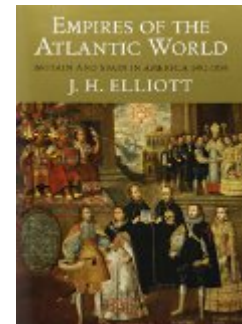


John H. Elliott. *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. XXI, 546 S. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11431-7; \$22.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-12399-9.

Reviewed by Todd Webb (Department of History, Laurentian University)
Published on H-Canada (October, 2007)



An Epic of Greater America

J. H. Elliott sets himself a daunting task in *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830*. Comparing two empires, focusing on the individual, local, regional, and transatlantic contexts of European expansion, he aims to counter the “black legend” of Spanish imperialism. Elliott does not deny that the Spanish process of conquest could be, and often was, brutal. He argues, however, that the viciousness and chaos of initial contact were followed by something other than centuries of inept imperial management. According to Elliott, the Spanish empire in the Americas constituted a highly complex society governed by a generally effective colonial system. It was that very complexity and stability, he attempts to demonstrate, that made the Latin American wars of independence so destructive. In this, and in many other ways, the history of Spanish America differed from the history of British America; but that does not mean that the British were better empire builders. In comparison to Spain, Britain was often utterly hapless in its dealings with the settlers of New England, Virginia, and the Middle Colonies. That Elliott goes far towards making this case, while providing a detailed survey of the rise and fall of two European powers in the Americas, is a testament to the magnitude of his achievement.

Empires of the Atlantic World is divided into three parts, each focusing on a discrete phase of the settler experience in the Americas: occupation, consolidation, and emancipation. In the first part—occupation—Elliott begins by outlining the mindset and motivation of two archetypal adventurers, the Spanish conquistador Her-

nan Cortes and the English captain Christopher Newport. In Elliott’s reading, these two men possessed a similar mentality of conquest and both were motivated by the same zeal for wealth. Indeed, tales of Spanish success in the New World did much to whet the collective appetite of the founders of Jamestown, though, of course, their hopes of finding their own Aztec empire to overthrow and pillage were doomed to disappointment. Still, Elliott’s main point is clear enough: in the beginning, the Spanish and British empires in the Americas were similar. Such differences as did exist between them—and Elliott is careful to point these out—had more to do with the varying contexts of Spanish and British settlement than with any hard-and-fast distinction between empires of conquest and commerce. This is an argument that Elliott drives home in his discussion of the impact of Spanish and British settlement on the geography, indigenous people, and resources of the Americas.

In part 2, Elliott deals with the consolidation of the European presence in North and South America. He concentrates on those political, social, and religious factors that tended to pull the two colonial societies apart, including the “relatively slow and haphazard British moves towards the imposition of empire” and Spain’s incorporation of its overseas territories “within an effective imperial framework” (p. 119). That “effective imperial framework” consisted of a byzantine bureaucracy and a culture of loyalty that permitted political dissent as long as it did not aim to topple the imperial regime itself. There was nothing quite like this in British America, Elliott argues,

largely thanks to Britain's higgledy-piggledy approach to colonial government. Instead, the British settlers were compelled to make their own way in the New World, developing, for instance, a legal system that was based on the English customs of the time, but that was also adapted to their own unique circumstances. This pattern of Spanish hierarchy and British "liberty" was repeated in the overall development of the two empires; but, Elliott concludes, the final result of this process of imperial consolidation was the same for the British and Spanish colonists: they became increasingly "American" in their outlook. By effectively analyzing both the similarities and differences between Spanish and British America, Elliott, once again, avoids any reductionist explanation of colonial development. This delicate balancing act allows him to draw attention to the striking similarities between Protestantism and Tridentine Catholicism, made manifest in the Salem witch trials of 1692 and the mass hysteria that gripped the Spanish American city of Queretaro in 1691. At the same time, Elliott convincingly pinpoints the differences between the broader religious cultures of the two settler societies: British America was marked by a diversity of sects and Spanish America by religious uniformity. Each culture had its weaknesses: the former tended towards instability and the latter towards rigidity. Those same weaknesses, Elliott demonstrates, were evident in the social and political structures of the British and Spanish colonies.

