

## NETWORKING: TRADE AND EXCHANGE IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH EMPIRE\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *Historians face the problem of how to write the history of the eighteenth-century British empire. How can the history of Britain and the history of its empire be brought together? Recent research has demonstrated the value of employing the idea of networks to describe the interrelatedness of empire. In the history of science and economic history such a notion has been quite thoroughly articulated, particularly in relation to the exchange of botanical knowledge and the transaction of goods. Here it is argued that conceiving of empire as a set of networks through which knowledge and ideas were exchanged, trust was negotiated, goods were traded, and people travelled is an avenue worth pursuing in the project to write the history of the eighteenth-century British empire.*

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In 1997 A. G. Hopkins in his inaugural lecture as the Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at Cambridge lamented the lack of ‘an influential general interpretation of modern British history that is based on a close reading of imperial history’. He contended that if ‘a small island acquires a large empire, it seems obvious enough that the two cannot be understood in isolation’.<sup>1</sup> Historians face the problem of how to bring the ‘small island’ and the ‘large empire’ together to understand the British empire. Partial solutions have been offered by world systems theory, notions of the core and the periphery, orientalism, and the post-structuralist approaches associated with it. These perspectives and concepts, and, increasingly importantly, refinements and criticisms of them, have informed recent scholarship on the British empire in the eighteenth century. In particular, much research has been profitably founded on critiques that argue that these notions of empire ‘essentialize’ the mother country, the colonies, the East, the West, the core, the periphery, or indeed the empire itself, let alone the experiences of the ‘colonizers’ and the ‘colonized’. But if historians want to deal with

\* I am very grateful to Kate Davies, Simon Smith, and Matthew Townend for their comments on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>1</sup> A. G. Hopkins, *The future of the imperial past* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 9; he developed the themes of this lecture in ‘Back to the future: from national history to imperial history’, *Past and Present*, 164 (1999), pp. 198–243.

differentiation, variation, and contingency of experience and meaning, and still be able to contribute to imperial history, what might a useful conception of empire be? Historians have been exploring ways of putting the history of the empire together to overcome the fragmentation noted by David Fieldhouse in 1984.<sup>2</sup> Here I look first at the ‘large empire’, then the ‘small island’, and in the final section I discuss some recent research on the British empire in the eighteenth century, from diverse perspectives, that suggests that thinking of empire as a series of networks is a direction worth pursuing.

## I

World systems theory provides definitions of imperial structures that remain influential. Immanuel Wallerstein, the scholar most frequently associated with this approach, proposed that European expansion in the early modern period was part of the history of a single expanding world economic system. The development and increasing influence of trading companies centred at first in Amsterdam and later in London was, Wallerstein argued, central to this system.<sup>3</sup> For Wallerstein the economy could be divided into cores, peripheries, and subperipheries. Often simplified as the pairing of core (or sometimes metropole) and periphery Wallerstein’s conception, and the related centre–periphery model developed by Edward Shils, have informed both directly and indirectly a wide range of studies in addition to the specifically economic, as will be seen in what follows.<sup>4</sup> To give just a single example here, Jack P. Greene has used the core–periphery paradigm to explore the political ties between Britain and the American colonies in the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Partly because of its emphasis on discrepancies between the economies of developed and developing countries, world systems theory has attracted the attention of historians of science and especially those writing environmental

<sup>2</sup> D. Fieldhouse, ‘Can Humpty-Dumpty be put together again: imperial history in the 1980s’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12 (1984), pp. 9–23. Amongst those calling for histories that bring the fragments of imperial history together are Dane Kennedy, ‘Imperial history and post-colonial theory’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 24 (1996), pp. 345–63, at p. 358; C. A. Bayly, *Imperial meridian: the British empire and the world, 1780–1830* (London, 1989), p. 256; J. G. A. Pocock, ‘British history: a plea for a new subject’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, 8 (1974), pp. 3–21; idem, ‘The limits and divisions of British history: in search of the unknown subject’, *American Historical Review*, 87 (1982), pp. 311–36.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *The capitalist world economy* (Cambridge, 1979); idem, *The modern world system* (3 vols., New York, 1974–88). Other works associated with this approach include Samir Amin, *Accumulation on a world scale* (2 vols., New York, 1974); Andre Gunder Frank, *World accumulation, 1492–1789* (New York, 1978); idem, *Dependent accumulation and underdevelopment* (New York, 1978). Fernand Braudel’s conception of the world economy in the early modern period can be usefully compared to Wallerstein’s ideas. See Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and material life, 1400–1800*, trans. Sian Roberts (3 vols., London, 1974), II.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Shils, *Center and periphery: essays in macrosociology* (Chicago, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and center: constitutional development in the extended politics of the British empire and the United States, 1607–1788* (New York, 1986).

history.<sup>6</sup> Prominent among those in the early modern field who have been influenced by world systems theory is Richard Grove, who draws upon, critiques, and adapts world systems theory in his extraordinarily wide-ranging, detailed, and important study, *Green imperialism*.<sup>7</sup> In this history of early environmentalism in Dutch, French, and British maritime empires in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Grove suggests that Wallerstein's theory is useful for understanding the impact of 'European capital activity' on the environment of small islands in the Indian and Atlantic Oceans and the Caribbean.<sup>8</sup> Much of the most ambitious, and one might argue best, imperial history is comparative and indeed the core-periphery paradigm lends itself to making comparisons between different empires as Grove demonstrates in charting the responses of the Dutch, French, and British to the island environment and the ecological challenges it posed. Differences in the development of environmental attitudes are partly explained by national distinctions back home, among them the conventions of state intervention in land use and the prevalence of timber.<sup>9</sup> This is only part of Grove's story; he also explores contemporary images of the island to argue that modern conservation came about as a result of European encounters with the tropics.

Grove is not reluctant to criticize the theory: Wallerstein, he suggests, underestimated the number of economic centres, particularly those in Asia.<sup>10</sup> The 'shape' of imperial structures that partially emerges from Grove's adaptation of world systems theory will be turned to in the third section below. He is not alone in his questioning of world systems theory; like most 'grand narratives' it has come under attack from all directions in the last thirty years. According to Lauren Benton in a very useful survey of the field the theory has been challenged as being historically inaccurate (particularly in question is Wallerstein's emphasis on the transitions occurring in the sixteenth century) and theoretically problematic.<sup>11</sup> She notes three sorts of theoretical problems: the role of change within the system, conceptions of the state, and most relevant here, that 'the structure of the system is seen as dictated by the "needs" of the core' results in a tendency to neglect local politics.<sup>12</sup> Allied to this, Benton observes, 'the world-systems perspective has done poorly in recognizing or representing the complexity of culture'.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Roy Macleod, 'Passages in imperial science: from empire to commonwealth', *Journal of World History*, 4 (1993), pp. 117–50, at p. 123. For a review of imperial environmental history see John M. Mackenzie, 'Empire and the ecological apocalypse: the historiography of the imperial environment', in Tom Griffiths and Libby Robin, eds., *Ecology and empire: environmental history and settler societies* (Edinburgh, 1997). See also Roy Macleod, 'Introduction', *Osiris*, 15 (2000), pp. 1–13; Richard Drayton, 'Science and the European empires', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22 (1995), pp. 503–10.

<sup>7</sup> Richard H. Grove, *Green imperialism: colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism, 1600–1820* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 62–3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61–2.

<sup>11</sup> Lauren Benton, 'From the world-systems perspective to institutional world history: culture and economy in global theory', *Journal of World History*, 7 (1996), pp. 261–95, at pp. 262–70.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

Although world systems theory has been thoroughly critiqued, then, even for its critics (including, as will be discussed below, Benton herself), it remains influential as a point of departure. Sudipta Sen, for example, is concerned with the cultural and social aspects of the marketplace in India in an attempt to understand the impact of colonial rule on marketplaces and market exchange in the greater Bengal and Banares regions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>14</sup> European involvement in Asian markets was not, in Sen's words, 'just a mechanistic structure of inevitable economic dominance and subservience between the industrializing core and the undeveloped periphery' but rather the result of a process of negotiation, conflict, and compromise between the East India Company and Indian interests.<sup>15</sup>

If such characterizations of colonial relationships which stress the agency of indigenous people, the contingency of European influence, and the multiplicity of interest groups might now seem familiar the difficulty of writing their history remains.<sup>16</sup> Sen's study explores one way to approach such difficulties: by examining European and indigenous ideas; in his case the contrasting, and at times profoundly conflicting, British and Indian ideas of markets. For pre-colonial rulers in India markets yielded not only monetary rewards in the form of, often paltry, dues, but far more importantly the opportunity 'to display rights over people and goods and thus partake in the creation of affluence'.<sup>17</sup> East India Company officials disrupted such patterns by, for example, trading prestige goods, like salt, betel nuts, and tobacco, that were regarded as imbued with the authority of rulers. British attempts to undertake reforms, such as imposing uniformity on the collection of revenues from land and internal trade, and to enforce them, demonstrate the transference of Georgian ideas and practices of state building and a free market from Britain to India.<sup>18</sup> The application of European ideas to colonial settings is a theme which recurs in much imperial history. Grove, for one, has studied the application of approaches to the British landscape – particularly schemes of 'improvement' – to colonial islands.<sup>19</sup> The sorts of struggles that often ensued, both on colonial islands and in Bengal, were not simply played out along a colonizer–colonized axis but involved tensions between many different British and Indian groups with vested interests.

