



Indian Detective

Helen Rountree's painstaking research on Virginia natives has brought back not only a forgotten culture, but also forgotten figures. Her most recent book, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Lives Changed by Jamestown*, is her most groundbreaking.

Hampton native Helen Rountree, for decades a professor at Old Dominion University, has carved out an entirely unique role for herself as historian of Virginia's Indian culture. Surprisingly, when her career took off in the 1970s, very little was written and proven about early Virginia Indians. Today, while much remains to be known, Virginia's early Indians have become real historical figures, largely as a result of Rountree's work.

Her book *Pocahontas's People* was a watershed event for Virginia's Indians, who, before its release, were thought of as invented tribes with very little actual Indian heritage. Through Rountree's painstaking academic work, she proved that Virginia's tribes were real. Best yet, while her books are scholarly and well footnoted, they are written in plain, direct English that leaves little room for hedging.

Rountree has the frank-speaking demeanor of a British detective right out of fiction, down to the knitting needles kept at her side. That's ironic, because her chief career role has been unraveling many of the myths about the first English settlers through the surviving history of Virginia's Indian tribes. She got involved after studying at William and Mary, doing fieldwork for the Doris Duke Foundation in Nevada for graduate work in American oral history. After Rountree returned to Virginia, on a trip to the Mattaponi reservation, she says, the folks she saw there looked like western Indians. "They sounded in their attitudes like the res-

ervation people I knew in Nevada," says Rountree. "You think they would be different"

Her biography of Pocahontas, father Powhatan and his brother Opechancanough goes through all the known history of the time, but it does it from the perspective of the Indians, not the English. While it relies on English accounts, which were the only written ones, Rountree marries biology, archaeology and anthropology. It's her (quite correct) contention that an account based only in written historical documents would not tell the full story.

The book, published by University of Virginia Press this year, is not just scholarly. Some of it is quite funny. Of the famous John Smith/Pocahontas rescue, she writes, "Even if she had been inside the house at the time, he would not have needed rescuing from anything other than overeating." Of Pocahontas, she was probably "short but stocky. And in describing the various haircuts of an Indian maiden, she quotes the reference that Pocahontas probably had hair like the Irish "do by a dish."

In a time of historical revisionism, Rountree is possibly post-revisionist, combining a no-nonsense view of history with an apolitical, old school compulsion to follow the history wherever the facts lead her. Indeed, the charming thing about her is that one can sit down with her at lunch (in this case at Williamsburg's Second Street) and never actually know for certain her personal views of the early days of Virginia history.

VL: How did you get interested and find information on Virginia's Indians?

Rountree: I started 35 years ago collecting records avidly. I'm a collector, not of things, but of records about Virginia Indians, and I am also a compulsive indexer of things. So I have worked up indexes, so I knew pretty much what was out there within the first seven years, and the book I really wanted to write was my second one, *Pocahontas's People*. That was the one the Indians needed to show that they really did go back to colonial times, that they could be hooked up, that they were not simply recent reappearances. And the world is full of those, but the people I was working with are the real McCoy.

I was doing all these community service books, which is how I think of them, and that was really what I wanted to do. But it was in the back of my

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mind from fairly early times—not a biography of Pocahontas, because I found so little about her, I'd have to do a magnificent padding job to do a book about her—but I did realize there was enough material for a shortish book on her father. And nobody seemed to be interested in her father. [Pocahontas] was the daughter of a very busy tycoon, and fathers like that don't have a lot of time for their children. So her position, as long as he was alive, was going to be fairly important, but not as important as the legend that has built up. So he was the one I really wanted to see elucidated, along with Opechancanough [Powhatan's brother, pronounced O-PEE-CHAN-can-OH] .

VL: Is that how you pronounce it?

Rountree: Think Jackie Chan. Those two men, whose lives were intertwined, of course, made a much better story, the much more complete story. The way they are usually portrayed in the movies is exactly the opposite of the way they seemed to the colonists. Powhatan was the fearsome guy, and [his brother] Opechancanough was the friendly younger brother. He turned out later, of course, not to be friendly, but—20-20 hindsight—everyone portrays him as hostile from the beginning. But that's not how it was at the time. So I wanted to do a biography of those two people, and maybe throw in Pocahontas.

