

Brave New Worlds: Beyond the English Atlantic

Simon P. Newman, *University of Glasgow*

Envisioning an English Empire: Jamestown and the Making of the North Atlantic World. Edited by ROBERT APPELBAUM and JOHN WOOD SWEET. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. 385 pages. \$59.95 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper).

The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800. Edited by DAVID ARMITAGE and MICHAEL J. BRADDICK. New York: Palgrave, 2002. 344 pages. \$95.00 (cloth), \$35.00 (paper).

If one did not know that he was referring to the world of early modern scholarship, David Armitage's assertion that "we are all Atlanticists now" (11) might have seemed obvious rather than fresh. A peculiarly Anglo-American construction of the Atlantic retained currency until late into the twentieth century. Though they struggled to preserve imperial dominion in India and Asia, Britons in the late 1930s embraced a political vision of the northern Atlantic world that bound together the United States and the British Isles while most of western Europe succumbed to fascism, culminating in the Atlantic Charter of 1941. Similarly, the single most important alliance to emerge from the ashes of that conflict as a new global Cold War began was the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and, once again, people who were very aware of their connections across and around the planet nonetheless found some measure of security and stability in conceiving of their position vis-à-vis an Atlantic world.

Contemporary analogies to the contrary, and despite a plethora of new courses and degree programs, centers, doctoral dissertations, articles, and books that appear to support Armitage's claim, an Atlanticist approach to the early modern history of western Europe, western Africa, and the Americas is far from ubiquitous: though some scholars continue to teach and research primarily in terms of explicitly nationalist or regional paradigms and neglect the larger perspective and comparative approaches of Atlanticists, others object that the early modern world could not be contained in either practical or conceptual terms by the Atlantic rim. Both of these volumes make effective arguments against such naysayers, illustrating the ways in which seventeenth-century Englishmen and -women and eighteenth-century Britons physically and mentally constructed an Atlantic world.

The twentieth-century Anglo-American Atlantic world gained much of its meaning and significance in opposition to a readily definable other, whether a fascist or a communist threat, and the shared characteristics and identities celebrated by Anglo-Americans emerged from this crucible of conflict. As the essays in both these books illustrate, similar processes were at work in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the English and then the British and their colonists defined themselves externally against the Spanish and the French and internally against Native Americans and then Africans. Encountering others around the Atlantic rim—from Ireland to the Chesapeake to Barbados to West Africa—enabled the English and their colonists to develop different yet intimately related English, British, and North American identities.

Robert Appelbaum and John Wood Sweet's volume, subtitled *Jamestown and the Making of the North Atlantic World*, comprises an engaging study of the remarkably varied ways in which the Atlantic identity of one fragile community coalesced in ideas and experiences forged in England and in societies around and even beyond the northern Atlantic rim. As many of the essayists remind readers, Elizabethan and Jacobean England was a society that

knew about the expulsion of the Moors from Spain, traded with North Africa, invested in the Levant Company, and followed and even participated in the war between the Holy Roman Empire and the Ottoman Empire. All of these experiences of a larger world informed English colonization of Virginia, the manner in which that colonization proceeded, and the ways that colonists and Englishmen and -women began to think of an Atlantic world that united mother country and colony as much as it separated them.

The editors and many of the contributors to these two volumes share an understanding of the Atlantic world's origins in the European imagination; J. H. Elliott notes in his afterword to *The British Atlantic World* that the Atlantic "began its historical existence as a European lake" (234). In their focus on English and British conceptions and experiences of that world, the authors are thus primarily concerned with how residents of and colonists from the British Isles experienced and constructed a particular Atlantic. Elliott laments the limitations of work conceived of in nationalist terms, and his own comparison of Spanish and British Atlantic history underlines the value of comparative approaches. Yet these volumes indicate that even within English and British Atlantic history, nationalist typologies need not constrain an Atlantic perspective. In Appelbaum and Sweet's collection, Lisa Blansett, Alden L. Vaughan, James Horn, Appelbaum, and Jess Edwards all enlarge the Anglo-American perspective to consider how Native Americans came to conceive of this Atlantic World and some of the ways in which they informed the evolving white British construction. Blansett's inventive reading of John Smith's map of Virginia illustrates how the rendering reflected not only European preconceptions but also the geographical knowledge and mastery of Native Americans, their beliefs, their culture, and their uses of the natural environment. Vaughan takes Powhatan agency to a higher level by examining the more than two dozen people who traveled to early-seventeenth-century England either as official envoys or as guests of the Virginia Company, and he explores the effects that their reports had on native attitudes toward the English and a wider Atlantic world that they were only beginning to comprehend. Horn explores conflicts over land in Virginia and illuminates a clash between such radically different conceptions of territory and sovereignty that "neither side was capable of comprehending the basis of the other's claims" (47), which made violence inevitable.

Pompa Banerjee and Susan Iwanisziw range further afield, illustrating how an emerging English conception of a North Atlantic world was fed by experiences of and connections with areas beyond the Atlantic rim. Banerjee's engaging analysis of Smith's experiences in the Holy Roman Empire's war against the Ottoman Turks shows how his accounts of these experiences were woven into his experiences in and writings about Virginia: if Smith helped construct an English Atlantic world, he did so in ways informed by experiences of worlds and others beyond its geographic and imaginative limits. Iwanisziw's examination of the portrayal of Morocco in contemporary English plays illustrates that as Englishmen and -women defined themselves and their Atlantic world in opposition to Spaniards and their Spanish Atlantic they were more than willing to reach outside the North Atlantic and beyond Christianity for allies.