C. A. Bayly too highlights Britons' recent 'experience of abolishing "restraints to trade" at home' as shaping their understanding of 'Indian social expenditures and the political exchange of gifts as bribery and extortion'. This mismatch

<sup>14</sup> Sudipta Sen, *Empire of free trade: the East India Company and the making of the colonial marketplace* (Philadelphia, 1998), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> For an early statement of this sort of characterization (in relation to the Indian language) see Robert E. Frykenberg, 'The myth of English as a "colonialist" imposition upon India: a reappraisal with special reference to South India', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 2 (1988), pp. 305–14.

<sup>17</sup> Sen, *Empire of free trade*, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 100. See also, pp. 3, 123–4.

<sup>19</sup> Grove, *Green imperialism*, pp. 65, 275–9.

between Indian priorities and classical political economy did not however, Bayly argues, create an unbridgeable gap in understanding.<sup>20</sup> Rather, Bayly contends, 'Indian merchants were quite capable of separating social and "protection" costs from the accounting of profit and loss.' This distinction not only made 'Indian trade relatively transparent to Europeans' but also meant that Indians were able to come to grips with European trading practices: '[c]oncepts of profit and loss, double-entry book keeping, rates of exchange and credit notes were common to both sides in the Indo-European trade'.<sup>21</sup>

But the gap in understanding could also be closed by the Europeans who were well versed in the language of political patronage and gift exchange. This point is well made by William Pinch who shows the wide gulf in the interpretations of the history of knowledge and power in colonial India between Bayly's account and Bernard Cohn's published in the same year. Cohn, in his book *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge*, suggests that

the British in seventeenth-century India operated on the idea that everything and everyone had a 'price'. The presents through which relationships were constituted were seen as a form of exchange to which a quantitative value could be attached ... [the British] never seemed to realize that certain kinds of cloth and clothes, jewels, arms, and animals had values that were not established in terms of market-determined price, but were objects in a culturally constructed system by which authority and social relations were literally constituted and transmitted.<sup>22</sup>

Pinch uses the impressions of the mughal court formed by Sir Thomas Roe, sent by the East India Company as an ambassador to India, to show that the differences between European and Indian understandings of symbolic power, court ritual, and the role of gifts were 'primarily differences of detail, not of substance [and] ... were translatable'.<sup>23</sup> Admittedly Pinch's argument rests on a Jacobean example but the continuing importance of patronage and gift exchange in eighteenth-century Britain, which historians are currently demonstrating, suggests that the gap between European and Indian understandings of markets might be bridgeable.<sup>24</sup>

The stress on commonalities between the European and Indian economies extends beyond the sharing of categories. Many scholars have highlighted the

<sup>20</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 47.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46. Bayly discusses this at length in C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: north Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge, 1983), chs. 10–11.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> William R. Pinch, 'Same difference in India and Europe', *History and Theory*, 38 (1999), pp. 389–407, at p. 404.

<sup>24</sup> Dustin H. Griffin, *Literary patronage in England, 1650–1800* (Cambridge, 1996); Roy Porter, 'The gift relation: philanthropy and provincial hospitals in eighteenth-century England', in Roy Porter and Lindsay Granshaw, eds., *The hospital in history* (London, 1990); Hannah Elizabeth Smith, 'Georgian monarchical culture in England, 1714–1760' (PhD thesis, Cambridge, 2002).

similarities between forms of commercial organization of Indian and European merchants. Older positions concerning the inferiority of Indian traders are being overturned: against the view built on Weberian foundations that Indian merchants were all peddlars it is argued by Michel Morineau, for example, that, as amongst European traders, there were big fish as well as small fry in India.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, scholars are questioning the economic importance of Europe as a trading partner for India. The view that Bengal's chief trading partners in the eighteenth century, and consequently the major importers of bullion, were the Dutch and British East India trading companies is being revised, most thoroughly by Sushil Chaudhury.<sup>26</sup> In a recent essay Chaudhury, using new evidence from the India Office Library, argues that in the middle years of the eighteenth century the export of raw silk from Bengal by Europeans was valued at between a quarter and a fifth of that exported by Asian merchants.<sup>27</sup>

This research on the exploration of similar trading practices across the eighteenth-century British empire, and the relative significance of European trade in India, can be considered alongside a chronologically and geographically broader project to explore and explain the divergent economic development of Europe and Asia in the modern period. Broadly speaking the debate splits over the question of how stark were the differences between Europe and Asia up to the end of the eighteenth century. The most recent defence of the view that Europe dominated the world economy in the early modern period can be found in David Landes's book *Wealth and the poverty of nations*.<sup>28</sup> Opposed to the position Landes takes are those such as Andre Gunter Frank, R. Bin Wong, and Kenneth Pomeranz who challenge the notion of European superiority and advocate a global economy focused on Asia, with a particular emphasis on the central role of China.<sup>29</sup> This debate has generated much

<sup>25</sup> Michel Morineau, 'Eastern and Western merchants from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries', trans. Cyprian P. Blamires, in Sushil Chaudhury and Michel Morineau, eds., *Merchants, companies and trade: Europe and Asia in the early modern era* (Cambridge, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Sushil Chaudhury, *From prosperity to decline: eighteenth century Bengal* (New Delhi, 1995). Those who have defended the view that European trade was very significant in Bengal's economy include P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: the British Bridgehead: Eastern India, 1740–1828* (Cambridge, 1987); K. N. Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 1978); Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the economy of Bengal, 1630–1720* (Princeton, 1985); C. A. Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British empire* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Sushil Chaudhury, 'The Asian merchants and companies in Bengal's export trade, circa mid-eighteenth century', in idem and Morineau, eds., *Merchants, companies and trade*, p. 309.

<sup>28</sup> David Landes, *Wealth and the poverty of nations: why some nations are so rich and some so poor* (New York, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Andre Gunter Frank, *ReOrient: global economy in the Asian age* (Berkeley, 1998); R. Bin Wong, *China transformed: historical change and the limits of European experience* (Ithaca, 1997); idem, 'The search for European differences and domination in the early modern world: a view from Asia', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 447–69; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The great divergence: China, Europe and the making of the modern world economy* (Princeton, 2000); idem, Kenneth Pomeranz 'Political economy and ecology on the eve of industrialization: Europe, China and the global conjuncture', *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 425–46.

comment and criticism.<sup>30</sup> In the context of the themes of trade and exchange in the eighteenth-century British empire explored here, it may be sufficient to say that scholars seeking to assess the relative conditions of European and Asian economies have been rebuked for their relative neglect of the interaction between the two.<sup>31</sup> Indeed in the early 1990s John E. Willis suggested that early modern European expansion in maritime Asia could be described as an ‘interactive emergence’.<sup>32</sup> Indeed the connections and common ground found between Indian and European merchants discussed above – the sharing of commercial categories, a mutual interest in accounting and attending to profits, and similar forms of organization – were also common to Europe and Asia more broadly.<sup>33</sup>

What the fallout of this debate will be on the history of the eighteenth-century British empire remains to be seen. Whatever one thinks is the nature of the gap between Asian and European economies (if indeed one thinks a gap exists) or whether one conceives of the global economy to be a patchwork of small economies, or dominated by one, two, or more centres, it is hard still to think of India (and indeed the British colonies) as in any sense simply ‘peripheral’ to a colonial ‘centre’.<sup>34</sup> The ‘large empire’ part of Hopkins’s formulation cannot be treated as a single entity because it involves such a multiplicity of meanings and experiences, and perhaps is not so different and isolated from ‘the small island’.

## II

How is the small island itself now thought about? As the category of the ‘periphery’ is being problematized so too is the ‘centre’. For the British empire the project to interrogate the centre is being tackled on two fronts: at the British level, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales are receiving attention in an imperial framework, and in the English context the relationship between the metropolis and the provinces is being re-examined.

<sup>30</sup> David D. Buck, ‘Was it pluck or luck that made the West grow rich?’, *Journal of World History*, 10 (1999), pp. 413–20; Joel Mokyr, ‘Eurocentricity triumphant’, *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 1241–6; P. H. H. Vries, ‘Are coal and colonies really crucial? Kenneth Pomeranz and the great divergence’, *Journal of World History*, 12 (2001), pp. 407–46.

<sup>31</sup> Prasanna Parthasarathi, ‘The great divergence’, *Past and Present*, 176 (2002), pp. 275–93, at p. 279. See also Lauren Benton, *Law and colonial cultures: legal regimes in world history, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> John E. Willis, Jr, ‘Maritime Asia, 1500–1800: the interactive emergence of European domination’, *American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), pp. 83–105.

<sup>33</sup> Jack A. Goldstone, ‘Whose measure of reality?’, *American Historical Review*, 105 (2000), pp. 501–8, at p. 505; Frederic Mauro, ‘Merchant communities, 1350–1750’, in James D. Tracy, ed., *The rise of merchant empires: long-distance trade in the early modern world, 1350–1750* (New York, 1990); Frank Perlin, ‘Proto-industrialization and pre-colonial South Asia’, *Past and Present*, 98 (1983), pp. 30–95; idem, ‘The other “species” world: speciation of commodities and moneys, and the knowledge-base of commerce, 1500–1900’, in Chaudhury and Morineau, eds., *Merchants, companies and trade*, pp. 147, 161–2.

<sup>34</sup> The breakdown of the global economy into these four simple models comes from Patrick Manning, ‘Asia and Europe in the world economy: introduction’, *American Historical Review*, 107 (2002), pp. 419–24, at p. 423.



