

John Fea. *The Way of Improvement Leads Home: Philip Vickers Fithian and the Rural Enlightenment in Early America*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. 269, illustrations, appendix, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95.)

John Fea's well-crafted and readable biography of the diarist Philip Vickers Fithian shows how metropolitan culture from Paris and London trickled down to seemingly isolated rural colonists in the years before the American Revolution. Unfortunately, I could not bring myself to like the book's principal character. Whereas Fithian's detractors in the early twentieth century called him an "insufferable prig" (166), I could not shake the sense that he was just phony, filling his journals with sentiments that he believed an enlightened gentleman of his era would hold. My personal distaste for Fithian aside, his published and unpublished writings demonstrate what Fea calls the "rural Enlightenment" (7).

For Fea, the Enlightenment meant self-improvement: it "challenged the prevailing view that people were incapable, largely because of their sin natures, of improving themselves apart from divine intervention" (5). Fithian and his fellow gentlemen believed that intellectual and moral self-improvement would lead to bettering their communities, and by extension the world. Being enlightened entailed navigating complex worldly compromises. The enlightened knew reason was best, but useful passions could be justified. Faith sometimes conflicted with reason, but nonetheless provided a moral compass and a sense of identity for its believers; universal and cosmopolitan attitudes were best, but even local biases and attachments could prepare one for an understanding of the world. With this in mind, Fea orders the narrative of Fithian's life as a quest for self-improvement. Although Fithian seems to have used this language rarely himself, Fea's arrangement is convincing: Fithian spent most of his life struggling with the dilemmas of the rural Enlightenment, torn between his love of his native soil and the desire to get away from his father's modest farm.

Fithian was born in 1747 in the Cohansey River valley of southwestern New Jersey, to a Presbyterian farming family. He began writing in his journal on the first day of the June harvest in 1766 and continued until his death in 1776. What he left behind became some of the best known diaries of the late colonial period, tracing his travels and thoughts as he trained to become a minister. As a youth, he traveled to three sermons a week to hear the word of God and commune with fellow Presbyterians. Managing to convince his father to give him his inheritance early so that he might pursue an

education, he attended a local clergyman's preparatory school for two years and then graduated from Princeton. After tutoring on the Carter estate in northern Virginia for a year, he became an itinerant minister, preaching in coastal New Jersey, central Pennsylvania and the Shenandoah valley, as well as in his home region. In 1776, he became a chaplain for the Continental Army, and died of dysentery in a New York camp.

Fea enhances his biography with background knowledge and analysis of the fixtures of Fithian's life. For example, he demonstrates the deep Atlantic roots of southwestern New Jersey, where English farmers settled after a series of intra-imperial migrations. The malarial Cohansey River valley provided its residents with large plots of land for yeomen to pass on to their children, allowing Fithian and others of his generation to be the first in their families that could strive for a life outside the fields. Fea illuminates many other topics, such as everyday farming life in the Delaware Valley, the educational system in early New Jersey, the impact of the First Great Awakening on the Presbyterian community in the Mid-Atlantic, and the Presbyterian embrace of the American Revolution. Often, Fea can show Fithian's direct involvement in the rural Enlightenment, such as when he helped form the Bridge-Town Admonishing Society. Its members wrote essays to one another in letters, then criticized each other, so that they might better become right-thinking and right-feeling world citizens.

Gregarious in person, Fithian tended to write in flowery language with exaggerated expressions of sentiment. In a typical letter, he described his country home to two female friends from Philadelphia: "where the evening dews & sunny days & autumnal flowers and falling leaves, & busy farmers, & sprightly girls & lovesick Swains, where Plenty & Pleasure & Health making a consistent variety, keep over Bodies & minds in a successive enjoyment of something new & pleasing." Here, Fea notes that Fithian mimicked "the Roman pastoralist who romanticized a rural life without ever experiencing it," despite his own direct knowledge (85–86). His affection for the ancients came up again when writing about his belief in heliocentric astronomy, which he thought contradicted the Bible. He imagined that others might "call down the Vengeance of Jove in wrathful Lightning upon the impious Rebels who dare utter such blasphemous language" (75). His prose failed to impress at least one contemporary: Fithian's future wife Betsy (whom he nicknamed Laura, in imitation of Petrarch) initially doubted the intentions of his love letters, fearing that he was a "gallant," boldly proclaiming his affections for every girl he knew (91).

Princeton had trained Fithian to embrace the worldview of Paris and London, but he could never shed his Cohansey upbringing and its jaundiced view of foreign places. For him, the elites of northern Virginia were urbane but irreligious and cruel to their slaves. Terrifying Indians and drunks filled the mountains of central Pennsylvania; its common folk could not discuss ideas and often possessed no furniture on which he could write sermons. Before he visited the Jersey shore, he imagined its inhabitants as “straggling, impertinent, vociferous Swamp-Men.” After preaching there, he changed his mind: coastal Presbyterians were respectful and civilized, and among them numbered a few “English . . . Gentlemen of Fortune and Breeding” (130).

Often, Fithian chose not to record his thoughts on crucial episodes in his life. About his formative Princeton experience, including the sudden death of his parents and his subsequent responsibility for his younger siblings, he wrote little. Although Fea speculates that he participated in the revolutionary Greenwich tea party, Fithian wrote nothing about his own involvement in it, nor about how he became a chaplain in the Continental Army. He wrote at great length regarding his six year courtship with Betsy, but when they married, he became strangely silent. Fea describes Fithian’s journals as “self-absorbing” and believes that his final diary while he worked as a chaplain “was drafted, more than any of his previous efforts, with posterity in mind” (100, 181). It is posterity’s loss that when he was most engaged in life, his journal entries disappeared. Nonetheless, the writings he left suggest the wide circulation of cosmopolitan ideas and attitudes throughout the American colonies by the time of the Revolution.

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Richard S. Newman. *Freedom’s Prophet: Bishop Richard Allen, the AME Church, and the Black Founding Fathers*. (New York: New York University Press, 2008. Pp. ix, 359, notes, index. Cloth, \$34.95.)

This work does many things. It tells how one leader shepherded black Methodist worshippers into the creation of a full-blown denomination. Through a limited set of sources which he has thoroughly mined, Newman supports the idea of Allen as founder by showing that he had a clear sense of purpose in establishing the church—almost as though Allen intuited