In Armitage and Michael J. Braddick's volume, Joyce E. Chaplin offers a similar comparative context for an English and British Atlantic world. In a fascinating essay on the development of race, she compellingly argues that, on the one hand, the English imitated Iberian attitudes and practice in their attitudes toward Africans, while, on the other hand, the English developed their own markedly different ideas about Native Americans. Yet apart from the plea for more comparative work with which Elliott draws this volume to a conclusion, the remaining essays are rather less comparative than those in Appelbaum and

Sweet's collection. Building on a summer institute at the Folger Library, *Envisioning an English Empire* focuses on the brave new world imagined by the English as they first settled Jamestown, allowing for wide-ranging speculation about how an Atlantic world was first constructed, in concrete and abstract terms, and the non-English influences on that process.

The chronological sweep of Armitage and Braddick's volume is altogether greater, and the somewhat more historiographical essays constitute a rather different approach to understanding the nature and construction of a British Atlantic between 1500 and 1800. The focus is far more internal to a British North Atlantic with less sense of outside influences, perhaps because as an English and then a British construction of the Atlantic world matured it became ever more focused on the world of the British Isles and its mainland American and Caribbean colonies. Though trade, smuggling, and warfare regularly drew Britons beyond their own Atlantic, the British North Atlantic became an ever more self-assured construction.

Based on a seminar and subsequent conference at Harvard's Atlantic History Seminar, Armitage and Braddick's voyage across a very British Atlantic employs an ambitiously thematic approach that works quite well. With the exceptions of Bernard Bailyn's prefatory essay on context, Armitage's theoretical first chapter, and Elliott's concluding plea for comparative work, the essays in this collection each deal with diverse themes and concepts such as class, economy, gender, migration, politics, race, and religion. It is a rewarding approach, and together these essays work to support the editors' conviction that the British Atlantic "is not an arbitrary creation of historical scholarship but corresponds to real networks of social, political, and economic connection in the past" (3). Thus, for example, Alison Games elaborates on how migration and the movements of people across and within the domains ruled from London helped to create a British identity. Keith Wrightson elucidates the ways in which shifting conceptions of social orders and the relationships between them in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England played out in very different ways in far-flung imperial possessions, producing starkly different yet intimately related articulations of class all around Britain's Atlantic world. In an essay dealing with the ways in which Britain's Atlantic project affected and was affected by religion, Carla Gardina Pestana argues that, though a Protestant agenda initially gave impetus to this endeavor, as the British Atlantic world assumed shape, its Protestant character became increasingly "multivalent and decentralized" (87). The result is a compellingly eclectic array of approaches to the creation of a British Atlantic world, and the reader gains an impression of the pervasive nature of this world and its effects on all aspects of British and colonial society.

Armitage and Braddick's excellent collection of essays has considerable utility for courses on Britain's early modern North Atlantic world. Elliott ends the volume with a cautionary reminder of a larger context and proposes the existence of three different Atlantics: a northern European Atlantic, a Spanish Atlantic, and a Luso-Atlantic linking Lisbon to Brazil. It was only in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Elliott contends, that the African slave trade helped merge these Atlantics, and he argues for a larger and more comparative Atlantic framework. A Braudelian perspective on the Atlantic would support Elliott, yet, with the exception of some work on the slave trade, few historians of northern Europe and North America have comprehended a subequatorial Atlantic as part of the world they study.

If Europeans were the first to conceive of an Atlantic world, Britons conceived their Atlantic rather differently than Swedes, Dutch, French, Germans, Spanish, and Portuguese. And over time the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean and the Americas and West Africans

constructed their own sense of an Atlantic world and their relationship with it. Some of the most exciting future research is likely to explore how these various Atlantics came together and the effects on the rather more tangible economic, social, and political networks that united the communities of the Atlantic rim. Such work can operate within nationalist historiography, and work on the slave trade and on seafarers has shown some of the potential of such an approach. Given that so many British seafarers spent only part of their lives aboard ship, one can only wonder at how their experiences in the long weeks on the West African coast, in Caribbean and North American ports, and in a variety of ports outside the British Atlantic affected their sense of the Atlantic world and their place within it. When such men abandoned the sea and began new lives ashore in Britain or its colonies, they surely carried with them remarkably rich experiences of the diversity of many Atlantic worlds: if they defined themselves and their society and culture in British Atlantic terms, they did so in the context of their often-extensive knowledge of non-British Atlantic worlds.

It is difficult to conceive of a comprehensive Braudelian history of the Atlantic that transcends national histories and, in fact, it is hard to imagine comprehensive histories of even one European nation's Atlantic world. Nonetheless these collections very effectively demonstrate how thinking about Atlantic worlds can illuminate our understanding of how Europeans, Africans, and the peoples of the Americas came to make sense of their first encounters and subsequent relationships as their pre-Columbian worlds exploded.