

VIRGINIÆ



# PATRIARCHY IN PERIL



*William Byrd II and Slavery in Early Virginia*

DENNIS TODD



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*Talk not about kind and Christian masters.*

*They are not masters of the system.*

*The system is master of them.*

—James W. C. Pennington

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Dennis Todd



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*To Barbara*



# CONTENTS

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Preface

ix

List of Abbreviations

xiii

Chapter One.

Here at the End of the World

i

Chapter Two.

Carrying the Machine Forward:

William Byrd and His Slaves

35

Chapter Three.

Our Fellow Creatures:

William Byrd and Slavery

79

Chapter Four.

In the Bear Latitudes

iii

Notes

135

Works Cited

169

Index

187



## P R E F A C E

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The focus of this study is William Byrd II and patriarchy. When we speak of patriarchy in our own time, we usually are referring to men's domination over women, often a husband's domination over his wife and children, and when historians want to point to the prominence of patriarchal thought in colonial Virginia, they typically turn to Byrd, whose "overriding concern for order and clear lines of authority and obedience within the household" make him a perfect example of a "domineering patriarch."<sup>1</sup> When his first wife, Lucy, was going to travel with him to Williamsburg and wanted to indulge in the new fashion of plucking her eyebrows, Byrd put his foot down. "My wife and I quarreled about pulling her brows," he recalled. "She threatened she would not go to Williamsburg if she might not pull them; I refused, however, and got the better of her, and maintained my authority" (*SD*, 296).

A number of insightful studies have been written about Byrd's domineering over his wife and children,<sup>2</sup> and though I occasionally touch on his relationships with members of his immediate family, my interest is elsewhere. For patriarchalism was a way of thinking so pervasive that it shaped "virtually all social relationships" and infiltrated "all strata of thought, from well-ordered and self-conscious theories . . . to the unstated prejudices of the inarticulate masses."<sup>3</sup> In Byrd's time, patriarchal authority was thought to extend well beyond a man's dominance over his wife and children to include people, such as servants, apprentices, or employees, who were not of his immediate family but who were nevertheless dependent on him. These are the patriarchal relations I focus on: the relations between Byrd and the workers on his plantations—his apprentices, his wageworkers, his overseers, and his White servants. And most especially his slaves, who constituted the bulk of his workforce. In 1718, he calculated that he owned "about 43000 acres of land and 220 Negroes at work upon it" (*Corr*, 1:321). It is not known how many slaves Byrd owned when he died in 1744, but since he had more than quadrupled his landholdings to 180,000 acres, he obviously owned substantially more than he had twenty-five years earlier.

In spite of the fact that Byrd was one of the largest slave owners in early eighteenth-century Virginia, little has been written on how he dealt with his

slaves or how he felt about slavery itself. This is not surprising. Our main source for information is his diary, which covers more than 1,300 pages. Yet where one would hope to find a detailed account of his day-to-day management of his plantations, a meticulous record of his interactions with his slaves, and a revelation of his inner feelings as a slave owner, the diary has almost uniformly disappointed readers. It seems little more than “a cold and bloodless account of the bare facts of his daily routine[,] . . . entirely lacking in . . . self-revelation,” and even as a record of the bare facts of his daily routine it is disappointing, its “many pages” yielding up but “scanty information.”<sup>4</sup> Still, even though it is impossible to reconstruct Byrd’s interaction with his slaves with all the particularity and texture we would wish, the diary does allow us to piece together some sense of how he attempted to manage them.

As valuable as it is to recover as many of the details of Byrd’s dealings with his slaves as we can, I make no claim that Byrd’s approach to managing his slaves was representative of the way other large plantation owners of his generation managed theirs. The records of other slave owners of this period are too scarce or too scanty, and slavery as an institution was too new for practices and procedures governing the treatment of slaves to have been codified for us to make any generalization. The real value of paying attention to how Byrd oversaw his slaves lies elsewhere.

