

Book Review Rhonda L. Thomas: HIST 4309

Slide 1: Front Matter

Myths & Realities: Societies of the Colonial South, by Carl Bridenbaugh: A Review.

Slide 2: Sources

Bridenbaugh, Carl. *Myths & Realities: Societies of the Colonial South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952; New York: Atheneum, 1963.

Reviews

- Westermeier, Clifford P. *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (1952): 339-40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40037916>.
- Jones, Howard Mumford. *The William and Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1953): 263-67. doi:10.2307/2936940.

Slide 3: Introduction

About this Monograph

This monograph is a cultural study of the “first societies to develop” in the eighteenth-century colonial south; in particular, between the years 1730 to 1776, four and a-half decades before the Revolution.¹

Historian Carl Bridenbaugh does not speak of the south that comes to mind in modern vernacular: Prior to the American Revolution, “there was no South; there never had been a South. It was not even a geographical expression.”²

In this discussion, the author aims to “draw aside the curtain . . . of the great unknown and unsuspected Southern historical heritage.”³ To do so, he reconsiders “many fixed ideas about this newly settle land” and probes “the real nature of the society that began to emerge.” He closely examines the beginnings of a region “eastern contemporaries casually referred to as the ‘Back Country,’ ‘Back Parts,’ or the ‘Back Settlements.’ Only at the outbreak of the Revolution, the author notes, “can we begin to discern the contours of a new society.”⁴

Slide 4: Thesis / Argument / Interventions

Thesis / Arguments

The author presents a thesis that the “Old South” was preceded in time by the “Old Souths,” which he describes as “the vast domain of the King lying between Mason and Dixon’s line and

East Florida.”⁵ This area, he proposes, was “the scene of three, possibly four, different modes of existence:⁶ the Chesapeake Society, the Carolina Society, and the Back Country.

Author’s Premise

Bridenbaugh’s main argument is that, as historians, we “will mistake the true nature of the first great internal folk movement of American history if we see in it either the hand of God or the working out of a logical process.”⁷

Scholarly Interventions

According to the author, no “sustained effort to analyze and depict the life of the Southern provinces has yet been made;”⁸ that all previous authors of colonial south history stemmed from “the gentry,” whose work was “essentially aristocratic narratives of the past.”⁹

He offers a revision of “ideas about the colonial societies of the South” that he hopes will dispel the romantic myths previously handed down by historians; revisions that offer a “useful perspective . . . sketched against the broad backdrop of all the colonies and . . . the cosmopolitan Western World of the eighteenth century.”¹⁰

Slide 5: Monograph Chapters

The monograph is broken down into three parts which represent three distinct “modes of existence,”¹¹ or folkways in early colonial settlement:

1. The Chesapeake Society – already an old society and “erected on a tobacco base.”
2. The Carolina Society – “burgeoning on profits from rice and indigo”
3. The Back Settlements – or back country, “unformed but prospering in several stages from hunting to mixed farming.”

Slide 6: The Back Country: Introduction

This review considers one folkway, in particular, the Back Country, discussed in part III of the monograph.

The author begins by putting the Back Country into context. “Only an occasional white hunter or fur trader,” he notes, “was to be found in this whole vast area in 1730” . . . “Less than four decades later over a quarter million people of “European American, or African birth occupied the country.”¹²

Through primary research, the author shows this population “did not compose a uniform society. One of the most striking features about it was that in different parts various groups of its people lived in several stages of development at the same time. Why this was so becomes immediately evident as the process of settlement is traced.”¹³

The author depicts “a backwoods existence that was constantly becoming rural in imitation or in extension of Pennsylvania and of the Chesapeake and Carolina societies,” discussed in parts I and II of the monograph. He stresses that “on the eve of Independence the Back Country was a land of sharp contrasts;” that the “elements for a society were there, but fusion had not yet taken place because its exact form had still to be determined.”¹⁴

Slide 7: The Back Country: Author Claims

The author makes important claims which he supports with research:

- “For too long have we been limited in our understanding of the Back Settlements by applying uncritically . . . to those who endeavored to found permanent communities and succeeded . . . the concepts of the forest freedom of the Indian trader and the cattleman.”¹⁵
- “The Back Country never witnessed the complete return to nature or social disintegration often implied by historians and sociologists.”¹⁶
- There is “no evidence to support the customary assertion that their Ulster experience made the Lowland Scots better settlers after the initial stage.”¹⁷

Slide 8: Conclusion

The late Dr. Carl Bridenbaugh was a university scholar at Brown University, president of the American Historical Association, and author of fourteen books. He specialized in colonial America and was the first director of the Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg.

I believe he broke new ground with this revisionist history.

At the time of its writing, this small volume no doubt introduced fresh insights; packed with new perspectives for anyone interested in the cultural history of the colonial south.

Methodology

Bridenbaugh supports his arguments with a considerable amount of personally inspected primary source materials; including:

- Southern newspapers and magazines published before 1776
- Printed records of the five colonies and historical maps
- Manuscript records of South Carolina at Columbia
- Publications of southern local and state historical societies
- Remains of late colonial civil and domestic architecture, including private and public paintings collections

- Moravian records
- County court records and population distribution schedules
- Letters, diaries, and manuscripts
- Commercial and plantation papers

Bridenbaugh also turns to a number of scholarly monographs and journals.¹⁸

Historiography

Where does this work fit in to the historiography? It appears to represent a paradigm shift in colonial south interpretations. It is a necessary read for anyone interested in the cultural evolution of the colonial south, or indeed, the historiography of the topic.

Slide 9: Credits

Image attribution: Fry, Joshua, Approximately, Peter Jefferson, and Thomas Jefferys. *A map of the most inhabited part of Virginia containing the whole province of Maryland with part of Pensilvania, New Jersey and North Carolina*. [London, Thos. Jefferys, 1755] Map.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/74693166/>.

¹ Bridenbaugh, viii.

² Bridenbaugh, vii.

³ Bridenbauth, ix.

⁴ Ibid., 120

⁵ Bridenbaugh, viii.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 123.

⁸ Ibid., vii.

⁹ Ibid., viii.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., viii. Not covered in this volume is a fourth folkway, seaboard North Carolina, also shown to have “produced an individual social pattern” by history scholar Charles Christopher Crittenden.

¹² Ibid., 121.

¹³ Ibid., 122.

¹⁴ Ibid., 195.

¹⁵ Ibid., 194.

¹⁶ Ibid., 134.

¹⁷ Ibid., 135.

¹⁸ Ibid., Bibliographical Note, 197.