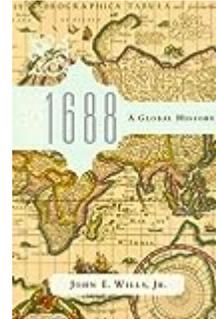




**John E Wills, Jr.** *1688: A Global History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. vii + 330 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04744-8.



**Reviewed by** Tony Claydon (Department of History and Welsh History, University of Wales, Bangor)

**Published on** H-Albion (October, 2001)

### **Around the world in three hundred pages**

Around the world in three hundred pages

When I received this work for review, I thought it was a splendid idea for a volume. Here was a book which was to take the reader on a world tour of a single year, and would entertain with the sheer diversity of human activity in 1688. This, I imagined, would be an opportunity to avoid the Euro-centrism of many world histories. Here also, would be an opportunity to provide thick description of cultural moments (taking advantage of the short time span to concentrate on the telling details); to consider interaction between various parts of the globe; and to explore if common themes emerged—to see if there were features or changes which were shared by widely-separated societies in the late seventeenth century.

Were my hopes fulfilled? In part they were. I was certainly entertained. This book is evocative and engaging, introducing a wealth of fascinating incident, and a gallery of extraordinary people. It would be hard to forget Cornelia van Nijenroode, the half-Japanese Dutch woman from Batavia arriving in Amsterdam for the first time in her life to pursue a legal case against her husband. As moving is the description of Eusebio Chini tirelessly

working to convert the natives of American deserts—despite his continuing hopes that his Jesuit order would send him to China; or the author’s account of Henry Purcell’s tragic family life. The book also tries hard to present cultures in their own terms. It deals squarely with the Euro-centricity of sources, admitting that some groups—such as the aboriginals whom William Dampier met as his ship waited out storms off Australia—will only be known from Western descriptions; and illustrating the problem with Vincenzo Cornelli’s maps which left blank the hearts of continents yet unexplored. Beyond this, however, the author does a creditable job collecting non-European records, and reading European sources “against the grain.” There are, therefore, cogent accounts of family rivalries at the Chinese court and the timeless ceremonies at Mecca; and even an attempt at unravelling the dizzying politics of Siam.

Yet despite the charm of individual vignettes, and the exotic variety of people, other hopes are disappointed. The worst problem is that the sheer number of stories brings superficiality. This whirlwind tour-guide never stops long enough anywhere to allow more than the

briefest snapshot before shepherding readers back on his bus. Thus, for example, one of the most dramatic events of the year—the Irish night panic in London—is dismissed in seven sentences, whilst the opening passage takes us round the whole world in seven short paragraphs. A particular problem here is that the author feels he must set the context, especially the political context, of every incident before he relates it. The results are breathless, potted histories of the seventeenth century in each location, which pack in events decades before 1688. Consequently, the advantages of concentrating on a single year are lost, along with any aspirations to thick description or even rounded historical analysis.

Compounding this, the volume suffers from a lack of unifying themes. The introduction makes a brave attempt to find parallels between cultures in such things as the rise of science, urbanization, an explosion of the written word, re-interpretations of the great religions, and the prevalence of the “baroque” (defined as layers of intricacy, irony, and illusion). The problem, though, is that these themes are only occasionally referred to in the stories which follow: and they are anyway too broad to identify unique features of the late seventeenth century. After all, what age could not claim to see a growth of towns, to question doctrine, or to embody a “baroque”

complexity of experience? Even the many stories of interaction between different parts of the world fail to pull things together. Certainly, the growth of merchant navies meant more people had careers which took them across oceans and continents—but the numbers of such folk remained tiny in proportion to the total human population, and as the book (fascinatingly) shows, there were places which resisted or even lost wider contacts. In 1688, Timbuktu was suffering because its traditional overland trade routes were in decline in the face of coastal competition; whilst in closed Japan, the city of Kanazawa, one of the twenty largest towns in the world, had no foreign residents at all.

In a sense, of course, none of this might matter. This book could remain an informative and engaging proof of human variety, without unifying themes. It could even be such a work precisely because it found so little common experience or grounds for consolidating interpretation. Unfortunately, however, this reader missed a wider message too much. As the book failed to be more than a sum of its parts, it began to be rather less than them. Without any greater argument, I increasingly questioned why I was being told any of the individual stories. Shamefully, I cannot claim to have got through them all.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Tony Claydon. Review of Wills, John E, Jr., *1688: A Global History*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. October, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5584>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).