

Atlantic history: what and why?

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One of the discernible trends in the historiography of recent decades – especially in that which concerns the early modern centuries – has been the emergence of a literature that describes itself as Atlantic History. This paper seeks to identify positive and negative reasons why the once-popular history of exploration and discovery has given way to this new subject, it identifies some fresh meanings that may be drawn from some well-known sources when they are reappraised in an Atlantic context, and it suggests some possibly fruitful lines of enquiry that would lead to a better understanding of how an Atlantic world was fashioned and functioned during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Finally, the paper draws a distinction between Atlantic history and Global history and suggests that the latter is a subject that belongs more properly to the nineteenth and subsequent centuries.

It is relevant to pose the question – Atlantic history: what and why? – because an increasing number of historians, several research centres, and many conferences in both Europe and North America are dedicated to the study of what is being called ‘Atlantic history’. Most scholars involved with these enterprises are specialists of the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, and all of them are concerned with aspects of exploration, discovery, voluntary and involuntary migration, overseas settlement and trade. If anything unites them it is that, in the words of J. H. Elliott, all are interested in the comparative history of colonization in an Atlantic context¹. Since those committed to the project of Atlantic History can, to this modest extent, agree over their purpose, it might be more appropriate for me to pose a sequence of more refined questions: what is novel about this subject? Why Atlantic history rather than global history? What are its parameters? How can we account for the increasing popularity of Atlantic history over the past decades?

It seems logical to proceed by first addressing the fourth question and, in doing so, I will allude to what I see as the positive as well as negative explanations for this upsurge of interest in what remains an ill-defined subject. All such appraisals of what might have influenced scholars’ research preferences are, by definition, personal and impressionistic and what I say may therefore differ considerably from what others think about these issues. However, it strikes me, although it is nowhere acknowledged and is sometimes denied, that Fernand Braudel’s imaginative depiction of a Mediterranean world at the close of the sixteenth century spurred

several historians of Atlantic colonization to enquire if anything analogous could be said of the Atlantic during the centuries when that ocean was being mastered by several maritime peoples of western Europe. Soon after the appearance, in 1949, of Braudel's *La Méditerranée et le monde Méditerranéen*, his concept of a human world being defined by a surrounding sea was being applied to the Atlantic, almost instinctively, by Francophone scholars – notably Pierre and Huguette Chaunu and Charles Verlinden. While this was happening, Braudel's ideas were attaining a cult status in Anglophone academic circles, long before 1973 when the book first appeared in English translation.²

During the years between 1949 and 1973, the term the 'Atlantic world' became more frequently used, if not precisely defined, by English language scholars, many of them seemingly under the spell of Braudel. However, the need to test Braudel's model against actual experience in the Atlantic ocean became unavoidable once historians of Asia (some professed disciples of Braudel, others reacting against western presumptions) argued that the vast Indian ocean, encompassing at least four distinct cultural regions, had been shaped into a 'common geographical space' by indigenous Asian merchants who had been plying their trade from the Persian gulf to the coast of Japan long before 1498, when Vasco Da Gama became the first European to sail into those waters by the Cape of Good Hope.³ Such assertions, backed by empirical evidence, further challenged historians of Europe to speculate whether the Atlantic had also served to facilitate commercial contacts between peoples who remained divided religiously and culturally.

The second factor which, in my opinion, brought western historians to conceive of the Atlantic as a body of water that facilitated communication between peoples of different cultures was the renewed interest both in slavery as an institution and in the Atlantic slave trade which sustained this institution for much of its existence in the Americas. This interest, which also began to flourish in the second half of the twentieth century, was an outgrowth of the American Civil Rights movement and of the associated demand for the establishment of Black Studies as an academic discipline. This was, in the first instance, a North American phenomenon, and three of the many positive features of the New Black History convinced historians that they should consider the slave trade as an Atlantic phenomenon. The first such feature, which might be termed the 'Roots' syndrome, persuaded scholars to relate the history of the black population in the United States to the history and culture of the societies of West Africa where their ancestors had been inducted into slavery. Secondly, scholars came to identify the history of the British Caribbean (which, after 1776, came to enjoy a separate political existence from the United States) as having been closely related to that of the southern mainland colonies surrounding the Chesapeake Bay and extending to the Carolinas. This connection was, in the opinion of Jack Greene, so close as to justify his contention that the colonial experience of these two areas impacted on the values of the United States more profoundly than did the history of New England.⁴ The third factor that brought historians of the slave trade to situate their subject in an Atlantic context was that they came to appreciate that the transfer of slaves from West Africa to North America was but part of a larger human movement that was mobilized by Portuguese and Dutch, as well as by British and American, merchants and navigators. The more deeply historians investigated this subject the more they appreciated that this conveyance of human cargo had made an even greater contribution to the population stock of much of central and south America than to that of the United States.