I went into hiding, literally—I even dropped out of church for a while, which is extreme for me. I am a very active Episcopalian. And I simply went into hiding and pushed my mind back 400 years, without the 20/20 hindsight, and tried as best I could to push myself into the Indians' frame of mind, ignoring the English. At the same time, I had to work from the English records. And this book was the result. When I was part of the way through it, I took a look at what I had written and I realized ... I looked at those early history chapters and said, 'I've never seen anything like this before, from me or from anybody else. This is weird—spooky stuff is coming out of my hands.' And I talked about it with some friends, and they said, 'OK, so it's weird.'

VL: Because it had never been written before?

Rountree: It had never been written before, and it was completely different from anything that I had seen anybody else write. Most books about the early Jamestown colony are firmly fixed on the English, and the language is firmly pro-English, and if the Indians are in it at all they are just Indians—they used to be savages. Nowadays, people are PC enough to say 'Indians' or 'Native Americans,' but never 'people,' never 'men,' never 'women.' When you say the 'men' went somewhere, it's automatically the English being talked about.

VL: Very good point.

Rountree: In any encounter between the two, it was males, frankly, my dear, males on both sides, with all the macho-ness that their cultures dictated. And I was able to figure out from the Indian side what that would have been like. So that's mostly what I wrote. And the Indians didn't think a lot of the English abilities, [but] they were respectful of the firearms, intensely curious about them.

I was trying to eliminate the English thinking the Indians were a bunch of duds and wimps, when in fact I was almost positive the Indians thought the English were wimps, because the English did all sorts of stupid things, which I start recording in the book. John Smith called them stupid, too. Straggled off the fort and got themselves picked off by snipers. "Nothing will prevent them but hanging," Smith said, direct quote. And Indians didn't think much of people who were lousy military folks.

Most of these poor slobbs among the colonists weren't military at all. They were workers. They were laborers. They were supposed to find things and dig 'em up. Or cut trees. No military experience for a lot of those guys. It was mostly the gentlemen who had the military experience. And the Indians and the Indian culture, all men, were military men automatically. The enemy came right to your town. You had jolly well better be able to defend your own family, yourself.

Also, the military skills in the Indian world were the same as hunting skills, and hunting put meat in the stew pot. So every man was a hunter of people or animals. And they were accustomed to thinking in those terms. And when they met people who didn't, especially people who claimed to be male, "You guys, real men? I doubt it. Naaay, look at 'em." So I was trying to write from that point of view. It was different for me, too.

I have been acquainted with David Price for a little while, and I've reviewed his book. It's almost entirely English and pro-English. Very good read, by the way. Wish it had some illustrations. [But] this is what the culture is used to, pro-English. We call them colo-

nists—colonist has the nuanced meaning of somebody who has a right to settle down. If you are a Powhatan Indian, you didn't have any right. [The colonists] were a bunch of strangers. "This is our land." So I was writing from that point of view. It felt weird to me, too, because, as a professional scholar, I've had to be neutral all these decades, and in this book I was not being neutral.

VL: I felt "neutral."

Rountree: Well, I didn't go overboard and make it horribly, horribly emotional, but I was still writing from a pro-Indian point of view. Did you catch the way that I don't call them English most of the time, and I never call them people and I never call them men?

VL: Maybe it's just that I'm so immersed in the English version that I didn't notice.

Rountree: Well, maybe so. Maybe I should have shrieked louder!

VL: There is a current presumption that if an Indian did anything bad, you don't want to mention it. But when you didn't do that, it seemed realer to me.

Rountree: Well, I put where [Indians] shot people and killed people. And they killed a lot of people all at once. But I don't call it bad. I don't call it a massacre, although technically it was. I call it a great assault, which is what they thought they were doing.

VL: To me that just seems neutral.

