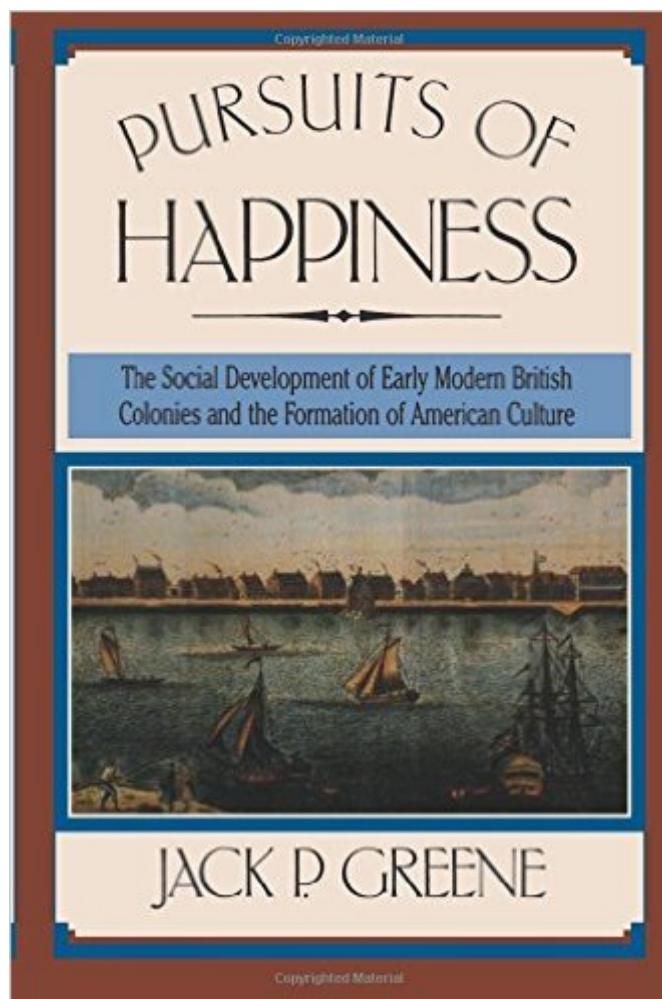


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Pursuits Of Happiness: The Social Development Of Early Modern British Colonies And The Formation Of American Culture



Synopsis

In this book, Jack Greene reinterprets the meaning of American social development. Synthesizing literature of the previous two decades on the process of social development and the formation of American culture, he challenges the central assumptions that have traditionally been used to analyze colonial British American history. Greene argues that the New England declension model traditionally employed by historians is inappropriate for describing social change in all the other early modern British colonies. The settler societies established in Ireland, the Atlantic island colonies of Bermuda and the Bahamas, the West Indies, the Middle Colonies, and the Lower South followed instead a pattern first exhibited in America in the Chesapeake. That pattern involved a process in which these new societies slowly developed into more elaborate cultural entities, each of which had its own distinctive features. Greene also stresses the social and cultural convergence between New England and the other regions of colonial British America after 1710 and argues that by the eve of the American Revolution Britain's North American colonies were both more alike and more like the parent society than ever before. He contends as well that the salient features of an emerging American culture during these years are to be found not primarily in New England puritanism but in widely manifest configurations of sociocultural behavior exhibited throughout British North America, including New England, and he emphasized the centrality of slavery to that culture.

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Customer Reviews

Greene is on a mission to show that the South (especially the Chesapeake) represents the

"normative" model of American development-not the New England model. To do so, he decries the standard "declension" model, based on the history of Puritan New England, and produces a "developmental" model that he proves was normative for all British New World colonies--here New England represents the exception, not the rule. He seeks to analyze three points. First, to analyze the assumptions that have emphasized the preeminence or normative character of the Orthodox Puritan colonies of New England in the early modern social development and formation of American culture. Second, to evaluate and compare among the experiences of other societies in the early modern British Empire and to formulate a model of colonial social development that made be more broadly applicable than the heretofore used declension model of British colonial history. Finally, to delineate the process by which the general American culture began to emerge out of several regional cultures during the century after 1660 and identifying the most important elements in that emerging culture. Colonial historians have used the declension model to explain the early experiences of the Orthodox European colonies of Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut. Greene proposes a developmental model which looks at historical change in new societies as a movement from the simple to the complex. The Chesapeake, being the oldest settle the region, experienced this model first and the others followed - except the New England region, which was atypical from all other British colonies. Green does not discuss Native Americans, and only superficially covers slaves.

In erudite and responsible fashion, Greene establishes his thesis by first laying out the nature of the Chesapeake and New England colonies. Virginia, he states, was the result of profit-driven members of The Virginia Company, and therefore a commercial colony from the beginning. It furthermore was an individualist colony and only accepted the idea of a community after realizing it otherwise would not succeed. By contrast, New England was a religious colony wholly devoted to the community, where not until later was any individualism expressed. Having laid that foundation, he then proceeds to criticize the declension model of New England and to propose a developmental model for the Chesapeake. His criticism of the declension model rests principally in that it assumes a deterioration of New England culture and quality of life. As such, it cannot properly address the demographic and economic changes occurring in those colonies beginning around 1660. Having thus assessed the validity of the declension model, he then proposes his own developmental model for the Chesapeake region. That model states, in essence, that permanent civilization grew out of temporary colonies by virtue of the change from strictly individual, go-it-alone pursuits to the much more practical individual-within-a-greater-community approach. That latter phenomenon, he

demonstrates, is a reflection of life and the socioeconomic situation in Great Britain itself, thereby proving that not only does the declension model fail to hold for the Chesapeake colonies, it was never representative of the Old World either.

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