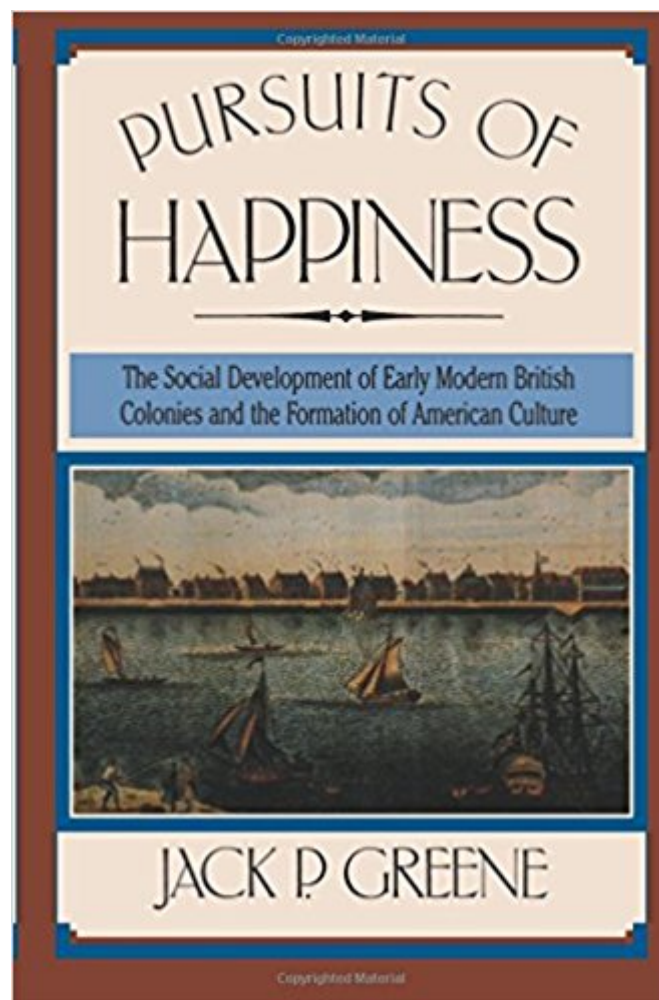




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Pursuits Of Happiness: The Social Development Of Early Modern British Colonies And The Formation Of American Culture



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

The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture. This book provides a compelling synthesis of a veritable mountain of scholarship and, in its detailed annotation the best guide available to recent work on the social and economic history of early modern Britain's Atlantic world.

Jack P. Greene is author of *Peripheries and Center* and *Quest for Power*.

Despite what you may have learned in school about Plymouth Rock, the Mayflower and the Pilgrims, the institutions and culture that have, more than likely, shaped your life as an "American" came by way of Jamestown or Philadelphia. Don't mistake this book for a narrative history of the British North American colonies. This is a finely tuned study of the cultural pathways the people of British North America followed on the journey from immature colony to young nation. The author uses a creative physical metaphor of centrifugal force to convincingly argue that typical American culture, at least as it developed in the United States, originated in the relatively moderate colonial societies of the Chesapeake. The author asserts that New England society was cloistered - constantly turning in upon itself as to limit its geographical reach. On the other end of the spectrum were the exceptionally "centrifugal" societies of the Southern and Caribbean colonies. These societies spread very quickly, but remained highly transient. They left few permanent markers or institutional foundations as they tore themselves apart, uprooted and moved, usually in search of additional natural resources. The middle colonies (Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, in particular) maintained a society that was stable without being sedentary, and dynamic without being nomadic. It is this society that created the first permanent inland settlements. Dr. Greene claims that it is this moderate, practical society that came to dominate the culture of the United States, and defined the "American Dream." Even if you don't agree with the thesis, you will appreciate Dr. Greene's thorough research and lucid presentation. This book brought new vigor to the study of American colonial history by challenging the existing dichotomy of North vs. South.

A vital source for any interest into colonial America, but should be read in context with accounts of early New Netherlands and Canada

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. However, he admits to pursuing his argument with three assumptions: 1) the focus of the book is upon social development and religious, political, and economic developments are considered only as far as their social dimensions are concerned; 2) focus is upon European and African immigrants and their descendants - excludes Native Americans; and 3) attempts to avoid the "idol of origins" which assumes how an area appeared later in time was equivalent to how it began (concerns the subject specially of slavery in the South). An excellent book for any student of American history, it is well written and thoroughly researched. It discusses the major historians and arguments concerning colonial American history.

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