

MOVIE REVIEW: *POCAHONTAS*

Pocahontas is a typical Disney fairy tale, a modern descendant of Disney's 1937 *Snow White*. The earlier romances were all animated versions of fairy tales or fiction for children: *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *Peter Pan*, and *Sleeping Beauty*. But this one is based on a true story, or rather, is a fictionalized elaboration of some ideas about what happened between some real people in Virginia in 1608-1609. There really were individuals there called Pocahontas, John Smith, Powhatan, Ratcliffe, and Kocumom. But the story in the film is actually less well-founded in historical and ethnographic reality than is the often told story about George Washington and the cherry tree.

The movie presents a budding romance between two protagonists. Pocahontas is a beautiful, buxom, tan young woman with long black hair, oriental eyes, and an "Indian" nose in profile (but lacking a bridge in full-face), who has a tasteful tattoo on her upper right arm and wears a skimpy off-the-shoulder dress of fringed leather. Captain John Smith is a handsome, tall, muscular, clean shaven, young white man, with long blond hair and blue eyes. Perhaps a mixture of Richard Gere and Tom Cruise, he wears tight trousers, high loose boots, shirt sleeves turned up, and vaguely 17th century helmet and cuirass. The two exchange a few words in mock Indian (taken from the vocabulary in

Strachey's history of the Jamestown colony), but Pocahontas immediately speaks impeccable English to Smith. Other ethnographic details are hardly more realistic. A few bits have been taken from the historical record on Virginia Indian culture of the period, but these are mere fragments of local color, and most of them are not convincing. One example among many is the robe that Powhatan briefly dons. This is based ultimately on "Powhatan's mantle" in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, but the version

we are shown comes from an inaccurate, simplified copy that is now exhibited at Jamestown. In addition, informed scholarship has long held that the shell-decorated hide panel in Oxford is not a mantle and cannot be surely associated with Powhatan, although it did originate among the Indians near the Jamestown settlement.

Other elements of Indianness in the movie are based on positive features in the modern stereotype. For example, the animated tree called "grandmother willow" tells Pocahontas, "All around you are spirits, child. They live in the wind, and the water, and the sky. If you listen, they will tell you." Powhatan tells his daughter, "Let the spirits guide you." He greets her

with the remark "My heart soars," quoting Dan George in *The Little Big Man*, perhaps the finest feature film on the Indian-White experience. The Indians are fundamentally good and right, although ill-informed about the English. The English, and especially Ratcliffe (here their leader, but not in reality), are caricatured as mad gold seekers, ill-informed about the Indians. It may be aspects like these that have led Russell Means, the old activist



Matoaka als Rebecca daughter to the mighty Prince Powhatan Emperour of Ananoughkomock als virginia converted and baptized in the Christian faith; and wife to the worth. M^r. John Rolfe. Compen. Holland excu

for Indian rights, to comment that "It [Pocahontas] is the finest feature film ever done in Hollywood on the Native American experience." But perhaps his judgment was affected by his own employment by Disney to provide the voice of Powhatan in the movie. It does seem significant that this love story does not have a happy ending in the film. After Pocahontas saves Smith, persuading her father Powhatan not to kill him, the romance ends as the wounded Smith sails for England, while Pocahontas stays in Virginia, feeling she belongs with her own people.

Questions about the accuracy of the movie may be answered in several ways. One might begin by saying that this is in no sense a documentary, that accuracy was not a high priority for the writers and artists. If it had been, what sources could have been used? There is little reliable direct evidence on the details of Virginia Algonquian culture, material or non-material. The most appropriate sources are: (1) John White's watercolors representing the Indians of Roanoke (prepared 50 years earlier and 100 miles away) especially for such things as houses, clothing, weapons, music and dance; a source only sparingly used by the Disney artists. (2) Archaeological evidence from the Jamestown area, which was not used. (3) Materials on other Indian cultures of neighboring areas in the 18th century when reliable evidence was recorded and objects were collected. Little was used here. Anthropologists and modern Indian people also have ideas about appropriate attitudes and behavior, but these can only have a rather remote relation to the long-lost reality of life in Virginia about 400 years ago.