The project to understand the variety of connections between different parts of the British empire and Scotland, in particular, goes some way towards overcoming the post-colonial propensity to ‘essentialize’ the West.<sup>35</sup> The well-established field of Scottish–American connections is being reinvigorated by new studies that illuminate not only Scottish links to the eastern seaboard but also the Americas more generally.<sup>36</sup> In a collection of essays on Scotland and the Americas in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries edited by Ned Landsman are discussions by Douglas Hamilton, on the application to the Windward Islands of a ‘distinctive Glaswegian trading style’ (the store system) which had been well tested in the Chesapeake, and David Hancock, on the transference by Scottish merchants of successful commercial strategies from continental Europe to the West African–Caribbean slave trade; other essays address Nova Scotia, Upper Canada, and America.<sup>37</sup> Increasingly historians of Scotland and empire are turning their attention to the less well-worked ground of relations with India.<sup>38</sup> Martha McLaren is concerned with the careers of three Scots – Thomas Munro (1761–1827), John Malcolm (1769–1833), and Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779–1859) – and their application of Scottish Enlightenment thinking on governing in India.<sup>39</sup> B. R. Tomlinson, using private papers rather than official records, charts the private trading activities of the Lennox family from Stirlingshire in India.<sup>40</sup>

Scholars are still, as R. C. Nash put it in 1985, ‘dispelling the obscurity of Ireland’s role in the Atlantic economy’.<sup>41</sup> Building on the research of Thomas Truxes, recent work investigates the Irish provisions trade and particularly the

<sup>35</sup> Dane Kennedy notes a tendency to see the West ‘as an undifferentiated, omnipotent entity, imposing its totalizing designs on the rest of the world without check or interruption’: Kennedy, ‘Imperial history’, p. 353. For a summary of some of the recent research on Scotland, Ireland, and empire see P. J. Marshall, ‘Imperial Britain’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 23 (1995), pp. 379–94.

<sup>36</sup> Older material that remains influential includes T. M. Devine, *The tobacco lords: a study of the tobacco merchants of Glasgow and their trading activities, c. 1740–1790* (Edinburgh, 1970); Jacob M. Price, ‘The rise of Glasgow in the Chesapeake tobacco trade, 1700–1775’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 11 (1954), pp. 179–99; idem, ‘The economic growth of the Chesapeake and the European market, 1697–1775’, *Journal of Economic History*, 24 (1964), pp. 496–511. For a survey of Scottish imperial history see John M. Mackenzie, ‘Essay and reflection: on Scotland and the empire’, *International History Review*, 15 (1993), pp. 714–39.

<sup>37</sup> Douglas Hamilton, ‘Scottish trading in the Caribbean: the rise and fall of Houston and Co.’, and David Hancock, ‘Scots in the slave trade’, in Ned C. Landsman, ed., *Nation and province in the first British empire: Scotland and the Americas, 1600–1800* (London, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> Earlier work on this area that focuses on Scots in India includes: G. J. Bryant, ‘Scots in India in the eighteenth century’, *Scottish Historical Review*, 64 (1985), pp. 22–4; J. G. Parker, ‘Scottish enterprise in India, 1750–1914’, in R. A. Cage, ed., *The Scots abroad: labour, capital and enterprise* (London, 1985); Alex M. Cain, *The Cornchest for Scotland: Scots in India* (Edinburgh, 1986).

<sup>39</sup> Martha McLaren, *British India and British Scotland, 1780–1830: career building, empire building, and a Scottish school of thought on Indian governance* (Akron, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> B. R. Tomlinson, ‘From Campsie to Kedgerree: Scottish enterprise, Asian trade and the Company Raj’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 36 (2002), pp. 769–91.

<sup>41</sup> R. C. Nash, ‘Irish Atlantic trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 42 (1985), pp. 329–56, at p. 329.



related development of Cork as an ‘economically prosperous colonial Atlantic port city’.<sup>42</sup> Nini Rodgers has considered the impact on Ireland of the American slave plantations and charts the emergence of anti-slavery in Ireland in the closing years of the eighteenth century.<sup>43</sup> Wales is not neglected in this charting of British imperial connections. Chris Evans, for one, charts the connections between a south Wales metal manufacturing company and its suppliers of pig iron in America both before and after the Revolution.<sup>44</sup>

The imperial dimensions of British history are also being pursued from another angle. Historians are beginning to tackle the thorny conceptual issues presented by the label ‘British’ that are often marginalized or ignored in its pairing with empire. Intellectual historians, drawing partly on the existing history of the ‘British problem’, are at the forefront of this movement to take both parts of the pair seriously as concepts with intellectual histories.<sup>45</sup> David Armitage, for example, in a rich and wide-ranging study, *The ideological origins of the British empire*, examines the debates concerning the tangled relationships between Ireland, Scotland, and England in the context of the British empire from the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

Armitage is concerned with tracing both the concept of the British empire – ‘the idea that an identifiable political community existed to which the term “empire” could be fittingly applied and which was recognisably British’ and the different conceptions of this empire.<sup>47</sup> Crucial to the characterization of empire in the second quarter of the eighteenth century as Protestant, commercial, maritime, and free was the recognition that liberty and empire could be reconciled by political economy with its commitment to the principle that commerce was a matter for state concern. Political economy, Armitage argues, ‘provided the means to describe and explain the relationships’ among Scotland, Ireland, and England ‘in the context of the wider Atlantic economy’. It was divisive and cohesive: ‘as economics linked the interests of the Three Kingdoms and the Atlantic world, so politics sharpened the competition between those interests’. Such debates about the nature of the relationships between Scotland, Ireland, and England ‘set the terms of the debate for relations between Great Britain and its overseas possessions for much of the succeeding

<sup>42</sup> Thomas M. Truxes, *Irish–American trade, 1660–1783* (Cambridge, 1988); Thomas Bartlett, ‘“This famous island set in a Virginia sea”: Ireland in the British empire, 1690–1801’, in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire*, II: *the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998); Mark McCarthy, ‘The forging of an Atlantic port city: socio-economic and physical transformation in Cork, 1660–1760’, *Urban History*, 28 (2001), pp. 25–45, at p. 25.

<sup>43</sup> Nini Rodgers, ‘Ireland and the black Atlantic in the eighteenth century’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 32 (2000), pp. 174–92.

<sup>44</sup> Chris Evans, ‘Global commerce and industrial organization in an eighteenth-century Welsh enterprise: the Melingriffith Company’, *Welsh Historical Review*, 20 (2001), pp. 413–34.

<sup>45</sup> Brendan Bradshaw and John Morrill, eds., *The British problem, c. 1534–1707: state formation in the Atlantic archipelago* (Basingstoke, 1996).

<sup>46</sup> David Armitage, *The ideological origins of the British empire* (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

century'.<sup>48</sup> Armitage's book not only helps us to understand conceptions of empire but it also shows that in the early eighteenth century these conceptions were formed on both sides of the Atlantic and articulated in diverse genres including topographical histories and pamphlets. The 'concept of the British Empire as a congeries of territories linked by their commerce, united with common interests and centred politically upon London, was ... originally provincial, and arose among Unionists in Ireland, planters in the Caribbean and officials in the mainland colonies'.<sup>49</sup>

The role and importance of the English provinces has also been highlighted by Kathleen Wilson in her book *The sense of the people*, a study of extra-parliamentary opposition in one of the three kingdoms, England. By doing so she further unravels the 'centre'. If the importance of empire can be gauged by considering English involvement with imperial trade then Wilson is right to stress that the colonial market was the most conspicuous in the eyes of contemporaries and for most of the eighteenth century grew the most rapidly (although in terms of the market share Europe remained England's most important trading partner).<sup>50</sup>

The involvement of a cross section of the British population in one imperial trade – the East India trade – is emphasized by H. V. Bowen who shows that 'the sinews of Britain's Asian trade and empire extended beyond London and into the metropolitan provinces'.<sup>51</sup> It was not just the manufacturers of wool textiles (like Devon serge and Norwich worsted), metal raw materials (such as tin from Cornwall), and commodities for European settlers who relied heavily on the trade to India and China for the survival of their businesses but a whole host of intermediaries also profited from such trade. '[C]arriers, clerks, labourers, and merchants played a part within the increasingly sophisticated organizational and logistical networks that helped ensure that goods produced in the provinces were eventually assembled in London as cargoes ready for dispatch to the East.'<sup>52</sup>

Given this highly visible, intensive, and extensive involvement in eighteenth-century colonial trade, and given how little research has been undertaken on 'the impact of empire on domestic political sensibilities', Wilson's study marks an important departure.<sup>53</sup> Employing an appropriately broad definition of politics, she considers how notions of empire figured in urban provincial opposition politics evident in print culture, particularly newspapers and periodicals, commemorative pottery, and in the activities of clubs and societies. Patriotic conceptions of empire were a key component of eighteenth-century opposition positions and at times became particularly visible; the celebrations of Admiral Vernon's defeat of the Spanish at Porto Bello in 1739, for example, reinforced a particularly mercantilist

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 146–8, quotations at pp. 148, 162.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 56. See also John Brewer, *The sinews of power: war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 185.

<sup>51</sup> H. V. Bowen, 'Sinews of trade and empire: the supply of commodity exports to the East India Company during the late eighteenth century', *Economic History Review*, 55 (2002), pp. 466–86, at p. 468.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 484.