This summary suggests that the first body of English-language historical scholarship to be conceived and presented as Atlantic History was that concerning the slave trade, and the first book to win universal acclaim within this rich corpus of scholarship was Philip D. Curtin's, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: a Census*.⁵ Curtin's book proved influential principally for two reasons. First, it provided a stimulus to continuing work of an ever more sophisticated nature on the slave trade conducted by all European and Euro-American carriers, from all sources in Africa, and to all destinations in the Americas. At the same time it brought historians of European emigration to the Americas to confront similar questions concerning what Bernard Bailyn has termed the 'peopling' of America.⁶ As they did so, these historians came to appreciate that the movement of white people to British North America (including the West Indies) was, like the slave migration, more culturally and linguistically diverse, and on a far greater scale (especially during the seventeenth century) than was previously thought. Again, as with the study of the slave trade, historians of white emigration to British North America were inspired to compare this migration flow in scale and composition with that which went to make up the populations of New France and of Iberian America. Historians also began to relate this transatlantic movement of peoples from Africa and Europe to migrations within those two continents.⁷

Another obvious stimulus for early-modern historians to consider the process of colonization in a broader perspective came when scholars in other disciplines, notably anthropology and literature, generated a wide academic (and even a popular) interest in what they described as 'Cultural encounters'. This literature was obviously concerned with the past but it was ahistorical to the extent that it seemed to proceed from the assumption (and in some instances seemed determined to prove) that what could be documented concerning relations between European colonists and various Australasian and African peoples during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had held true also for relations between Europeans and both African and Native American peoples in previous centuries. This literature also proved challenging for historians because, in many instances, the only evidence cited in support of some of the boldest of assertions were occasional letters from explorers, or texts from what used to be known as 'creative literature'.⁸

The more historians queried the methods of other scholars the more they were obliged to reconsider their own sources to see if they contained discernible common responses of western peoples, whether Protestant or Catholic, elite or lowly, male or female, to the increasing number of 'alien' peoples to whom Europeans had been exposed, from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. As they reconsidered such evidence, it became increasingly clear that western perceptions of most Asiatic peoples during the early modern centuries were, for the most part, a repetition of those that had been formed on the basis of imperfect information during the medieval centuries. Therefore, what was increasingly described as European encounters with 'the other' during the early modern period came to be accepted as a largely Atlantic phenomenon, and the emerging historical literature on the subject of encounter was therefore principally based on what happened in the Atlantic basin.

While these three academic developments may have encouraged some historians to treat the history of colonization in a comparative Atlantic context, they certainly compelled them to reflect upon what historians of colonization had been attempting, as well as upon the nature and bias of the evidence that they had been using. This reappraisal forced them to recognize

teleological prejudice even in historians' reconfigurations of the past, and this admission ultimately brought historians themselves to accept the usefulness and propriety of employing the concept of an 'Atlantic world' to provide an organizing framework for their reappraisal of well known evidence.

The first anomaly that came to light from this reassessment of evidence was that twentieth century historians of colonization, and their nineteenth-century predecessors, had been treating exploration and discovery as an extension of the national and confessional rivalries that had vexed European society from early modern times to the mid-twentieth century. This older scholarship had produced many fine books on the origin and formation of particular overseas empires of several European powers, but these accounts, which had once gone unchallenged, were exposed as deficient on several grounds. Authors were now charged with having been Euro-centric, and with gullibly accepting the special pleadings of successive adventurers that every colonial endeavour they had undertaken was with the purpose of furthering the dynastic ambitions of potential royal patrons against their 'national' rivals. As the evidence was reassessed it also became clear that earlier writers had failed to acknowledge that it was so many people from Extremadura, or the Basque country, or Bristol, or Brittany, or Normandy, or Holland rather than from Spain, or France, or England or the United Provinces who promoted European expansion into the Atlantic and further afield. And it was now also realized that the previous historians of colonization had not recognized the extent to which the maritime communities of Western Europe shared common knowledge and prejudice, and depended upon, and learned from, each other even while they competed for scarce resources and were divided culturally and religiously.