Byrd managed his slaves—or, to be more accurate, thought he *ought* to manage them—on the basis of patriarchal principles. Perhaps because we tend to think that the “dominant watchwords” of patriarchy are “authority, rigid control, adjudication, unswerving obedience, and severe discipline,”<sup>5</sup> and because during Byrd’s lifetime slaves in Virginia were driven hard, subjected to coercion and terror, and beaten and whipped frequently and violently,<sup>6</sup> it has seemed natural to assume that patriarchal principles underwrote such draconian treatment. But, in point of fact, these precepts encompassed much more than the simple demand for obedience, and Byrd’s understanding of them, as his belletristic writings, his commonplace book, his letters, and especially his *Secret History of the Line* reveal, was much more nuanced and wide-ranging and his behavior much more flexible. Patriarchy did insist that subordinates obey their masters, but it required masters to assume reciprocal obligations as well. A man like Byrd, who prized being a good patriarch, was expected to govern his subordinates in ways that were not rigid, severe, or despotic.

Byrd habitually thought of his slaves as members of his “family.” Not only did he expect much the same deportment and performance from them as he demanded from his White dependents, but he also assumed he should be able to govern slaves according to the same patriarchal rules he governed the rest of his

family by. Of course, he could not do so. Slavery and patriarchy were fundamentally incompatible. Slavery was a coercive system of labor, not a voluntary one, and this fact alone made a mockery of any thoughtful notion of reciprocal duties and obligations at the core of patriarchy. And the brutal realities of enslaved life, far from being underwritten by patriarchal principles, led Byrd to act in ways that directly contradicted the behavior of a true patriarch. By its very nature, slavery undermined the ideal of a patriarch as a Christian and a good-natured man and sabotaged the central tenets a patriarch was supposed to govern his subordinates by—self-restraint, kindness, and fair treatment.

Byrd was never able to bridge the gap between the ideals of patriarchy and the realities of slavery. In his day-to-day management of his plantation, he resorted more often than not to beatings and whippings, and his violence and anger struck at the heart of the patriarchal identity he so deeply cherished. As a result, his feelings about slavery and his own management practices were fraught with ambivalences, inconsistencies, vacillations, and contradictions he could never resolve.

Just as Byrd's management of his slaves was probably not representative of the methods of other large plantation owners, his commitment to patriarchal principles was not entirely typical either. Byrd's devotion to patriarchal ideals was much more deep-rooted and intense than that of most of his fellow Virginians, and it is precisely for this reason that an examination of the conflict between his veneration of patriarchy and his management of his enslaved workforce is so valuable, for it highlights in detail the contradictions between slavery and patriarchal values and shows how slavery put these standards of patriarchy under considerable stress.

In Byrd's lifetime, patriarchy was an ideology, a code of conduct, and an essential constituent of any number of social and personal identities. And in spite of all the stresses and contradictions slavery subjected it to, patriarchy did not disappear after Byrd died. Its core values were handed down to succeeding generations, transformed into an ideology we have come to call paternalism. In order to preserve the sense of an organic social hierarchy and reciprocal duties and responsibilities that was central to patriarchy, paternalism sought to resolve those very stresses and contradictions that so bedeviled Byrd. It was able to do so, but only by fantasizing slavery as a voluntary system of labor.

\* \* \*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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- ASD William Byrd II, *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1739–1741, with Letters and Literary Exercises, 1696–1726*, ed. Maude H. Woodfin (Richmond, VA: Dietz, 1942).
- CB William Byrd II, *The Commonplace Book of William Byrd II of Westover*, ed. Kevin Berland, Jan Kirsten Gilliam, Kenneth A. Lockridge (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
- Corr Marion Tinling, ed., *The Correspondence of the Three William Byrds of Westover, Virginia, 1684–1776*, 2 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977).
- HDL William Byrd II, *The History of the Dividing Line*, in *The Dividing Line Histories of William Byrd II of Westover*, ed. Kevin Joel Berland (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 65–341.
- JLE William Byrd II, *A Journey to the Land of Eden*, in *The Prose Works of William Byrd of Westover*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 381–415.
- LD William Byrd II, *The London Diary (1717–1721) and Other Writings*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).
- LWB Kevin J. Hayes, *The Library of William Byrd of Westover* (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1997).
- PM William Byrd II, *A Progress to the Mines*, in *The Prose Works of William Byrd of Westover*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 339–78.
- SD William Byrd II, *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709–1712*, ed. Louis B. Wright and Marion Tinling (Richmond, VA: Dietz, 1941).
- SHL William Byrd II, *The Secret History of the Line*, in *The Dividing Line Histories of William Byrd II of Westover*, ed. Kevin Joel Berland (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 343–460.



