

H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, John G. Reid. *Britain's Oceanic Empire: Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds, c.1550-1850.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 464 S. ISBN 978-1-107-02014-6.



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H. V. Bowen u.a. (Hrsg.): Britain's Oceanic Empire:

The development of the British Empire was, to a large extent, based on maritime connections and exchanges. Ships, goods, people and ideas circulated within and between oceanic trading systems, forging the eighteenth-century empire and laying the foundations for future imperial developments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Recently, there has been renewed academic interest in interrogating the ways in which such networks operated. *Britain's Oceanic Empire* makes an important and significant contribution to this scholarship. It powerfully confirms the value of exploring the maritime links binding together the commercial, social and political concerns of geographically disparate and culturally diverse regions. In doing so, the collection offers innovative and exciting ways for understanding the mechanics of trade and the logistics of empire in the early modern period.

While the Atlantic world (connecting Britain, Africa, North America and the Caribbean) and the Indian Ocean world of the East India Company (linking Britain to India and China) have been comprehensively interrogated by historians, *Britain's Oceanic Empire* offers a refreshingly comparative approach to the study of British imperialism

in these oceanic regions. The collection is based on the premise that the Atlantic and Asian worlds of the British Empire should be investigated for convergences, comparisons and contrasts. In doing so, the series of essays collected here will help scholars to access pertinent, and largely under-researched, contemporary debates about the nature of the British Empire. The editors, in their excellent introduction, observe that 'by the mid-eighteenth century some Britons discerned a transoceanic imperial presence that was global in both its ambition and scope'. Networks of trade and commerce, patterns of settlement and migration, and expeditions of exploration had extended Britain's influence around the globe. Such maritime endeavours suggested to some contemporaries that 'Britain now possessed a global empire', emphasising the strength, status and comparative advantage that such developments afforded the country. Others, however, saw things differently. For them, Britain's global engagements were a series of 'haphazard, scattered, and unconnected' encounters (p. 1). *Britain's Oceanic Empire* tests these debates and, in the process, forces present-day scholars to step outside their historiographical comfort zones and re-evaluate their own work.

The collection is divided into four parts, exploring themes such as oceanic spaces, sovereignty and law, governance and regulation, diplomatic and military relations, and commercial and social relations. The essays – together with the introduction and editorial afterword – discuss these themes in order to shed new light on the processes of expansion that influenced the empire. Essays are paired in order to provide a discussion of a particular theme in the Atlantic and Asian worlds respectively. While some readers might have preferred comparative analyses within individual essays, it should be borne in mind that the approach adopted has allowed the editors to gather the leading scholars in their respective fields. Further integration and comparative analyses of oceanic systems will undoubtedly follow, partially inspired by this collection.

There were, of course, important differences and divergences in British imperial endeavours in Asia and the Americas: significant differences in the size of indigenous populations, as well as obvious geographical, climatic and cultural differences, help to explain why British approaches to indigenous polities and politics in Asia and the Americas were very different. One of the strengths of the collection is the editors' frank acknowledgement that British America and British India represent parallel rather than intertwined courses of expansion, which need to be discussed on their own terms. Yet, taken together, this book argues that these differences must be seen in the context of what British merchants, migrants and officials shared. Common approaches and shared understandings of developments in different hemispheres did exist, as attested by the contributions that explore constitutional principles, claims of sovereignty, disciplinary regimes and military attitudes.

The great triumph of the collection is the potential it offers for future research, offering expanded, more sophisticated and less literal geographical understandings of the British Empire. The South Atlantic region, for example, is an area often omitted from Atlantic histories and frequently ignored by historians of Britain's Asian

empire. Yet, the region is important for understanding the developments that took Britain into the Pacific Ocean in the early nineteenth century (p. 439). Another potentially fruitful area for further research is the role of commercial companies and other institutions straddling these oceanic worlds. As Lakshmi Subramanian points out, the East India Company was the principal conduit between two related but divergent worlds, the Asian and the Atlantic (p. 311). Historians of the East India Company, for example, might usefully heed H. V. Bowen's enjoinder not to forget about East Indiamen when they enter the waters of the Atlantic (p. 46). Throughout the collection, the importance of the sea as the principal connecting agent in this period is emphasised. As H. V. Bowen notes in his essay, in general histories of the East India Company (and, one might add, the British Empire more generally), the sea disappears from view from about the mid-eighteenth century (p. 45). This collection is a welcome corrective to that oversight.

Britain's Oceanic Empire undoubtedly provides an exciting new conceptual framework in which to examine the early modern Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds together. It introduces diverse approaches to the projection of British imperial power, considering legal, governmental, economic, social, diplomatic and military factors simultaneously. And it sets empire in the context of indigenous societies, to shed light on both differences and commonalities of British-indigenous interactions in different global contexts. Comparative analyses that explore the convergences, confluences and crossovers between maritime worlds, oceanic systems and imperial structures – of the sort pioneered in *Britain's Oceanic Empire* – are likely to prove the most rewarding for future scholars seeking to understand the inherently maritime nature of the early modern world. This collection of essays, incorporating contributions from an array of internationally renowned scholars in their respective fields, represents an important milestone in the study of early modern European empires in general, and the British Empire in particular.

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