These criticisms, which are still being formulated, amount to a demand that the history of colonization as we know it, be reformulated in an Atlantic context. This means, of course that what is now recommended, and is actually being proceeded with, is not, as Bernard Bailyn would have it, a completely new subject but is rather an outgrowth from the older history of exploration and discovery with the signposts still recognizable if not always pointing in the same direction.⁹ In addition, as with all historical revisions, the more sources are reassessed the more it emerges that scholars of the older generation were not as naive as they have sometimes been represented. To illustrate this proposition I will introduce readers to some sources that warrant reappraisal, beginning with some texts by Sir Walter Raleigh. A reconsideration of these will illustrate how well-known sources can be read differently today than they were by earlier historians of exploration and discovery.

Raleigh, his half brother Humphrey Gilbert, and their associates, came from a seafaring background in the English west country and they took advantage of the collapse of relations between England and Spain during the 1580s and 1590s to elevate their desire for booty to the level of national and religious interest. Therefore, most of the pamphlets that Raleigh wrote or sponsored during the course of a hectic life portrayed his actions, and those of his associates, as serving these higher causes. Thus, his description of the final battle of *The Revenge*, captained by Sir Richard Grenville, fought at the Azores with 'an armada of the King of Spain' was used by Raleigh not only to illustrate the 'true valour' of a brave English Protestant gallant, who stood alone against Spanish 'ostentation' even when he was hopelessly out-numbered and out-gunned, but it was also cited by Raleigh to prove that God had really fought on the side of Grenville to hinder the Spaniards in striving after 'unlawful and ungodly rule and empery'.

This was the stuff of propaganda that appealed to English historians of later generations who dedicated themselves to tracing the origin of their Empire as much as it did to trenchant Protestants of Raleigh's own generation. What the earlier historians tended to downplay, and what seems obvious today, is that Grenville had been forced to stand alone because the several accompanying English ships under Lord Thomas Howard had fled on first hearing of the approaching Spanish *flota*. Neither did the older accounts mention that all these English ships had been forced to flee from these Iberian-dominated islands only because a war was being fought between England and Spain. Otherwise, they would have enjoyed the same freedom as any European navigators to use the Azores as a staging post on the Atlantic where they might effect the repair of their vessels, take on board some ballast and water, and allow the hundreds of their crews who had been taken ill at sea an opportunity to convalesce. Older accounts of this episode also tended to disregard both Raleigh's acknowledgement of the subsequent fair treatment of those taken prisoner by the Spanish, and the conversations between the English prisoners and their captors, including the efforts of an Irishman Maurice FitzJohn, 'son of old John of Desmond a notable traitor ...to persuade' the English captives 'to serve the King of Spain, by promising to triple their pay and to give them 'the exercise of the true Catholic religion, and safety of their souls to all'.¹⁰

Raleigh's *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empyre of Guiana*, published in 1596, was also regularly cited by older historians of empire because it too was written in a stridently propagandistic tone with Raleigh stating repeatedly that his purpose in seeking Guiana and the fabled City of Monoa was to secure 'a better Indies for her Majesty than the King of Spain hath any', and to bring honour as well as profit to Queen Elizabeth and 'the English nation'. Repeated failures by the Spaniards to reach Guiana constituted proof for Raleigh that this land, 'that hath yet her maidenhead' had been by God 'reserved for this English nation'. Consistently, throughout the text, Raleigh emphasized how this one potential success would make it possible for England to overtake the might of Spain in Europe as well as in the New World, with London becoming 'a contraction house [*casa de Contraccion*, or custom house] of more receipt in Guiana, than there is now in Civil [Seville] for the West Indies'. The text was also peppered with reference to the cruelties inflicted by the Spaniards upon the native populations of both the West Indies and Peru, and to the encouragement which it had given these people to learn that the English had, in 1588, inflicted an exemplary defeat of the Spaniards, whom the American populations had previously thought invincible.