<sup>53</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the people*, p. 22.

view of empire.<sup>54</sup> Her timing of the emergence of trade ‘as a “patriotic” political issue’ during the excise crisis of 1733 has, however, since been questioned by Perry Gauci who locates it in 1713 when the French commerce bill was debated.<sup>55</sup> Wilson’s argument is not simply that empire and trade were contentious topics of opposition political debate but that the ‘issues raised by state expansion worked to galvanize political consciousness and civic patriotism in new directions, stimulating merchants, traders and shopkeepers, journeymen and servants, and men and women to initiate political activities on their own or join national campaigns’.<sup>56</sup> Manufacturers, in particular, are seen to be players in such debates. In the last third of the eighteenth century, as British manufacturing expanded and international trade became more extensive, manufacturers took a greater interest in politics and gained more political clout suggests Nancy Koehn who, like Wilson, finds that attitudes to ‘[i]mperial governance – the means for achieving the ends of empire – ... became a touchstone for political identity’.<sup>57</sup>

The intersection of the issues of empire and trade in popular politics was particularly potent and contested when it coincided with conceptions of national identity. Indeed many historians have been keen to explore the ‘identity politics’ on both sides of the Atlantic in the eighteenth century. Where did Britons and Americans feel they belonged? Who were ‘foreigners’? What were the categories of identity?<sup>58</sup> In the context of the American revolutionary war, as Dror Wahrman notes, scholars have largely looked at two sorts of identity: political identity, or following Linda Colley’s study *Britons*, national identity. He adds personal identity to the agenda.<sup>59</sup> Identity, however, has broader resonances in British imperial history. In their explorations of identity in the context of empire, particularly in relation to indigenous peoples, many historians have drawn on

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129; Perry Gauci, *The politics of trade: the overseas merchant in state and society, 1660–1720* (Oxford, 2001), p. 235.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>57</sup> Nancy Koehn, *The power of commerce: economy and governance in the first British empire* (Ithaca, 1994), p. 107.

<sup>58</sup> T. H. Breen, ‘Ideology and nationalism on the eve of the American revolution: revisions *once more* in need of revising’, *Journal of American History*, 84 (1997), pp. 13–39; S.J. Connolly, ‘Varieties of Britishness: Ireland, Scotland and Wales in the Hanoverian state’, in Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer, eds., *Uniting the kingdom? The making of British history* (London, 1995); Stephen Conway, *The British Isles and the War of American Independence* (Oxford, 2000); *idem*, ‘“A joy unknown for years past”: the American war, Britishness and the celebration of Rodney’s victory at Saints’, *History*, 2001 (86), pp. 180–99; *idem*, ‘From fellow-nationals to foreigners: British perceptions of the Americans, circa 1739–1783’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (2002), pp. 65–100; Eliga H. Gould, ‘The American Revolution in Britain’s Imperial identity’, in Fred M. Leventhal and Roland Quinalt, eds., *Anglo-American attitudes: from revolution to partnership* (Aldershot, 2000); *idem*, *The persistence of empire: British political culture in the age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Jack P. Greene, ‘Empire and identity from the Glorious Revolution to the American Revolution’, in Marshall, ed., *Oxford history of the British empire*; P. J. Marshall, ‘A nation defined by empire, 1755–1776’, in Grant and Stringer, eds., *Uniting the kingdom?*; Andrew W. Robertson, ‘“Look on this picture ... and on this”: nationalism, localism and partisan images of otherness in the United States, 1787–1820’, *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), pp. 1263–80.

<sup>59</sup> Dror Wahrman, ‘The English problem of identity in the American revolution’, *American Historical Review*, 106 (2001), pp. 1236–62, at p. 1238.

post-colonial theories, most notably notions of the ‘other’.<sup>60</sup> Dane Kennedy has suggested that these theories offer a way to put imperial history back together again: ‘[b]y presenting a case for understanding the construction of cultural difference as a binary process – we define ourselves in the context of how we define others – post-colonial theory has insisted that the metropole has no meaning apart from the periphery, and the West apart from the Orient, the colonizer apart from the colonized’.<sup>61</sup> If such an approach might help to surmount the problem of the fragmentation of imperial history, then Wilson’s refinements of such theories, particularly in her drawing upon the work of Homi Bhabha, suggest a way to get beyond the simplicity and artificiality of the distinction between the centre and the periphery or the colonizer and the colonized. She suggests that the “‘others” identified or subdued through the imperial project were internal as well as external, domestic as well as foreign, within as well as without’, and in doing so she very profitably challenges the tendency to map a binary model of identity on to the largely geographically defined binary of core and periphery.<sup>62</sup> To give just one example of application: in the Seven Years War the ‘discourse of effeminacy, as deployed in the political initiatives of the moment, ... privileged the claims of the white, trading and commercial classes to political status while excluding a range of “effeminate” others who threatened their supposedly distinctive goals: Frenchmen, aristocrats, nonwhite colonial subjects; the foppish, the irrational, the dependent and the timid’.<sup>63</sup> Such an example, however, prompts questions of whether her analysis could be taken further: is the usefulness of the notion of the ‘other’ hampered by it being packaged as part of a pair? Does this ‘discourse of effeminacy’ play on contradictions that are not necessarily binary?

### III

As the ‘essential’ nature of the large empire and the small island have both been challenged and problematized then so too have the connections between them. Such was the extent of the trade within the Atlantic world, for example, and the links it created between producers, consumers, and distributors, that the empire has been characterized as an ‘empire of goods’. T. H. Breen, who coined this phrase, links consumption to identity in an important contribution to the discussion of identity politics: ‘pride of ownership translated into pride of being part of the empire’.<sup>64</sup> Such pride might stimulate political action:

[i]n mid-eighteenth-century America, the outside world often spoke most seductively through imported consumer goods, and because they imagined themselves within an

<sup>60</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).

<sup>61</sup> Kennedy, ‘Imperial history and post-colonial theory’, p. 358.

<sup>62</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the people*, p. 25. She cites Homi Bhabha, ‘Of mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse’, *October*, 28 (1984), pp. 125–33. Elsewhere (for example, p. 282) in discussions of nation and empire she usefully employs Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities* (New York, 1983).

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the people*, p. 202.

<sup>64</sup> T. H. Breen, ‘An empire of goods: the Anglicization of colonial America, 1690–1776’, *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), pp. 467–99, at p. 498.

empire of commerce, colonists who had previously not had much to do with each other came to see it as a matter of common sense to respond to the disruption of their economic and political lives through specific commercial strategies such as an ever-wider boycott movement.

By the 1770s these colonists had been provoked ‘to imagine a powerful commercial empire of their own’.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, the consumption of colonial goods in England has been linked to identity, with Wilson arguing that the ‘colonies provided many of the crucial raw materials for social emulation and display’.<sup>66</sup> Recent contributions have reminded us, though, that not all colonial imports were finished ‘consumer goods’: S. D. Smith establishes how extensive was the importation of goods that were to be used in colonial manufacturing; and Ann Carlos and Frank Lewis note that we must attend to the consumption habits of native Americans.<sup>67</sup>

These trades did not operate independently. Jacob Price, in an essay entitled ‘What did merchants do?’ republished with some of his other seminal essays suggests that:

[w]hen one looks at particular trades, one cannot but be impressed by the interdependence of the parts. Domestic industries needed imported raw material and semi-processed inputs paid for in part by re-exports or American and Asian produce. Slaves were bought in Africa with Asian textiles as well as Birmingham guns and Italian beads. The common linen exported to the American colonies could be made in Bohemia or Westphalia or Ulster or Fife.<sup>68</sup>

Contemporaries were aware of the webs trade weaved. In 1762, a New Yorker commented:

Our importation of dry goods from England is so vastly great, that we are obliged to betake ourselves to all possible arts to make remittances to the British merchants. It is for this purpose we import cotton from St. Thomas’s and Surinam; lime-juice and Nicaragua

<sup>65</sup> T. H. Breen, ‘Narrative of commercial life: consumption, ideology, and community on the eve of the American Revolution’, *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 50 (1993), pp. 471–501, at p. 480. See also idem, ‘“Baubles of Britain”: the American and consumer revolutions of the eighteenth centuries’, *Past and Present*, 119 (1988), pp. 73–104.

<sup>66</sup> Wilson, *Sense of the people*, p. 56. For London as a centre of consumption of colonial goods see Nuala Zahedieh ‘London and the colonial consumer in the late seventeenth century’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 47 (1994), pp. 239–61.

<sup>67</sup> S. D. Smith, ‘The market for manufactures in the thirteen colonies, 1698–1776’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 51 (1998), pp. 676–708; Ann M. Carlos and Frank D. Lewis, ‘Trade, consumption, and the native economy: lessons from York Factory, Hudson Bay’, *Journal of Economic History*, 61 (2001), pp. 1037–64. Furthermore, colonial goods were not always simply ‘bought’ and ‘sold’. Mid-seventeenth-century attempts to control deforestation on Barbados involved the imposition of penalties in the form of sugar for those who illegally felled trees; Grove, *Green imperialism*, p. 68.