## CHAPTER ONE

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# HERE AT THE END OF THE WORLD

### I

In 1726, William Byrd II wrote from his Westover plantation on the James River to Charles Boyle, Earl of Orrery. In his letter, Byrd extols life in Virginia, where the “warm sun” produces an abundance of “fine fruit,” the climate is “charmingly delightful,” and the air is so pure that it keeps the inhabitants in “good health, and good humour.”

Besides the advantages of a pure air, we abound in all kinds of provisions, without expense (I mean we who have plantations). I have a large family of my own, and my doors are open to every body. Yet I have no bills to pay, and half-a-crown will rest undisturbed in my pocket for many moons together.

Like one of the patriarchs, I have my flocks and my herds, my bond-men and bond-women, and every soart of trade amongst my own servants, so that I live in a kind of independance on every one, but Providence. However, tho’ this soart of life is without expense yet it is attended with a great deal of trouble. I must take care to keep all my people to their duty, to set all the springs in motion, and to make every one draw his equal share to carry the machine forward. But then tis an amusement in this silent country, and a continual exercise of our patience and oeconomy. (*Corr*, 1:354–55)

The letter is one of Byrd's most self-conscious performances, so eager is he to impress on his friend that in Virginia he is living the embodiment of the traditional patriarchal ideal. It was an ideal rooted in the possession of property. Byrd owns land ("we who have plantations"), and his land furnishes him "all kinds of provisions"—his flocks and herds, his orchards and fields—and these provisions are miraculously bestowed on him "without expense." For to possess land is to possess a "machine" that is self-sustaining, almost self-activating. All Byrd has to do, and this only as an "amusement," is to "set all the springs in motion." The machine moves forward under its own volition, pouring forth all that is necessary not only for a good life, but for a free life, a life lived "in a kind of independance on every one."

For Byrd, this kind of independence encompassed something more than mere personal autonomy. According to the ideals of civic humanism and traditional patriarchal thinking, those who owned enough land to be self-sufficient were freed from the bonds of necessity and fortune, and from the influence of other people. Thus unencumbered, they possessed an independence of mind that allowed them to assess the general welfare disinterestedly and a freedom of will that allowed them to act in service of the common good.<sup>1</sup> With this independence came great responsibilities for the patriarch: mastering his self-seeking impulses so he could rise above his own self-interest and tend to the general welfare, and mastering his subordinates, too, guiding, directing, and commanding them to serve the greater good he himself served. This freedom of mind and will, this capacity to transcend narrow self-interest and to be moved solely by public spirit, impartial reason, and an unfettered sense of right and wrong, gave a gentleman social standing, moral probity, and self-respect; underwrote his honor, integrity, and virtue; and legitimized his claim to patriarchal status.<sup>2</sup> "*The true Gentleman*," wrote Clement Ellis in 1660, "is one that is *God's servant, the World's Master, and his own Man*."<sup>3</sup>

Byrd's claim in his letter to Boyle that Virginia is fertile soil for patriarchal values is, to say the least, hyperbolic. In reality, a market economy like Virginia's prized competition and monetary gain, and it rewarded a self-seeking individuality that flourished at the expense of others. This flatly contradicted the traditional patriarchal view, which subordinated economic considerations to social and ethical ones. A patriarch's role was characterized by reciprocity and mutual obligations, not competition, and by the subordination of the self to communal interests, not the pursuit of individual economic success. This traditional ethic not only failed to tally with the economic realities of the time, but it ran counter to them.<sup>4</sup> Virginia's market economy was thoroughgoing. Everything—labor, the products of the land, the land itself—was a commodity, and it is probably

because this emphasis on profit and self-interest contrasted so sharply with traditional values that so many Virginians asserted patriarchal ideals so emphatically. Whatever the reason, Byrd's eagerness to separate himself from the money economy ("a half-a-crown will rest undisturbed in my pocket for many moons together") and to fantasize himself as "one of the patriarchs" seems barely anchored in reality.<sup>5</sup>

