

## Between Two Worlds: How the English Became Americans

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Across the 17th century, more than 350,000 English people went to America. Yet many, if not most of those who went brought with them a keen sense of their bringing 'Englishness' with them, rather than transforming into 'Americans'. Emigrants travelled to the New World for a variety of reasons. There were those who sought greater religious freedoms and an escape from persecution, while many saw an opportunity for economic advancement. Others, in a dark underbelly of Atlantic migration, did not go willingly – both English indentured servants, and later black slaves. A sense of adventure, and great courage, lay behind practically all of these tales of travel, hardship, success and failure. It is the complex relationships between England and America, and the people living in both of them, that are at the heart of Malcolm Gaskill's book. Establishing a new England required adaptations to a harsh environment, and ultimately raised question as to what 'English' meant, both in the Old and the New Worlds.

In the book, Gaskill sets out three major points of enquiry. The first is to examine what happened to English people in America, from those who settled in harsh New England, through to the development of the Caribbean colonies including Bermuda and Barbados. The second aims to investigate, in turn, the impact of America on those who remained at home. At the heart of this approach lies a critique of some English historians, who 'lose interest' in English migrants once they leave European shores, while some American scholars in turn are neglectful of the 'backstory' of these migrants (p. xiv). Gaskill's argument is that the New World was not a cut-off sphere of action from Old England, but rather that events in the colonies had an impact on those 'at home', rather than purely vice versa. The third proposes to examine the idea of the extension of England to America: the importing of English ideas, values, and social and political structures into an American context. Gaskill questions the idea of an inherently 'progressive' America, arguing that many such ideas were already in circulation in England. Central to all of this is nostalgia. English migrants to the New World overwhelmingly set out to 're-create a world felt to be vanishing at home'. Seen in this light, emigration, while still requiring great depths of courage and adventurousness, becomes something more conservatively-driven, a 'conservative counter-measure' to changes at home in England (p. xiii). This in turn naturally affected the character of many of the colonies that were established in America, and later generational shifts would produce crises of identity as the New World moved further away from the Old, with England seen more as a distant cousin than a parent or sibling.

The book is broadly organised into three major sections, arranged in a chronological sequence. Section one opens in 1607 and closes in 1640; section two deals with the tumultuous decades between 1640 and 1670; while section three mainly covers the period from 1670 until 1692, although examples are drawn from the 1700s as well. Gaskill is impressive in his geographical breadth, as examples from across the colonies are pulled into each chapter. While this organisation gives the reader an idea of the scope – as well as, often, the confusion – of English settlement of the New World, this arrangement does call for a good working knowledge of both the basic chronology of the establishment of the individual settlements, as well of course as their geographical relationship with one another. The volume does feature several beautifully-drawn maps at the beginning, which may have proved more useful to the reader if they were placed alongside the text itself, as many of the well-chosen images that feature were. Such criticisms do not take away from the sweeping ambition and profound knowledge that Gaskill brings to the work as a whole.

Section one deals with the very earliest stages of English colonies in America, and particularly with the exploits of the Virginia Company from its foundation in 1606. Early recruitment for Virginia, as Gaskill shows, focused its attentions on two major strategies: the first was the presentation of America as a kind of ‘earthly paradise’; while the second portrayed colonisation as a form of divine duty, with the invoking of Old Testament patriarchs such as Abraham, who was promised Canaan in return for his service to God. Also potent was the influence of Roman thinking, especially regarding the idea of civilising: just as the Romans themselves had brought law, religion, and civility to the ancient Britons, so the English must in turn bring all those things to America. However, practical realities were very different from abstract ideas, and Gaskill shows that there was constant tension between the two. Advertising for Virginia emphasised the opportunities in America, but the best-laid plans often went awry, and everyday life was extremely difficult. In 1620, a group of English settlers arrived at New Plymouth on the legendary *Mayflower*, and they too struggled with the harsh practicalities of establishing a viable colony versus the idealised notion of a New Jerusalem and divine providence providing them with a New England. Despite their desire to leave old England behind, it rapidly became clear in Virginia, New England, and later Bermuda, that they had brought with them many of the very differences, conflicts and tensions that had contributed to their flight to the New World. Forced migration, especially to Virginia, replicated many of the problems and pressures that existed in England, with a growing and disaffected underclass within the colony, and this would have serious consequences later in the century. In the 1630s, with the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Gaskill shows how religious frictions were transplanted to the New World: restrictions on church membership were contested, as was the abandonment of the Book of Common Prayer. Later, after the establishment of Maryland in 1632, hostilities between the ‘Catholic’ colony and Virginia were palpable: a replication of the distrust and enmity often directed against recusants in England. Such conflicts, when combined with a harsh and inhospitable environment, meant that Massachusetts, together with New Hampshire and New Plymouth lacked cohesion and stability, and this in turn threatened their very survival.