This text again appealed to authors wishing to extol the virtues of Empire and to praise the achievements of one who, almost from the moment of his death, became identified with English prowess and steadfastness against its 'natural' enemies. These, however, failed to note that Raleigh and his associates had first come to know of Guiana and Manoa, and the possibilities they offered, from Spaniards with whom they associated, and that more precise (and, as it transpired, no less dubious) information came to them through their interrogation of native Americans most of whom had had dealings with Spanish adventurers before the arrival of the English. Also, while Raleigh enjoined upon Sir Charles Howard and Sir Robert Cecil, to whom he dedicated his text, to keep 'secret' the map of the area which he had commissioned lest 'by a draught thereof all may be prevented by other nations', he acknowledged that he himself had learned much about those regions, both from Spanish

reports and from the writings of André Thevet, the French explorer. This again points to the fact that all fresh information as well as false leads concerning the Atlantic and its resources quickly became knowledge that was common to all European explorers, even when the monarchs, from whom they sought patronage, were at war.

Again, in stereotypical fashion, Raleigh contrasted the fair 'usage' accorded to the native population by the English with the tyranny of Spaniards, most graphically when he contended that, to his knowledge, none of his 'company ... by violence or otherwise, ever knew any of their women' even those who were 'very young and excellent favoured' who had come among them 'without deceit, stark naked'. While thus claiming credit for English Christian forbearance, Raleigh did not deny the charge of one *cacique* that the English and the Spaniards 'came both for one errant, and that both sought but to sack and spoil them'. At one point, Raleigh warned against assailing the religion of the natives before the English had the opportunity to teach them 'better' but this fitted uneasily with his stated ambition to emulate the achievements of Cortez in Mexico and Pizarro in Peru so that 'the shining glory' of [his] conquest [would] eclipse all those so far extended beams of the Spanish nation'. This purpose seemed, in turn, to be inconsistent with Raleigh's assertion that the English had always been motivated by the quest for 'honour' as well as 'abundance', although he did acknowledge that the English 'common soldier [would] fight for gold and pay himself instead of pence with plates [of gold] half a foot broad'.¹¹

Raleigh returned to the question of motivation in his *History of the World* where he had the opportunity, in his prison cell, to reflect on his own past career, as well as that of all humanity. There, he concluded that 'discourse of Magnanimity, of National Virtue, or Religion, of Liberty and whatsoever else [which] hath been wont to move and encourage virtuous men, hath no force at all with the common soldier in comparison with spoil and riches'. Instead, he conceded that 'our English nation' had fought against the Spanish in the Indies, frequently at impossible disadvantages, 'in hope of their rials of plate and pistolets which had they been put to it upon the like disadvantages in Ireland and in any poor country they would have turned their pieces or pikes against their commanders contending that they had been brought without reason to the butchery and slaughter'.¹²

This rereading of these Raleigh texts has drawn a distinction between rhetoric that characterized all propaganda pieces by authors of whatever nation who were seeking patronage for speculative overseas ventures, and the honest acknowledgement of the frequently crude measures that had been, and would be, required to achieve purely material ends. Ultimately, as has been suggested, all such adventurers recognized that they would have to rely on their own resources and they had no compunction about working in consort with the professed enemy if this was the best means of turning their adventures to personal profit. Also, as we have seen, all such adventurers took such a close interest in what their rivals were about that practically no fresh information concerning new lands, islands, passages or opportunities could remain secret for long. In this sense, as was already said, all European voyagers on the Atlantic shared a common information pool, even while striving for advantage over their rivals. It is also true that they were the victims of shared pools of misinformation that sometimes spurred them to efforts which we know to have been hopeless.

The classic example of how an expedition could proceed from a false premise was the first Atlantic crossing by Columbus. He set about his task of getting to Asia by sailing westwards

into the Atlantic because he had been convinced of its feasibility by the gross underestimation of the world's circumference made by the makers of globes and maps. Scientific errors continued to give mariners false hopes, until well into the seventeenth century, notably in the quest for both Northwest and Northeast passages to Asia. Navigators of several nations pursued these passages assiduously, and were able to persuade practical businessmen to finance their expeditions, because Ortelius and his imitators had depicted such free flowing passages of water, south of the north pole, in their otherwise reasonably accurate world maps. Raleigh was possibly led more astray than most by such geographical rumours and conjectures, including that concerning a fabulously wealthy Guiana. It is therefore not at all surprising to find him complain in his *History of the World* of 'the fictions (or let them be called conjectures) painted in maps' where 'geographers in their maps described those countries whereof, as yet, there is made no true discovery, that is, either by leaving some part blank, or by inserting the land of pigmies, rocks of loadstones with headlands, bays, great rivers and other particulars agreeable to common report' which sometimes misled 'such discoverers as rashly believe them' until they were shown by 'experience' to be 'contrary to truth'. In the meantime, he complained, such liberties and conceits of 'describers ... drew upon the publishers, either some angry curses, or well deserved scorn'.¹³