And as for his claim of independence, this, too, bears little resemblance to the real world of eighteenth-century Virginia. No Virginia planter was free from necessity, fortune, or the influence of other people. To the contrary, he was subject to the implacable forces of capital and trade, the whims of commerce, the volatility of a tobacco market buffeted by recurrent booms and busts, and the instability of a credit economy. Virginia planters were especially vulnerable to economic and political decisions made by men who lived thousands of miles across the Atlantic—by Parliament, the Board of Trade, and powerful London merchants. In reality, tobacco growers were so bound by necessity, fortune, and the wills of others that they lived their lives in "endemic insecurity,"<sup>6</sup> making that air of independence, ease, and self-sufficiency that Byrd conjures up in his letter to Boyle seem an implausible bucolic fantasy. Far from living a life independent of fortune, "our Estates here," wrote the tobacco planter William Fitzhugh in 1687, "depend altogether upon Contingencies."<sup>7</sup> In his more down-to-earth moods, Byrd confessed that he was in fact subject not only to any number of contingencies and "misadventures of fortune," but also to the machinations of "ravenous traders" and grasping merchants and to a system of trade whose workings he could neither understand nor control (*Corr*, 1:268; 2:488; 2:455).

Further, tobacco was a demanding crop that required not only constant care and attention but also a good deal of luck. It could not be cultivated as an "amusement." Seeds were sown in seeding beds in late February and March, and the newly sprouting plants were susceptible to a killing frost. In June, when the plants were moved to nearby fields, they needed moist ground, and they would thrive only if they were transplanted after a rain. During the growing season, long spells of rainy weather injured the tobacco, and drought shriveled it. When the crop was ready for harvesting in the fall, the planter had to judge the best time to trim the plants so that they would reach their fullest size and yet not be killed by an early frost. Harvested tobacco was hung in tobacco barns to be cured, and then—again, the weather was the determinant here—packed when the leaves were moist enough not to become brittle but dry enough not become moldy. The success of the crop depended on the skill, experience, judgment, and especially the constant attentiveness of the planter, but it depended just as much on the weather, too, and the weather was neither predictable nor controllable.

And beyond the usual unpredictable variations in weather that could spell success or failure, there were the occasional hurricanes, tornadoes, and hail that leveled crops.<sup>8</sup>

Byrd shipped his tobacco on consignment to his agents in England. This meant that he assumed all the risks up until the sale of his crop in England, even though once it left his dock it was out of his control. Hogsheads could burst, or they could be damaged by careless mariners when loaded into the holds of the ships. The tobacco could be pilfered by sailors and inspectors, and inspectors could burn it if they judged it to be inferior. If the Atlantic crossing was made during a hot spell, the tobacco could spoil; if the weather was too cold, it could spoil. Leaks in the ship could cause the crop to rot. Storms could batter the delicate commodity so badly that it would be unsalable, or they could sink the ship and, with it, the planter's entire yearly labor.

There were other equally intractable contingencies. Tobacco was a commercial crop whose value was largely governed by distant markets, and anyone who dealt in tobacco, as Byrd's brother-in-law John Custis acknowledged, "must run the hazard of the rise and fall of any commodity" (*Corr*, 1:317–18). And rather than rising and falling in regular, predictable patterns, returns were affected by erratic forces such as wars, consumer demand, and competition from abroad—like the weather, forces beyond Byrd's control.<sup>9</sup> During periods of war, there was an inadequate supply of ships, and those that did take tobacco to England were targeted by enemies. Consequently, freight rates rose, credit became short, tobacco prices declined, and some European markets closed completely. "My letters from England," Byrd wrote during the War of Spanish Succession, "tell me tobacco is sold for nothing there. . . . It is time there should be peace to remedy these misfortunes" (*SD*, 76–77). The remedy for these misfortunes, too, was quite out of his hands.

Even during times of peace, fluctuating consumer demands and competition abroad made the Virginia tobacco business unpredictable. In addition, competition from tobacco growers abroad was exacerbated by an exploding population in the Chesapeake and the opening of more and more new land for the cultivation of tobacco, which in turn led to an even greater oversupply of tobacco and even more instability in the market. Regulations involving the growing, packing, and shipping of tobacco changed again and again. "If the humor of trade alters every year," Robert Carter complained, "'tis impossible we should keep pace with it."<sup>10</sup>

Rather than being able to keep pace, planters seemed helpless pawns in invisible processes that compelled them to act against their own interests. When tobacco prices declined, they had little choice but to plant more tobacco. This increase in production led to even lower prices. After several years of ruinous stag-

nation or decline, prices began to rise, planters planted more tobacco to recoup their losses, and this new overproduction precipitated a new decline. Individual tobacco growers had little control over many of these factors—indeed, they had little comprehension of the commercial forces that were shaping their lives.<sup>11</sup> Even such an assiduous student of trade as Daniel Defoe concluded, “Trade is a Mystery. . . . Today it obeys the Course of things, and submits to Causes and Consequences; tomorrow it suffers Violence from the Storms and Vapours of Human Fancy. . . . A Sort of Lunacy in Trade attends all its Circumstances, and no Man can give a rational Account of it.”<sup>12</sup> Byrd said, more tersely, “The mystery[s] in trade are as great as those in religion” (*Corr*, 2:455).

