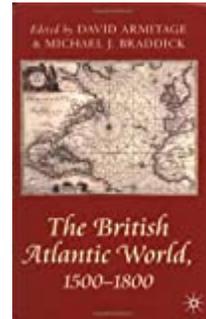




David Armitage, Michael J. Braddick, eds. *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xx + 324 pp. \$37.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-96341-8; \$110.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-96340-1.



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We Are All Atlanticists Now

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“We are all Atlanticists now,” David Hancock writes in the opening of his essay in *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800*. “Atlantic Studies is certainly a growth industry in the historical profession.... The field is in fact fluid and undefined, an imprecise geographical expression” (p. 3). In his preface, Bernard Bailyn describes the Atlantic as “a congeries of entities—cultural, political, economic—distinctive in themselves each with peculiar, anomalous features. [It included] a diversity of lifeways constantly forming and changing” (p. xv). In his afterword, J. H. Elliott similarly pictures Atlantic history as “the story of the creation, destruction, and recreation of communities as a result of the movement, across and around the Atlantic basin, of people, commodities, cultural practices and ideas ... [the story] of change and continuity in the face of new experiences, new circumstances, new contacts, and new environments” (p. 239). What is one to make of such an enormous, complex, and fluid subject? Can a book like this really offer new approaches, new questions, even a new framework for Atlantic history? Is the subject too vast to embrace, too kaleidoscopic to

make sense of? If it is doable, what is its potential?

To address these questions Harvard University’s International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, working with the Charles Warren Center for American History, called together a dozen scholars working on particular aspects of early modern Atlantic history. The group met for preliminary discussions in 1997 and then met again four years later to present and consider members’ papers, which then became chapters in this book. The book begins with Bailyn’s lecture opening the seminar and ends with Elliott’s closing remarks. After an introduction by David Armitage and Michael Braddick, Armitage introduces the core articles in an essay proposing a tri-partite framework for the study: circum-Atlantic history, “the history of the Atlantic as a particular zone of exchange and interchange, circulation and transmission”; trans-Atlantic history, a comparison of national developments; and cis-Atlantic history, the study of national or regional history within an Atlantic context (p. 15).

The core of the book consists of eleven essays grouped somewhat mysteriously into the categories

“Connections,” “Identities,” and “Politics” (section titles which seem mystifying to me and under which not all of the papers fit comfortably). Under “Connections,” the grouping closest to Armitage’s “circum-Atlantic,” Alison Games takes a broad and very useful view of English migration to Europe and Asia as well as America, of the movement of African peoples east as well as west, and of the relocation of Indians within North America. Nuala Zahediah looks at the American colonies as economic producers as well as consumers, reminding us that American exports like sugar and tobacco became increasingly important in the European market as they became cheaper and reminding us also that the American economy grew faster than its English counterpart in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Carla Pestana, writing on religion, concludes that although Christianity became the dominant religion throughout British America, it existed in so many forms among both Europeans and African slaves (who reshaped it) that liberty of conscience, rather than religious conformity, became the norm.

Under the decidedly catchall section “Identities,” Braddick’s chapter argues that elites throughout the Anglo-American world developed similar assumptions about their dominant role in shaping local culture and expressed these assumptions in a shared language. But growing local diversity and imperial friction undercut any sense of imperial loyalty or “bonding” that such common assumptions might have created. Sarah Pearsall emphasizes that the household as a unit, not separate spheres for men and women, should be central to studies of gender in early England and America. Despite brief lapses in times of religious and political upheaval, she argues, Anglo Americans continued to equate civic order with household stability. Keith Wrightson, in his essay on class, agrees with Braddick that a common language of social classification “disguised the fact that social inequality existed in different forms, was experienced in different degrees, and carried different implications” throughout the Anglo-American world (p. 156). According to Joyce Chaplin’s essay on race, the American colonial need for labor created among Englishmen the ideology, previously lacking, that inborn characteristics made some peoples more exploitable for labor than others. (American Indians died off in droves from European disease, so it was not worth enslaving them, while Africans did not, so they were more reliable sources of labor and hence more appropriate for enslavement.)

In section 3, “Politics,” both Elizabeth Manke and Eliga Gould conclude that Atlantic expansion strength-

ened state building in England because it strengthened the government’s function of handling foreign affairs (Manke) and because the existence of overseas empire, itself the product of seventeenth-century revolutions, helped “insulate England ... from revolutionary upheaval in all but the North American mainland colonies” (p. 197). Finally, Christopher Brown looks at slavery in terms not of the slaves but of their owners, who enjoyed substantial imperial influence before 1750, but thought their political and social leadership threatened by the rise of English anti-slavery sentiment after that, and rebelled to escape English interference. Inevitably some important subjects are missing from the essays: literature and the arts, fashion, scientific/intellectual trends (besides Chaplin’s essay on race), and epidemics, for example. Nevertheless, the papers do serve “as a guide to where the growing interest in Atlantic studies has already taken us in several key areas” (Jack Greene, cover remark).

Inevitably also, since the essays here present historiographical overviews rather than original research, some of the material will be familiar to students of Atlantic history. Nevertheless, a number of the essays develop provocative new syntheses. All the papers are clearly written and carefully edited, though each appears to be limited to about seventeen pages, which does not give the authors space to do much more than discuss general trends and then conclude that the trends had different manifestations from area to area.

The editors recognize the challenges of putting together a collection of essays even with the modest hope of demonstrating the potential value of a unified Atlantic history. Right now, they admit, the time is not ripe for a comprehensive history because Atlantic history is still “so difficult both to conceptualize and to write” (Elliott, p. 248). The field itself is undefined; it has no agreed upon boundaries in time or space. Should it include the nineteenth century? The Plains Indians? How do we discuss the multitude of climates and environmental conditions? Paradoxes abound. We need a much fuller picture of the British Atlantic before we compare the first British Empire with other contemporary Atlantic Empires. But in order to study the British Empire fully, we first must compare it with other empires, for such a comparison will highlight features and suggest questions we would not have noticed.

The editors and authors are quite aware of the challenges and the difficulties of such a large undertaking. They are ambitious but cautious, hopeful but guarded. Their efforts should inspire the rest of us.

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