<sup>68</sup> Jacob M. Price, ‘What did merchants do? Reflections on British overseas trade, 1660–1790’, *Journal of Economic History*, 49 (1989), pp. 267–84, at p. 277. Reprinted in Jacob M. Price, *Overseas trade and traders: essays on some commercial, financial and political challenges facing British Atlantic merchants, 1660–1775* (Aldershot, 1996).

wood from Curacoa [sic]; and logwood from the bay, &c. and yet it drains us of all the silver and gold we can collect.<sup>69</sup>

These transactions depended on credit, negotiated through complex international relationships: ‘the produce of North America could be sold in the West Indies, Iberia, or Ireland for bills of exchange on London and the surpluses and deficiencies in different branches of trade balanced on the books of London merchants’. Rather than a set of ‘bilateral exchanges’ there existed, Jacob Price goes on to suggest, ‘a complex, multilateral trading system, the various parts of which have to be viewed in the context of the whole’.<sup>70</sup> Such systems are investigated in many recent studies of imperial trade. Hamilton explores the multilateral arrangements that the Glasgow firm Houston and Co. established to further their Caribbean trade.<sup>71</sup> Transferring money from India to Britain was not just a concern for individual traders like John Lennox, the captain of the Indiaman *Southampton* and subject of Tomlinson’s study, but also for the East India Company from the mid-1760s onwards.<sup>72</sup> H. V. Bowen argues that there is more behind the rise in tea imports from China in this period than an increased demand for tea in Britain. In fact, he points to the significance of the Company’s need, following the acquisition of Bengal, to transfer its enlarged revenue to Britain.<sup>73</sup>

Trust was required at every stage in the process of buying and selling goods.<sup>74</sup> As Nuala Zahedieh, among others, has demonstrated, ‘[c]redit in the sense of belief, confidence, faith, trust, the estimate in which a character is held, reputation, was the elusive but fundamental key to success in early modern commerce’.<sup>75</sup> To be profitable in their businesses merchants attempted to reduce the risks involved in trading. Certainly knowledge about the trustworthiness of the numerous individuals involved in the ordering, purchasing, shipment, and payment of goods might secure such a profit. Hamilton describes a situation where Houston and Co., for example, refused to order goods for a certain Dr Robert Telfer of Jamaica because he was “‘an entire stranger’”.<sup>76</sup> Some groups, like Quakers and Jews, held a particularly strong position in the colonial trade, argues Zahedieh: their ‘strength drew partly on their “awe of God and conscience” but, perhaps even more, on the community leaders’ ability to enforce

<sup>69</sup> William Smith, *The history of the late province of New York ... 1762, collections of the New York Historical Society*, IV, Part 2 (New York, 1829), p. 281, quoted in Breen, ‘An empire of goods’, p. 487.

<sup>70</sup> Jacob M. Price, ‘The imperial economy, 1700–1776’, in Marshall, ed., *Oxford history of the British empire*, p. 91.

<sup>71</sup> Hamilton, ‘Scottish trading in the Caribbean’.

<sup>72</sup> Tomlinson, ‘From Campsie to Kedgeree’, pp. 779–80.

<sup>73</sup> H. V. Bowen, ‘Tea, tribute and the East India Company, c. 1750–1775’, in Stephen Taylor, Richard Connors, and Clyve Jones, eds., *Hanoverian Britain and empire: essays in memory of Philip Lawson* (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 162–5.

<sup>74</sup> Nuala Zahedieh, ‘Credit, risk and reputation in late seventeenth-century colonial trade’, *Research in Maritime History*, 15 (1998), pp. 53–74, at p. 54. See also Nuala Zahedieh, ‘Making mercantilism work: London merchants and Atlantic trade in the seventeenth century’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 9 (1999), pp. 143–58.

<sup>75</sup> Zahedieh, ‘Credit, risk and reputation’, p. 53.

<sup>76</sup> Hamilton, ‘Scottish trading in the Caribbean’, p. 107.

good conduct and information flows'.<sup>77</sup> Ties of credit, and 'the accompanying indispensable recourse mechanisms' bound other groups of traders together like the Armenian merchants, studied by Michel Aghassian and Kéram Kévonian, whose networks spread from India to Central Asia and the Middle East.<sup>78</sup>

Kinship ties were crucial to the commercial success of merchants belonging to these minority groups. In a recent survey of risk, credit, and kinship in the early modern period Peter Mathias suggests that '[k]inship, by creating a bond of personal confidence, provided a crucial base for lending of last resort for a relative over-extended in business'. Drawing on Jacob Price's research, Mathias suggests that 'there is every reason to suppose' that such financial assistance however was instrumental not just amongst the kin of minority groups but 'was a universal characteristic of the linkage between kinship and enterprise'.<sup>79</sup>

The webs of imperial trade were not simply woven out of the exchange of goods and the bonds of trust but also involved the transmission of commercial information. Gathering trading knowledge was central to the Atlantic trade with American merchants visiting Britain to observe production processes, inspect goods, and build up contacts. Kenneth Morgan describes how the number of such visits increased in the second half of the eighteenth century as did the sending of samples, pattern books, and price lists to American correspondents.<sup>80</sup> In the Asian trade there was a similar eagerness to find out about the market for East India Company goods in India. Bowen notes that not only did the directors of the Company seek 'up-to-date intelligence from their servants on the nature of local demand' but 'they also initiated numerous experiments in order to test different products in the market'.<sup>81</sup> The traffic in commercial information in the Asian trade was two-way with the Company also obtaining information on production. C. A. Bayly charts how the East India Company gave priority to finding out information about the textile trade in India. Information about production

<sup>77</sup> Zahedieh, 'Credit, risk and reputation', p. 74. See also Jacob M. Price, 'The great Quaker business families of eighteenth-century London: the rise and fall of a sectarian patriciate', in R. S. Dunn and M. M. Dunn, eds., *The world of William Penn* (Philadelphia, 1986); and Jacob M. Price, 'English Quaker merchants and the war at sea, 1689–1783', in R. A. McDonald, ed., *West Indies accounts: essays on the history of the British Caribbean and the Atlantic economy in honour of Richard Sheridan* (Kingston, 1996). Both these essays are reprinted in Price, *Overseas trade and traders*. For other studies of international trade amongst particular religious groups include J. F. Bosher, 'Huguenot merchants and the Protestant international in the seventeenth century', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 52 (1995), pp. 77–102; D. Ormrod, 'The Atlantic economy and the Protestant capitalist international, 1651–1775', *Historical Research*, 66 (1993), pp. 197–208.

<sup>78</sup> Michel Aghassian and Kéram Kévonian, 'The Armenian merchant network: overall autonomy and local integration', in Chaudhury and Morineau, eds., *Merchants, companies and trade*, p. 83.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Mathias, 'Risk, credit and kinship in early modern enterprise', in John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, eds., *The early modern Atlantic economy* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 25. For the contributions that relatives might make to the success of a London businessman's career see Richard Grassby, *Kinship and capitalism: marriage, family, and business in the English speaking world, 1580–1740* (Cambridge, 2001).

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Morgan, 'Business networks in the British export trade to North America, 1750–1800', in McCusker and Morgan, eds., *The early modern Atlantic economy*, pp. 41–50.

<sup>81</sup> Bowen, 'Sinews of trade and empire', p. 474.



and market conditions came from direct observation by Company servants, Indian merchants, and the petitions of Indian artisans. Drawing on the work of D. Basu he also highlights the role of ‘permanent commercial agents’ – *banians* and *dubashs* – in the gathering of information. These agents acted as ‘cultural intermediaries and interpreters’; indeed *dubashs* literally means ‘men of two tongues’.<sup>82</sup>

If conceiving of empire as a set of networks of trust, trade, and commercial information offers a way to bring the ‘small island’ and the ‘large empire’ together, then much recent work on the history of the Atlantic world shows how this might be achieved. The field rests on the foundations laid by Bernard Bailyn, David Cressy, Jacob Price, and Ian Steele who, in their studies of trade, migration, and communications, stressed the interconnectedness of the Atlantic world.<sup>83</sup> The important work of Huw Bowen, Douglas Hamilton, and Kenneth Morgan has already been touched upon.<sup>84</sup>

Among the other scholars charting the networks that connected the empire is David Hancock. His influential book, *Citizens of the world*, provides a template for the sort of network approach to imperial history explored in this article.<sup>85</sup> In this extensively researched book he considers almost every aspect of the lives of four London merchants – Augustus Boyd, Alexander Grant, John Sargent II, and Richard Oswald – and their associates in the fifty years after 1735. At the heart of their commercial activities was the international shipping and trading of goods such as wine, gold, ivory, sugar, tobacco, medicine, and slaves. Whether they were operating on their own account, or as factors for other merchants, Hancock attributes the success of these traders to their acumen in making full use of their ships by maintaining full cargoes, achieving fast turnaround times, and, as Zahedieh also found, employing trustworthy representatives. ‘Commercial linkages to men with established, tested skills were culled and cultivated from a collection of blood, ethnic, and neighbourhood connections. Dogged persistence in finding contacts in the colonies was critical.’<sup>86</sup>

Hancock’s central argument in the book is that these merchants moved into new areas of business that related to their existing enterprises: ‘they undertook work their correspondents and suppliers had previously performed and thereby

<sup>82</sup> C. A. Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 45–6, quotations at p. 45.

<sup>83</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West: a passage in the peopling of America on the eve of the Revolution* (New York, 1986); David Cressy, *Coming over: migration and communication between England and New England in the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 1987); Jacob M. Price, *Capital and credit in British overseas trade: the view from the Chesapeake, 1700–1776* (Cambridge, MA, 1980); Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675–1740: an exploration of communication and community* (Oxford, 1986).

<sup>84</sup> Huw V. Bowen, *Elites, enterprise and the making of the British overseas empire, 1688–1775* (Basingstoke, 1996); Hamilton, ‘Scottish trading in the Caribbean’; Morgan, ‘Business networks’. See also many of the essays in McCusker and Morgan, eds., *The early modern Atlantic economy*; and Marshall, ed., *Oxford history of the British empire*.

<sup>85</sup> David Hancock, *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge, 1995).