Despite the hardships associated with migration, it was often the very difficulties associated with life in America that both forced adaptations upon the English, and also encouraged innovations of sorts (though the settlers themselves, with their stress on bringing *English* laws and liberties to America, would probably have disagreed!). In several of the colonies, including Virginia, Massachusetts and Bermuda, assemblies were created for the better governing of the settlement by those who lived there, thus beginning a long history of local assembly government in the Americas. Other English administrative and legal organs also featured: Bermuda, for instance, witnessed the introduction of churchwardens, magistrates and constables, as well as assize courts, and the building of a prison after several years of apparent disorder and profligacy with the island’s natural resources. Such moves gave rise, Gaskill notes, to the idea in some quarters at least that English authority over the colonies was ‘conditional and contestable’, as seen in the disregarding of the Book of Common Prayer by New England (pp. 90–1). However, even such appeals for autonomy were couched very much in the language of loyalty, and with the recognition that English laws and administration provided the framework of life in America. Embracing all of these efforts, however, was a dual tension to life in the New World. In many of the colonies, the English settlers’ very survival depended on good relationships with the Indians living there: witness the famous ‘first Thanksgiving’ in Plymouth in 1621. [\(1\)](#)

However, continued survival also depended on expansion, especially as more migrants began arriving from England, with the 1630s in particular being the age of the 'great migration'. This in turn caused tension, conflict and resentment among the Indian population, and would lead to problems further down the line.

In section one, Gaskill also highlights the important role that the 1622 Jamestown Massacre would have on English-Indian relations. The relationship between the English and the natives was altered forever with the events in Virginia, and this tipped the scale between accommodation and aggressive expansion towards the latter. 347 settlers died in the attack by the Powhatan, and the colony was almost completely wiped out. From henceforth, across English America, the Indians were not to be trusted, as Powhatan chief Opechancanough had demonstrated that peaceable co-existence was incompatible with the colonies' expansion. Furthermore, the Indians also exposed themselves to having their lands and possessions seized by right of war. The 1622 massacre was a hugely important event in early America, and also had repercussions across the Three Kingdoms – when the Irish rebelled in 1641 for instance, the emphasis on revenge in the pamphlet literature generated in its wake was recycled from episodes such as Jamestown, and also undoubtedly influenced the Irish land policies of the Protectorate in the 1650s, just as the Indians' territories were seized.<sup>(2)</sup> The 1622 massacre was to be a lingering shadow over English America, and coloured relationships between native and newcomer thereafter.

The tumultuous years between 1640 and 1670 are the focus of section two. The civil wars across the Three Kingdoms undoubtedly had an impact on the American colonies in numerous ways, as Gaskill shows. Firstly, it split loyalties among the English themselves, with Virginia for instance tending to favour royalism, while New England resolutely supported the Parliament. These divided loyalties caused real conflict and violence on the ground: in Maryland, Catholics were targeted for violence, while also in Maryland there was an aborted attempt to seize Parliamentarians' property. Settlers worried for the safety of family members still in England as the war continued. From the later 1640s, the renewed emphasis on morality in England found its way to parts of America as well, with a new push to evangelise the Indian population, heralded by the 1649 establishment of the New England Company. Actual conflict also found its way to the Caribbean, with the 1651–2 Parliamentary attack on Barbados for its apparent disloyalty; a force was simultaneously sent to Virginia, after large numbers of disaffected royalists made their way there from 1649 onwards. However, actual violence was averted when a settlement was reached. Maryland also saw war, with clashes between Catholics and Protestants in 1655. It was a period of instability both in Old and New England, and divided loyalties at home in turn divided those who lived in the various American colonies. The colonies in turn had their impact on events in England, as a stream of emigrants returned to England, many of them to fight for Parliament.

However, from the Restoration of the monarchy onwards, Gaskill shows, things began to become more difficult for the English in America. In New England, the Boston colonists were criticised for their harsh treatment of Quakers, and described as intolerant, bloodthirsty, and even as soldiers of Antichrist, while also facing criticism for ignoring the rights of English subjects. American, and especially New Englander, fears were further heightened by a series of natural disasters and omens across the 1660s and early 1670s, ranging from poor harvests to repeated comet sightings, which it was believed signalled calamities ahead. This was combined with a greater Crown interest in exerting more control over the colonies. In the Caribbean, the economic benefits of greater English involvement were plain to see, with the profits from Barbados and Jamaica swelling the Crown's coffers. Greater control over the more 'troublesome' colonies such as New England would also be pushed through, especially in the light of criticisms of the treatment of the Quakers, and the concern that the New English settlers were essentially devising and implementing their own laws, with no regard for the laws or rights of England and her subjects. By the early 1670s, America, and especially New England, was on edge and fearful – fearful of a loss of zeal among the next generation largely bred up in the colonies, and of an impending disaster foreseen in the many signs and wonders that dotted the preceding decade.

