

Sahana Sarangi

History

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Reading Response #1

In the chapter “Serving Time in Virginia” of *After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection*, James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle use evidence of historical documents removed of bias to argue that early settlement in Virginia was unsuccessful. ~~Their interpretations of these documents are convincing.~~ Specifically, they argue that desire for financial success was key to Jamestown’s downfall. Davidson and Lytle ~~describe how~~ Governor Argall’s evidence ~~showed~~ that “at the same time that settlers were willing to let the colony fall apart, they were energetically planting tobacco”¹ At this point in time, tobacco was a particularly profitable good. The authors used historical data ~~to find~~ that some settlers were able to make 200 sterling in one year producing tobacco, while one of the settlers, along with his servants, was able to make 1000 sterling. These profits further incentivized other settlers to grow tobacco for riches. Many settlers also chose to produce alcohol for these reasons. However, in the settlers’ desire for profit, none of them planted a necessity—food. Davidson and Lytle argue that corn, ~~being~~ much easier to cultivate than tobacco, was not produced because it simply did not have the same monetary value. Because none of the settlers planted food, many in the colonies died of starvation, which was the main reason that Jamestown was largely unsuccessful. For these tobacco-producing settlers to make such large profits, Davidson and Lytle also address ~~how~~ servants were “bought

¹ Davidson and Lytle, “Serving Time in Virginia,” 41-2.

and sold, treated almost as if they were property.”² The demand for human labor was ~~increasing~~, and the situation of servants, tenants, and apprentices was much worse than that of the settlers. They were treated not as humans, but as methods in which profit could be earned. Unlike in England, workers had no means escape from their masters if treated badly. The authors mention ~~how a~~ Duty Boy had written that “he was to be ‘whipt from the forte to the gallows and from thence be whipt back again’” and “was ordered to begin his term anew.”³ Davidson and Lytle use primary source documentations such as the one of the Duty Boy’s to ~~make inferences about what early settlements in Virginia were like. They come to the conclusion that Jamestown was a failure.~~ Their interpretations of this data ~~is~~ fairly persuasive because they address multiple times that historical primary sources must be stripped of bias and cannot be taken at face value. Davidson and Lytle’s acknowledgement that historical documentation comes with preexisting perspectives of the writer allows their overall argument about settlement in Virginia to be more convincing and seemingly reliable.

² Davidson and Lytle, “Serving Time in Virginia,” 48.

³ Davidson and Lytle, “Serving Time in Virginia,” 46.