<sup>86</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the world*, p. 140.

substantially reduced transactions costs'.<sup>87</sup> Such a strategy of 'backwards integration' led the merchants into investment in American plantations, slave trading and military contracting, and so by integrating their own businesses 'they helped integrate the empire'.<sup>88</sup> As Hopkins argues, empire was an act of integration involving the mobilization of economic resources'.<sup>89</sup>

In Hancock's more recent work on the Madeira wine trade the same sustained analysis of the global connections traders established in the eighteenth century remains central. Charting the under-researched topic of the development of a distribution infrastructure in eighteenth-century America, for example, he shows how Madeira's wine was initially distributed by those who had direct contact with the island. Pedlars, packhorse traders and those who operated wagon trains played an important role in getting wine to the back country. By the end of the century the wine could be bought in a store which signalled 'more specialized commercial services'.<sup>90</sup>

Although this sort of approach to the trading world is more familiar to historians of the eighteenth-century Atlantic world there is some related research being undertaken on the Asian trade. Tomlinson, for example, using the activities of John Lennox – a ship captain – in India as a case study describes an 'empire of enterprise' which was centred on Bengal.<sup>91</sup> Lennox's 'network of connections', like those mapped in the studies of the Atlantic world, made good use of kith and kin contacts.<sup>92</sup>

Commercial networks cannot be isolated from the other ties that spanned the empire. Not only did commercial information move through channels down which all sorts of other information passed but trading practices had much in common with other forms of exchange. Indeed Bayly's findings on commercial information exchange practices are only a very small part of a large and powerful history of 'empire and information' in which he argues that '[o]ne overriding reason why the East India Company was able to conquer India and dominate it for more than a century was that the British had learnt the art of listening in, as it were, on the internal communications of Indian polity and society'.<sup>93</sup> This involved the British closing down lines of communication between Indian powers, and seizing control of Indian communication networks, as well setting up their own networks in the final decades of the eighteenth century.<sup>94</sup>

The history of knowledge practices and networks of information have long been concerns of historians of science, particularly under the influence of Bruno

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> Hopkins, 'Back to the future', p. 215.

<sup>90</sup> David Hancock, "'A revolution in the trade": wine distribution and the development of the infrastructure of the Atlantic market economy, 1703–1807', in McCusker and Morgan, eds., *The early modern Atlantic economy*, pp. 131–3, quotation at p. 132. See also *idem*, 'Commerce and conversation in the eighteenth-century Atlantic: the invention of Madeira wine', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 29 (1998), pp. 197–219; *idem*, 'Transatlantic trade in the era of the American Revolution', in Leventhal and Roland, eds., *Anglo-American attitudes*.

<sup>91</sup> Tomlinson, 'From Campsie to Kedgeree', p. 788.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 783.

<sup>93</sup> Bayly, *Empire and information*, p. 365.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

Latour's sociological analysis of the practices of contemporary scientists.<sup>95</sup> Botanical knowledge, largely based on indigenous sources, was collected by naturalists throughout the European empires. Gardens, modelled on the one at Leiden, were established world wide in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and formed the nodes in a network of international information exchange. The research by scholars such as Richard Grove and Richard Drayton on the networks through which botanical, medical, and climatic knowledge circulated in early modern European empires, and on the status of such knowledge and the carriers of it, shows that environmental history can get beyond the boundaries of national histories and collapse what is sometimes a stark distinction between the categories of core and periphery.<sup>96</sup> These networks of knowledge were intimately connected to the networks through which trust, commercial information, and trade were negotiated and exchanged. The Dutch and English East India Companies, for example, employed naturalists and supported botanical projects.<sup>97</sup> Likewise, the Swedish East India Company, Sverker Sörlin shows, encouraged 'scientists to avail themselves of their ships' and urged the employees 'to help collect specimens and make observations'.<sup>98</sup> Recent contributions to the study of the Royal Society and its imperial connections by R. W. Home and Mark Govier make clear the intimate associations the Society had with both the East India Company and the Royal African Company.<sup>99</sup> If we are too eager to draw a rigid boundary between commerce and science we might argue that this was simply a case of the former sponsoring the latter and ignore the broader ground which trade and natural philosophy shared in terms of priorities and knowledge practices.

As historians of science observe, establishing and maintaining the credibility of knowledge and the reputations of individuals in the fields of 'science' and 'trade'

<sup>95</sup> Bruno Latour, *Science in action: how to follow scientists and engineers through society* (Cambridge, MA, 1987). For a sophisticated statement on knowledge networks see S. J. Harris, 'Long-distance corporations, big sciences, and the geography of knowledge', *Configurations*, 6 (1998), pp. 269–304.

<sup>96</sup> Grove, *Green imperialism*; Richard Drayton, *Nature's government: science, imperial Britain, and the improvement of the world* (New Haven and London, 2000). On the point that environmental history crosses national boundaries see Donald Worster, 'Doing environmental history', in idem, ed., *The ends of the earth: perspectives on modern environmental history* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 290. An important example of trans-national ecological history is Alfred W. Crosby, *Ecological imperialism: the biological expansion of Europe, 900–1900* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>97</sup> Grove, *Green imperialism*; idem, 'Indigenous knowledge and the significance of south-west India for Portuguese and Dutch construction of tropical nature', in Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran, and Satpal Sangwan, eds., *Nature and the Orient: the environmental history of South and Southeast Asia* (Delhi, 1998); Deepak Kumar, 'The evolution of colonial science in India: natural history and the East India Company', in John Macdonald Mackenzie, ed., *Imperialism and the natural world* (Manchester, 1990), pp. 51–2.

<sup>98</sup> Sverker Sörlin, 'Ordering the world for Europe: science as intelligence and information as seen from the Northern periphery', *Osiris*, 15 (2000), pp. 51–69, at p. 69.

<sup>99</sup> R. W. Home, 'The Royal Society and the empire: the colonial and commonwealth fellowship', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 56 (2002), pp. 307–22, Appendix 1; Mark Govier, 'The Royal Society, slavery and the island of Jamaica: 1660–1700', *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 53 (1999), pp. 203–17.

had much in common.<sup>100</sup> Lucy Chester, for example, in a comparative study of British and French cartographies of India in the late eighteenth century, writes about the knowledge practices of the British cartographer James Rennell (1742–1830). Rennell's differential practice of acknowledging his sources is telling: he criticizes Indians for their ignorance of Indian geography and neglects to give Indian surveyors credit; but he respects the English and French in India who provide him with cartographic knowledge and acknowledges their assistance in his mapping projects. Similarly, he demonstrates respect for the knowledge gathered by his predecessors.<sup>101</sup> As Michael T. Bravo argues, Rennell's evaluations were expressed by appealing to the notion of precision. 'Precision ... added a new, critical, and sometimes polemical, dimension to the language of travel: it made space for making differential judgements about the reliability of observations.'<sup>102</sup> Techniques and equipment were used to establish such precision and, as the editors of a volume of essays on instruments, travel, and science remark, 'colonial empires needed reliable information'. If 'instrumental and quantifying procedures of precision ... allowed for the delocalisation and travel of distant data or experiences' the contribution from Simon Schaffer on assaying gold and the Guinea trade shows that such procedures might sometimes meet with resistance.<sup>103</sup>

Science, empire, and trade intersected in the notion of improvement which was conspicuously played out in eighteenth-century approaches to the land, and the landscape. Despite a conflict with the belief that islands were the site of paradise on earth, attempts were made, Grove argues, to create British-style landscapes on Caribbean islands by land clearances in imitation of schemes to 'improve' land in Britain. Similarly, efforts by Soame Jenyns, a member of the Lords Commissioners for Trade, and the Society of Arts to 'improve' the landscape of the Ceded Islands after the Peace of Paris in 1763 can profitably be read in light of his forebears' involvement with East Anglian fen drainage schemes.<sup>104</sup> As well as their land schemes we can also read the philanthropic, transport, and industrial projects undertaken by the traders studied by Hancock to better their social status as part of such improvement programmes.<sup>105</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Steven Shapin, *A social history of truth: civility and science in seventeenth-century England* (Chicago, 1994); Mary Poovey, *A history of the modern fact: problems of knowledge in the sciences of wealth and society* (Chicago, 1998).

<sup>101</sup> Lucy P. Chester, 'The mapping of empire: French and British cartographies of India in the late-eighteenth-century', *Portuguese Studies*, 16 (2000), pp. 256–75, at pp. 266–7.

<sup>102</sup> Michael T. Bravo, 'Precision and curiosity in scientific travel: James Rennell and the Orientalist geography of the new imperial age (1760–1830)', in Jaś Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, eds., *Voyages and visions: towards a cultural history of travel* (London, 1999), p. 163.

<sup>103</sup> Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Christian Licoppe, and H. Otto Sibum, 'Introduction', in idem, eds., *Instruments, travel and science: itineraries of precision from the seventeenth to the twentieth century* (London, 2002), p. 14; Simon Schaffer, 'Golden means: assay instruments and the geography of precision in the Guinea trade', in Bourguet, Licoppe, and Sibum, eds., *Instruments, travel and science*.

<sup>104</sup> Grove, *Green imperialism*, pp. 65, 275–9. <sup>105</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the world*, chs. 9–10.

