

The Grim Years: Settling South Carolina, 1670–1720

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John J. Navin offers a new account of the first half century of settlement in the colony of South Carolina, which he characterizes as *The Grim Years*. By the mid-18th century South Carolina would become the wealthiest British colony in mainland North America, but in recent years scholars long familiar with its distinctive plantation system have turned more attention to these earlier, formative decades. If few scholars of early South Carolina have been so bold as to offer an overview of the whole period, almost all of them would agree that it could be aptly described as “grim.” Navin organizes his book as a chronological narrative interspersed with analysis, and there is little direct explanation for why these years were so grim, though the usual suspects are all present, including the creation of a brutal plantation system, hurricanes, fires, war, and epidemic disease. Nonetheless, the emphasis of the narrative is hard to miss. For Navin, early South Carolina was a grim place especially because of stark inequities in wealth and power. Along those lines, he frames pieces of his narrative with references to Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, suggesting, in the language of his epigraph, that in the South Carolina lowcountry life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” and that “every man” was “Enemy to every man.” There is surely room for debate over whether Hobbes provides an apt context for this story, but there is also thought-provoking irony in Navin’s contention that a colony with a system of government partly designed by John Locke would turn out to be Hobbesian. Whether one prefers a Hobbesian or Lockean perspective, this is a dramatic history, filled with suffering and challenges that need no exaggeration.

In his introduction, Navin moves backwards in time, reviewing the many challenges and difficulties faced by Carolinians. Drawing from the remonstrative writings of Hugh Bryan, he notes that, by the end of 1740, the lowcountry had experienced not only a fire but also “drought, disease, slave insurrections, and a failed assault” on St. Augustine (p. 3). Here, and throughout the book, Navin makes use of contemporaries’ language of a providential reckoning for South Carolinian greed and sin. Yet, he also parts ways with scholars who have emphasized the mid-century prosperity of South Carolina’s elite, noting that “few men grew rich in South Carolina” during its first 50 years. Instead, he describes a Charles Town with wealthy rice planters but also filled with “legions of paupers” (pp. 6, 7). Shifting to the 16th and 17th centuries, Navin evokes a world European explorers imagined filled with seemingly limitless promise. With the settlement along the Ashley River in 1670, the lowcountry became home to an unusually ruthless pursuit of profit, ultimately making it “unique in remarkable, important, and sometimes terrible ways” (p. 14).

In recent years some scholars have become more circumspect about the connection between Barbadians and the founding of South Carolina, but Navin devotes a full chapter to “Barbadian Precedents.” For his purposes, it may be less important how connected Barbadians and South Carolinians were than how much South Carolinians sought to imitate Barbadians. Barbados was the first British colony in the Americas to transition to large-scale plantation slavery, so its influence on British America in general, and South Carolina in particular, is clear. Developments in Barbados presaged the same developments that Navin emphasizes in South Carolina. 17th-century Barbados, in other words, was a grim place in its own right, characterized by an “unrelenting pace,” “high mortality,” the ceaseless toil” of “an unfree majority,” and, consequently, considerable “emotional and physical distress” (p. 16). After all, Barbados had a large enslaved majority, epidemic diseases, tropical storms, and a notoriously brutal labour regime. While Navin rarely uses the word “class,” he focuses his sketch of Barbados squarely on issues related to economic exploitation. To that end, he devotes as much attention to indentured servants and other poor whites as to the massive numbers of Africans arriving in Barbados before the founding of South Carolina. Because Navin sees Barbados as the template for both a system of economic exploitation and a pattern of struggle, both groups of labourers are described more in terms of their resistance and treatment than their cultures or identities. It is easy to see how South Carolinians who aspired to Barbadian levels of wealth also had to accept a variety of tensions and dangers that made Barbados a potentially precarious place.

Navin’s second chapter, succinctly titled “Carolina,” explores the establishment of the Ashley River colony according to the plans of the Carolina Proprietors and their Barbadian associates. Here again, Navin depicts the key historical actors primarily as profit-seekers. In his view, sometimes South Carolinians were seemingly “so hell-bent on making money that no scheme was too immodest or immoral” (p. 88). By extension, the chapter describes South Carolinians’ need for labour. Various efforts encouraged both free immigrants and indentured servants to come to the new settlement, but they largely failed, perhaps unsurprisingly given South Carolina’s reputation and limited economic opportunity during its first few decades. While free workers, indentured servants, and Africans all labored in the lowcountry from the earliest settlements, enslaved Native Americans became more significant for several decades. But, while profits were preeminent, Navin contends that colonists also preferred bound labour out of their fondness for “the sweet nectar of unchecked power” (p. 90). He suggests that the growth of slavery in South Carolina was contingent and that other alternatives could have emerged, but he also concedes that in colonies at this time the brutal exploitation of all forms of labour was “business as usual” (pp. 43, 58, 91).

