

Isaac, Rhys. *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for The Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1982. Pp. xxxii, 451. Illustrations, notes, index. \$29.50.

For those of us who spend much of our time in the eighteenth century, Rhys Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* is a treasure, albeit an imperfect treasure. Isaac comes closer than has any colonialist to "reconstructing" the life of mid-eighteenth century Virginia, to portraying the tangled web of terrain, events, symbols, people, and the encounters among them which shaped and gave substance to that life. Portraiture is not, however, the only goal of this Pulitzer prize winning book. A more nearly adequate understanding of the nature of cultural change and why Virginia changed during these fifty years also elicit the author's attention.

Isaac's theme is not a simple one. By 1740, he contends, Virginia was a traditional, hierarchically organized society, shaped primarily by the gentry. These men of wealth and power had contoured both the physical and the social landscapes in order to enhance their own authority. As early as the late 1750's and the early 1760's, however, a popular movement, evangelicalism, arose to first challenge and then to undermine the gentry's hegemony. In the post-Revolutionary decade a radically different society, a pluralistic and an individualistic one, emerged within Virginia. By 1790, also, the society and its culture drew less from the terrain and the social structure than it did from ideas.

This theme unfolds in three sections. In "Traditional Ways of Life" Isaac focuses on the components of Virginia life, presumably at mid-century. Following a series of illustrations, he describes the fields, the churches, the homes, the shared public occasions, and the human intercourse that occurred within and among them. Using historical ethnography Isaac is able to "thickly" describe the actions of slaves playing banjors (sic), of horse races and cockfights, of court day business, of musket-carrying common planters harkening to the militia colonel's orders. All of these scenes on the Virginia landscape, as well as the rituals and symbols therein, accrued from the power of and reinforced the dominance of the gentry.

The second and third sections treat the unraveling of what in Isaac's view is really a gentry-defined hierarchical society. The clergy, morally lax and in some cases guilty of lascivious behavior, constituted the weak thread in Virginia's social fabric. They became the object of those in the middling and poorer ranks who vented their accumulated resentments toward the system in general and the gentry-supported churchmen in particular after mid-century. Evangelical religion-stressing the brotherhood of believers, material simplicity, and individual responsibility and "right" living-emerged in stark, even direct contrast to gentry culture. In fact, Isaac contends, first the Baptists and then the Methodists developed a "counterculture" which became a defense against and a major factor in the undermining of the competitive, assertive, patriarchal gentry view and means of control of Virginia. Arising at a time when constitutional issues came to the front and when the gentry itself was wrestling with the reality

that the levers of authority lay in England, evangelicalism was not the only force—although in Isaac's scheme it was a primary one—propelling Virginia to change. And change did hasten during the 1780's, as the symbols and rituals of evangelicalism continued to collide with and to challenge the residual symbols and rituals of the traditional culture. The result was a new synthesis, new layers of meaning in Virginia life, new and varied understanding of and responses to liberty, individualism, and virtue.

*The Transformation of Virginia* has two primary achievements. It clearly reinforces the importance of the gentry in shaping eighteenth century Virginia. Sufficiently, if not with as great a degree of clarity, the book also describes the rise of evangelicalism and links it to the political and social upheaval of Revolutionary Virginia. Isaac does, however, over-simplify a number of things, especially the polarization of Virginia's social structure into the gentry and "others," the agency of these "others" in the shaping of their own lives and the lives of the gentry, and the relationships of the gentry to the Anglican clergy and to the "new lights." He primarily explores evangelical-gentry relations from the perspective of the evangelicals, and he fails to fully examine the gentry-Anglican clergy issues and the fact that some gentlemen abandoned Anglicanism in favor of a number of "new" religious systems. Nor does he consider a broader perspective to account for the changes occurring within late eighteenth century Virginia life: specifically, what was occurring was really a multi-faceted segmentation of life itself, a process involving the reconceptualization of life and the creation of separate spheres.

Where Isaac is at his best and on the most nearly solid ground is in the first section. Unlike the diffuse, and in some cases refutable, later arguments about the nature of and the reasons underlying change, the material of "Traditional Ways of Life" forms the basis for an integrated look at life as it probably existed in the middle of the eighteenth century. In Isaac's hands colonial life becomes dramatic, textured, and full of mundane and daily tasks and joys. Horse racing becomes a venture in meaningfulness, while cock fights and gambling appear as real and as vivid as were the great houses in gentry-common planter intercourse.

But his portrayals of the sporting life point elsewhere, too: to the structural irony of *The Transformation of Virginia*. Having thoroughly contexted evidence to produce the scenes of life, Isaac is unable to replace the scenes in the drama that was eighteenth century Virginia. The reader is never quite certain where in the total distribution of colonial scenes (i.e., the total life) the ones Isaac has chosen to illustrate that life actually fit. In part at least, this uncertainty of "fit" stems from his method. Phenomenologically-based and borrowed from anthropology, ethnography in the hands of the historian can, and in this case does, result in the confounding of temporality, even as it helps one to uncover experiences as they may have been lived and perceived by eighteenth century Virginians. In the case of horse racing Isaac collapses time, and consequently the validity of his sources, to establish what was circa 1740. To develop the significance of horse racing as a public ritual, as well as the symbols of gentry dominance therein, he uses two major and often-cited sources: Hugh Jones who de-

scribed the common planters' attachment to their horses in 1724, and Philip Fithian who was actually talking about the great planters but not until 1774. And although Isaac alludes to a change in the style of gentry racing, he does not develop that change itself. Had he done so, he might have uncovered yet another dimension of and source for the transformation of late eighteenth century Virginia.

The limitations of Isaac's methodology do not, of course, deny the significance of *The Transformation of Virginia*. They may just leave the reader a little wary about accepting some of his findings. Isaac's book is an enlightening account of colonial society and, in particular, of the meaningfulness of sport and dance within that society. It is also a source of innumerable questions, not only about the substance of colonial social history but also about how one "does" social history.

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