The ways that empire, science, and trade were brought together under the umbrella of improvement can be seen in the career of the naturalist Joseph Banks (1743–1820). In John Gascoigne's second book on Banks he sets out to understand Banks's role as an unofficial adviser to the British government in scientific, and largely imperial, matters.<sup>106</sup> In the eighteenth century the British government employed a range of advisers. A number of the merchants studied by Hancock, for example, counselled on matters of trade; and manufacturers, like the Birmingham ironmaster Samuel Garbett, as Koehn discusses, also offered government officials important information about empire – 'its trade, inhabitants and general health' – and consequently made it hard for government officials to ignore their political demands.<sup>107</sup> In response to the requirements of war the machinery of state expanded dramatically in this period and, Gascoigne argues, Joseph Banks's career represents a transition in government from the 'informal methods of patronage and connection natural to the unreformed, oligarchic constitution to the beginnings of a bureaucratic order based on career civil servants whose first loyalty was supposed to be an impersonal State'.<sup>108</sup>

Throughout his career Banks was an intermediary, and it was in this capacity that he was most useful to the government. He not only negotiated on the domestic scene between the various government offices and committees, most importantly the Admiralty and from 1784 the Privy Council for Trade, but also on the international scene; 'Banks's great ability [was] to draw together the different threads which linked government with the conduct of science'.<sup>109</sup>

Gascoigne places science in the context of the Baconian ideal of a government-sponsored project 'for the relief of "man's estate"'.<sup>110</sup> Thinking that emerged in Bacon's wake suggested that natural philosophy was a collaborative project of improvement predicated on the exchange of knowledge, and Banks, as an intermediary brokering exchanges between various government bodies and scientific institutions, can usefully be seen as an 'intelligencer' in its seventeenth-century sense.<sup>111</sup> Much as prosopographical studies of groups of merchants, like Hancock's, allow the exploration of commercial networks, so a study focusing on a single individual illuminates the connections involved not only in imperial trade but also in science.

Banks not only acted as an intermediary in these ways but his own interests very directly indicate the inextricable ties between the interests of imperial

<sup>106</sup> John Gascoigne, *Science in the service of empire: Joseph Banks, the British state and the uses of science in the age of revolution* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>107</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the world*, p. 279; Koehn, *The power of commerce*, p. 109. On the subject of the relationships between merchants and British government see also Alison Gilbert Olson, *Making the empire work: London and American interest groups, 1690–1790* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

<sup>108</sup> Gascoigne, *Science in the service of empire*, p. 5.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18. A lengthier discussion of Baconian ideals and imperial science can be found in Richard Drayton, 'Knowledge and empire', in Marshall, ed., *Oxford history of the British empire*.

<sup>111</sup> Michael Hunter, ed., *Archives of the scientific revolution: the formation and exchange of ideas in seventeenth-century Europe* (Woodbridge, 1998).

commerce and of science. In response to the expanding demand for tea from China, for example, Banks undertook investigations into the growing of tea in territories under British control. In his recommendation to the East India Company to pursue growing tea in Assam, Banks took economic conditions – Indian labour was cheap – as well as climatic conditions into consideration.<sup>112</sup> Banks's commitment to the imperial uses of botany, and his role in international networks of scientific exchange, were most prominent in his role as *de facto* director of the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew from 1773. Under his control they became 'virtually an institute for economic botany', not only cultivating specimens to be grown on British-controlled land for imperial profit, but also stimulating the establishment of other gardens with which exchange of plants and knowledge could occur.<sup>113</sup> Drayton notes that ultimately, however, Kew's 'practical contributions were ... meagre. Moral sustenance, rather than breadfruit, flax, or dyes, became Kew's principal contribution to British power.'<sup>114</sup>

As an intermediary in empire Banks is a prominent example of a 'type' that is attracting increasing attention from historians. Commercial agents – *banians* and *dubashis* – in the East India Company's commercial information-gathering exercises are worth mentioning again here as they also fall into this category. The roles of what have been called 'cultural brokers' operating between (or across) white, black, and indigenous peoples is well established in the history of America.<sup>115</sup> The histories of such figures is also being written as a part of imperial histories other than the British. Julia C. Wells, for example, has studied the life of a Khoena woman, Eva, who acted as an interpreter, mediator, and intermediary between the Dutch and Africans at the Cape of Good Hope in the eighteenth century.<sup>116</sup> Much of the history of cultural brokers, and 'intimates' in particular, operating in a middle ground, or what has also been called a 'zone of deep intercultural contact', is concerned with the making of colonial knowledge.<sup>117</sup> Botanical knowledge that interested naturalists, geographical knowledge sought after by cartographers, commercial information required by traders, or population information wanted by census makers, all depended upon indigenous knowledge,

<sup>112</sup> Gascoigne, *Science in the service of empire*, p. 114.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>114</sup> Drayton, *Nature's government*, p. 80.

<sup>115</sup> Gary B. Nash, 'The hidden history of Mestizo America', *Journal of American History*, 82 (1995), pp. 941–62; Margaret Connell Szasz, ed., *Between Indian and white worlds: the cultural broker* (Norman, OK, 1994); Richard White, *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650–1815* (Cambridge, 1991).

<sup>116</sup> Julia C. Wells, 'Eva's men: gender and power in the establishment of the Cape of Good Hope, 1765–1774', *Journal of African History*, 39 (1998), pp. 417–37.

<sup>117</sup> Nash, 'The hidden history', p. 947. On intimates at the turn of the nineteenth century in Southeast Asia see Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: race and the intimate in colonial rule* (Berkeley, 2002); *idem*, 'Sexual affronts and racial frontiers: European identities and the cultural politics of exclusion in colonial Southeast Asia', in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley, 1997); *idem*, 'Carnal knowledge and imperial power: gender, race and morality in colonial Asia', in Micaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the crossroads of knowledge: feminist anthropology in the postmodern era* (Berkeley, 1991).

and consequently someone was (usually) needed to mediate it.<sup>118</sup> Such research on colonial knowledge making, with its emphasis on intermediaries suggests, in Lynn Zastoupil's words (with terminology borrowed from Eugene F. Irschick), 'that initially colonial discourses were not so much European impositions as products of dialogic encounters'.<sup>119</sup>

A stimulating example of how studying intermediaries might lead to writing a trans-national history is Lauren Benton's book on colonial legal regimes in the 500 years from 1400. She argues that 'the colonial state was in no small part the product of the politics of legal ordering'.<sup>120</sup> The study is partly concerned with 'indigenous legal personnel' whose 'very presence tended to pose a challenge to colonizers' representations of cultural and legal boundaries'.<sup>121</sup> Drawing on various case studies, including that of a disputed inheritance in Patna in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, Benton suggests that 'legal and cultural intermediaries' had a 'special role ... in de-centering the carefully constructed scaffolding of the colonial legal order. In part, their challenge to the stability of the plural legal order resulted simply from the contradictions built into dual roles as insiders and outsiders. In part, it resulted from legal sophistication and efforts to exploit such ambiguities in support of their own interests.' They both upheld and challenged the legitimacy of colonial state law.<sup>122</sup> This study of intermediaries in a legal context is part of a larger comparative study to push what she usefully labels 'middle ground analyses' both outwards towards the global context and inwards towards the local context in a type of institutional world history.<sup>123</sup>

Intermediaries in empire provide one point of departure to think about the nature of imperial connections and build upon our understanding of commercial and botanical networks. The movement of people around the empire provides another. Atlantic migration, both forced and free, is already a well-established area but many other areas are only just beginning to be tackled.<sup>124</sup> Many of those 'employed' by the empire were 'people on the move'. The log of John Lennox's journey aboard the *Southampton*, demonstrating 'the existential abruptness of the life of an eighteenth-century sea captain', is representative of a large archive of

<sup>118</sup> Grove, *Green imperialism*, ch. 2; Chester, 'The mapping of empire', pp. 266–7; Bayly, *Empire and information*, pp. 45–6; Norbert Peabody, 'Cents, sense, census: human inventories in late precolonial and early colonial India', *Comparative Studies in History and Society*, 43 (2001), pp. 819–50. See also Robert E. Frykenberg, 'India to 1858', in Robin W. Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, v: *Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), p. 197.

<sup>119</sup> Lynn Zastoupil, 'Intimacy and colonial knowledge', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 3 (2002); Eugene F. Irschick, *Dialogue and history: constructing South India, 1795–1895* (Berkeley, 1994).

<sup>120</sup> Benton, *Law and colonial cultures*, p. 253. See also idem, 'The legal regime of the South Atlantic world, 1400–1750: jurisdictional complexity as institutional order', *Journal of World History*, 11 (2000), pp. 27–56.

<sup>121</sup> Benton, *Law and colonial cultures*, p. 10. <sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 165–6.

<sup>123</sup> Benton, 'From the world-systems perspective to institutional world history', pp. 285, 262.

<sup>124</sup> Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West*; Cressy, *Coming over*; Alison Games, 'Migration', in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic world, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke, 2002); Alan L. Karras, *Sojourners in the sun: Scottish migrants in Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740–1800* (Ithaca, 1992).



imperial travel.<sup>125</sup> Such logs were also kept by maritime surveyors, such as John Septimus Roe, studied by Felix Driver and Luciana Martins in their investigation of ‘the ways in which practices of drawing and surveying shaped the geographical imagination of British mariners’ in the early nineteenth century.<sup>126</sup> This study of the practice of drawing, making observations, and keeping a log by a Navy employee takes us back to the theme of knowledge practices in its concern with ‘relationships between traveling, seeing and knowing’.<sup>127</sup> Roe’s constant movement – he is ‘perpetually unsettled’ – his need for approval from his superiors, and indeed the physical work of making observations, suggest that the ‘imperial eye appears not as transcendent, all-knowing, global, but instead as situated, partial, local’.<sup>128</sup>

Writing about travel often ends up being writing about travel writing.<sup>129</sup> Recently published anthologies of travel writing suggest that there is interest in the ‘South Seas’ that extends beyond Captain Cook, as well as interest in writings about travel in other parts of the world.<sup>130</sup> Writing about eighteenth-century travel writing is comparatively neglectful of the imperial context, with the exception of Mary Louise Pratt’s book *Imperial eyes*.<sup>131</sup> Pratt goes to some lengths to avoid privileging metropolitan perspectives and invites readers to think about the view of Europe from the colonies as well as how ‘travel and exploration writing produced “the rest of the world” for European readerships’.<sup>132</sup> Particularly suggestive are Pratt’s attempts to look at travel writing alongside other types of writings like natural histories. Likewise Driver and Martins read Roe’s letters alongside his log.