Lest it be thought that only evidence concerning English adventurers overseas give us occasion to reinterpret European exploration in an Atlantic context I will now introduce readers to the *Itinerario* of Jan Huygen van Linschoten, the famous Dutch reporter on colonization, because he fits precisely with what we said of the pooling and broadcasting of information among those involved with colonization. Linschoten first came to know of the world outside Europe in the service of Vincente da Fonesca, a Portuguese Dominican Archbishop of Goa. His principal concern in reporting his adventures seems to have been to encourage people in the Low Countries to take advantage of the fame and riches that were within the grasp of all who engaged in exploits beyond Europe. However, the insider information that he transmitted to a Dutch reading audience soon gained international currency because versions of his account were printed almost immediately in German and English editions. While most of the text treated Asia, and extolled the enrichment and sexual favours that were available to all westerners who ventured there, he exposed the parasitic character of the European presence in that continent when he acknowledged that the principal ports and trading routes had been well established before the Portuguese arrived there. Thus, in so far as Linschoten attributed anything creative to European adventurers, besides the construction of trading vessels that were capable of passing the Cape of Good Hope, and of forts capable of defending their interests in Asia, it was for charting reliable sailing routes in the Atlantic. These, as he explained, were sufficient to keep vessels within reasonable distance of safe halting places when they traversed the Atlantic on both outward and return journeys to Asia. He also assured his readers that if the recommended routes were followed assiduously in the proper season, ships would have a reasonable chance of keeping to the recommended schedule, which was necessary to avoid storms and calms. Consistent with this, Linschoten attached equal importance to detailed maps of both the island of St Helena and the Azores, as to the charts of Asian port towns, within the portfolio of illustrations which appeared with his text. Interestingly, his *Itinerario* also included an account of the last fight of the *Revenge* as Linschoten had witnessed it from the secure vantage point of a promontory on the Azores.¹⁴

Similar references could be drawn from the compositions of other Continental propagandists of colonization from several countries, but they would lead to the same conclusion that all authors and actors shared the same information, and that fresh discoveries, whether of fishing grounds in the North Atlantic or possible places of exploitation or settlement in warmer climates, did not remain secret for long because of the frequency with which sailors, navigators, mineral refiners, and highly skilled personnel moved from employer to employer and from country to country. Also, as the making of maps, globes, and ultimately atlases, became a commercial business, those involved strove to publish the most up-to-date information, as also did those who printed both original pamphlets on travel and discovery and translations of those which had appeared in foreign countries. And information that was thus casually compiled or distributed was broadcast widely by compilers, such as Richard Hakluyt and Samuel Purchas in England or their counterparts in every country of Continental Europe where there was an established print culture. Thus, for example, the printer who published a rendition of Linschoten's *Itinerario* in the 'English tongue' did so because he was so 'commanded by Master Richard Hakluyt', whose own published works were sent by the English East India company to its overseas factors to 'recreate their spirits with variety of history'.¹⁵

If all European propagandists of colonisation, and all actors in these enterprises, shared a common pool of geographic and ethnographic knowledge, a close reading of texts published in support of exploration and colonisation suggests that their authors of whatever nationality and religion also drew upon the same authorities to justify their involvement in actions that were morally dubious. This proposition runs counter to an older contention that colonists from Catholic societies, notably the French and the Spanish, were ultimately more humane in their treatment of native populations, because of the moral imperative to win converts for Christianity, than were colonists who had been influenced by Calvinist notions of pre-destination, notably the English and the Dutch, who, it is contended, were bound by no such imperative. Such a proposition is now rejected as simplistic because it takes no account of the Portuguese involvement with colonization, because it ignores well-documented Spanish depredations in the West Indies and Peru where there was scant concern for evangelization, and also because it pays no attention to English and Dutch expressions of interest in converting the populations of the New World with whom they came into contact. The orthodoxy towards which we seem to be moving is that the way in which native Americans were treated by Europeans, of whatever nation, was determined principally by such factors as the amenity of the indigenous population to becoming servile subordinates to the colonists, by the economic ambitions of the colonists, and by the resource base in particular places of settlement.

