

They Were All Atlanticists Then

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The Early Modern Atlantic Economy. Edited by JOHN J. MCCUSKER and KENNETH MORGAN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 383 pages. \$85.00 (cloth).

The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: Organization, Operation, Practice, and Personnel. Edited by PETER A. COCLANIS. The Carolina Lowcountry and the Atlantic World. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005. 400 pages. \$49.95 (cloth).

Readers will notice the similarity of the titles of the two volumes under review. Both postulate an Atlantic economy in place more than three hundred years ago. Essayists in both books contribute to the histories of localities, empires, and the Atlantic world and all are assiduously attentive to the importance of the economy in their development.

The earlier of the two, edited by John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, honors the work of Jacob M. Price, a leading scholar in the field. The collection focuses heavily, but not entirely, on white men and on events within the British Empire. Topics range from the activities of a single cosmopolitan businessman to the operation of vast networks of traders; from the twists and turns in the evolution of a single branch of trade to a comparison of plantation production in Barbados and Brazil; from a comparative analysis of the effect of their Atlantic colonies on the economies of France and Britain to an evaluation of the health and welfare of European immigrants to the Chesapeake.

Published four years after the McCusker and Morgan volume, the collection edited by Peter A. Coclanis boasts a broader scope and more eclectic methodology. Reaching into this grab bag, one finds three essays on Dutch traders in the New World and one on Spanish regulations and Cuban tobacco growers; another examines the racial and gender makeup of laborers working at Cape Coast Castle in Africa and still another surveys Native American economic activities in South Carolina. Several essays look at conflicted identities such as those of planters, merchants, and smugglers. Coclanis helpfully aims to summarize the state of the field in an introduction to his volume. Factor and product markets on both sides of the ocean, he says, had become sufficiently closely linked by the middle of the eighteenth century to form a dynamically articulating system of exchange directed mostly by Europeans and Euro-Americans. The growth of consumer demand for warm-weather products including sugar, tobacco, tea, and cotton not only revolutionized agriculture in the New World but also fed the expansion of retail shopkeeping in the Old World. Supplying retail businesses in turn spurred the development of sophisticated financial tools and the creation of larger-scale, capital-intensive sites such as large sugar plantations in the West Indies and textile factories in England.

David Hancock contributes essays to both volumes on the Madeira wine trade. The earlier uncovers a most interesting narrative about how regional variations in consumer preferences gradually led to a transformation of the wine from a relatively cheap, undifferentiated beverage into a luxury potable prized by connoisseurs. In *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, he tries to make sense of that transformation by proposing a model for long-term economic processes in the Atlantic world as systems that were, in his editor's words, much more "open, adaptive, nonlinear, unpredictable, and contingent than scholars believe" (xiv). The outcome for the Madeira

trade could not have been predicted in 1700, he argues, because it was the product of the unorganized operations of “protean men, working in an uncertain and porous environment, with an opportunistic approach to everyday business” (60). Hancock’s notion of the Atlantic economy as highly contingent and dependent on multiple actors, from empires to individual investors, producers, laborers, and consumers, is borne out by studies of all these agents of economy and the diversity of locales and economic outcomes treated in the essays.

Morgan’s essay elaborates the underlying connectedness that enabled such a thing as an Atlantic economy; he lists five ways in which business networks in Britain’s export trade to North America became more closely intertwined in the last half of the eighteenth century: (1) merchants on both sides of the ocean made personal visits across the Atlantic; (2) they made greater use of samples, pattern books, and detailed price lists; (3) American merchants and inland manufacturers in Britain corresponded directly more than ever before; (4) businessmen developed complex credit instruments for financing commerce; (5) merchants, agents, and manufacturers better coordinated their efforts, enabling them to deliver the precise products desired by consumers. Morgan’s enterprising merchants grew their businesses by informing manufacturers about consumer desires. Louis M. Cullen’s study in *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy* of Thomas Sutton and his circle illuminates the world of international finance by presenting an archaeology of a circle of Irish businessmen based in Dublin, London, Paris, Bordeaux, Saint-Malo, and Cadiz whose members intermarried with allied French families.