The third and fourth chapters of *The Grim Years* concentrate on South Carolina’s second quarter century, beginning in 1695. The third chapter bears the title “Paradise Lost,” and, if Navin has made it clear that South Carolina was never much of a paradise, he is correct to note that at first it had been promoted as “a sort of Eden in which an ideal climate and abundant resources provided a life free from sickness, want, or worry” (p. 95). More to the point, if South Carolina had never been so idyllic there is plenty of reason to believe that, after a couple of decades, it was becoming even less so. For one thing, by the start of the 18th century the colony was beginning its transition to rice cultivation, a switch which increased the scale and brutality of slavery and heightened economic inequality among free people. Increasing numbers of slaves, both African and Native American, also complicated South Carolinians’ ability to defend themselves in a tense and often violent region. As planters bought more enslaved people and military expeditions asserted themselves, colonists also became more anxious about keeping order in the lowcountry. Many of their fears were realized in 1715 when the Yamasee War devastated some South Carolina settlements. After losing paradise, matters cannot be said to have improved for the colonists in Chapter Four, which Navin, quoting S.P.G. Minister Francis LeJau, calls “Dreadfull Visitations.” Here he addresses a number of significant challenges in the colony, some of which deserve even more attention, including the consequences of the war, increasing poverty in Charles Town, four hurricanes, fires, the collapse of the proprietorship, and repeated disease epidemics. Records used by Navin from the St. Philip’s Parish and other institutions suggest more poverty and deprivation among free colonists than one might expect in a colony accumulating such conspicuous wealth.

In a fifth chapter and an epilogue Navin carries his narrative and its implications beyond 1720. The last chapter notes the consolidation of the rice plantation system and increasing prosperity of the lowcountry elite. But, to at least some degree, earlier problems lingered on, including epidemics, fires, systematic violence, and stark inequality. Perhaps Navin has misnamed his book. Can the years before 1720 be “The Grim Years” if life continued to be as grim for later generations in South Carolina? If greed and exploitation had made many miserable before the expansion of the plantation economy, it is difficult to believe that matters improved after it arrived. The material environment, political relations, and health might have improved for many free people at least by the second quarter of the 18th century, but Navin does not focus on these matters. The epilogue connects *The Grim Years* to other historians of early South Carolina who have also “painted a grim picture” (p. 164). In doing so, it also raises ethical questions and calls for historical interpretations that are less sympathetic to the colony’s wealthy plantation elite. Navin wants us to “give due consideration to the *other* people in South Carolina—men, women, and children of different races and ethnicities who endured not only the calamities that tested the mettle of the colony’s elite, but also a host of other crises and hardships”(p. 165). This seems to be the central aim of Navin’s book. He has written a narrative account of neglected histories and shown that a variety of people faced severe challenges and endured considerable suffering in early South Carolina.

In this context, *The Grim Years* is not a book designed to persuade academic historians to change their interpretations. Indeed, as the epilogue shows, many of them already agree with Navin’s main points. Along the same lines, Navin does not marshal evidence or prove his points so much as he narrates, asserts, and references. He also does not cite research evidence in a manner that is consistent with academic conventions. It is difficult to be sure how much research went into a project from its notes, but this book contains virtually no references to manuscript sources, and it is tempting to conclude that the author did not consult any. Many of the references to primary sources suggest that the author has relied on quotations within other secondary sources without examining their original context. In some cases, the sources that are cited are not the most authoritative editions. When Navin makes arguments about historiographical points and engages with important scholarship, he sometimes does so only in the notes and in a manner that may strike some readers as dismissive. For all of these reasons, scholarly audiences may be dissatisfied with *The Grim Years*, no matter how compelling they find its narrative.

On the other hand, Navin's line of argument raises questions that deserve serious consideration from academic audiences. Specifically, we need to have some sense of how "grim" life was in Colonial South Carolina, and in early modern colonies more generally. Has Navin identified a distinctive feature of South Carolina before 1720, or is he showing us fundamental problems in the settling of the Americas? Certainly, scholars agree that lowcountry colonists developed an especially brutal and profit-oriented plantation system during this period. Early South Carolina was also clearly an unhealthy place for everyone, so much so that Navin might have paid more attention to health problems to support his argument. Hurricanes were another serious challenge, and war had devastating consequences within the region. In fact, these problems were almost all more severe for indigenous peoples and for Africans in South Carolina than for the colonists at the center of Navin's narrative. It could be argued as well that they were all more severe in South Carolina than in any of the mainland British colonies that would become part of the United States. There is no particular reason why we should use that frame of reference, however. If we follow the lead of many other scholars who compare the South Carolina lowcountry to the British Caribbean colonies, these matters look very different. In this context, South Carolina's plantation system still seems terrible, but it was not as brutal, deadly, or large-scale as some others. South Carolina's high mortality also had much to do with tropical diseases that were even worse in much of the Caribbean. Hurricanes struck more often in the Caribbean too, and the islands also had their share of unrest and warfare. Of course, Navin acknowledges some of these West Indian comparisons and no doubt understands that many readers in the United States will pay more attention to South Carolina than to Antigua. But South Carolina before 1720 needs to be understood as part of the British colonial world before 1720, and the British West Indies were a central part of that world. They shared most of the "grim" features Navin discusses in this book, and they substantially complicate any claims about the distinctiveness of South Carolina.

On the other hand, if Navin has shown us little that was distinctive to South Carolina, his catalogue of threats, disasters, and challenges reminds us of just how difficult life could be for Europeans trying to carve out settlements on the western shores of the Atlantic during the 17th and 18th centuries. Several years ago, Bernard Bailyn reminded us of the same thing, in his own inimitable fashion, while somehow completely ignoring the establishment of the Carolina colonies.^[1] Bailyn and other members of his generation of historians have noted the cultural challenges faced by distant settlers with few resources, in a place they considered "barbarous." Later generations of historians, more attentive to early modern environments, have recognized the difficulties colonists confronted because they were in a place very different from Europe. The years between 1670 and 1720 could indeed be grim for colonists, both within and beyond South Carolina, for the reasons Navin demonstrates and for still others too.

^[1] Bernard Bailyn, *The Barbarous Years: The People of British America: The Conflict of Civilizations, 1600-1675* (New York, 2013).

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