More specifically, the recent reappraisal by Anthony Pagden of the well-documented Spanish self-examination on their moral responsibilities in their colonial endeavours suggests that Aristotle's concept of natural slavery influenced the opinions of even the most scrupulous commentators and actors.¹⁶ No other European society engaged in such soul searching as did the Spanish, but the more articulate sponsors in other European societies were aware of this debate and, in an admittedly less developed fashion, deployed the same arguments and cited the same authorities to justify their actions. Equally important, most European authors seemed to have framed their arguments as if they were writing to a common model. In order to exemplify this I will again look to the texts by Sir Walter Raleigh to which readers have already been introduced.

Raleigh, like all colonists, believed that the actions he was engaged upon could only be justified when consideration was given to the evangelization of indigenous populations, and this explains his commissioning Thomas Hariot and the limner John White during the 1580s to conduct a comprehensive ethnographic study of the population of Roanoke Island.¹⁷ This idea remained with him as he became involved in Guiana, but, on this occasion, time did not permit him to commission any reports because, as he put it, to describe all the birds, plants, and animals he had seen would require as ‘many volumes as those of Generus’, and to detail all the religious customs of the population would require ‘another bundle of decades’. Here, the models he was acknowledging were Conrad Gesner, *Historia animalium*, and Peter Martyr, *De orbo nove ... decades*, but he also cited Pliny’s *Natural History*, André Thevet’s report on Antarctica, and *Cronica del Peru* by Cieza de Leon as reliable guides. The latter, although Spanish, was considered especially apt because de Leon had established, to Raleigh’s satisfaction, that the native population of Peru, and presumably also that of Guiana, believed in the immortality of the soul, worshipped the sun, and had wives and treasure buried with them in their graves. This list of authorities was no different from what any European author, of whatever denomination, might have compiled. Raleigh also admired Thomas Aquinas – ‘not inferior to any man in wit’ — and, while insisting that Aristotle did not enjoy a monopoly on truth, he endorsed Aristotle’s theory on natural slavery and thought it applicable even to his own country where the abolition of slavery during medieval times had left ‘a rake of rogues, cutpurses and other the like trades; slaves in nature though not in law’.¹⁸

While relying upon the authority of the ancients, and of respected European authors of his own time, Raleigh also based his appraisals upon his personal experience and that of revered ancient men in the societies he encountered. But if he sometimes showed himself to be credulous, his interrogations of the elders frequently led him to the desired conclusions because they were made to fit into pre-fabricated models. Thus when, with the aid of an interpreter, he interrogated the King of Aromia, who was allegedly 110 years old, concerning what he knew of the land of Guiana, Raleigh questioned him concerning ‘the state thereof, what sort of commonwealth it was, how governed, and of what strength and policy, how far it extended, and what nations were friends and enemies adjoining, and finally of the distance and way to enter the same’. Then also, when Raleigh conceded to the request of Francis Sparrow that he should remain behind to continue the quest for Guiana, it was because ‘he could describe a country with his pen’, by which Raleigh meant that Sparrow could be relied upon to construct a narrative after an agreed formula.¹⁹

If Raleigh was inspired by the same authorities as other European writers and explorers, if he sought the same information, and if he fashioned his texts to an accepted model, it suggests that we will reach a better understanding of what Europeans attempted and achieved in the Atlantic only when we consult all surviving sources (maps, charts, propaganda literature, and itineraries) by actors of all nationalities rather than considering the achievements of each supposedly national group in isolation. Those who favour Atlantic history thus recommend the writing of a history of exploration, settlement and trade within the Atlantic basin, which is transnational if not post-national.

Some progress towards the writing of such a history has already been made. As a consequence of the investigations of what actors of different nationalities actually knew of the Atlantic we have a better understanding of what all European and Euro-American navigators

of the Atlantic understood of the currents and wind systems of that ocean and their seasonal variation, of the routes that were followed for the pursuit of particular trades or opportunities, of the resting places that mariners used for particular voyages, and of the mutual assistance that sailors provided to each other in moments of stress regardless of nationality or religion. A good deal is also known of the kinds of buildings constructed by Europeans in different locations and for different purposes on the coasts of Africa and the Americas, although more work of a comparative nature needs to be done on this humanly constructed environment.²⁰ Work on the design by Europeans of townscapes and village-scapes is well underway but there is still considerable scope for studying this architectural aspect of human settlement in a comparative context. Geographers, more than historians, have given thought to how the outcome of the best-laid plans of Europeans was ultimately determined by the natural environment.²¹