One is on slightly firmer ground in evaluating the historical accuracy of the basic story line. It is clear that when Pocahontas and Smith first met, she was 11 or 12 years old and he was 27. Her appearance, other than her age, is documented only by a rather uninformative engraved portrait done in 1616. But Smith is known to have been rather short and stocky, sporting a bushy full beard. Smith left for England in October, 1609. Pocahontas was often in the Jamestown settlement thereafter, and acted in some respects as an intermediary between her

people and the English, until she was captured by the English in 1613. Kocoum, who in the movie is her fiance and is killed by the English, in fact is said by one historical account to have married Pocahontas in 1610. Then on April 5, 1614, she married the Englishman John Rolfe, when she was 19 or 20 years old. Their son Thomas Rolfe was born in 1615, and the next year the family went to England where Pocahontas died in March, 1617.

There is very little evidence for any romantic relationship between Smith and the young girl that Pocahontas then was. The well known story has her saving him from execution just at the time that they first met, in January, 1608, when he was brought as a captive before her father, Powhatan, the paramount chief of the area. One difficulty is that Smith is the only source of the story, and he did not introduce it in his earliest writings on Virginia, but waited until several years later. Another problem is that, according to Smith, several times during his earlier adventures in Turkey and the Balkans, a woman of high status saved his life or helped him escape captivity. This is, of course, an old element of folklore, which at best influenced Smith's dramatic accounts of his life. Even if some such event actually occurred when he was taken captive by the Virginia Indians, it is possible that Smith misinterpreted a dramatic mock execution that was part of an adoption ceremony, in which Pocahontas played the traditional role (perhaps assigned by her father) of a woman who adopted as son or brother a prisoner of war who would otherwise have been killed. This deduction is based on evidence of type (3) above, for the custom is not documented for the Virginia Indians but is recorded for Indian tribes to the north. The rescue is of course the central feature of the traditional history (or myth), but it fills a rather different position in the plot of the Disney story. The message of Disney's historical myth is one of interethnic conflict, based on greed and ignorance, that was defused by an intelligent young Indian woman in search of romance. This may have some slight basis in real history. It is certainly true, although rarely recognized, that intermarriage between Indians and Europeans (and Africans) in the first centuries of contact was an important

mechanism for peaceful solution of interethnic conflicts. One may wonder whether it is only for dramatic effect that Disney's retelling omits the miscegenation that actually occurred between Pocahontas and Rolfe. That marriage provides another reason, besides her supposed rescue of Smith, for her continuing fame and significance in American history. The movie can be recommended for its simple, dramatic plot; its wonderful, artistically sophisticated animation, and its use of classic Disney animal characters, who play their traditional comedy roles as well as emphasizing the supposed closeness of Indians to the natural world. It is a fairy story with a fundamentally positive message about Indian-White relations. It is not a useful document about Virginia Indian culture.

Viewers whose interest is aroused can be referred to *Pocahontas and her World* by Philip L. Barbour (Boston: Houghton, 1970), for a reasonable reconstruction of Pocahontas's life story, including her relations with the English and her position in her native society. For information on Virginia Algonquian culture of the time, the best places to begin are Christian F. Feest's article "Virginia Algonquians" (pp. 253-270 in vol. 15, *Northeast*, Bruce G. Trigger, ed., 1978, of the Handbook of North American Indians. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution), and Helen C. Rountree's *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990). On the Pocahontas myth (but not on its relation to ethnography or history), see Robert S. Tilton, *Pocahontas: The Evolution of an American Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994). A very different, and amusing, version of the relation between Pocahontas and Smith was invented by John Barth, for his novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (New York: Doubleday, 1960)--probably not to be recommended for high school or younger students.

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[Rountree recently published a children's book titled, *Young Pocahontas in the Indian World*, available from Helen Rountree, c/o J & R Graphic Services, Inc., 124 Production Dr., Yorktown, VA 23693.]

