

Sparks, John. *Raccoon John Smith: Frontier Kentucky's Most Famous Preacher*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. Pp. xxvi, 462. \$45.00, cloth.

In this extensive but somewhat cluttered study, John Sparks explores the life and ministry of Kentucky Baptist-turned-Disciple preacher "Raccoon" John Smith against his ecclesial and cultural background. Sparks, an elder of the United Baptist Church, authored *The Roots of Appalachian Christianity: The Life and Legacy of Elder Shubal Stearns*, for which he received the Thomas and Lillie D. Chaffin Celebration of Appalachian Writings award in 2003.

As settlers pushed into Western Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee in the latter years of the 18th and the early years of the 19th century, the Baptist faith showed itself able to follow these pioneering men and women into the wilderness with little difficulty. As a result, the Baptist witness became a permanent feature of the newly opened lands of Appalachia and the plains that lay to their west.

It was into this wilderness of the young United States that Sparks' hero, John Smith, was born. Sparks traces Smith's life and career, exploring the tensions between Smith's own intelligence and lack of education, between John Smith as he actually was and as he has been painted by a series of hagiographers since his death, and, not least among these, between his belief in the goodness of God and the reality of suffering. While "Raccoon" John is best known among historians of American religion as one of the architects of the union between Alexander Campbell's "Disciples" and Barton Stone's "Christians," Sparks is more interested in presenting John Smith as an example of a man whose grip on Christian hope was not loosened by the unusually acute suffering and grief that punctuated his life. In fact, Elder Sparks asserts that John Smith's conversion to Alexander Campbell's rationalistic gospel was born of his own need to find a replacement for the Calvinism that he could no longer accept in the wake of the sudden loss of his first wife and two small children.

As an exploration of the problem of evil, *Raccoon John Smith* is a searching and genuinely touching work of personal confession. As a work of history, however, Sparks' work suffers from some weaknesses which, while not rendering the book unhelpful, would make its use in an academic setting difficult. If nothing else, Elder Sparks has pressed enough material for three books into one massive tome. The extensive genealogical information presented in the work has potential to be interesting in its own right, but its presentation in this work seems to complicate the book to the point that the life of John Smith himself is occasionally obscured. Similarly, the intricate explanations of the Kentucky Baptist political scene into which Smith found himself cast are interesting but distracting, causing the reader to forget why the information presented is important for the story being told.

From the perspective of the discipline of history, Sparks' frequent use of conjecture when facts have been lost to history casts a shadow over his entire narrative. For instance, Sparks notes that the Calvinist Baptist pastor that ministered to Raccoon John's parents during their time in Virginia was "almost certainly" one John Alderson Sr. owing to the fact that he was the only Regular Baptist minister working in the county at that time (14). To be fair, this is not mere speculation, although at times it is difficult to tell the difference between this sort of conjecture and the facts that Sparks draws from his sources. Using this method, then, Sparks succeeds in adding significant color to his work,

but at the high price of casting a pall over his own claims of objectivity, the lack of which forms the basis of his criticism for all previous Smith biographers.

With that said, Sparks' efforts at research are nothing less than heroic. Not only has he pored over countless primary documents to piece together the story of this iconic Kentuckian, he has set that research against previous biographies of Smith in order to seek the grain of truth in their sometimes "sweetened" accounts. As a result, it can be fairly said that whatever weaknesses *Raccoon John Smith* may bear, it is not a work of hagiography. Sparks is able to look beyond the romanticized accounts of Louis Cochran and John Augustus Williams to reconstruct a believable, fallible human being.

While *Raccoon John Smith* has its flaws, then, it still serves as a helpful and well-researched look into a life whose details are worthy of scholarly attention. If nothing else, Sparks presents his readers with a glimpse at one human being's own tenacious faith, a faith that compelled him to proclaim the risen Christ after suffering all the grief and privation that the early American frontier had to offer.

Andrew C. Smith
Vanderbilt University