It will be clear from what has already been said that we now know a great deal of the recruitment by Europeans of a multi-ethnic and multi-national labour force for the Atlantic world they were creating during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Consideration has been given to the contribution made by the communities of sailors, shipbuilders, and dock-workers who enabled the creation of this Atlantic world. However, while some would speak of an Atlantic working class eager to defend customary work practices against innovation, we still need to learn how many people were engaged upon various employments in different places of settlement in the Atlantic basin, and how they came to be in their several locations.²² Most progress in Atlantic history has been made in the realm of trade, but while exemplary studies have been published on how officially recognized trade by merchants who identified with particular nationalities was conducted, we need to know more of such matters as smuggling and piracy.²³ More attention to the role of marginal trading groups such as Jews, Irish Catholics, English Quakers, and merchants from Hanseatic towns is also called for. Such studies would reveal how traders who did not enjoy the full rights of subjects in any of the polities that came to dominate trade on the Atlantic created significant cross hatching between major networks of trade, often from such apparently unpromising places as the Canary Islands or the French West Indies.

All such matters, which must feature on the research agenda of Atlantic history, concern the contribution made by Europeans and Euro-Americans to the shaping of an Atlantic world. This concentration on Europeans is justified because the world that emerged was principally of their conception and Europeans remained its managers until the close of the eighteenth century. However, historians are also increasingly conscious that Europeans did not fashion this world alone, and while some work on the contribution made by Africans and Native Americans to its fashioning is exemplary it points both to the need for comparative work in this area and to the difficulty associated with appraising the contribution made to any historical enterprise by peoples who leave few records.²⁴

While thus pointing to excellent work that has been conceived in an Atlantic framework, and while suggesting an agenda that might fruitfully be proceeded with, there remains the question of why Atlantic history rather than Global history. The answer to this was hinted at by Linschoten in the sixteenth century when he pointed to the parasitic character of the Portuguese presence in Asia, where the world of commerce had been fashioned by Asian merchants and remained largely under Asiatic control. Subsequent Dutch involvement in the

East Indies might force a modification on this generalization, especially where the Molucca islands are concerned. Otherwise, European involvement with Asian trade and manufacturing continued to be pursued on Asian terms until well into the eighteenth century. Until then, Asian rulers remained always the potent military force on land. It also remained true that, until the late eighteenth century, the principal skill required of European mariners to Asia was to navigate their way through the Atlantic sea routes because Asian pilots had chartered the waters of the Indian Ocean long before the arrival of Europeans there. Asian commodities were, of course, traded on both sides the Atlantic from the seventeenth century, and Atlantic-sourced commodities – notably silver, sugar and tobacco – found a market in Asia. Historians of both Dutch and Portuguese endeavours overseas might also argue that one cannot understand the multi-dimensional aspect of slavery until adequate attention is given to happenings on the eastern as well as in the western coast of Africa.²⁵

While acknowledging such exceptions, the weight of evidence suggests that the Atlantic World of trade and settlement, which was fashioned slowly and deliberately over three centuries by Europeans, with assistance from African and Native American collaborators, remained reasonably self-contained until the late eighteenth century. Then, improvements in navigational technologies, notably John Harrison's chronometer of 1763, which facilitated the accurate calculation of longitude, made it possible for western explorers and traders to aspire towards predictable global navigation, while advances in manufacturing technology made it possible for Europeans, for the first time, to market western products in Asia at a price advantage. The resulting western economic dominance became associated with a western bid for political dominance in much of Africa and Asia, at which point historians need to address the problem of researching and writing Global rather than Atlantic history.

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3. K. N. Chaudhuri (1985) *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge), p. 21; this volume succeeded two others by the same author which display less the explicit influence of Braudel; see K. N. Chaudhuri *The English East India Company: the Study of an Early Joint Stock Company, 1600–40* (London); K. N. Chaudhuri (1978) *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge); for another work on Asia displaying an influence of Braudel see N. Steensgaard (1973) *Carracks, Caravans, and Companies: the Structural Crisis in the European-Asian Trade in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Copenhagen); and for books on commerce in the Indian ocean seemingly written in reaction to western presumption see S. Chandra (ed) (1987) *The Indian Ocean: Explorations in History, Commerce and Politics* (New Delhi); and O. Prakash (1998) *European Commercial Enterprise in*