Rountree: I felt very defensive as I was writing the book. And the two readers from University of Virginia Press actually told me, "Change some of your passages, because you sound too defensive in your footnotes, and you don't need to be." But I had spoken to enough historical societies and ancestor worshippers, which is what I call the DARs, and some of them are my relatives, that I know they don't like to hear pro-Indian, anti-English things. So yes, I was defensive.

[But] I've never had it that easy. ... I think it's because Pocahontas was part of it. They [UVA Press] knew that Pocahontas would sell it.

VL: [The Pocahontas story] is kind of irresistible.

Rountree: I gathered in everything I could actually find that's reliable about Pocahontas. And I have done some speculating—I call it that in the book—about some other things, but, otherwise, if it ain't in there about her, it ain't so.

VL: When you talked about Pocahontas' hair and how long that was, that was inference?

Rountree: That was inference based upon the usual hairdo of girls. Another thing I was able to bring to the book—by this time, I knew the eyewitness records about their culture backwards and forwards. Incomplete as those records are, there are still things I will never know without a time machine. I wish somebody would invent me one, please. I know the culture, so I can do a lot more reconstructing. And I also know where to stop reconstructing, because I know where the records are going to start screaming for mercy: 'You are stretching this too far.'

VL: When you look at the book, it seems intuitively obvious that there should have been this book. The other thought I have is that you are amazed that the information is out there.

Rountree: Lots of archeology. Paper records and things buried in London. Buried in the attics and archives of [English] country houses, probably. If I had another life-



time where I could clothe myself, that's what I would like to do, is search in some of those places. The museum archives and the Lambeth Palace Library and so on have got inventories, and they tell pretty much where things are. Inventory is way, way behind at most of the big country houses. Longleat [House], for instance.

VL: I saw lions there [at a zoo].

Rountree: Yeah, I know. That's how they keep the roof on the house over the old records.

VL: So our Virginia history is buried at Longleat?

Rountree: It's buried in a lot of places. If you had a nobleman who was contributing money to a colonial enterprise, then he might well get sent papers or copies thereof. You never know. There are a lot of things in the ground still to find. And archaeological methods are improving all the time, so that what we do find we are better at analyzing.

Since 1987, I have been compulsively collecting things from botanical manuals on useful plants to Indians that are recorded as either edible, or historically were used by Indians, including Cherokee and Iroquois. ... Another example, the British colleague that I took to the Dismal Swamp on Saturday is writing a biography of [the] John Tradescant[s] Sr. and Jr.

VL: How interesting.

Rountree: John Tradescant the younger came to Virginia in 1637 to '38. He is the only one of the two who actually came over here. It was from him that the famous Powhatan Mantle wound up in the Ashmolean Museum [in Oxford]. But it wound up in somebody's cabinet first. Thanks to the John Smith Voyages Project, which got me in touch with geologists, I know where the shells on it came from. Thanks to pulling a hissy fit in the early 1990s on my own, and contacting malacologists [experts on mollusks] and getting my friends at Jamestown Settlement to get a close-up picture of those shells while the mantle was on file. I got an identification species of the shells.

So when I talked to the geologist last year, I said, 'Where do you get [*Marginella roscida*] shells? They're late Pliocene, early Pleistocene—where do you get 'em? And then I said, that's weird, because they didn't come from the right place. I'll tell you why. They are found from the York River, southward. Which is fine if it was really Powhatan's property, which it probably was not. He was living on the York River, so was Opechancanough. It was probably Opechancanough's mantle.

But the only description anywhere in the English records of any garment like that comes from Maryland. Somebody saw it in Maryland. A Jesuit missionary in Maryland saw it in 1638, and mentioned chief-like garments that [had] that kind of embroidery in a 1639 report, which has been in print for quite a long while now. And I wanted to know how in the bloody "hmmm" it got to Maryland. And this colleague was able to help me. It was by a trader, probably, who worked in both the York River and up in Maryland. I think it was Bill Claiborne who did it, but I cannot prove it.

