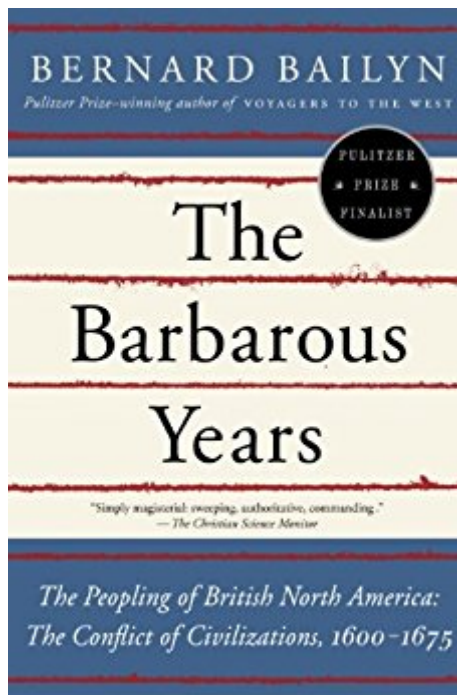


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The Barbarous Years: The Peopling Of British North America: The Conflict Of Civilizations, 1600-1675



Synopsis

Finalist for the Pulitzer PrizeA 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 encounter "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

I'd give this a five star rating, except that I can't honestly say I loved the book. But I sure learned a lot from reading it, and learning is one of the joys of my life now. I have ancestors from this time period in most of the original 13 colonies, but I've not read a book that pulled the time period together so well before. Now I understand more about why the Indian uprisings in one colony did or did not spread to others. I think I have a better grasp of how my ancestors probably lived, and I have great admiration for them. This is probably a book anyone with an interest in the first 50-60 years of the British colonies in North America should read. It won't be painful, I promise!

"The Barbarous Years " is a book any serious historian probably should have on his or her shelf. However, I am wondering if Bernard Bailyn actually wrote this book or if he merely approved the work of a graduate assistant, allowing his own name be put on the cover. There are some astounding errors in this book. For example, on page 308 Bailyn talks about Jacob Alrichs, who "settled in Fort Christina, now renamed Altona..." This is wrong information. Fort Christina/Altona was the Swedish colony taken over by the Dutch West India Company. Alrichs was never its director. The text should read, "Jacob Alrichs settled in Fort Casimir, now renamed New Amstel." New Amstel was the City of Amsterdam's Colony and Jacob Alrich was its head. Sentences that sound like transcriptions of taped lectures don't help: "In addition he had fined one Anders the Finn a parcel of rye and other essential goods, the lack of which would probably result in the man's death from starvation and that of his wife and children." Although I am not in love with this book, it offers some interesting insights into seventeenth century North American history. Definitely not Bailyn's best book. Kim Burdick Stanton, Delaware

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.

I read books like *The Barbarous Years* to learn something. I guess you could say there is some entertainment for me, since I chose to read the book. It was a difficult read. I had to drag out the dictionary a few times. I was not familiar with some of the people and religious groups he talks about. So, I had to do a few aside learning. Bailyn does a good job of interweaving the various threads into the theme. He discusses the different cultures, religions, and characters that are the history of the 75 year time period. He touches on the Native Americans without going into a lot of detail, just enough to show how they influenced the colonies. He even tells us why he used barbarous in the title.

This goes into much more detail than Fischer's *Albion's Seed*, which had been one of my favorites. Also paints a far less flattering picture of the early leaders and settlers - not the noble people one learns about in school but a rather scurvy lot. The Pilgrims, for example, were far outnumbered by adventurers, unfortunates, and random outcasts of society. The settlements of Virginia and Maryland seemed to have been not much more than an ongoing internecine fight. I was not even aware of the Scandinavian settlements along the Delaware, or their eventual takeover by the Dutch

- before the Dutch were taken over by the English. The discussion of the whole phenomenon of the Puritan movement, both in England and in the New World, is superb.

Very thorough description of the peopling of North America. Well documented. Has given me much to look into with my genealogical work.

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