- pre-Colonial India: The New Cambridge History of India* II.5 (Cambridge); see also H. L. Wesseling (2001) Eurocentrism: an editorial, in *European Review*, **IX**, 121–124.
4. J. P. Greene (1988) *Pursuits of Happiness: the Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC).
 5. P. D. Curtin (1969) *The Atlantic Slave Trade: a Census* (Madison).
 6. B. Bailyn (1986) *The Peopling of British North America: an Introduction* (New York).
 7. B. Bailyn (1986) *Voyagers to the West; Emigration from Britain to America on the Eve of the Revolution* (London); I. Altman and J. Horn (eds) (1991) 'To Make America': *European Emigration in the Early Modern Period* (Berkeley); N. Canny (ed) (1994) *Europeans on the Move: Studies on European Migration, 1500–1800* (Oxford).
 8. The most stimulating, and the most challenging for historians, of the vast array of such books are S. Greenblatt (1991) *Marvelous Possessions; the Wonder of the New World* (Chicago); and S. Greenblatt (1993) *New World Encounters* (California); for a critique of such literature see D. Armitage (1998) Literature and empire, in N. Canny (ed), *The Origins of Empire British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, vol. 1 of *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (Oxford), pp. 99–123.
 9. B. Bailyn, Idea of Atlantic history, pp. 20–21.
 10. W. Raleigh (1984) A report of the truth of the fight about the Isles of Azores this last summer betwixt the Revenge ... and an Armada of the King of Spain, in G. Hammond (ed), *Sir Walter Raleigh: Selected Writings* (Manchester), pp. 65–75.
 11. W. Raleigh (1596) *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empyre of Guiana* (London), edited by N. L. Whitehead (Manchester, 1997).
 12. W. Raleigh (1971) *The History of the World*, C.A. Partridges (ed) (London), p. 260.
 13. W. Raleigh (1971) *The History of the World*, C.A. Partridges (ed) (London), p. 173.
 14. The best modern edition is H. Kern and H. Terpresta (eds) (1956–57) *Itinerario: voyage ofte schipvaert van John Huygen van Linschoten naer oost ofte Potugaels Indien, 1579–92*, 3 vols (The Hague); see also A. C. Burnell and P. A. Tiele (eds) (1884) *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies from the Old English Translation of 1598* (London, Hakluyt Society).
 15. A. C. Burnell and P. A. Tiele (eds) (1884) *The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten to the East Indies from the Old English Translation of 1598* (London, Hakluyt Society), p. li; G. Birdwood and W. Foster (1893) *The First Letter Book on the East India Company, 1600–19* (London), p. 419; the other items included in a slim reading package were religious tracts by William Perkins, and Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*.
 16. A. Pagden (1995) *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven).
 17. P. Hulton and D. B. Quinn (eds) (1964) *The American Drawings of John White*, 2 vols. (London); P. Hulton (1984) *America 1585: The Complete Drawings of John White* (Chapel Hill); T. Hariot (1590) *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (published as part 1 of *De Bry's America*) (Frankfurt).
 18. W. Raleigh, *History of the World*, pp. 98, 365–366.
 19. W. Raleigh, *Guiana*, pp. 173, 185.
 20. In this respect, a work that might usefully be imitated and expanded upon is R. van Oers (2000) *Dutch Town Planning Overseas during VOC and WIC Rule, 1600–1800* (Zuthphen).
 21. D.W. Meinig (1986) *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, vol. 1: *Atlantic America, 1492–1800* (New Haven).

22. P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker (1990) The many headed Hydra: sailors, slaves and the Atlantic working class in the eighteenth century, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, **III**, pp. 225–252; more data to support this thesis is displayed in P. Linebaugh and M. Rediker (2000) *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Atlantic* (Boston); see also W. J. Bolster (1997) *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA).
23. A model study of one trading network is D. Hancock (1995) *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735–85* (Cambridge).
24. Good leads are provided in C. Schnurmann (1998) *Atlantische Welten: Engländer und Niederländer in amerikanisch-atlantischen Raum 1648–1713* (Cologne), and C. Schnurmann (1998) *Europa trifft Amerika: atlantische Wirtschaft in der frühen Neuzeit, 1492–1783* (Frankfurt/Main).
25. The model study on the African side of the Atlantic is J. K. Thornton (1998) *Africa and Africans and the Making of the Atlantic World* (Cambridge).
26. For some useful guidance see J. R. Bruijn and F. S. Gaastra (eds) (1993) *Ships, Sailors and Spices: East India Companies and their Shipping in the 16th, 17th and 18th* (Amsterdam).

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