

Meeting in the Middle: Myth-making in *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*

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The east coast of the Americas has been fertile ground for European colonization as well as for myths surrounding the major colonization players. In Plymouth, Massachusetts, you can see the rock where pilgrims purportedly disembarked from the Mayflower, though mariners typically steer away from rocks. St. Augustine, Florida, has hosted events commemorating Ponce de Leon's mythical quest and discovery of a fountain of youth, despite the explorer never having set foot there. And in the very cradle of American colonization, in Santo Domingo Este of the Dominican Republic, rest the honored bones of Christopher Columbus, curiously enough, since the tomb of the man is located in Seville, Spain. The bones of Columbus have long been a source of myth, with Mark Twain noting, "In a museum in Havana, there are two skulls of Christopher Columbus, one when he was a boy, and one when he was a man."⁽¹⁾

Pocahontas is the undisputed princess of east coast myth from the colonization era, as most of what we know of her has been legend or propaganda. Americans are apt to believe that she rescued John Smith from imminent death, and possibly fell in love with him, acts

memorialized in popular movies like Disney's *Pocahontas* and Terrence Malick's *The New World*. Fans of the celebrity Pocahontas who are interested in getting closer to her can visit the Mattaponi Indian Museum in West Point, Virginia, and see iconic Pocahontas relics firsthand, such as the necklace she wore and the club that would have bashed in John Smith's brains had she not intervened.⁽²⁾ That these items might be only as genuine as an anthropomorphic Disney raccoon matter only to a few jaded literalists.

Despite the little we actually know about Pocahontas's brief life, new books are published about her almost every year, some of which go un-noticed, and some of which grow in importance over time. One of the books that has sustained interest on the internet especially, but which can also be found in the bibliographies of recent scholarly books and articles, is *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History* (2007), by Dr. Linwood Custalow and Angela L. Daniel. In popular culture, the words "true story" in a title generally suggest precisely the opposite, but this book has been taken seriously by many. I asked cultural anthropologist and Native American scholar Buck Woodard for his thoughts on it.

"That book lays out broad tropes that tell how a people feel at a certain point in time, and that's where its value lies," he said. "I knew Linwood Custalow. He was a good man, and he had an interesting take on things in that era."⁽³⁾

Custalow passed away in 2014 at the age of 77 after a battle with Parkinson's.⁽⁴⁾ His early years were marked by poverty and severe discrimination.⁽⁵⁾ He had made a name for himself as a local physician who contributed to the health care of his tribe and who stood on the boards of many organizations that promoted Native American rights and recognition. *The True Story of Pocahontas* was a project of personal

importance to him that he completed in the latter years of his life with the help of then-doctoral student, Angela Daniel. Custalow was known for having an unorthodox view of American history, believing that Americans had copied and taken undeserved credit for their form of government from the Powhatan tribes, and that they had appropriated their national colors from the Powhatan nation, substituting only dark blue from the distinctive Powhatan colors of red, white and black.⁽⁶⁾

The authors of *The True Story of Pocahontas* characterized their book as “a great love story,”⁽⁷⁾ referring to the affection Pocahontas and Chief Wahunsenaca (Powhatan) had for the Powhatan people and for each other. For some readers, myself included, the allure of this book was not the so-called love story, but rather the intrigue revealed in its more controversial statements, namely that Pocahontas had been raped and murdered by some of the colonists, and that this information came from long concealed “sacred Mattaponi oral history.” I found myself wondering if this information could have originated as stated by the authors, and I began to search for verification that this was not just another myth.

Trying to arrive at the truth behind *True Story* has been a slow process, and one that encountered some obstacles along the way, namely that many people more versed in Powhatan history than myself are reluctant to comment on the book or its reliability as “oral history.” I was able to make email contact with a number of prominent historians and anthropologists who have researched the Powhatan Indians extensively and who have published widely read books on Powhatan history and culture, but several declined to reveal their thoughts on *True Story*. I asked Woodard, who knows some of them personally, why that might be.

“I suspect it’s because there’s no upside. And besides, they don’t know where you’re going with this [line of inquiry].”⁽⁸⁾ Reading between the lines, I suppose that many academics who devote their lives to Native American research have put in a great deal of effort to reach out to tribal members and secure their trust. Speaking too frankly about *True Story* might damage relationships, and could be viewed as unnecessary input by ivory tower academics on an elderly Native American’s personal, heart-felt project achieved in his final years. Too, some historians may not wish to elevate the claims by taking them seriously, as they are unverifiable and fall into the realm of hearsay.

Nevertheless, one prominent expert who knew Custalow, and who has written many volumes on the Powhatan Indians, did choose to weigh in. Anthropologist Helen C. Rountree wrote in a personal email, “

I don’t believe Linwood’s “sacred tradition” stuff was either accurate or passed down through the Mattaponi. ... Linwood didn’t get any of his stuff from his ancestors.”⁽⁹⁾

The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History (2007), Fulcrum Publishing, is published in paperback as well as in a digital version. It can be found in bookstores as well as in the Historic Jamestown Museum Shop and the nearby Archaearium Shop in Jamestown, Virginia. The work stands out among the many published Jamestown accounts for its astonishing claims, which Daniel said had been “silenced”⁽¹⁰⁾ while simultaneously being kept secret and preserved in “sacred Mattaponi oral history.” Among these revelations were the shocking news that Pocahontas had been raped in captivity, probably by Governor Thomas Dale, and gave birth to an illegitimate son (Thomas) prior to her marriage to John Rolfe.⁽¹¹⁾ The authors further claimed that

Pocahontas died in England not of a disease, as widely believed, but from deliberate poisoning by prominent Virginia Company operatives, most likely Captain Argall and John Rolfe, her own husband.⁽¹²⁾

The new approach of this book resonated with those dissatisfied by the Hollywood portrayal of Pocahontas, and among Native Americans in particular. Many said that finally the real story of Pocahontas was being told. When Native Americans spoke of an American Holocaust, reaction was typically muted, but when Pocahontas was declared a kidnap, rape and murder victim, people seemed to sit up and take notice, and the injustice of colonial American history had finally become obvious.