An essay by Peter Mathias (again in *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*) points to the changing nature of business connections throughout the period and shows the interconnections between kinship, risk, and the extension of credit in the mainly British mercantile business in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, when transoceanic commerce bore very high risk. As the scale and complexity of transatlantic trade began to outgrow family connections, creditworthiness became crucial to business success. Interestingly, Lois Green Carr finds that the Chesapeake tobacco colonies in the eighteenth century had become less risky and more comfortable for British immigrants, yet these improvements came at a cost: “decreasing opportunities to acquire land and participate in local decision-making” (337).

Among the twenty-seven contributors to the two volumes, several others take on big questions posed by a history of the Atlantic economy, including the critical role of empires in their colonial economies. Stanley L. Engerman poses this one in the McCusker and Morgan book: why did France’s New World colonies not give its economy the transformative boost that Britain’s supposedly did? Counterfactually reasoning his way through an enormous literature, this wise and seasoned veteran of the Atlantic slavery debates takes his readers on a breathtaking flight over the scholarly treetops. Though his own inclination is toward an environmental rather than cultural explanation, our pilot finally lands us not in a field with clear-cut answers but rather in one with better-informed questions.

Historians have never given much attention to the Dutch presence in the Atlantic world because the roles of Spain, France, and Britain so vastly overshadowed their neighbor’s, whose influence on Asia was far greater and more enduring. In his succinct and informative overview of Dutch economic activities in the New World, Jan de Vries (in *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*) highlights a paradox. The Calvinist Dutch did not use indentured servitude at home or abroad, nor did they impose their culture, language, or religion on subject peoples. Yet these saints were also the most

coolly efficient slave users and traders in all of Atlantic history, nor did a Dutch antislavery movement ever emerge.

A comparative approach to writing history is often worth the extra effort it requires because of the anomalies such a study can uncover. In *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*, for instance, Russell R. Menard discovers that planters in seventeenth-century Brazil remained dispersed and took their crops to large central mills for processing, whereas those in Barbados consolidated their landholdings and integrated cane growing with milling and refining. Why this striking difference? Brazilians had access to plentiful supplies of Portuguese slaves from Angola but meager credit with which to buy them. Menard argues that, because the law did not permit creditors to seize capital goods, including equipment, livestock, and slaves, in lieu of payment, loans to planters were too risky. Without credit Brazilian producers could not expand their operations.

Clearly imperial regulations could have an economic effect not foreseen by the policymakers who drafted them. In Coclanis's collection, Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert examines a critical moment in Spain's imperial regime when the ruler turned to Portuguese merchants in the 1640s for advice on commercial policy. Cultural and religious conservatives rallied to silence the Portuguese by forcing them to leave the country, and the opportunity for reform slipped away.

Mercantilist-inspired trade policies actually benefited colonial growers in the case of Cuba, according to Laura Ntetter (again in Coclanis's volume). She describes how Spain sought to control the quality of its reexported tobacco to maximize returns from its European markets. Only tobacco from certain Atlantic islands, including Cuba, was allowed to enter this trade; Seville was the sole authorized entrepôt and the only designated manufacturing site for snuff. Other colonies could raise tobacco only for local use, and its cultivation on Spain's mainland was strictly forbidden. Though smuggling led to a continuing shortage of supply to Seville, the monopoly helped growers to build up sufficient supplies of domestic capital to finance their transition to sugar production in the nineteenth century.

