H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John E Wills, Jr. *1688: A Global History.* New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001. vii + 330 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-393-04744-8.

Reviewed by Andrew D. Nicholls (Department of History, Buffalo State College)
Published on H-W-Civ (August, 2001)

The Unconfineable Variety, Splendor, and Strangeness of the Human Condition

The Unconfineable Variety, Splendor, and Strangeness of the Human Condition

On page 112 of *1688: A Global History*, John Wills compares the work of the historian to the artistic style of the seventeenth-century Chinese painter Shitao: "The historian seeking to sketch a world tries not be confined by any style, any set of questions but to follow hunches, to let one thing lead to another. Like Shitao letting the One Stroke appear in many forms, he hopes to avoid system and to put before his reader many pictures of a world, reflecting the unconfineable variety, splendor, and strangeness of the human condition." Such is Wills's analogy between history and painting, and such is the nature and spirit of this remarkable book.

Wills, an eminent and accomplished scholar in the field of Chinese history, has attempted something truly inventive in this work: a biography of the world circa. 1688. While the title suggests that his focus will be on that year alone, Wills is far too conscientious a historian to simply place his readers down in Mexico City, Batavia, Moscow, Nagasaki, or London (to name just a few of the stops on his tour), and introduce us to his cast of unforgettable characters, without first providing some sense of background and context. Wills understands the early modern world, and overall, he succeeds admirably in preparing his readers for the sights they will see, and the people they will meet, as they traverse the globe with him.

That is not to say that very many readers will feel at home or at ease in most parts of the world of 1688. What they will often encounter is a world where superstition, violence, greed, intolerance, racism, and avarice are all prevalent. And therein lies another of the subtle triumphs of this book. While Wills is never overt in making the suggestion, he does force his readers, in looking at one year in the past, to see our own world reflected in its image. The hidden axiom is that much of what repels us about the conduct of our ancestors is still with us, albeit, often in different forms. But, this realization about *1688: A Global History* should not lead one to the conclusion that Wills is in the business of moralizing. Far from it. Instead, his primary motive is to demonstrate how interconnected the regions of the globe actually were in the early modern period. This is not always an easy task, but he is deft in his selection of examples that illustrate the interplay of different cultures. In the end, the reader comes away with a much more enlightened and complete picture of the world machine.

Wills' treatment of the Atlantic slave trade from the African perspective, is a good example of this. In the book's second chapter we are introduced to "Dom Joao Manoel Grilho, who treads on the lion in his mother's belly." He was the ruler of a kingdom on the Congo, who had converted to Christianity, and by 1688, was corresponding with a locally based Italian Capuchin priest, in Portuguese. In framing his epigram about this potentate, Wills argues that such an exchange could not have taken place without more than two centuries of Portuguese trade and missionary activities along the mid-Atlantic African coast, a bitter rivalry among missionaries that led to the destruction of the old Kongolese kingdom, and pressures associated with the lucrative slave trade that emanated from the African interior. Into this one figure, therefore, the author sees the uniting of numerous strands that were illustrative of what he refers to as "Many Africas."

A similar, but much more localized example of his talent for presenting diversity, can be found in the seventeenth chapter. The setting is Amsterdam. Here was a global trading center of the first importance; a clean and orderly city boasting such amenities as watch patrols and street lamps, but, asks Wills, where did sovereignty lie? Did Amsterdam's power rest in its position as economic juggernaut within the United Provinces (a fact confirmed when one notes that the city paid more than half of the taxes for the entire United Provinces), or was it, and

were the other cities, subject to the provincial assemblies? In a republic with a very weak central government, such questions were highly important ones, and as Wills' states, a visitor was apt to be baffled by Dutch politics.

In normal circumstances, the governmental idiosyncrasies of a small republic might not have been of global importance, but for a combination of reasons, in 1688, the United Provinces were enjoying their heyday. A tradition of enterprise and commerce, coupled with considerable religious and political freedoms, had placed the Dutch in a position of power that belied the small size of their homeland. Furthermore, in 1688, one of their own, the Prince of Orange, was about to embark on a successful invasion of England. In telling the story of how the Dutch came together to assist Prince William in his bold venture, Wills is again at his best, revealing the inter-connection of peoples, events, ideas, and technologies. Here, and in numerous other places in this book, he shows why history can never rest on a bland formula of famous names and dates. In short, there is always much more to the story, with many unexpected aspects to be discovered, in even more unexpected places.

This book deserves to gain a wide audience. For those who are interested in global approaches to historical writing, it is invaluable. Furthermore, its many compelling anecdotes, broaching everything from science and philosophy, to travel and courtship rites, make it a volume that can be consulted and revisited regularly.

If there is one element of the work that I found somewhat disappointing, it is the decision to eschew source citations. The pace and readability of this work will make it popular, but students will not have an easy time re-tracing Wills's research. While the bibliographic sketches that are provided at the end of the book will be of some use, these are also quite limited. That may have been a publisher's decision, but the lack of citations, coupled with a thin bibliography, sometimes make it difficult to see the historian at work. This might prove to be a shortcoming for those selecting books for instructional purposes, especially if one tends to choose works that demonstrate scholarly techniques.

In the end, however, it would be nit-picking to focus unduly on such things. For a writer and historian whose stated purpose was to reveal that "serendipity, surprise, and letting one thing lead you to another..." helped to drive this project, allowances must be made. Wills tells us that "it was fun to do" (p. xi), and I can wholeheartedly recommend *1688: A Global History* as something that is fun, and informative, to read.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Andrew D. Nicholls. Review of Wills, John E, Jr., *1688: A Global History*. H-W-Civ, H-Net Reviews. August, 2001.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5382

Copyright © 2001 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.