Most reviews of *True Story* were positive. Robert Shultis in the *Virginia Gazette* wrote,

“The True Story of Pocahontas” is a must-read for anyone interested in the full story of the epic of Jamestown and its participants. It is different. It is beautifully written. Acquire it, read it, then read it again. You will be well rewarded.⁽¹³⁾

Debra Utacia Krol in *Native Peoples* (2007), wrote:

This recollection of Pocahontas’ real-life experiences should be required reading for all students of American history.⁽¹⁴⁾

Ethnohistorian J. Frederick Fausz, on the other hand, called it “flawed” and suggested that publication of the book was aimed at impacting a political issue facing the Mattaponi tribe, the King William Reservoir Project.⁽¹⁵⁾

Since *True Story* was published in 2007, the surprising claims in the book have spread on the internet and been widely incorporated into

the re-telling of the Pocahontas story. Countless blogs and websites now include the death-by-poisoning version of Pocahontas's last days. At least one book, *Pocahontas & Sacagawea; America's Most Famous Native American Women*, by Charles River Editors (2013), absorbed almost the entire narrative of *True Story* in its account of Pocahontas., and the Custalow/Daniel version of the story now firmly resides on the Historic Jamestown pages of America's National Park Service website.⁽¹⁶⁾ Professor at New England Law, Alisson M. Dussias, mentioned the *True Story* version of Pocahontas's death in a scholarly article that appeared in the *American Indian Law Review* in 2012,⁽¹⁷⁾ as did Peter Firstbrook in his 2014 John Smith biography, *A Man Most Driven*,⁽¹⁸⁾ just two of the many published research articles and books that lend credence to the Custalow/Daniel account.

Missing, for the most part, have been comments, praise or criticism from the most prominent experts and scholars on the Powhatan Indians. Neither Helen Rountree, Frederic Gleach, or Keith Egloff have published any formal criticism of it, and J. Frederick Fausz's mildly negative review likely went unnoticed by many, as it was just one of several books reviewed in his article. Interestingly, and somewhat inexplicably, the *True Story* authors chose not to seek out the comments or recommendations of any of these Powhatan experts at the time of publication,⁽¹⁹⁾ preferring instead to have personal friends and contacts write the book cover testimonials. One of those friends who does qualify as an expert is Danielle Moretti-Langholz, an associate of Angela Daniel from the College of William and Mary. She wrote in the afterword,

Some readers may ask, "Why now? Why share this story now?" Others will ask, "Is this version the true story, and how will scholars receive this work?" A more important question might be,

“How would this Mattaponi version of history have been received if it had been shared with the non-Native community at some other point in the past?”⁽²⁰⁾

The last question may be viewed as a pre-emptive shot at deflecting inquiry, implying that those who question the account are no better than the oppressors of Virginia Indians from times past. As for the timing, publication in 2007 had more to do with the hoopla surrounding the Jamestown Quadricentennial celebration than with any consideration of contemporary receptiveness to revisionist Indian history. Works like *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* had been well-received some 37 years earlier, and Columbus Day has been replaced by Indigenous People’s Day in some parts of the country since 1992. If back then organizations like the National Council of Churches and the American Library Association could characterize Columbus as a purveyor of “genocide, slavery, ‘ecocide,’ and exploitation” and describe his legacy as one of “piracy, brutality, slave trading, murder, disease, conquest, and ethnocide,”⁽²¹⁾ then it’s difficult to view Custalow and Daniel in 2007 as revisionist pioneers.

That title may more properly be awarded to Native American academic, Jack D. Forbes, who inserted himself into Powhatan affairs back in 1969. He attempted to put together a new “Powhatan Confederacy,” but ultimately abandoned his efforts in Virginia when the tribal members failed to share his level of activism.⁽²²⁾ Near in age to Linwood Custalow, it’s possible his revisionist stance on European colonialism had an influence on Custalow’s thinking. Decades before *True Story*, Forbes wrote about the lies and thievery of John Smith and associated Smith with the *wétiko* (cannibalistic) bent for European-style violence.⁽²³⁾ He also appears to be the first to speculate that Pocahontas

had been poisoned to death, offering up the same motivations and perpetrators as *True Story*. There is no indication his ideas were sourced from the Mattaponi, however, as his theories were said to spring from the lack of solid information surrounding her death and his mistrust of the colonists.⁽²⁴⁾

Moretti-Langholz's endorsement notwithstanding, *The True Story of Pocahontas* appears to deserve more skepticism than it has received to date, not least of all because Dr. Custalow's own account of the story had evolved over the years. In 2003, he shared the speculation of Forbes on the poisoning of Pocahontas, but he characterized it then as his personal opinion. Speaking to Bobby Whitehead of *Indian Country Today*, he said, "I find it difficult to believe she died of natural causes. I think she was poisoned."⁽²⁵⁾ Like Forbes, he did not state that the story came from "sacred Mattaponi oral history." Perhaps it had not yet occurred to him that claiming so would give it more traction.