The mounting tension is ramped up even further in section three, in which Gaskill covers the period 1670–92. It reached its zenith with the outbreak of King Philip's War in 1675, and the devastation witnessed

on English communities across the northern colonies. The settlers were transformed into warriors who were at once ruthless and savage in dealing with Metacom's incursions, while also claiming the violence to be godly and justified. The treatment of the so-called 'praying Indians' mirrors the kind of pressures and tensions that Gaskill described between English and native from the outset: those Indians who embraced Christianity were seen as traitors by Indians who had not, but they were in turn not fully trusted by the settlers, and so confined to an island and compelled to live in great hardship while the war raged on. However, as Gaskill shows, King Philip's War became the defining event for a generation of settlers, and only increased the mental distance between Old and New England, with the growing belief of New Englanders that they were hardier, more courageous people. This led them to take a different approach to their everyday reality, emphasising the primacy of the local. The consequences of the hardening experiences of this generation, and a renewed distrust of and distaste for the Indian population would persist long after the war drew to a close.

Across the later part of the 17th century, running alongside the changes wrought by war in the northern colonies, further transformations were afoot. The previously-mentioned Crown controls were personified through the establishment of Carolina, while eventually New England reached a new settlement in 1691, with Massachusetts becoming a Crown colony, albeit with a restored charter and the assemblies that had characterised the earlier experiences of the colonies. Despite these protestations of loyalty, however, tensions continued between Old England and America, with issues over protest, consent and agreement plaguing relations and further muddying the waters between them. Furthermore, these decades also witnessed a move towards a new kind of economy in the Americas: one founded on slavery. Slavery had been a feature of the Caribbean colonies since their early years, but it gradually moved into Virginia and the Chesapeake, and New England. In Virginia, Bacon's Rebellion in 1676 was fuelled by large numbers of former indentured servants who were angered by the colonial government's refusal to claim more lands from the Indian population for their use. Black slavery served to reduce the dependence of landholders on what was thought of as more unreliable labour in the form of white indentured servants, while providing the opportunity for greater profit. The results for American history across the centuries, of course, would be transformative.

There can be little doubt that Gaskill has written an absorbing and ambitious tale of courage and adventurousness on the part of his cast of characters. However, the cast does include several gaps, and opens up further questions which are not fully addressed here. While from the beginning Gaskill stresses that this is an English story, an investigation of the impact of Scottish, Welsh and Irish settlers on the colonies would have been welcome, particularly how (if?) they affected the idea of what 'English' was in the Americas. In the Three Kingdoms, Englishness was often defined against, for example, the barbarousness of the Irish: how then were Irish men and women dealt with upon their arrival in the New World? Did ethnic antagonisms that were a feature of conflict in the Three Kingdoms also find their way to America, as religious conflict had done? Likewise, the effect of slavery, and the influence of justifications of being slaveholders on the idea of 'Englishness' would also have made an intriguing strand of investigation. Slavery did not exist in Old England, and so the impression such a change – that is, owning slaves – made on an identity that claimed English liberty and the rights of subjects as its defining characteristics would have been a welcome addition to the discussion.

None of these critiques, however, take away from the fact that Gaskill has presented us with a work of impressive scope, and also great depth. The array of personal testimonies and rich insights via individual experiences mean that the book is at once engaging and uplifting, and yet also tragic and horrific in places. The evidence of a continuous looking to England as the source of identity for those who went to America should check any ideas of a burgeoning American exceptionalism or nationalism, while his exploration of the treatment of groups including the Indian population, as well as fellow Englishmen such as the Quakers, indicate that American 'liberty' was still informed by the conflicts and prejudices of the Old World, while also adapted to the realities of colonial life. However, forces of greater Crown control also meant that the distinctions between the colonies, so sharp at the outset, were by the late 17th and early 18th centuries

becoming blurred into something more like a common ‘American’ experience, particularly along the eastern seaboard of North America. This book represents an important contribution to our understanding of the earliest years of American history, while also reminding us of how America in turn shaped England and its early imperial history.

## Notes

1. The use of the term ‘Indian’ is Professor Gaskill’s, rather than the reviewer’s. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E. Darcy, *The Irish Rebellion of 1641 and the Wars of the Three Kingdoms* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 24–8. [Back to \(2\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/between-two-worlds-how-the-english-became-americans-by-malcolm-gaskill-book-review-9888020.html> [2]

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