

Book Review

Trevor Burnard, *The Atlantic in World History, 1490-1830*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. ix + 320. Paperback: \$30.02.

This volume is one of the many Trevor Burnard has published on the subfield of Atlantic History. He adopts two main perspectives of historical writing, namely: the transnational perspective and the *longue durée* perspective. The former sees Burnard analyze historical developments and draw connections across the four continents of Europe, Africa, North America, and South America, where the Atlantic Ocean enjoined them, hence the use of the term “Atlantic World.” On the latter, the volume covers a time period of over three centuries, from the late fifteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, a historical period accredited with birthing the “modern world” (ix-x).

This volume is a survey of the subfield of Atlantic History, tracing its emergence to the early 1990s. The volume is organized into four main parts, of which there are fifteen chapters in total. In part one, Burnard provides the geographical and temporal parameters of the subfield. He posits that the Atlantic Ocean was more than just a geographical feature, rather, for over three centuries, it was a zone of exchange and interchange, circulation, and transmission. Atlantic History thus encompasses studying more about the local, regional, and transnational and intercontinental connections of the time. Studying history in that way allows us to transition from older Eurocentric narratives toward “polycentric” history, including the contributions of all the communities involved (3-4). In terms of dating, Burnard argues that Atlantic History began with the late fifteenth century sea voyages of Christopher Columbus, and ended in the 1830s, when the Atlantic Revolutions brought independence for countries in South America and the Caribbean although some elements of Atlantic contacts continued, especially slavery in the Americas (6 and 15-16).

In part two, the volume begins with the Columbian Exchange, named after Columbus’ sea voyages, leading to the “accidental” discovery of the New World, and the subsequent transfer of peoples, ideas, diseases, and materials. The voyages led to among other things, Western European colonization, and thereafter, made the Atlantic a “highway” for the aforementioned transfers (39-41). European settlement was

associated with a series of injustices, including dispossession of land from Native Americans, starting in San Salvador, where Columbus first arrived. Using the principle of *res nullius*, anchored under Roman Law, the Europeans claimed that land remained a common property until put to use. Other Native Americans also faced elements of enslavement in the Americas and in Europe (41-43). Initial European contacts with West Africa involved trade in natural commodities, especially gold. Later, African slaves became the main trade commodity. Over twelve million Africans were transported across the Atlantic Ocean (44-47 and 68-70).

Environmental issues also feature significantly in this volume, one of which was the spread of diseases. There were health problems for the Spanish Conquistadors, many of whom suffered and perished from diarrhea, emanating from unsafe drinking water. Cramps, dehydration, and famine also led to numerous casualties. Old World diseases, such as malaria, smallpox, measles, and influenza, also contributed to the depopulation of Indian communities. These, alongside those who died in wars of resistance, saw the Indian population reduced from fifty-four million in 1492 CE to 13.5 million in 1570 CE (46-53). Commodity production was also key in the Americas, of which silver and sugar were the major commodities. The former, was first discovered at Potosi (present-day Bolivia). Sugar was mainly cultivated in the Caribbean plantations. The production and transportation of both commodities was an essential component of the so-called “Iberian Lake,” – connecting the Europe, Africa, and the New World (59-62). Attempts by Indian communities to resist European intrusion and rule were ruthlessly crushed, such as the famous Pueblo Revolt of 1860 in northern Mexico (65 and 82-83).

Our understanding of Atlantic history will be incomplete, as the author argues, if we exclude women’s experiences, using a gender perspective. The European settlers transferred their patriarchal systems to the Americas and, whereas the Europeans enjoyed married life, the same was denied to African slaves, whose marriages, where allowed, were broken at will by slave holders. Most slave holders also sexually exploited and violated female slaves. For instance, Thomas Thistlewood, a British slave holder in Jamaica, claimed in his memoirs to have had sex with 138 different women in 37 years, mostly through rapes (104-108).

The Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries also connected the Atlantic world societies. The demands for independence in the New World, and the removal of an authoritarian monarchy in France, marked the birth of the “modern world.” The Revolutions generated new ideas on how to run governments, and put Enlightenment ideas into practice, including pushing for personal liberty, natural rights, and the abolition of slavery (113-132).

The plantation was a key institution in the making of the Atlantic World. Burnard posits that the plantation system, which was conceived in Europe, eventually became a global complex. It relied on European capital, initial indentured European labor, African

and Indian labor, and supplied its products to the Old World, enriching the Western European empires. Plantations were also “melting pots,” and multi-ethnic complexes, bringing together people from the four Atlantic world continents. Many of these were African slaves, who, subjected to inhumane working conditions, ended up with shorter life spans, hence the term “killing fields” (237-245).

The last part of the volume revisits some of the themes covered in the early chapters, and ones that many Atlantic World Historians often grapple with. First is the theme of ‘war, violence, and conflict.’ Violence began at the point of contact between Europeans and Native Americans, and continued up to the age of independence. There was also violence in capturing African slaves, across the Middle Passage, and in the plantations. The spread of Christianity was also associated with violence, especially as Roman Catholic missionaries in the Americas often enforced religious orthodoxy, the so-called “The Inquisition.” European pirates on the Atlantic were often a source of conflict, compelling European states to declare piracy a ‘capital crime’ (251-258). The territorial Seven Years War, between Britain and France, from 1756 to 1763, is a classic example of warfare in the Atlantic World (261-263).

The role of European merchants is also widely studied. The merchants, mostly from humble backgrounds, played a key role in transporting goods and people in an often-risky business environment (269-285). Such movements contributed to the process of globalization. Burnard argues against notions that ‘globalization’ began during the late fifteenth century, following the discovery of the Americas. Rather, this must be traced to the early eighteenth century, when the Atlantic World became a definable economic entity, and developed a ‘seaborne culture’ for the four continents. Music and musical instruments, such as the banjo, were a key aspect of such Atlantic exchanges (297-302).

The Atlantic in World History makes a very important contribution to the subfield of Atlantic History. Burnard has extensively and successfully used the available primary and secondary sources. The former includes maps and other rare paintings. The various books and journal articles consulted also enrich the academic quality and contextualization of the book. The volume’s transnational and transtemporal perspectives will also appeal to a wide range of scholars. This being a survey, however, means that some of the themes covered lack a deeper level of analysis and coverage, as the author had to cover as many themes as they could. That shortfall aside, this volume is a must read for scholars working in the following subfields: Atlantic history, world history, imperial history, cultural history, environmental history, economic history, and the history of globalization. They will all find use for Burnard’s book and must include it in their collections.

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