For this to happen, Dr. Custalow, a self-styled historian and a local ear, nose and throat physician, first had to come to terms with the idea that the general public cared little about his personal thoughts on Pocahontas, but that his status, which had been severely damaged by a Federal indictment for Medicaid fraud in 1989,⁽²⁶⁾ could be better enhanced by claiming to be the bearer of secrets from a 400-year succession of covert Mattaponi *quiakros* (high priests) entrusted with faithful transmission of the sordid details of Pocahontas's victimization. In Angela L. Daniel, an eager doctoral student, he found a willing partner in bringing the new story to light.

In 2007, Custalow and Daniel got Fulcrum Publishing to release their barely book-length account of Pocahontas's life and English criminal behavior in time for the Jamestown Quadricentennial, as well as to coincide with public hearings for the final decision on the King

William Reservoir project, an ecologically risky development Custalow was eager to defeat. He and the *Alliance to Save the Mattaponi* were ultimately successful in that regard.⁽²⁷⁾

Much earlier in those proceedings, however, in 2000, questions were raised by the City of Newport News (proponents of the reservoir) about Custalow's veracity when he claimed to have knowledge of sacred Mattaponi sites that would be damaged by the reservoir project only after information about the sites had been revealed elsewhere. Spokesmen for the Mattaponi Tribe countered that the published record merely confirmed the accuracy of Custalow's oral history account. Ultimately, in 2000, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) and the Virginia Dept. of Historic Resources (VDHR) accepted the Mattaponi argument,⁽²⁸⁾ a development that may have bolstered Custalow's courage for making claims about oral tradition in later years.

The True Story of Pocahontas is exceptional among oral history accounts both for what it reveals and for what it fails to reveal. Powhatan Indians have occupied the Chesapeake Bay area for millennia. Rountree (2005) places their arrival at 200 A.D. based on archaeological evidence,⁽²⁹⁾ but other sources have occupants in the area far earlier.⁽³⁰⁾ While we cannot know exactly when the Mattaponi tribe came into being, we can assume that its presence preceded the arrival of the English by many years, if not centuries. As such, we would expect Mattaponi oral history, like other Native American oral histories, to be a separate, but roughly parallel history to Eurocentric accounts that has its own areas of emphasis, such as genealogies, mythologies, folklore, indigenous technology and perhaps accounts of extraordinary battles and leaders pre-contact, but which intersects with the Eurocentric history at critical moments post contact.

As it turns out, Dr. Custalow's record of relating Mattaponi oral

history reveals almost none of those things, with the exception of denying some written historical details over the two decades in history that correspond with Pocahontas's life. Non-Native historians have been criticized for giving the impression that Native American history began when Europeans first observed Indians during colonization, but Custalow and Daniel's account appears to support that premise.

Of course, *True Story* is meant to focus on Pocahontas, and as such it cannot be expected to offer a comprehensive look at all Mattaponi history. Yet Dr. Custalow, during his lifetime, had numerous opportunities to add to the historical record on the Mattaponi but chose not to do so. Rountree, while living on the Mattaponi reservation in the 1970s, repeatedly asked Linwood Custalow and other tribal members for unrecorded information that had been handed down, but their supply of historical stories had long been exhausted.⁽³¹⁾

When people cite the *True Story* version of events in Pocahontas's life, they invariably say that the information comes from Mattaponi sacred oral history, implying that it carries the weight of a holy book vetted by priests, chiefs and learned individuals from generations past. To accept the book as such is to grant it a level of respect it does not deserve. *True Story* is indeed the product of oral history, but of the oral history revealed by a single individual, Dr. Linwood Custalow. The "doctor" in the title, as we know, refers to his degree in Ear, Nose & Throat Medicine, not to a degree in history or anthropology. There is a co-author, Angela L. Daniel, but she is not Mattaponi (she claims to have traces of Indian ancestry, "most likely Cherokee"⁽³²⁾), and she did not grow up hearing these or any other Powhatan oral traditions, but first learned of them when she began her research and met Custalow in the late 90s. Her function in the *True Story* authorship pairing was not to transmit or corroborate Mattaponi oral history from personal memory,

but to do the hard work of writing, to lend her credibility as a doctoral student in anthropology, and to add historical information and sources where applicable. Her value to the project was that she was willing to put on paper the thoughts of Dr. Custalow and endorse them as “sacred Mattaponi oral history.”

Worth mentioning, too, is that *True Story* is at best a Mattaponi account, and not one that is shared by all Powhatan tribes or individual tribal members. There is no historical consensus that Pocahontas or her mother were Mattaponi, as stated in *True Story*, as none of the English chroniclers of Jamestown history identified them as such. Presently, the Patowomeck tribe also claims Pocahontas as their own tribal member.⁽³³⁾ For Patowomeck members who toe the tribal line, *True Story* is fantasy, though they may be sympathetic to some of the overarching themes and assumptions about English motivations present in the book. Historically, nearly every Powhatan tribe has claimed Pocahontas at one time or another.⁽³⁴⁾ Consequently, anyone who unquestioningly accepts the Mattaponi account is choosing one Powhatan tribe’s version of history over others. And one must keep in mind that of the original 30-plus known Powhatan tribes, two-thirds have vanished and can no longer make their own case for being the actual tribe of Pocahontas.

