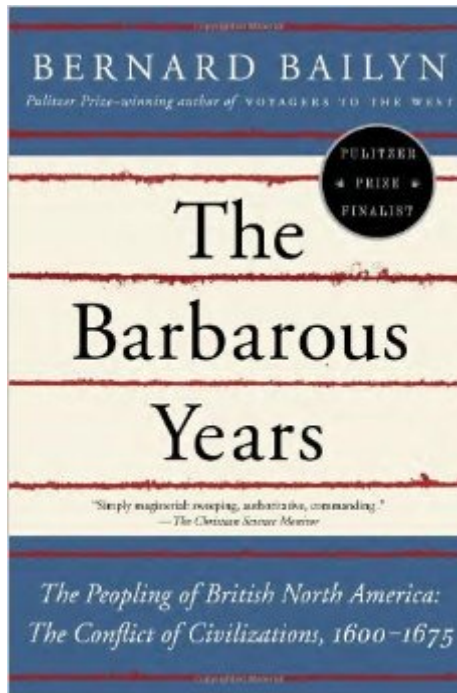


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The Barbarous Years: The Peopling Of British North America--The Conflict Of Civilizations, 1600-1675



Synopsis

Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize Bernard Bailyn gives us a compelling, fresh account of the first great transit of people from Britain, Europe, and Africa to British North America, their involvements with each other, and their struggles with the indigenous peoples of the eastern seaboard. The immigrants were a mixed multitude. They came from England, the Netherlands, the German and Italian states, France, Africa, Sweden, and Finland, and they moved to the western hemisphere for different reasons, from different social backgrounds and cultures. They represented a spectrum of religious attachments. In the early years, their stories are not mainly of triumph but of confusion, failure, violence, and the loss of civility as they sought to normalize situations and recapture lost worlds. It was a thoroughly brutal encounterâ "not only between the Europeans and native peoples and between Europeans and Africans, but among Europeans themselves, as they sought to control and prosper in the new configurations of life that were emerging around them.

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Customer Reviews

To a reader like myself who's fairly familiar with aspects of British and Irish history but hardly at all with American history, especially early stuff, this is fascinating. I didn't know that the earliest efforts to colonize Virginia were such a disaster -- people were dying like flies over there, even as entrepreneurs sought recruits to sail to new lives in what was presented as a terrestrial paradise. The lure of land, the development of the tobacco trade, and later the fur trade, the relations with the indigenous peoples, the blending of religious and commercial motives, the context for the behavior of the natives -- Bailyn lays it all out very deftly, blending a chronological organization with a

geographical one. The cases of Maryland and New England are very different from Virginia's (and each other) despite the overlap in time. The idea of colliding cultures (English and native American) that one finds in the blurb oversimplifies things. There is no single English or European culture, and the native tribes have likewise their own pressures and agendas. So it's a complicated story to tell, and at times the reader might be overwhelmed with colonists' names and Indian place names -- and more maps would help, I think -- but the main lines of the various stories (for there isn't just one) are clear. Bailyn seems to be aiming at the general reader, but some work is required. Some Tudor and Stuart background helps, and it helps to know, for example, what a joint-stock company is and what English policy towards Ireland was in the early 17th century. Readers who aren't up on such things need to do a little work, but it's worth it. A couple of impressions to indicate what I find fascinating: first, the juxtaposition of the almost Darwinian struggle against nature, disease, and indigenous natives that is being waged in Virginia c. 1623 by people struggling also to just stay alive, while back in London very sophisticated financial transactions (and political transactions) are being undertaken to get people to a place where most of them would die in fairly short order. Second, I didn't know that Maryland was founded by Catholics who sought to establish a colony of tolerance but who found, when the Jesuits insisted on proselytizing both the natives and the Protestant colonists, that they (the Catholic governors) had to appeal to the Pope to get the Jesuits to back off. They were afraid that the English government -- trending increasingly Protestant prior to the English Civil War -- wouldn't support, maintain, or fund an aggressively Catholic colony. So . . . if this kind of stuff is news to you, get this book.

Bernard Bailyn is a titan in the field of early American history and the 529 pages of text in this book display his mastery of that field. *The Barbarous Years* presents in thorough detail the first six or seven decades of the Virginia, Massachusetts, and New York settlements and to a lesser extent Delaware and Maryland as well. Certainly anyone looking for a comprehensive overview of these events should read this book. *The Barbarous Years* is, mainly, an overview, but, as the title indicates, Bailyn emphasizes the barbaric circumstances of the settlement experience in an attempt to establish thematic unity. He relates in graphic detail the killings, tortures and massacres committed by the European settlers and Native Americans against each other, particularly in the chapters on Virginia. But he takes pains to note how each such group inflicted identical horrors upon its own members as well. In a similar vein, he sets forth the details of the deprivations the Europeans endured in their earliest years, the mean conditions of their daily lives and the astonishingly high mortality rates. There is also substantial demographic analysis of the settlement

communities; significant description of the conditions and events in 17th century England that caused the exodus to America; and a detailed exposition of the diverse viewpoints on religious and other issues, such as land management, within the several communities, and the roots of those differences in England. The reading experience, however, was not commensurate with the scholarship. Having read Philbrick's "Mayflower" and "The Island at the Center of the World" I was already familiar with the Massachusetts and New York narratives. Those books, particularly Philbrick's, are written more as narratives than expositions, and held my attention better than this one did. There is just a lot of exposition in this book. I am not referring only to the passages on demographics and land management practices, which, being new topics to me, held my interest initially for some time, but just went on too long. But the book often had that "no index card left out" feeling to it. Every person mentioned seems to get a short biography. I would have liked a little editing to focus more on the people who were truly important. Last, the author is just verbose. Rarely is a person characterized by just one phrase or quote; three seems to be the median. Few nouns go without the company of an adjective and the same for verbs. In a span of just 8 lines on page 431, Roger Williams is described as "self-confident", "self-willed," , "self-conceited", "stubborn", "spiky", "uncompromising", "assertive", "imaginative", "attractive", "insensitive", "unquiet", "turbulent", "stiff", and "uncharitable". Surely some of these are redundant. John Winthrop, Jr., is introduced on page 401 as "the most accomplished among them, the most cosmopolitan, worldly, sophisticated and intellectually adventurous". Cosmopolitan, worldly and sophisticated? It's like a thesaurus entry. On page 405, a group of persons is described as "equally experienced in practical affairs, equally contentious, equally contrary-minded, equally argumentative, sensitive to slights and relentless in following through on their own opinions." Are not the phrases "equally contentious" and "equally argumentative", if not others, sufficiently "equal" that one could have been deleted? As a reading experience, it was unfortunately more of a slog than I had expected. I see the Publishers' Weekly review uses the word "weighty" to describe the book and that's not a bad choice, in both its favorable and unfavorable senses.

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