[The scholar] wanted to know where Tradescant himself traveled. He did not keep a journal. He was much more of slob than his father was. His father kept journals. Young Johnny didn't. So, we don't know where he traveled around. We just know he came over. But he did list plants that he got samples from to take back to London. So I said, 'Bingo, what's the list?' And the first thing on the list was bald cypress, *Taxodium distichum*. Thanks to the J. Smith Voyages project, and a forest biologist who clued me in to all this, I know where the stands of cypress are in the Chesapeake region. That narrowed things down considerably.

I found that everything on the list occurs in James City County. Johnny Tradescant scarcely needed to stir 10 steps out of Jamestown in 1637-38 to get the plants he got. He didn't need to go anywhere. All he needed to do is park himself at Jamestown and on a few day trips ...

VL: We have an impression of him scurrying through the woods.

Rountree: [Tradescant] had somebody to haul out interesting things for him. He didn't even need to do his own. That's the kind of stuff studying plants will tell you.

VL: What was the most upsetting or surprising or upside-down-world-turning thing?

Rountree: I thought up several more reasons why John Smith wasn't rescued by Pocahontas.

VL: What do you hope is going to happen after the book seeps into the culture?

Rountree: I don't bother hoping. I've already gone on to the next project. I've got three books in progress. I'm not thinking about what's ...

VL: These things do have repercussions.

Rountree: I know they do.

VL: I think good ones.

Rountree: I think these will be good, too. I haven't really tried slamming the English. I don't really slam anybody in the book.

VL: They do that enough to themselves.

Rountree: Just by being themselves. John Smith did a lot more slamming in

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his book than I did in mine. I don't know, I really don't know. And the reason I say that is, the Pocahontas legend is so heavily entrenched in the people's minds. And Disney made it worse.

VL: Don't you think it really gives you a departure point?

Rountree: I hope it gives other people reading it a departure point.

VL: In a story, I remember reading that some Virginia Indians were frustrated that Disney had left out her conversion to Christ.

Rountree: I don't think her conversion to Christianity says that much about Indians in general, frankly. ... I think she converted because of the Stockholm Syndrome.

VL: I watched the Patty Hearst documentary the other day.

Rountree: I almost did the other night. I suggested Stockholm Syndrome. I say it in there. It's one thing I didn't footnote. And yes, she did she suffer some abuse, not physical, but that's why she converted. She was still quite young, and she was flexible. She wasn't high status in her society. Her father was.

VL: So the British valued her as high status, and she was willing to go along with that?

Rountree: I've said that for years. She was not exactly a non-entity, because she was her father's favorite. But by herself, she was not high status, and she did not have a sparkling future ahead of her. She was going to wind up a nonentity before long, whenever her father died, because of the nature of inheritance.

VL: So Indians did bad things in your book, too.

Rountree: So did the English. They're humans. They're regrettably human. Any kind of contact situation you get, there are going to be misunderstandings, and later there are going to be deliberate misunderstandings, and people are not going to show up in the best light. But that's the period I have to write about.

VL: Is there one villain?

Rountree: No. No.

VL: Is there someone you just can't stand?

Rountree: No. I even admire John Smith. There isn't anybody in there that I really dislike. I'm not making it up.

VL: I believe you.

Rountree: There is no one hero—no one heroine. I don't tend to think of people in that respect. I used to get that across to my students—I don't have likes and dislikes unless I get to know people really well face to face, which doesn't happen in the classroom.

VL: You have to judge them objectively.

Rountree: Take them for what they did, and what they were trying to do. At any given moment, I may approve or disapprove. I don't try to voice my own opinions. I tried to see things through somebody else's eyes, through multiple people's eyes. Because the young Indians tended to see things differently from their elders. I'm trying to do multiple views.

It's not my view. I'm not sure what my views would be. I guess I come closest to it when I'm giving a public lecture, because I put asides in, and that would indicate how I feel, but most of the time I don't think about how I feel about it. I want to know what happened. I'm being a reporter. A different sort of reporter. I'm a reporter. And I deeply appreciate it when people don't try to kill the messenger.