Then there’s the matter of current Pamunkey and Mattaponi tribal members who distance themselves from *True Story*. Pamunkey Chief Robert Gray, when asked by an audience member at the 2017 “Pocahontas and After” conference in London if Pocahontas had been murdered, replied that the story was not part of his tribe’s oral tradition.⁽³⁵⁾ This is significant, because Pocahontas’s connection to the Pamunkey tribe through her father, Wahunsenaca, is not in dispute, while any claim to her mother by the Mattaponi is unverifiable. Furthermore, a knowledgeable Pamunkey reservation resident and tribal member

in 2016 stated that she regards *True Story* as a “fairy tale,”⁽³⁶⁾ an off-reservation Pamunkey dismissed the book as “tourist trap stuff,”⁽³⁷⁾ and an elder on the Mattaponi reservation stated at the mere mention of *True Story* that Custalow and Daniel “just made that up off the top of their heads.”⁽³⁸⁾

None of this proves unequivocally that *True Story* is false. Much of what transpired in the years 1607-1617 went unrecorded, or the records have been lost. Countless people since—authors, playwrights, movie makers and historians among them—have speculated and attempted to fill in the gaps with conjecture, some plausible, some not. It is reasonable to assume that some Mattaponi members had opinions of their own about events from that period and that they shared their thoughts on occasion. Anthropologist Buck Woodard said, “There was a time when you could find elders from several tribes who would say, ‘I can tell you what happened back then.’ But once you get beyond 150 years of an event, the actual details become obscured.”⁽³⁹⁾

Indeed, in the four centuries since colonization, Virginians, even with maps and written records, managed to lose the actual site of the original Jamestown fort, thinking it had eroded into the James River, until it was rediscovered by archaeologists in 1997.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Nevertheless, readers of *True Story* are being asked to believe that a select line of Mattaponi Indians preserved, in a stunning feat of intergenerational commitment to a cause, the details in the life of a single individual who in their own story did not provide the John Smith rescue for which she is remembered by almost everyone else. To put this feat into perspective, 400 years from now, we will have forgotten almost all of our history, customs and language, but we may recall even mundane details in the life of say, Caroline Kennedy, diplomat and daughter of one of our esteemed historical leaders.

Ultimately, it may be impossible to prove definitively whether the claims of Custalow and Daniel have any basis in fact, or whether the authors reliably communicated the oral history of those who preceded them. However, one of the ways ethnohistorians evaluate accounts of oral history for authenticity is to take note of how the accounts change or remain the same in subsequent retellings. On this point, Linwood Custalow's account prompts doubt. In 2003, Custalow was quoted by Bobbie Whitehead in *Indian Country Today*:

“As far as Pocahontas saving [John Smith's] life, I don't have any facts on that. This was not something in our oral history,” Custalow said.⁽⁴¹⁾

Just a few years later, Custalow's “sacred Mattaponi oral history” revealed clearly in *True Story* that Pocahontas would not have been present at the ceremony and John Smith was never in danger and needed no rescue.⁽⁴²⁾ One would not think 400-year old sacred history could change so much in four years.

The reason Custalow was found contradicting himself on this point is because of his tendency to engage in what may be called “historical syncing.” As alleged by the City of Newport News earlier in this article, Custalow had a habit of incorporating as much of the written historical record into his oral history as possible, thereby creating numerous points of correspondence between his version and the historical record. The effect of this is that if most points are in agreement, then his oral history version takes on added credibility when there are gaps in the historical record, or when discrepancies between the oral history and historical accounts occur. In this case, however, he forgot that he had confessed no inside knowledge of the John Smith incident in an interview for a

Native American publication four years previous.

Numerous errors and mischaracterizations that appear in the text of *True Story* contribute further to doubts on how well the authors can relate oral history when they are unable to accurately state the historical record on points that can be easily verified with online sources. While many of these points may be considered minor, they collectively reveal the authors' casual approach to accuracy in reporting.

- On the naming of Thomas Rolfe after Sir Thomas Dale:

Custalow and Daniel attribute the choice of a given name to Dale being the actual father:

It is not known who Thomas's father was, but one likely candidate appears to be Thomas Dale. ... Assuming Rolfe was not the biological father, this would explain why he named his firstborn son by Pocahontas "Thomas" instead of "John."⁽⁴³⁾

Ignoring the unlikelihood of naming a child after his mother's alleged rapist, we know that firstborn sons in that era, like today, were not always named after their fathers. Thomas Rolfe is thought to have been named after Sir Thomas Dale as a gesture of honor. Dale was a prominent leader in the colony at the time and the person to whom John Rolfe asked permission to marry Pocahontas. A quick internet search of notable Jamestown settlers reveals that families of several of the Jamestown colonists did not follow the pattern of naming their firstborn son after the father. John Smith, for example, was the firstborn son of George Smith.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Samuel Argall had four older brothers, and it was the third son that was named after their father, Richard.⁽⁴⁵⁾ In the case of Gabriel Archer, it was his younger brother, the second son, who was

named after their father, John.⁽⁴⁶⁾

- On John Rolfe's use of the word "creature" to describe Pocahontas:

Custalow and Daniel wish to portray Rolfe as Pocahontas's murderer, so they try to cast doubt on his affection for her:

It is equally problematic to discern whether Rolfe loved Pocahontas. In Rolfe's letter to Dale requesting permission to marry Pocahontas, he referred to her as a "creature" instead of using a term to describe a female human being, such as *woman*.⁽⁴⁷⁾

In the letter, Rolfe indeed used the word "creature" twice, once to refer to Pocahontas and once to refer to himself.⁽⁴⁸⁾ The word "creature" meant "created being" in Rolfe's time. Shakespeare, a contemporary of Rolfe, scripted Romeo referring to Juliet as a creature. At Juliet's tomb, Romeo exclaims, "You horrible mouth of death! You've eaten up the dearest creature on Earth."⁽⁴⁹⁾ There was no negative implication in Rolfe's use of the word "creature."

- On John Rolfe's alleged failure to record the birth of his son, Thomas:

Custalow and Daniel strain to find evidence that John Rolfe was not the actual father of Thomas, so they make a claim that they must have known had no historical basis in fact:

Rolfe, the secretary of the colony at the time, did not record the birth of Thomas. Considering the English kept written records, it is odd that there is no record of Thomas Rolfe's birth.[6] It was Rolfe's job to do the census, yet he neglected to record the birth of his own son.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Rolfe undoubtedly kept written records of all births and deaths during his term as recorder, but as Custalow and Daniel certainly knew, many written records from the Jamestown colony were destroyed by fires or otherwise lost to time.⁽⁵¹⁾ In their footnote [6] above, they reference a separate footnote by Helen Rountree, where she wrote, “Thomas Rolfe was born sometime before his parents left for England; the precise date and place of his birth were not recorded.”⁽⁵²⁾ Rountree likely meant that the information cannot be found in any of the currently existing records, but in any case, she provided no evidence to back up a literal reading of the statement, a lapse which did not deter Custalow and Daniel from making the same unsubstantiated claim. The fact that John Rolfe named Thomas as his primary heir in his will is not mentioned in *True Story*.

- On the Sedgeford Hall Portrait:

In *True Story*, the Sedgeford Hall Portrait is said by the authors to “support our oral history,”⁽⁵³⁾ but it is much more likely that the portrait was the inspiration for Custalow and Daniel’s allegation of the Thomas Dale rape charge instead. One can easily imagine the authors seeing the portrait, which purportedly showed Pocahontas and a roughly 3-year old Thomas Rolfe, printed in various Pocahontas biographies⁽⁵⁴⁾ and wanting to reconcile the advanced age of the child with Mattaponi lore. A rape by Thomas Dale and an illegitimate pregnancy prior to the John Rolfe marriage would sync the painting, deemed by Custalow and Daniel to be a historically accurate rendering, to the “sacred oral history.” Unfortunately for them, the portrait was revealed in 2010 to not be Pocahontas and Thomas Rolfe at all, but rather Pe-o-ka, wife of Seminole Chief Osceola, and their son.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Clearly, the portrait no longer “supports” the Mattaponi oral history, yet the “sacred oral” allegations of rape and illegitimate birth live on, unsupported by any evidence

whatsoever. Furthermore, the authors stated that the woman in the portrait had “Powhatan facial features.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ Broadly speaking, anyone can see Native American heritage in the woman’s face, but to describe her as looking uniquely Powhatan was an overstatement that proved to be embarrassingly incorrect when the woman was revealed to be the wife of a Seminole chief. Not surprisingly, Angela Daniel has chosen not to include this portrait on her “Exhibition of Early Images of Pocahontas” page of the National Park Service website.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The false account in *True Story*, however, remains unchanged to this day when people purchase the book.

The details pointed out above probably matter little to the casual reader of *True Story*, but flaws in this book should appear obvious to historians. Nevertheless, this title now appears regularly in the bibliographies of every new rendering of the Pocahontas story. Why has this book garnered so much credibility?

Perhaps it’s because outright criticism of the book by historians has been lacking. More likely, though, it’s because people are hungry for Native American input on this seminal point in American history.⁽⁵⁸⁾ People who know the Pocahontas story, especially those who have read the revisionist research, are aware that too many portrayals of Pocahontas in history and popular media are far off the mark. Hollywood movies and books written for children are especially egregious in their feel-good depictions of Pocahontas happily abandoning her family and culture in favor of English men and English society. For many, portraying Pocahontas in a love affair with John Smith is an on-going myth that particularly chafes.

While many of the details in *True Story* are doubtful, the book serves to remind us that Pocahontas’s own thoughts on the story can

never be adequately presented due to her leaving no written words of her own. By relying only on the 17th century English chronicler's words, we are seeing but half of the picture. Custalow and Daniel remind us that Pocahontas's abduction is always glossed over and her ordeal minimized. She already had an Indian husband and may have had a child,⁽⁵⁹⁾ both of whom she never saw again. She was likely raised by Powhatan culture to accommodate her abductors, but that doesn't mean she was happy about it. The English say she quickly got over the trauma of being separated from her family and tribe, but how can we know? She probably had no say in the matter of making the dangerous journey to England with her infant son, so regardless of how she died, her life was cut short by the trip. Simply put, her actual story was no Disney fairy tale. And even if Pocahontas was not murdered, too many other Powhatan Indians like her certainly were.

