

# Carlyle House

## DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

### Book Review: "The Transformation of Virginia" by Rhys Isaac

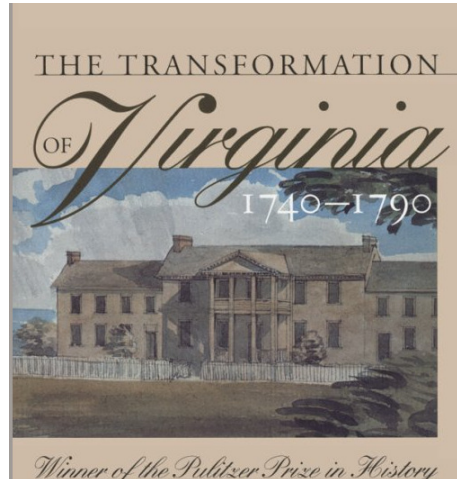
Reviewed by Sarah Coster

Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982.

Rhys Isaac's Pulitzer Prize winning work, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, draws the reader into the social world of Virginia on the eve of the Revolutionary War. Isaac skillfully paints a picture of Virginia, opening with early descriptions of the land and then carefully placing characters and actions within that setting. As he explains in a detailed chapter on his methodology, Isaac employs "ethnography" to show how Virginia's societal structure evolved during the events of the Revolution. Isaac defines ethnography as the search for meaning in people's actions. The historian who uses ethnography must be willing to view actions as statements. While he admits he presents no new facts, Isaac applies what he calls "humanistic social science" to illustrate a changing way of life in Virginia (p. 7).

The book is divided into three parts. The first part explores life in the colony up to the second quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with an emphasis on religion, learning and authority. The second part is a series of episodes that reveal the stress and change which occurred to the traditional lines of authority. The final section, the "afterview," mirrors the themes of the first section, illustrating the differences between pre and post-revolutionary Virginian society.

In the first section, Isaac presents a number of "stages" where social life was played out by the various "roles" in society. He begins with the largest



of these "stages;" the land itself. The tobacco culture of Virginia shaped the land and the way people lived. Farmers found land by waterways, with no need for towns. The churches and courthouses were therefore placed at strategic roadways, instead of town centers. The architectural structures on these plantations, Isaac argues, were symbols of the deferential society. The plantation manor, with its separated rooms and "segregated spaces" loomed

over the small slave quarters.

From the landscape, Isaac moves to the "stage" of ritual and celebration. On that stage, the Established Church, or the Church of England, reigned supreme. Isaac's convincing use of pictures and architectural descriptions of these churches demonstrate the formalities of the Anglican style of worship. These "fixed formalities" and didactic style of preaching, Isaac argues, could not have been easily assimilated to African modes of spiritual worship (p. 68).

In addition to church ceremonies, Isaac explores the differences between home rituals of gentry, yeomen, and slaves. Even the choice of drink could distinguish the classes, as we see when a visitor to a gentleman's house chooses "grog" over wine or punch. A ritual central to all three of

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these groups, however, was dance. Isaac makes a strong case for the need to explore non-verbal evidence such as dance. Historians, he notes, have long dismissed non-written historical evidence. This has led them to concentrate on New England, with its plethora of sermons commenting on society. Isaac argues that, in the case of Virginia, one must pay close attention to social interactions such as dance. A strict formality existed in gentry dancing compared to that of yeoman and slaves, but common throughout society were jigs. Visitors termed these “negro dances” and deemed them not for “polite society” (p. 84). One young tutor caught his charges dancing jigs with blacks, a scene illustrating how dance can link two opposite classes.



Slave Dance to Banjo, 1780s

Other activities, such as horse racing, cock fighting, militia musters and court days, brought together different groups of society, “cutting across but not leveling social distinction” (p. 98). Elections, for example, were a way for the gentry to express their “paternalistic dominance” (p. 112). Their presence at the voting was a physical symbol of their control, and the custom of “treating” voters reinforced the deferential society. By the eve of the Revolution, Isaac argues, there was a firm system of social hierarchy. Architecture and ceremony were symbols of this hierarchy. Underneath this seemingly permanent structure, however, lay a “perpetual struggle for advantage” (p.120).

The first section of *The Transformation of Virginia* sets up a society about to undergo a radical change. While Isaac successfully digs deep into the social life of the time, his introductory sections fails to have concise organization and strong flow. Jumping from theme to theme and with very little reference to dates, Isaac makes it difficult for his readers to determine exactly what era his

information is coming from.

In the second section, Isaac begins to look at specific events and people that shaped the changing Virginia society. Since “in the fabric of the traditional order the ecclesiastical establishment proved to be the least durable strand,” Isaac chooses to focus on the struggle between the increasing presence of evangelicals in Virginia and the established Anglican Church (p. 141).