In this respect the Spanish were not alone; the regulation of trade invited smuggling activities in all the Atlantic empires. Three authors in *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* investigate disparate motives behind such illegal trading. Claudia Schnurmann looks at English colonists' profitable and amicable relations with Dutch traders in Barbados and Virginia before 1674 and in New Amsterdam/New York before and after that date. Historians have long known about colonial resistance to imperial trade restrictions yet assumed their response was primarily out of self-interest. Schnurmann, however, discovers in settlers' acts and words evidence of competing identities and therefore views smuggling as political-ideological acts representing localist loyalties vis-à-vis nationalist pride. April Lee Hatfield, too, is interested in the tricky question of identity formation. She asks how it felt to be Dutch in a colonial English community as she sympathetically tracks the Dutch presence in public records of the seventeenth-century Chesapeake. As for the English, she believes their commitment to their pocketbooks overruled their loyalty to England. Kenneth J. Banks finds a plethora of illegal smuggling of slaves in eighteenth-century Martinique and suggests that responsibility for encouraging and even engaging in this practice lay with French colonial officials. These men were not merely taking private advantage of the opportunities their positions afforded but had consciously embraced the local "culture of contraband" (230) in the face of unrealistic regulations.

If the practice of smuggling is one location for analyzing attachments to collective identities, other areas of the economy can be similarly revealing. S. Max Edelson is another contributor in Coclanis's volume interested in getting inside the heads, and consciences, of

his subjects. He quotes extensively from planters in eighteenth-century South Carolina to show how proud they were of their skill in producing quality rice. By identifying with their premium crop, he says they were involved “as much in a quest for a viable colonial identity as they were with maximizing returns on investments” (349). Carolina’s other export crop, indigo, however, suffered from a poor reputation and consistently fetched lower prices on the London market than its Spanish and French rivals. Yet the growth of Carolina’s indigo exports to Britain suggests to Edelson that its growers were happy to settle for quantity over quality.

Consumption is sometimes the forgotten story, with customers the forgotten heroes and heroines of economic history. Carole Shammas (in *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*) touts the revolutionary consequences of European demand for some other warm-weather crops: sugar, tea, tobacco, cocoa, chocolate, and cotton. Their development constituted an agricultural revolution of unprecedented scale and created a consumer revolution that stimulated the growth and elaboration of the commercial networks and marketing methods that constitute the substance of so many of the essays.

McCusker furnishes an outstanding example of one consumer good piggybacking on another. Aided by technological improvements in distilling from 1650 to 1775, sugar distilleries spread through Great Britain and Western Europe, driving down the price of spirits to make alcohol an everyday beverage. In the New World, smugglers were happy to carry French West Indian molasses to New England, and rivers of cheap rum boosted per capita alcohol consumption in British North America to levels almost double those prevailing in contemporary Great Britain.

Cotton had a similar career. In Coclanis’s collection, Robert S. DuPlessis draws on local records from Charleston, New Orleans, Montreal, and Philadelphia to track the quantities and varieties of cloth in use. Lists of gifts to Indians show a consistently strong preference for woolens, yet for whites cotton became the most favored fiber. It replaced woolen and linen in most forms of clothing but was also used in window curtains and tablecloths because moths in summertime feasted on wool. DuPlessis finds hints of gender difference as well: men, more than women, tended to favor wool. His data are most intriguing and suggest new avenues for comparative inquiry.

The essayists do not forget how local politics can affect the business environment. Henry Roseveare (in McCusker and Morgan’s volume), for example, unveils the power struggle that took place in the port of London in the middle of the eighteenth century. The port’s wharfingers had formed a cartel before the end of the seventeenth century that so strictly controlled its quays they drove shippers to go elsewhere, contributing to the notable rise of western outports in the eighteenth century.

While Hancock celebrates the innovative role of businessmen in developing markets and Menard pinpoints the necessity for credit in financing capital expansion in *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy*, R. C. Nash in Coclanis’s volume asks who was bearing the risk. He categorizes participants in British transatlantic commerce by their roles as indigenous producers, indigenous traders, resident factors acting for merchants in Britain, and merchants in London and the outports who took shipments on consignment. While consignment trading to London accounted for almost all the rice and sugar that went to England, only about 20 percent of the tobacco was sent to London on consignment, and even that disappeared in the 1740s. Indigenous merchants acting as independent traders emerged early in the northern colonies, first in Boston. Well before independence indigenous merchants from New York, Philadelphia, and Boston controlled most of their regions’ shipping as well as their coastal and transatlantic trade. Southern merchants, by

contrast, did not invest in shipping or in large stocks of export commodities. Instead they relied on the financial resources of London commission merchants to back their importation of slaves and manufactured goods.

