Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom

Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation

Rhys Isaac
Landon Carter’s Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation, Rhys Isaac, Oxford University Press, 2004, 0199884986, 9780199884988, 448 pages. Landon Carter, a Virginia planter, left behind one of the most revealing of all American diaries. In this astonishingly rich biography, Isaac mines this remarkable document--and many other sources--to reconstruct Carter's interior world as it plunged into revolution. The aging patriarch, though a fierce supporter of American liberty, was deeply troubled by the rebellion and its threat to established order. His diary, originally a record of plantation business, began to fill with angry stories of revolt in his own little kingdom. Carter writes at white heat, his words sputtering from his pen as he documents the terrible rupture that the Revolution meant to him. Indeed, Carter felt in his heart that he was chronicling a world in decline, the passing of the order that his revered father had bequeathed to him. Not only had Landon's king betrayed his subjects, but Landon's own household betrayed him: his son showed insolent defiance, his daughter Judith eloped with a forbidden suitor, all of his slaves conspired constantly, and eight of them made an armed exodus to freedom. The seismic upheaval he helped to start had crumbled the foundations of Carter's own home. In Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom Rhys Isaac unfolds not only the life, but also the mental world of our countrymen in a long-distant time. Moreover, in this presentation of Landon Carter's passionate narratives, the diarist becomes an arresting new character in the world's literature, a figure of Shakespearean proportions, the Lear of his own tragic kingdom. This long-awaited work will be seen both as a major contribution to Revolution history and a triumph of the art of biography.

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Diversity as ethos challenges for interreligious and intercultural education, David Chidester, Janet Stonier, Judy Tobler, Jan 1, 1999, Education, 198 pages.


Spectacular Happiness A Novel, Peter D. Kramer, Jun 6, 2002, Fiction, 320 pages. Chip Samuels, a junior college English teacher and part-time handyman, becomes the prime suspect in a series of bombings of bayfront trophy homes on Cape Cod and finds himself.


Ruffin family and reform in the Old South, David F. Allmendinger, 1990, History, 274 pages. This is a fascinating combination of intellectual and social history focusing on the life and thought of Edmund Ruffin, a 19th-century reformer whose activities in the movement.


John Adams: A Life, John Ferling, Jan 9, 2010, Political Science, 544 pages. John Ferling has nearly forty years of experience as a historian of early America. The author of acclaimed histories such as A Leap into the Dark and Almost a Miracle, he has.
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Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Isaac (The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790) offers an eloquent and unique look at the beginnings and consequences of the American Revolution as seen through the eyes of early America's finest diarist, Landon Carter. Carter, who owned the magnificent Sabine Hall plantation in Virginia, recorded his daily life from 1752 until just before his death in 1778. Originally used to record "plantation procedures," as Isaac points out, the diary soon grew from a collection of proverbs about when to plant to a journal of Carter's attempt to understand the meaning of the coming revolution for himself and his family. A supporter of the British, Carter nonetheless sided with the growing American quest for liberty. He thought of himself much like a king whose authority extended over the realm of his plantation. As the larger revolution approaches, Carter experiences smaller revolutions and rebellions on his own plantation: his son defies him by
marrying against Carter's wishes, and eight of his slaves rise up in an armed rebellion. Angry that his authority is being challenged on all sides, Carter also exhibits perplexity at the changing world around him. Isaac weaves entries from Carter's diary with a splendid biographical narrative to provide a profound and intimate glimpse into one portion of early America.

"In Isaac's hands the story of the Revolution in a small corner of Virginia breaks into multiple competing narratives that reveal the rich interplay between the local and the Atlantic, between the personal and the political, and, above all, between lost stories told by subalterns and the recorded stories of a patriarch-master."--James Sidbury, The Journal of Southern History

The star of the show in this case is Carter himself rather than the author. Dr. Isaac does a wonderful job of framing and interpreting Carter's diary to make a coherent analysis of the profound social changes which occurred during the Revolutionary period. Carter was a first hand witness to the transformation of the American society from a rigid colonial society based on patronage to a participatory, republican society in which people made lives for themselves. The transformation is nothing less than a journey of existential self-discovery for Carter, which is something ANY person can appreciate. So this book is not just a biography of a member of the Virginia planter aristocracy, but a reflection of the undermining of the feudal, patriarchal social structure Americans largely rejected during the Revolution. And it illustrates that the highly dualistic interpretation of Americans of the period as either "patriot" or "loyalist" is largely a modern historical construct with little basis in truth. Marvelous work by one of the foremost historians of American colonial history.

Mr. Isaac's book is an excellent idea and almost perfectly executed. Far from being a "psycho-babble" book, Mr. Isaac explores in a powerful fashion the life of a man in such a way that we very much get to know him. Carter is a man who we have all met, known, or even lived with at one time or another.