The final part of *Empires of the Atlantic World* concentrates on the breakdown of British and Spanish imperial authority in the Americas. Elliott's contention that the colonies were shaped by "a host of personal choices and the unpredictable consequences of unforeseen events" (p. 411) comes most clearly into play in this section. He provides insightful character sketches of key players, including George Washington and Simon Bolivar, explaining how their different personalities and circumstances affected the outcome of the revolutionary struggles in North and South America. Revolutions being notoriously complex, Elliott goes further, outlining those structural factors—economic, political, and cultural—that contributed to the course of British American and Latin American emancipation. Particular noteworthy, however, is Elliott's attempt to understand why the independence movements in the two empires turned out so differently. Comparing the American and Latin American revolutions, Elliott finds the answer in the way that the Latin American wars of independence were fought and, equally important, in the relative staying power of the Spanish imperial system. Unlike the American rev-

olutionaries, the Latin American liberators had to contend with a series of highly stratified settler societies that were prone to civil war; and the civil wars that were part of the Latin American struggle for independence were far more economically disruptive than the conflict between loyalists and patriots in the Thirteen Colonies. Things only went from bad to worse once independence was achieved: the Latin American liberators attempted to recreate the centralized structures of government that they had just overthrown. It was a tactic, Elliott notes, that made sense politically and psychologically, but that was not well calculated to meet the economic needs of the time. In contrast, the revolutionary struggle of the new United States of America left it prepared to "make its way, with growing confidence, in the ruthlessly competitive environment of an industrializing western world" (p. 402).

There is much to praise in *Empires of the Atlantic World*. It serves as a model of how Atlantic history should be done. Drawing on a vast array of secondary material, Elliott more than meets the goal he sets for himself in the introduction: a comparative study of British and Spanish settlement that deals, in equal measure, with similarities and differences and that provides explanations and analysis calculated to do justice to both. And, though concentrating on the British and Spanish settler societies in North and South America, Elliott also effectively integrates Native American groups into his narrative. As he points out, the "tribal traditions and culture" of the indigenous people "were as important in determining the outcome of any confrontation as were the varieties of approach adopted by the Europeans themselves" (p. 63). In the end, Elliott's account bears out Richard White's argument in *The Middle Ground* that, when it came to negotiating Native-newcomer relations, the British were less successful than other European powers in the Americas.[1] Often by sheer force of circumstance, Elliott demonstrates, the Spanish were compelled to find a way to incorporate relatively large numbers of Native Americans into "an organic and hierarchically organized society;" for the British, in contrast, "there was no middle way between anglicization and exclusion" (p. 85).

However, for all his skill in comparing and contrasting the empires of the Atlantic world, at certain points Elliott seems to be too intent by half on dispelling the "black legend" of Spanish imperialism. In his discussion of the settler impact on American space, for instance, he provides valuable insights into the geographic transformations wrought by the introduction of European ideas of property and urban settlement, but he does not touch

on the environment consequences of contact in any sustained way. In particular, he overlooks Elinor Melville's argument that the process of Spanish conquest and settlement had a dire effect on the central Mexican highlands, transforming the Valle de Mezquital from a fertile region of the Aztec empire into a largely arid wasteland.[2] This image of catastrophic environmental degradation does not mesh well with Elliott's revisionist take on the Spanish empire in the Americas.

It is also worth pointing out that "Canada" (New France and British North America) plays only a passing role in Elliott's account of European colonization. It constitutes a shadowy presence, posing a threat to the Thirteen Colonies during the French regime and, between 1763 and 1774, acting as an increasing irritant to the future American revolutionaries. In the age of revolution, Elliott states, Canada was invaded, became a Loyalist refuge and, finally, along with the British West Indies, served as a sort of consolation prize for the disappointed empire builders of Britain. All of this, of course, is entirely accurate, as far as it goes; but it may be fair to suggest that it does not go far enough, despite the book's already broad scope. As J. G. A. Pocock argued over thirty years ago, Canada still had a British history to work out after 1783.[3] At the very least, touching on the uneasy

relationship between the imperial metropole and periphery as it unfolded in British North America might have given additional weight to Elliott's analysis of the nature of loyalism, which, he rightly notes, was often a mixture of instinct and opportunism.

Notwithstanding these relatively minor criticisms, *Empires of the Atlantic World* is a magnificent scholarly achievement. Enlivened by Elliott's elegant prose, it provides a consistently thought-provoking account of the colonial efforts of Spain and Britain in North and South America. As a contribution to the growing field of Atlantic history, it will be force to be reckoned with for a long time to come.

Notes

[1]. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[2]. Elinor G. K. Melville, *A Plague of Sheep: Environmental Consequences of the Conquest of Mexico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[3]. J. G. A. Pocock, "British History: A Plea for a New Subject," *Journal of Modern History* vol. 47, no. 4 (1975): 601-24.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: Todd Webb. Review of Elliott, John H., *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13652>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.