It involved more than a little bluster for Byrd to claim independence and mastery when he had so little knowledge about what was to be mastered in order to remain independent. The hub of trade was in London, a five- to six-week voyage across the Atlantic at best, and this made it extremely difficult for him to calculate even how much he was worth. “We can . . . have no certain way of valuing our estates by the year,” he lamented. Byrd could hazard a guess—as he said of his crops, “They produce more or less, according as the market happens to be for those commoditys [in England]” (*Corr*, 1:320). But because he was uncertain of the price tobacco was fetching in London, because (given piracy, war, or storms) he was uncertain what condition his goods would arrive in or whether they would arrive at all, because all his transactions were conducted by others far away, and because he would not find out how much his tobacco sold for until many months after it left his storehouse, Byrd could never be sure of his accounts’ accuracy or his own financial standing.

To add to his financial bafflement, not only were the rates of exchange between England and Virginia always in flux, but the lack of specie in the colony and the use of a bewildering variety of foreign coins “required resort to money scales and scratch paper.”<sup>13</sup> In the end, ascertaining the state of his finances was like shooting at a moving target. “I wish you had been so good to have mentioned the payment of the bills I remitted last year,” Byrd wrote to the tobacco merchants he dealt with in London. “All my comfort is, that you have returned me no protests, from whence their payment may be inferred, tho’ after all to come to the knowledge of ones business by inference only, is not quite so satisfactory, because it puts a man to his logick” (*Corr*, 2:522).

Byrd had to sell the tobacco he produced in England, but since the colonies had no manufacturing to speak of, he had to buy all of his goods from England too, and this distance and dependence on others brought additional “misadventures of fortune.” The simplest transactions could become maddeningly frustrating. Byrd purchased goods from England through tobacco merchants. He

wrote to them, drawing against a credit balance that he calculated by the anticipated value of the commodities he sent to market, and making duplicates of letters and invoices for fear they would be delayed or lost. He had to trust the merchant to select the goods he wanted, hoping the tradesman would search for the best quality at the lowest price and pack items with care. It might take a year to eighteen months for the shipment to arrive in the Chesapeake, and as often as not Byrd found the results disappointing. He wrote to one merchant in frustration,

Your . . . ship arriv'd safe with goods if one may call that safe where every thing is damagd and broke to pieces. I never saw any thing so demolisht as every parcel that belong'd to me was which was partly owing to the careless way of packing, and partly to your masters tumbling them ashoar at Hampton, and tossing them in to a warehouse, and then they were rolled to the water-side again, and put aboard another ship, which call'd there by chance, or else we might have been several months without them. Every thing that would break of mine was shattered to pieces, and what woud not break, was damagd. My oyl was quite lost. . . . All the pots the grocery was packt in were crusht to bits, and the sugar and plumbs scattered amongst the straw. My glasses were all to shatters. . . . In the same barrel were 4 chamberpots whole and one broken, and I am charged with six. . . . I am sorry I have so much reason to tell you that I never receivd goods in such a tattered condition, and if they had come safe several of them are very mean & very dear, and to make them still dearer you have added a heavy insurance of your own head, without any such orders from me. (*Corr*, 2:550–51)

Like most of the great planters in the Chesapeake, Byrd tried to lessen his dependency on tobacco by diversification.<sup>14</sup> He grew wheat, corn, and oats in addition to tobacco; he planted apple, peach, and cherry orchards; and he raised “a prodig[ous] quantity” of hogs, cattle, sheep, and horses (*Corr*, 1:312). Much of this produce went to support his many plantations, but the surplus went to increase his income. He also owned several gristmills, and at one of his upriver plantations, he built a tannery and a sawmill that produced shingles, staves, planks, and lumber for his own use and for sale. Byrd kept up his father’s business in Indian trading, regularly shipping skins to England, and he traded with colonists in North Carolina as well, dealing in pork and tar. He built boats for his own use and for sale and hire.