailed regional analysis into transatlantic and pan-colonial historiographical debates. The chapters proceed topically from "economic ambitions" to "inheritance practices," an analysis of the myths and realities of planter indebtedness, and (perhaps the ultimate bow to modern scholarship) elite identity (pp. 21, 139).

Burnard argues that the evolution of the Maryland elite progressed through several distinct stages. Early Maryland elites were likely to be migrants to the colony who were as interested in merchant activities as in slave-owning and staple agriculture. Subsequent native-born or "creole" generations, however, became increasingly "risk averse" and turned away from the uncertainties of entrepreneurship in favor of plantation agriculture. Their decisions stemmed, according to Burnard, from structural changes in the Atlantic and British im-

perial economies and from a growing sense of provincial identity that sought to refashion itself as landed English gentry. By the eve of the American Revolution, Maryland elites had fissioned into a conservative core of wealthy "creole" planters devoted to slave labor and tobacco production, on the one hand, and an aggressive entrepreneurial class of immigrant merchants centered around Baltimore, on the other.

The research foundation for *Creole Gentlemen*, especially in the early chapters of the book, rests heavily on a demographic study of the post-mortem inventories left by the wealthiest Marylanders. Burnard argues that the threshold for elite status, in material terms, seems to have been the possession of an estate worth at least 650 British pounds sterling. This fell far short of the elite threshold in more wealthy plantation colonies such as South Carolina and Jamaica, and was not in itself, he concedes, an absolute marker of social prestige. Wealth, for instance, did not always translate into political influence and vice versa. A number of Burnard's methodological assumptions and choices may thus be open to theoretical criticisms, many of which he has anticipated, but the 461 representative estates that comprise his sample nevertheless yield some interesting data. Moreover, as a research strategy originally pioneered to access the history of enslaved, non-literate populations, it is still oddly satisfying to see quantitative methods, or cliometrics, applied to the planters themselves.

Burnard weaves his primary statistical information into many of the famous historiographical debates concerning Chesapeake society. These debates were framed by Darrett and Anita Rutman, Russell R. Menard, Thad Tate, David Ammerman, and others in the 1970s and have never received the attention they deserved. More often than not Burnard's results merely confirm the consensus view or help to add depth and perspective to it, but in some notable instances he challenges time-honored assumptions. The argument that Maryland's progression toward internal political stability resulted from declining mortality rates and, hence, greater continuity between generations, for instance, does not stand up well. The stability was real, but Burnard cannot agree that mortality rates in Maryland were any more forgiving in the eighteenth century than in the seventeenth. Seventeenth-century political disruptions, he claims, were caused more by religious persecution than by the early deaths of patriarchs. By following prominent families through the probate records, Burnard makes a compelling case that, even though they failed in some cases to transfer political power to succeeding generations, they nevertheless continued to build their fortunes and wield considerable influence (pp. 109-111).

Perhaps because *Creole Gentlemen* has so much to recommend it, the book's flaws and omissions are especially troubling. Burnard repeatedly engages Alan Kulikoff's classic work *Tobacco and Slaves*, but *Creole Gentlemen* cannot really compete with that work in terms of sustained depth of research and complexity of analysis. Kulikoff admirers will suspect, perhaps unfairly, that Burnard might have coaxed more meaning from his numbers. The bulwark of his primary research, moreover, the survey of post-mortem inventories, begins to run thin by the end of the book. The crowning chapter on "the formation of elite identity" builds more on existing secondary literature than on the inventories (p. 205-236). Burnard does appear to use information from the inventories to add perspective to T. H. Breen's views on the consumer revolution, but there are no citations for the records discussed. His interesting discussion of elite rates of horse-drawn carriage ownership, or the lack thereof, as evidenced by post-mortem inventories, provides no footnote at all (p. 214). Researchers challenged by that assertion would apparently have to repeat the entire survey in order to stumble upon those estates again.

For quantitative historians versed in slave scholarship and eager for new perspectives on the master-slave relationship, the book's cursory treatment of this seemingly inescapable topic may be frustrating as well. Slavery only appears briefly in Chapter Two on the "economic ambitions of the Maryland elite" (pp. 36-44), and the controversial issues of planter paternalism, slave discipline, and management of "demographic performance" receive barely a paragraph (p. 38). Surely, if the time has come to "look afresh" at the colonial elite in the "light of new knowledge," the last fifty years of scholarship on slavery should cast more lumens than this (p. 1). It is a glaring oversight, and it raises questions about many of the book's otherwise informative discussions. Burnard argues, for instance, that elite identity was formed primarily through a binary imitative relationship with metropolitan ideals of gentility, even as he acknowledges that "the most visible difference" between Maryland and Great Britain "was the large number of black slaves in the Chesapeake" (p. 216). Every knowledgeable reader will expect at least an informed discussion of planter paternalism after that acknowledgment. But it will not come. Many readers of *Creole Gentlemen* are likely to come away from the experience wishing that the author had spent a few months contemplating Winthrop Jordan's model of triangulated identity, if

only to challenge it.

Even so, *Creole Gentlemen* is an engaging, well-written monograph. Burnard's ability to spark new interest in old debates and suggest new lines of inquiry makes the book at once an excellent primer for graduate students getting their feet wet in Chesapeake studies and a relevant voice for scholars currently engaged in these discussions. Because it is so rewarding in some areas, however, (and because Burnard has taken up this challenge so ably elsewhere), the book's conspicuous evasion of a serious engagement with elite involvement in slavery is disappointing. The elite quest for gentility that plays such a major role in Burnard's discussion proceeded amidst and was made possible in large part by the brutal coercion of enslaved labor. Some readers may feel that reality demands more than a token acknowledgment. It influenced elite conceptions of social order, scriptural interpretation, and, yes, republican ideology. This reviewer, at any rate, would argue that elites in the plantation colonies did more than simply fashion a "provincial consciousness" that differed from the metropolitan ideal (p. 205). They helped lay the foundations for a societal pathology that is still tragically playing itself out in modern America. If a new "elite school" of historical study does indeed emerge, one might hope for a greater commitment to confronting those unpleasant legacies.

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