By editing and contextualizing the voluminous diary of Landon Carter, Rhys Isaac has made a significant contribution to the social history of early Virginia and colonial America. By placing excerpts from Carter's diary within a larger framework of colonial society, readers can gain a more thorough understanding of the changing mores of mid 17th century Virginia. Carter emerges as a flesh and blood person throughout the book, though rarely sympathetic when seen through the eyes of 21st century readers. Of particular impact were Carter's regularly inhumane interactions with slaves and increasing inability to reconcile relationships with his own children. At times the book is abstract and academic in style, yet the end results are more than justified for anyone with an interest in knowing more about our "peculiar institution" and the origins of American society and culture.

The focus of the book is the conflicting world views of the patriarch, Landon Carter (whose plantation is in the Williamsburg area), his slaves, and his son. The book illuminates the cognitive disconnects and churning dissatisfactions that plagued Carter, his heirs, and their plantation slaves because of rigid social separation, institutionalized deceit, and the dissolution of personal and power relationships at the coming of the American Revolution.

I generally dislike social histories -- however necessary they may be -- if only because they seem always to be selective, poorly documented, and subject to easy contradiction. This one -- perhaps because it is so concentrated on the microcosm of one Virginia family -- manages to come across as solid, scholarly, believable, and a pretty good story to boot.

African American already April April 26 British burgess called Captain Carter Burwell chapter Colonel colonial Colonial Williamsburg Foundation coni→ic continued court daughter death declared dei→ance diarist English enslaved father i→eld i→erce i→gure i→nd i→ne i→rst French Gentleman George George Grenville Giberne governor Hill House of Burgesses ini→uence johnny king kingâ€™s knew Landon Carter Landon wrote Landonâ€™s diary later liberty lived Lord Manuel March master Moses narrative Nassaw never night noted old Landon overseer Parliament patriarchal perhaps persons plantation planter plants political quarter Rappahannock River rebellion record rei→ction Reuben Beale Revolution Richard Henry Lee Richmond County Robert Carter Robert Wormeley Carter runaways Sabine Hall scientiï¬→c seems Sept slaves sonâ€™s
Rhys Isaac and David Waldstreicher reconstruct the stories of two men who experienced the American Revolution toward the end of long lives. One—Benjamin Franklin—signed the U.S. Constitution to cap an illustrious career as scientist and diplomat. The other—Landon Carter—was a wealthy slaveowner in Virginia and might like Franklin have become a so-called Founding Father had he not died in 1778. Of the same generation, although from starkly different social origins, Carter and Franklin shared a similar set of hesitations when confronted by the turbulence of the American Revolution. As historians, Isaac and Waldstreicher do not share the same generation, and their interpretations of the American Revolution are dramatically divergent. Yet their microhistories are fruitful to juxtapose because they are so similar in subject and method, and because together they beg major questions about the meaning of the American Revolution.

Isaac sees the American Revolution as "the first comprehensive promise to mankind of freedom and equality in this world. " "It accomplished the symbolic pulling down of patriarchal monarchy as the keystone of the cosmic arch of public and private authority" (p. xi). Isaac depicts this transformation through the eyes of a Virginia planter who would remain invested in patriarchy even as he grudgingly turned his back on monarchy. Landon Carter would see his whole world turn upside down, when he wanted only half of it to do so. Imagining himself to be a firm moderate in public and private life, Carter came to embrace political revolution in Virginia even as household rebellions by his children and his slaves brought him copious headache and heartache.

Isaac is at the height of his powers in conjuring the poignancy of Carter's situation as it was swept up into escalating political tensions and household strains in the 1760s and 1770s. His great fortune is that Carter left behind a diary marvelous in quantity and quality; it is both extensive and expressive, and it is the vivid centerpiece of Isaac's microhistory. Among Early Americanists Laurel Thatcher Ulrich launched the trend of microhistory in 1990, in her case in the classic social history mode of reconstructing subaltern experience. There is nothing remotely subaltern about Landon Carter, owner of thousands of acres and hundreds of slaves, and Isaac is more interested in reconstructing outlook than experience. To capture that outlook, however, Isaac also reconstructs Carter's social environment, especially the lives of his adult children and his slaves, with a richness and deftness quite worthy the attention of social historians.

In the 1760s and 1770s Landon Carter struggled with children who moved away and children who stayed home, and with slaves who ran away and slaves who stayed on the plantation. Isaac painstakingly draws out the vicissitudes of all these struggles over the years of the diary, and yet he reconstructs considerably more than that: a typical year in the working life of a plantation, the contents of Carter's vast library, the practice of plantation medicine, the administration of colonial government—indeed, every dimension of Carter's world. Isaac does this in masterly fashion over the course of the book, alternately thickening the context around Carter and narrating the passage of time as the tensions and strains built up and then exploded with the outbreak of the American Revolution.