Social anthropologist Margaret Williamson Huber wrote that the Custalow/Daniel narrative should be considered equally valid when held up against the English accounts, and "there is no basis for favoring either the written 'eyewitness' accounts or the Mattaponi sacred oral history as being the more truthful."⁽⁶⁰⁾ She explains that giving *True Story* its due provides needed balance in evaluating the Jamestown story.

In each case—the English narratives, the Mattaponi sacred oral history—the implicit message is that the writers are superior to those whom they write about. The English represent themselves as God's gift—literally—to the New World. The Mattaponi sacred oral history counters the claim by representing the native Virginians as the true custodians of the knowledge of how best to live in this land and the English as a scourge and a blot. The Mattaponi

description ... counters the consistent modern Anglo refusal to acknowledge Native Virginian contributions to the success of Jamestown and the Virginia colony ...⁽⁶¹⁾

But whereas Huber sees subjectivity, myth-making and some truth in both accounts, she over-equalizes by accepting the Custalow/Daniel version with little doubt about its essential authenticity. To Huber, Custalow and Daniel are faithful messengers of oral history passed down from the 17th Century⁽⁶²⁾ and she considers no other explanation for the sudden appearance of their account. Personally, I'm as dubious of their story as the Pamunkey Indian I've corresponded with who wrote of *True Story*:

Revisionism does not fix one-sided narratives and the extent to which one has to rely on "just trust me" is a metric for how skeptical one should be.⁽⁶³⁾

Dr. Linwood Custalow undoubtedly made many contributions to the Mattaponi and Upper Mattaponi tribes, and to Virginia Indians of various affiliations. He provided much needed medical services and fought to preserve the Mattaponi River from being drained for a municipal reservoir. The many Native American advocacy organizations he served on and founded are evidence of his dedication to Native American welfare. The fact that he was honored upon his death by the Commonwealth of Virginia⁽⁶⁴⁾ despite his medical practice having previously been indicted for Medicaid fraud speaks to the extraordinary recognition he achieved in his lifetime.

On the other hand, there are reasons to be skeptical of *True Story*. The authors played fast and loose with historical facts, the “sacred history” changed over time, and there is not universal acceptance of *True Story*’s authenticity by Powhatan Indians or people who knew Linwood Custalow. Critically, Custalow demonstrated in his company’s billing practices that taking his word for it comes with substantial risk.

The value in *True Story* is that it helps us arrive at a nuanced understanding of the Pocahontas story, one that meets in the middle. Too much of what has been written about Pocahontas has been colonizer myth, but with *True Story*, the pendulum has swung exceedingly far in the other direction. Historians who write anew about Pocahontas may choose to read *True Story* and find value in its sympathetic portrayal of Powhatan history, but they should do so with a healthy degree of skepticism, and with recognition that how Pocahontas is portrayed will always reflect the bias of the teller, as most details of Pocahontas’s life and death remain unknowable.

Post Script

I showed a pre-publication version of this article to Camilla Townsend, author of *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma* (2004). She offered, among other thoughts, the following observation:

People who know nothing about Pocahontas are still speaking for her—and in ways that diminish her story. She wasn’t poisoned. It only things were that simple. No, she was a victim of European disease, like millions of others. She would want people to know this, not to pretend that she was caught up in a murder mystery, a pawn in the hands of a single evil villain. Her problems were

deeper than that. And she handled them beautifully. Only true research combined with a multiplicity of indigenous voices reveals the complex realities she experienced and handled and deserves to be known for. ⁽⁶⁵⁾

Notes

- (1) Twain, M. (1856-57). *The Adventures of Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass*, from Horwitz, T. (2008). From *A Voyage Long and Strange*. Henry Holt and Co., N.Y. p. 72. The Twain quote as well as all examples of East Coast myth were taken from the Horwitz book.
- (2) Visit to the Mattaponi Indian Museum, West Point, VA. Aug. 5, 2016. A very faded label in the display case references a photo of a re-enactment of the John Smith rescue, so the relics in the display case most probably came from that. However, a large, very clear label next to the club states, “*The EXECUTION CLUB that John Smith was to be executed with. When Pocahontas pleaded for his life, her father Powhattan pardoned him and peace was restored between the Indians and English until 1622.*” The italics are on the actual label.
- (3) Conversation with Buck Woodard, Williamsburg, VA. Aug. 19, 2016.
- (4) Conversation with Mattaponi elder at Mattaponi Indian Museum, West Point, VA. Aug. 5, 2016.
- (5) Rountree, Helen C. Personal email communication. April 29, 2016.
- (6) Daniel, A. L. (2003). “The Spirituality of Virginia Powhatan Indians and Their Descendants: Living Spirituality” p. 23. http://www.academia.edu/2081059/The_Spirituality_of_Virginia_Powhatan_Indians_and_Their_Descendants_Living_Spirituality Note: The U. S. Senate, in Resolution 331 of 1988, has recognized the contribution of the Algonquin Federation for its influence on American institutions. <http://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/hconres_331.pdf> Custalow took issue with the lack of appreciation shown to the Powhatan Indians re. same.
- (7) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 5.