The first signs of dissension appeared in Hanover County in 1743 when a group of ordinary people began to have gatherings inspired by Whitefield’s sermons. Soon this group organized as Presbyterians, and the presbytery sent Samuel Davies to lead them. Despite efforts by the Virginia government to limit their ability to build more meetinghouses, the Presbyterians grew in number. Presbyterians, Isaac argues, would only seem respectable to the gentry after the Separate Baptists arrived.

Isaac discusses the Baptists and the fear that they inspired in the established Church and their gentry patrons in a manner that some historians have argued is exaggerated. Isaac gives no figures regarding how many people converted, weakening his argument. One may assume, however, that the presence of converts in any number can reveal clues about the society. “Evangelism,” says Isaac, “can be seen as a popular response to a mounting sense of social disorder” (p. 168). A great example Isaac uses involved John Waller and his friends, who, while riding, encountered a drunken butcher they considered insolent. One gentleman reared his horse up on the man, accidentally killing him. Waller would later convert.

Evangelicals were attempting to impose controls on a loose society. Additionally, their mode of worship focused on equality, rejecting “the formalism of traditional community organization” (p. 165). Their efforts reached into the slave quarters, as they sought “to extend moral community to the quarters,” where there had been none (p. 171). Isaac fails to discuss the attempt of some Anglican groups to convert slaves, something Sylvia Frey mentions in her book *Water from the Rock*, but he does note that the evangelical form of worship, with its emphasis on singing and movement, fit much better with traditional African



modes of worship.

These new sects defied the gentry’s authority, arousing sharp criticism and conflict. The challenge the evangelicals presented, Isaac argues, caused division among the Church of England. Along with increasing anti-clerical sentiment, a disagreement arose as to whether there should be an American bishop. A bishop would help formalize the structure of the church and serve as a model for society. While advocates of a bishop wanted the “positive reinforcement of a hierarchical system,” opponents feared tyranny (p. 197). Some Whig-patriot gentlemen who supported an American bishop, however, used rhetoric against hierarchy and traditional forms of government. Whig patriots, who argued for a bishop, while at the same time speaking out against monarchical authority, had the same irony that the use of slavery metaphors by slave-owners did in the struggle against Britain.

From this discussion, Isaac moves into the period of the Revolutionary War. Although the word “events” appears in the title of this section, with the exception of a few cursory mentions of the stamp act and non-importation, Isaac avoids talking about specific political and military events relating to the war. Rather, he points out the difficulty of spreading news of the conflict to the common, often illiterate people. Newspapers, and even the speeches of the time, which were filled with classical references, were virtually inaccessible. Instead, it was their sense of identity as Protestants, fighting against the “popish menace” of Parliament, and the extempore sermon-like speeches of Patrick Henry that led many common people into the struggle.

with scenes of abandoned and altered Anglican churches. Those churches converted into evangelical houses of worship have been stripped of their towering pulpits and, in some cases, of their pews, replacing them with simple benches. While these changes would seem to indicate a more communal society, Isaac argues the opposite, and attempts to prove that post-revolutionary Virginia had a less hospitable and more restrained and refined society than before.

Isaac attempts to find the cause for this new individualistic society within the evangelical sects but fails. By focusing solely on their actions, such as wandering in the woods alone during a conversion experience, and ignoring the biblical precedent which may have guided these actions, such as Christ’s wandering in the desert, Isaac does not give fair balance to his argument. Certain aspects of the new sects, such as conversion, may have emphasized the individual, but overall it was a communal style of worship, something which Isaac himself refers to several times.

In his concluding paragraphs, Isaac joins scholars such as Gordon Wood in emphasizing the radicalism of the American Revolution. Republicanism, he argues, was first used by the gentry to “regenerate traditional authority,” but as the war evolved “it had become a vehicle of popular assertion” (p. 321). The takeover of Republican ideals by the common people of Virginia would create a rift between the culture of the New Lights and the culture of the gentry. By 1790, Isaac concludes, Virginia was “a polarized world” (p. 321).

Rhys Isaac succeeds in providing an enlightening glimpse of life in Virginia, from the everyday celebrations and activities, to the changing world of religion. His failure, however, is that he never connects these details to a clear and concise argument. The numerous small arguments he does make rarely tie back to a central theme.

*The Transformation of Virginia* is a well researched and innovative look at Virginian society, which will benefit scholars of colonial and early American history for generations to come. Isaac’s emphasis on the importance of religion in shaping the social order should not be overlooked.

The final section illustrates how the “settings” described in the first section have changed. Isaac presents the reader



Pulpit at Christ Church, Alexandria.