Patrick K. O'Brien (in McCusker and Morgan's collection) addresses Britain's monetary policy during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, when nearly eleven thousand British merchant ships were lost. After a run on the Bank of England's gold reserves in 1797, the government suspended specie payments and imposed a nonconvertible currency in the face of strong public criticism. Other crises followed but flexible supplies of cash and credit continued to keep manufacturers afloat and employment levels high despite serious interruptions in exports. Despite conservatives' fears of inflation, paper money kept Britain's wartime economy on an even keel.

Also in McCusker and Morgan's volume, François Crouzet presents a detailed study of one of the commercial crises mentioned by O'Brien. It led in 1807 to the notorious British Orders in Council that sharply restricted neutral trade. American vessels had been furnishing low-cost foodstuffs to the West Indies and selling cheap foreign sugar on the Continent, leaving British sugar to rot in warehouses. The resulting sugar crisis formed the background for parliamentary debates on the abolition of the slave trade, making this essay an important contribution to a major historiographical debate.

In a contribution to Coclanis's volume, Peter C. Mancall, Joshua L. Rosenbloom, and Thomas Weiss ask, How important were Native Americans to the eighteenth-century economy of South Carolina, the richest of all the British mainland colonies? In addition to tracking the exports of deerskins, the authors' diligent culling of government records uncovered budgetary items that yielded estimates of money expended annually on Indians by colonial officials for services rendered, including the return of runaway slaves. The authors believe that deerskins represented no more than 5 percent of total annual product per person among the Indians of the southeast, a stunningly small figure compared with its role in the region's historiography. The essay supplies a complex analysis of Indian adaptation to the expanding British presence.

Two essays look at the problems posed to owners and employers by a scarcity of labor. In *The Atlantic Economy during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Ty M. Reese uses records of the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, created by the British Parliament in 1750. The company faced major problems in obtaining enough laborers to build and maintain its coastal forts, warehouses, and other buildings vital to England's slave trade. They hired or leased Africans and English, free and unfree, male and female. Africans were more reliable workers than white indentured servants who were always getting drunk or sick or both. The work given laborers was sorted by race, status, and gender but all were exploited, according to Reese.

When the owners of Mount Airy plantation in Virginia began switching from tobacco to wheat in the early nineteenth century, the transition posed difficult questions on how best to use their workers' time and skills, according to Richard S. Dunn in McCusker and Morgan's collection. Whereas tobacco requires attention throughout its long growing period, grain growing makes its heaviest demands on labor at planting and harvest time. The Mount Airy owners constantly shifted their work assignments, coordinating the work of field laborers with artisans, with the goal of getting the best mix of people working at each site. Aggressive labor management not only reduced the number of slaves sold away but also made Mount Airy one of the most profitable slave plantations in the entire region. Under the daunting title "Planters' Exchange Patterns in the Colonial Chesapeake: Toward Defining a

Regional Domestic Economy,” Laura Croghan Kamoie’s essay in Coclanis’s volume argues that the entrepreneurial behavior of the richest planters on Virginia’s Northern Neck, observable in tax lists, furthered domestic economic diversification.

The metanarrative of the Atlantic economy suggests that growth begot growth. But the developmental processes were neither automatic nor preordained, as Hancock and others have shown. Thus the independent actions and decisions of hundreds of thousands of participants never coalesced into the system of mutually interacting cogs implied by Atlantic economy. The phrase is an appealing but subversive catchall, kind of like a steamer trunk. Historians can put their research into it, packaged any way they choose. The contents of that trunk, however, will continue to remain miscellaneous in character until a more deliberately transnational, comparative perspective discovers the missing connections.