- (8) Conversation with Buck Woodard, Williamsburg, VA. Aug. 19, 2016.
- (9) Rountree, Helen C. Personal email communication. April 29, 2016.
- (10) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 106.
- (11) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 64.
- (12) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 85.
- (13) Shultis, Robert. *The Virginia Gazette*, February 28, 2007, from Fulcrum Publishing site, no longer shown online; retrieved Jan. 21, 2016.
- (14) Krol, Debra Utacia. *Native Peoples*, Sept/Oct. 2007, from Fulcrum Publishing site, no longer shown online; retrieved Jan. 21, 2016.
- (15) Fausz, J. F. (2007). *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 115, No. 4, p. 581.
- (16) National Park Service website, *Historic Jamestown*, “Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend” <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/pocahontas-her-life-and-legend.htm>; accessed Dec 26, 2016.
- (17) Dussias, A. M. 2012. Protecting Pocahontas’s World: The Mattaponi Tribe’s Struggle Against Virginia’s King William Reservoir Project, p. 16 *Am. Indian L. Rev.* 1
- (18) Firstbrook, P. 2014. *A Man Most Driven: Captain John Smith, Pocahontas and the Founding of America*. Oneworld Publications, p. 337.
- (19) Personal email communication with Helen C. Rountree (April 29, 2016), Frederic W. Gleach (June 7, 2016), Keith Egloff (June 15, 2016), J. Frederick Fausz (June 8, 2016). All confirmed they were never approached by the *True Story* authors to endorse the book.
- (20) Moretti-Langholz, D. from Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 101.
- (21) Jacoby, J. (1997). *SunSentinel*, “Not a 90’s guy, but a truly amazing one” http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/1997-10-12/news/9710100146_1_christopher-columbus-columbus-s-discovery-slavery; accessed Sept. 8, 2016.
- (22) Rountree, H. (1990). *Pocahontas’s People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia through Four Centuries*. p. 243
- (23) Forbes, J. D. (1979). *Columbus and Other Cannibals*, Seven Stories Press,

p. 45.

- (24) Gunn Allen, P. (2003). *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat*. HarperOne. pp. 298-301. Over four years before the publication of *True Story*, Gunn Allen wrote of speculation on the part of Jack Forbes that Pocahontas might have been poisoned to death, possibly by John Rolfe. No mention was made of oral tradition; rather, suspicions by Forbes (and Gunn Allen along with him) were described as coming from the circumstantial evidence surrounding Pocahontas's demise, i.e., the absence of medical records and the lack of a specific cause of death, combined with their general mistrust of the principle figures involved.
- (25) Whitehead, B. (2003). *Indian Country Today*. May 20, 2003. "Archaeologists say they've found the Powhatan capital" <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2003/05/20/archaeologists-say-theyve-found-powhatan-nation-capital-88793>; accessed April 10, 2016.
- (26) Shawgo, R. (1989). *Daily Press*, "Doctor to pay restitution" Dec. 9, 1989. http://articles.dailypress.com/1989-12-09/news/8912090005_1_medicaid-claims-overbillings-pay-restitution; accessed Feb. 13, 2016.
- (27) *The Virginian-Pilot*. (2009). "Reservoir fight ends on Peninsula" Sept. 26, 2009. http://pilotonline.com/opinion/editorial/reservoir-fight-ends-on-peninsula/article_ccc3e5be-b722-5986-b7cc-f86af653a31e.html; accessed Sept. 13, 2016.
- (28) Google cache of "Recommended Record of Decision of the District Commander On Permit Application Number 93-0902-12 Submitted by the City of Newport News on Behalf of the Regional Raw Water Study Group" March 20, 2001. p. 131 <http://nepis.epa.gov/Exe/ZyPURL.cgi?Dockey=2000CS3N.TXT>; accessed June 14, 2016.
- (29) Rountree, H. (2005). *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown*. University of Virginia Press. p. 8.
- (30) Lutz, et al. (2015). *Virginia Indians at Werowocomoco; A National Park Handbook*. Virginia Department of Historic Resources. p. 17.
- (31) Rountree, Helen C. Personal email communication. April 29, 2016.
- (32) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 128.
- (33) *Patawomeck Indian Tribe of Virginia* (2015). "History of Patawomeck Indians" <http://www.patawomeckindiantribeofvirginia.org/ct-menu-item-3>;

- accessed Feb. 11, 2016.
- (34) Conversation with Buck Woodard, Williamsburg, VA. Aug. 19, 2016.
 - (35) Chief Robert Gray, speaking at the London conference, “Pocahontas and after; historical culture and transatlantic encounters, 1617-2017”, Mar. 18, 2017.
 - (36) Conversation with a Pamunkey tribal member at the Pamunkey Museum, Aug. 5, 2016. The individual is not being identified by name so as not to impact relations between members of the Powhatan tribes.
 - (37) Pamunkey Indian. (2016). Personal correspondence on SNS with Pamunkey individual who wishes to remain anonymous.
 - (38) Conversation with a Mattaponi elder at the Mattaponi reservation, Aug. 5, 2016. The individual is not being identified by name so as not to impact relations between members of the Mattaponi tribe.
 - (39) Conversation with Buck Woodard, Williamsburg, VA. Aug. 19, 2016.
 - (40) Historic Jamestowne. (2016). “History of Jamestown Rediscovery”, <http://historicjamestowne.org/archaeology/history-of-jamestown-rediscovery/>
 - (41) Whitehead, B. (2003). *Indian Country Today*. May 20, 2003. “Archaeologists say they’ve found the Powhatan capital” <http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2003/05/20/archeologists-say-theyve-found-powhatan-nation-capital-88793>; accessed April 10, 2016.
 - (42) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 19.
 - (43) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 64.
 - (44) *Geni* (2017). “Capt. John Smith, of Jamestown” <https://www.geni.com/people/Capt-John-Smith-of-Jamestown/6000000018330881153>; last updated Feb. 20, 2017; accessed May 7, 2017.
 - (45) *Geni* (2014). “Sir Samuel Argall” <https://www.geni.com/people/Sir-Samuel-Argall/6000000002246223562>; last updated Nov. 19, 2014; accessed Sept. 10, 2016.
 - (46) *Geni* (2016). “Capt. Gabriel Archer of Jamestown” <https://www.geni.com/people/Capt-Gabriel-Archer-of-Jamestown/6000000010646933254>; last updated July 20, 2016; accessed Sept. 10, 2016.
 - (47) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 65

