Book Reviews

_The Dividing Line Histories of William Byrd II of Westover_ • Edited by Kevin Joel Berland • Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013 • xviii, 508 pp. • $59.95

Reviewed by Philip Levy, associate professor of history at the University of South Florida. He is the author of _Where the Cherry Tree Grew: The Story of Ferry Farm, George Washington’s Boyhood Home_ (2013).

Samuel Johnson once told James Boswell that “the greatest part of a writer’s time is spent in reading,” for, in order to write at all, “a man must turn over half a library to make one book.” Kevin Joel Berland uses this quotation to help us see William Byrd II’s much reprinted and excerpted _History of the Dividing Line_ in a wholly new light. He urges readers to look again at the well-known manuscript and see a complicated, nuanced, and ambitious work of eighteenth-century English literature, reflecting Byrd’s lifetime of reading and emerging from a more complicated authorial process than we have tended to believe.

Byrd’s single (albeit bifurcated) literary effort has long held a berth in the canon of early Virginia writing, alongside works like _The Voyages of John Smith_, John Lederer’s _Discoveries_, Robert Beverley’s _History and Present State of Virginia_, and Thomas Jefferson’s _Notes on the State of Virginia_. Like its fellows, Byrd’s rich and detailed narratives of the 1728 surveying expedition to mark once and for all the border between Virginia and North Carolina have long been loved for being an invaluable source for historians, a unique entrée into the minds of colonists, and, at the same time, simply a cracking good read. Readers have been largely spoiled for choice when it comes to editions of Byrd’s book(s), so it is fair game to ask why we need a new one.

Berland has good answers for that. One is found in his 141 pages of detailed notes that constitute the most thorough discussion and explanation of the people, places, and events of the trip yet compiled. The research therein includes a wealth of biographical information about Byrd and his fellow travelers as well as great material ranging from colonial politics to weather patterns. In addition to this valuable and engaging contextualization, Berland also carefully outlines important differences between the various surviving manuscript editions of the texts—most notably those
held by the American Philosophical Society and the Westover Manuscript at the Virginia Historical Society, the one to which Berland gives special deference.

In this textual comparison resides Berland’s most profound contribution. By treating the various manuscripts with a thoroughness they have long eluded and bringing to them the same sort of able eye he already applied to Byrd’s Commonplace Book, Berland is able to offer new interpretations of the actual creation of the texts. Those familiar with the older editions (most commonly, these days, the Dover edition) will know the long-held assumption that the sequence of Byrd’s two versions of the story represents a process of refinement—with the shorter, rather cruder (in all senses of the word) so-called “Secret History,” representing a raw preliminary text—before the completion, years later, of the fuller, more polished version. Berland argues, though, that this vision rests on “an untested theory of the civilizing process of composition” (p. 46). Instead, Berland sees Byrd as composing his text differently for different audiences. He argues also that readers are wrong to continue understanding the texts as dating close to the time of Byrd’s travel. Byrd’s use of “dated-entry chronicles” represents more a literary edifice than entries in an actual field book (p. 47). Lastly, Berland argues that the idea that Byrd’s decorum prevented the publishing of The Histories is largely a contrivance concocted by later editors, who were themselves somewhat uncomfortable with some of the content.

By treating these enduringly important Virginia texts as serious works of literature, Berland has not only offered the finest and most detailed contextualization of Byrd’s travels and their narratives, but he has also helped recover their author as a complicated man of letters.

**The Chesapeake House: Architectural Investigations by Colonial Williamsburg** • Edited by Cary Carson and Carl R. Lounsbury • Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press in association with the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2013 • xiv, 472 pp. • $60.00


The product of decades of research by the historians, archaeologists, curators, and conservators of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CWF), *The Chesapeake House* brings together the knowledge they have gained about the “dwellings and dwellers” of the Chesapeake from the beginning of English settlement at Jamestown