Indeed it is letters that perhaps provide the best (and most tangible) evidence of the interconnectedness of empire. A single letter writer could form the hub of an enormous network of correspondents. The editor of the forthcoming six-volume edition of Banks’s scientific letters declares that ‘Sir Joseph’s correspondence was global in circulation and global in concern’.<sup>133</sup> Similarly, mercantile letters criss-crossed the globe, and in the words of Thomas Truxes, the editor of a volume of letters written between traders in New York and Belfast, merchant

<sup>125</sup> Tomlinson, ‘From Campsie to Kedgeree’, pp. 773–9, quotation from p. 779.

<sup>126</sup> Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, ‘Visual histories: John Septimus Roe and the art of navigation, c. 1815–1830’, *History Workshop Journal*, 54 (2002), pp. 144–61, at p. 146.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>129</sup> Elsner and Rubiés, eds., *Voyages and visions*.

<sup>130</sup> Tim Fulford and Peter J. Kitson, eds., *Travels, explorations and empires: writings from the era of imperial expansion, 1770–1835* (8 vols., London, 2001–2); Jonathan Lamb, Vanessa Smith, and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Exploration and exchange: a South Seas anthology, 1680–1900* (Chicago, 2000).

<sup>131</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation* (London, 1992). Much stimulating research has been undertaken on the Grand Tour, see, for example, Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and guilt on the Grand Tour: travel writing and imaginative geography, 1600–1830* (Manchester, 1999).

<sup>132</sup> Pratt, *Imperial eyes*, pp. 6, 36, 5.

<sup>133</sup> Neil Chambers, ‘Letters from the president: the correspondence of Sir Joseph Banks’, *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 53 (1999), pp. 27–57, at p. 38. Neil Chambers, ed., *The scientific letters of Sir Joseph Banks, 1743–1820* (6 vols., forthcoming). See also Neil Chambers, ed., *The letters of Sir Joseph Banks: a selection, 1768–1820* (London, 2000).

correspondence, ‘together with kinship ties and the structure of credit, formed the web that held commercial society together’.<sup>134</sup> Toby Ditz has read eighteenth-century Philadelphia merchant letters and argues that [u]nder the pressure of circumstance ... merchants could be ingenious, rather than formulaic writers ... their letters were artful’.<sup>135</sup> Such correspondence spanned the British empire: ‘As mercantile correspondence disseminated information about men, markets, and imperial policy among men working at a distance from one another, it complemented, and extended to virtually global proportions, the reach of face-to-face conversations that took place in coffee houses, taverns, wharves, and commercial exchanges.’<sup>136</sup>

If it is useful to conceive of empire as a set of networks through which knowledge was exchanged, trust was negotiated, people travelled (sometimes against their will), and commodities were traded, then some general qualifications are needed. A case can still be made for employing conceptions of the empire that give weighting and shape to particular areas at particular times. Hancock, for example, usefully distinguishes between the ‘hub-and-spoke’ model of overseas trade in the Atlantic world that characterizes the tobacco trade and (with some modifications) the sugar and slave trades, and the ‘spider-web’ model which more effectively describes the Madeira wine trade.<sup>137</sup> Bayly observes that it ‘is an anachronism to think of Indonesia, India, the Caribbean, let alone “Europe” or “Asia”, as separate or separable identities. In the eighteenth century the Caribbean remained part of the wider European north Atlantic system. North India looked towards central Asia and Iran; south India towards Ceylon and Indonesia.’ He suggests that a comparative approach is useful for exploring the ‘cultural links within these broader communities and the interconnections of trade, learning and clerical personnel [which] have given their histories common themes and a similar shape’.<sup>138</sup>

This is not to say, however, that empire can be seen as a web of connections where none is more significant than the rest. In terms of credit networks, for example, a certain amount of overall reciprocity needed to be achieved and those new enterprises that were successful tended to use existing networks.<sup>139</sup> Moreover, different traders had different roles in these networks: ‘[t]he credit network by which merchants, wholesalers, and specialized factors supported each other did

<sup>134</sup> Thomas M. Truxes, ed., *Letterbook of Greg and Cunningham: merchants of New York and Belfast* (Oxford, 2001).

<sup>135</sup> Toby L. Ditz, ‘Formative ventures: eighteenth-century commercial letters and the articulation of experience’, in Rebecca Earle, ed., *Epistolary selves: letters and letter-writers, 1600–1945* (Aldershot, 1999), p. 62.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>137</sup> Hancock, ‘“A revolution in the trade”’, pp. 106–7. For the drawing of similar distinctions between early modern knowledge networks (the centralized but far-reaching network of the Musaeum Kircherianum in mid-seventeenth-century Rome is contrasted with the scattered and multicentred network of eclipse observations) see Harris, ‘Long-distance corporations’, pp. 274–5.

<sup>138</sup> Bayly, *Imperial meridian*, p. 15.

<sup>139</sup> P. J. Marshall, ‘Empire and opportunity in Britain, 1763–75’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6th ser., 5 (1995) pp. 111–28, at p. 127.

not extend equally to the smaller manufacturer, who was more likely to be a receiver than a granter of credit'.<sup>140</sup> There were bottlenecks at certain points in some of these networks. In the second half of the eighteenth century the East India Company's buying and selling strategies suggest the crucial role of intermediaries: many of the goods to be exported to Asia were bought through single suppliers and cartels; and the Company did not market the tea they imported directly but rather sold it at auction.<sup>141</sup> Likewise the British export trade to America in the same period was channelled through a fairly small number of large firms in London and other British ports.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, particular places had particular significance. In the exchange of botanical specimens and knowledge, for example, there were some very influential gardens.<sup>143</sup> As some connections were more significant, and 'successful', others were weaker. The improvement ethic shaped much imperial practice in the context of both land and governance; not all schemes, however, could be adapted to suit local conditions: 'improvement programs devised and approved in Britain were not a sure guide to success in plantation America'.<sup>144</sup>

We need to heed the customary cautions about resisting a linear narrative. Sverker Sörlin, for example, admonishes: '[w]hen we explore and analyze patterns of Western domination in the modern period we should not ... be blinded by its seemingly linear trajectory of constant growth and ever more efficient networks of commerce, science, and military intelligence'.<sup>145</sup> The seasonality of trade in the eighteenth century has been well established but we must also pay attention to other trends and moments in the history of imperial networks. For most authors writing about the eighteenth-century British empire the American War of Independence marks a crucial turning point but financial crises and trade boycotts also had far-reaching effects on the nature of trading networks.<sup>146</sup> More gradual changes have been noted in the dynamics of trading networks with the attempts of some American merchants, for example, to circumvent British export firms and trade directly with provincial manufacturers in the second half of the eighteenth century in the hope of commercial advantage.<sup>147</sup>

Scholarship on the Atlantic world perhaps provides the best illustration of the usefulness of pursuing these directions. Rather than thinking about the Atlantic world just as an East–West phenomenon, for example, scholars have begun to consider what Hancock calls the "'interactivity" of peripheral regions', particularly in the context of the African slave trade.<sup>148</sup> At its best an Atlantic approach

<sup>140</sup> Price, 'What did merchants do?', p. 281.

<sup>141</sup> Bowen, 'Sinews of trade and empire', p. 483; Bowen, 'Tea, tribute and the East India Company', pp. 166–7.

<sup>142</sup> Morgan, 'Business networks', pp. 39–40.

<sup>143</sup> Grove, *Green imperialism*, p. 10.

<sup>144</sup> Hancock, *Citizens of the world*, p. 164.

<sup>145</sup> Sörlin, 'Ordering the world for Europe', p. 52.

<sup>146</sup> Morgan, 'Business networks', pp. 39–40.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50–2.

<sup>148</sup> See also David Hancock, "'A world of business to do": William Freeman and the foundations of England's commercial empire, 1645–1707', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 57 (2000), pp. 3–34 at p. 4 n. 4. As examples Hancock cites Robin Law and Kristin Mann, 'West Africa in the Atlantic

does not privilege the viewpoint from one side of the Atlantic or the other and allows the experience of indigenous peoples to be fully integrated into imperial history and not marginalized.<sup>149</sup> The community of the Atlantic world encompassed more than the British Atlantic imperial interests to include Dutch, French, and Spanish concerns. Moreover, the British trading world was not coterminous with its empire.<sup>150</sup> Such considerations suggest that at times it is useful to cross imperial boundaries.

The cultural turn that imperial history is currently taking has been criticized by some scholars who fear that so far this has been at the expense of economic history. Perhaps, however, if empire is thought of as a set of networks of exchange then economic history can be placed alongside, and in many cases must be inextricably linked to, the scientific, the cultural, the social, the political, and the intellectual histories of empire.

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community: the case of the slave coast', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999), pp. 307–34; Paul E. Lovejoy and David Richardson, 'Trust, pawnship and Atlantic history: the institutional foundations of the old Calabar slave trade', *American Historical Review*, 104 (1999), pp. 332–55.

<sup>149</sup> Ian K. Steele, 'Exploding colonial American history: Amerindia, Atlantic and global perspectives', *Reviews in American History*, 26 (1998), pp. 70–95.

<sup>150</sup> P. J. Marshall, 'Introduction', in idem, ed., *Oxford history of the British empire*, p. 12.