This yields a page-turning account, replete with father-son disputes, master-slave conflicts, imperial war, and colonial resistance. Isaac accomplishes one main agenda, to lend contingency to the American Revolution—to render it a history of uncertainty and anxiety. In politics, Landon Carter tried to find a middle path between obsequious loyalism and radical resistance. At home, he pursued the same instinct, softening his patriarchal authority with dollops of sensibility. Ultimately, however, Isaac must recount the story of an elderly patriarch whom the world was passing by, alienated from his headstrong children, irritated by his defiant...
The aging patriarch, though a fierce supporter of American liberty, was deeply troubled by the revolution. More Landon Carter, a Virginia planter, left behind one of the most revealing of all American diaries. In this astonishingly rich biography, Isaac mines this remarkable document—and many other sources—to reconstruct Carter’s interior world as it plunged into revolution.

This work focuses on Landon Carter (1710-1778). The author is interested in showing us how this man thought. Because he was one of the wealthiest men in Virginia, how he thought is very important. Having considered himself a patriotic citizen of the British empire for 50 years, having studied in London, having lived the privileged life available only to men who could surround themselves with hundreds of slaves, how did he justify in his own mind the rebellion against the King? And how did he deal with the daily rebellions by his slaves on his many estates and by family members in his own home?

Based on diary notations, this work focuses on the mental struggle of Landon Carter to understand the changes he is living through. As a Burgess, he was one of the first Virginians to remonstrate with Parliament over the unconstitutional imposition of the Stamp Act. He sided with the patriots between 1773 and 1776, though he did not agree with Thomas Payne or Patrick Henry. Instead, he hoped Virginia’s constitutional rights would be restored. When Lord Dunmore announced the emancipation of slaves and eight of his Africans joined the British, Landon Carter accepted the American independence movement.

This work covers other aspects of Carter’s mind, too. He considered himself trained in medicine and dispensed medical advice and recommended treatments continually. There is a fascinating chapter that explains Carter’s understanding of how the human body works, using constructs devised by Hypocrates and Galen and only slightly amended by Harvey’s discovery of the circulatory system. While his political views evolved somewhat, his medical understanding advanced but little.

The diaries primarily show us the Landon Carter who struggled to manage every aspect of his tobacco and corn-based estate economy. He also attempted to control all of his slaves and each of his dependents. In this arena, Landon plays the role of George III. His children and grandchildren disobey, disrespect and disregard him. His relations with his eldest son and daughter-in-law, who live with him in Sabine Hall in expectation of his demise, are especially difficult. His political world and the domestic world seem to be falling apart simultaneously. What did he think about these changes?

The Father/King figure was an important construct that explained and justified the way things worked in the political realm (the King), in religion (God), in the family (the father), and on the manor (the all-knowing patriarch). During Landon’s lifetime, many came to question this simplistic arrangement. Americans rebelled against the King and his ministers; the Enlightenment undermined traditional religious teaching, and Landon’s own family and slaves disobeyed and disrespected him.

Rhys Isaac helps us understand the painful mental transformation through which thoughtful eighteenth-century gentlemen had to go. Landon Carter had the intelligence to see the changes and to think in new ways, but he could not force himself to change fast enough. By studying Landon Carter, we are reminded how strangely different the world was before 1776 and how difficult it must have been to give up old patterns of thought.

In 1963 he emigrated to Australia, where he taught at the University of Melbourne and later at La Trobe University (1971-91). He also was Emeritus Professor of American History at La Trobe University, and a Distinguished Visiting Professor of Early American History at the College of William & Mary, in Williamsburg, Virginia.
In 1983, Rhys Isaac won the Pulitzer Prize for History for his book The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790. He remains the only Australian historian ever to win a Pulitzer Prize. 2005 saw the publication of Isaac's Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom: Revolution and Rebellion on a Virginia Plantation, which made use of the exemplary diary of a Virginian landholder and member of the House of Burgesses.

Paving-stone-sized, hardbound books devoted to particular founding fathers of the American republic have inexhaustibly flooded bookstores over the last two years. Rhys Isaac's Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom is the joker in the pack. We call them "founding fathers," yet we don't think about the fatherly ways in which they worried about their own parenting skills and the future of both their actual and metaphorical offspring. They could be, and often were, very proud of their national fatherhood, but they often were apprehensive when contemplating their offspring's future. As Isaac beautifully reveals, no one expressed this uneasy mixture of pride and worry as well as Landon Carter of Virginia.

It is a measure of Isaac's achievement that after you read Landon Carter's Uneasy Kingdom you wonder why you have never before heard of the old gentleman. Jack Greene published a meticulous edition of his diaries in the 1960s and wrote a slim biography of Carter as its introduction. Yet neither Greene nor all of us who have pored through the green-bound volumes have taken Landon seriously as a person. We instead troll his diary for social customs, cultural ideas, and anecdotes of his unbounded rage to fill our dissertations.

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