- (48) Rolfe, J. (1614). Letter of John Rolfe to Sir Thomas Dale, from *Virtual Jamestown*. http://www.virtualjamestown.org/rolfe_letter.html Rolfe refers to Pocahontas as creature: "... for the glory of God, for my owne salvation, and for the converting to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, an unbeleiving creature, namely Pokahuntas." Rolfe refers to himself as *creature*: "And these have happened to my greater wonder, ven when she hath bin furthest seperated from me, which in common reason (were it not an undoubted worke of God) might breede forgetfulnesse of a farre more worthie creature. Besides, I say the holy spirit of God often demaunded of me, why I was created?"
- (49) Shakespeare, W. (1595). *Romeo and Juliet*. Act 5, Scene 3, p. 3. from *SparkNotes.com*; http://nfs.sparknotes.com/romeojuliet/page_264.html
- (50) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 64
- (51) There is no comprehensive database on what Jamestown records were lost, as no one knows exactly what records existed, though reasonable assumptions can be made. Many records of the Virginia Company in England did survive. The only extant census of the Jamestown Colony was the 1624/5 Muster, compiled after the deaths of both John Rolfe and Pocahontas. <<http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Muster/introduction.html>> An account of how records from various counties were destroyed can be found at the Library of Virginia's "Lost Records Localities." <https://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/guides/rn30_lostrecords.pdf>
- (52) Rountree, H. (1990). *Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia Through Four Centuries*. p. 299.
- (53) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 70.
- (54) Many biographies of Pocahontas written prior to the re-identification of the sitters mention the Sedgeford Hall Portrait and sometimes include illustrations. Some examples are Woodward, G. (1969) *Pocahontas*; Sullivan, G. (2001) *In Their Own Words-Pocahontas*; Jones, V. (2010) *Pocahontas: A Life in Two Worlds*; and Gunn Allen, P. (2003). *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat*. Gunn Allen, who appears to have inspired *True Story*, erroneously stated (p. 294) that a portrait of Pocahontas and Thomas was painted while the two were staying at the

Rolfe estate.

- (55) PalmCoastObserver.com (2011). “Palm Coast author solves 160-year ‘Pocahontas’ mystery” <https://www.palmcoastobserver.com/article/palm-coast-author-solves-160-year-pocahontas-mystery>; March 31, 2011, retrieved Jan. 8, 2017.
- (56) Custalow, L., Daniel, A. (2007). *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing. p. 70.
- (57) Daniel, A. L. (accessed 2016). Appendix B: Exhibition of Early Images of Pocahontas. https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/jame1/moretti-langholtz/appendixb.htm
- (58) Author Peter Firstbrook, in a personal email, explained his rationale for including details from the Custalow/Daniel account in his John Smith biography, *A Man Most Driven* (2014): “In the case of Powhatan history pre-European contact, there really is nothing else to go on ...” “I decided to include at least some references from the C/D oral history, otherwise the early life of Pocahontas would have been very thin. I was also keen to include the perspective of the native people in the book—trying, for example, to see various situations from their own position. So this Pocahontas history was included as much out of respect for their version of history than anything.” (Feb. 21, 2017)
- (59) There is no written record of a child by Kocoum, however, Pocahontas was of child-bearing age in the years before her abduction.
- (60) Williamson Huber, M. (2013). “Pocahontas and Rebecca: Two Tales of a Captive” *The Art of Anthropology/The Anthropology of Art*. Brandon D. Lundy, ed. Pp. 75-102. Southern Anthropology Society Proceedings, 42. Knoxville: Newfound Press. <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.389.4379&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
- (61) Williamson Huber, M. (2013). “Pocahontas and Rebecca: Two Tales of a Captive” *The Art of Anthropology/The Anthropology of Art*. Brandon D. Lundy, ed. Southern Anthropology Society Proceedings, 42. Knoxville: Newfound Press. p. 93.
- (62) Williamson Huber, M. (2013). “Pocahontas and Rebecca: Two Tales of a Captive” *The Art of Anthropology/The Anthropology of Art*. Brandon D. Lundy, ed. Southern Anthropology Society Proceedings, 42. Knoxville: Newfound Press. p. 83.

- (63) Pamunkey Indian. (2016). Personal correspondence on SNS with Pamunkey individual who wishes to remain anonymous.
- (64) 2015 Session, House Resolution no. 206 Jan. 19, 2015 Celebrating the life of Linwood Custalow, M.D. <https://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?151+ful+HR206+pdf>; accessed Jan. 24, 2018.
- (65) Townsend, Camilla. Personal email communication. March 28, 2017.