



Atlantic Constraints and Global Opportunities

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Abstract

What makes a geographic region a logical unit of historical analysis? Historians are products of disciplinary conventions that classify jobs and professional organizations first by place (generally a nation or a continental landmass) and then by historical period; thus place is often the starting point in historical research. For historians of the early modern period, anachronistic political boundaries can be confining because early borders (where they existed or were acknowledged) were porous, contested, and shifting; historians find themselves struggling to write non-national histories within national paradigms. One strategy to escape this challenge can be seen in the growing field of Atlantic history, which takes as its unit of analysis not a single state but rather the four continents surrounding the Atlantic and the ocean itself. Atlantic approaches are greatly in vogue among early modern historians. But might the Atlantic be too small a unit of analysis? To what extent should historians engage with questions about developments within the Atlantic by looking elsewhere around the globe and thereby integrating the Atlantic into a larger global history?

While the migration of commodities and pathogens provides two obvious examples of the virtue of global perspectives, people circulated the globe as extensively as did commodities, and unlike inanimate products they transported their experiences with them. Such globetrotters and the networks they generated and sustained are mainstays of the historiography of Dutch and Portuguese overseas activity, but have had little discernible impact on English scholarship, aside from occasional biographies of exemplary cases.¹ Instead, for the most part they are obscured by an imperial historiography characterized by stark divisions between English ventures in the Atlantic Ocean and elsewhere, and likewise shaped by dichotomies between colonization and trade.² I offer, then, an example from the seventeenth-century English world, and suggest that it is important to consider global ventures in different oceanic basins in tandem, as indeed they were experienced by contemporaries who ventured among them.

It is a commonplace among historians of early America that English colonization on the American continent was shaped and constrained by prior English experience in Ireland.³ The Elizabethan conquest that commenced in 1565 thus marks a starting point for English Atlantic history.

But if the Atlantic is often a logical unit of analysis, it is also an artificial unit of analysis, yoking together some places that might not be happily joined and segregating others which might shed light on each other. The emphasis on the conquest of Ireland directs our attention to two particular features of English expansion further west in the North Atlantic. First, it privileges colonization as a style of interaction and, second, it distracts us from other places where future visitors to America similarly gained valuable overseas experiences. The English envisioned many different possible paths for the western Atlantic. First Atlantic forays were trade enterprises, characterized in the Caribbean by the theft of foreign ships and goods and on the American mainland by the clumsy exchange of commodities.⁴ That colonization proved ultimately to be a defining trait of English ventures in the Atlantic should not obscure the importance of trade in the first century.

Once we restore the importance of trade to early English ventures in the North Atlantic, we can start to appreciate the extent to which there were competing styles of engagement. Colonization then becomes an outcome requiring explanation, not a simple assertion of fact. The English who traveled outside of England had a range of experiences not limited to conquest and colonization. Many of the men who subsequently appeared in the western Atlantic first ventured east of England. They served as soldiers, for example, fighting on the continent during the Thirty Years War. This military background was crucial for numerous colonial governors.⁵ In the Mediterranean thousands of English people found their first significant experience with large-scale, long-distance trade in an alien and inhospitable environment. To thrive as both traders and travelers they learned the urgency of accommodation, the need for flexibility, the necessity of giving the appearance of adopting local mores.

Colonial historians' emphasis on the Irish model sets up an expectation of a certain type of behavior by the English in America. But many colonial figures actually had extensive experience in the Mediterranean before venturing to America. For some of these men, a sojourn in the Mediterranean was the first experience outside of Europe in a place where religion and nationality made one vulnerable. If this were the crucial overseas training ground, then perhaps we should attend more closely to the ways in which Mediterranean ventures shaped American ones. The Mediterranean was a school for dissimulation. These skills stand in contrast to those acquired in Ireland, where the English behaved brashly, aggressively, strutting and swaggering their way through the barely subdued kingdom.

At the time of the first permanent settlement in North America, the English had other, relevant, useful, viable models, including those acquired in almost 30 years of trade in the Mediterranean and elsewhere. Although historians might limit themselves to a single oceanic basin, inhabitants of the early modern world did not. Looking at North America solely in an Atlantic context erases these connections. This parochial view makes it

impossible to recapture lost conceptualizations of the world and the place of the English within that world at a time and in a place where they were weak and vulnerable. Experience had taught the English precisely how to comport themselves within such a power dynamic. The Atlantic is too small a region to explain the complexity of the processes at work, much less the outcomes.

Notes

Alison Games teaches in the Department of History at Georgetown University. She is the author of *Migration and the Origins of the English Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1999) and several articles on different aspects of seventeenth-century Atlantic history. She is currently working on a book titled *Agents of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1558-1660*.

¹ For the Portuguese, see A. J. R. Russell-Wood, *A World on the Move: The Portuguese in Africa, Asia, and America, 1415-1808* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1992, 1993). For two biographies of Englishmen with globetrotting experience, see M. Strachan, *Sir Thomas Roe 1581-1644: A Life* (Salisbury, Wilts., Michael Russell, 1989) or W. S. Powell, *John Pory, 1572-1636: The Life and Letters of a Man of Many Parts* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

² K. Andrews, *Trade, Plunder, and Settlement: Maritime Enterprise and the Genesis of the British Empire, 1480-1630* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984) offers one example of a book that tried to connect different types of enterprises, but the model has not generally been followed, particularly for later periods. Instead, the pattern has been to different geographic regions of English activity around the globe discretely, even within a single oceanic basin: separate essays, for example, explore English activity in the Chesapeake, New England, the Caribbean, Western Africa, Asia (primarily south Asia), Ireland, the Middle Colonies, and the Lower South in N. Canny, ed., *The Origins of Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998). Economic and maritime historians are generally more inclined to integrate these different places.

³ N. Canny, "The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America," *William and Mary Quarterly* 30, 1973, pp. 575-598; D. B. Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1966); J. Muldoon, "The Indian as Irishman," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 111, 1975, pp. 267-289. Quinn's, Canny's, and Muldoon's collective call for a reconceptualized historiography of English expansion has been enthusiastically answered, as the recent first volume of *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, N. Canny, ed., *The Origins of Empire* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998) with its rich exploration of the internal conquest of the British Isles makes clear. For an acceptance of the Irish model as fact, see Kathleen Brown's discussion of Virginia's gender frontier—which she suggests commenced in Ireland—in K. M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 32-36. The most persuasive case for the Irish connection can be made for Roanoke: see especially K. O. Kupperman, *Roanoke: The Abandoned Colony* (New York, Rowman and Allenheld, 1984).

⁴ Exchanges of commodities occurred whenever mariners landed on shore to replenish their supplies and see what goods the country had to offer. European contemporaries referred to these exchanges as trifling, although with commodities came diseases which could have a catastrophic impact on indigenous people. See J. Axtell, "At the Water's Edge: Trading in the Sixteenth Century," in J. Axtell, *After Columbus: Essays in the Ethnohistory of Colonial North America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1988). Predatory raids of ships and ports characterized English activity in the Caribbean well into the seventeenth century: consider, for example, Francis Drake's raid on Nombre de Dios in 1572.

⁵ Thomas Dale (Virginia), John Smith (Virginia), and Nathaniel Butler (Bermuda and Providence) were all colonial governors in the first half of the seventeenth century whose prior experience in continental wars made them particularly attractive to overseas companies looking for men to regulate settlements and trade factories.

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