

**David Ormrod.** *The Rise of Commercial Empires: England and the Netherlands in the Age of Mercantilism, 1650-1770.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xvii + 400 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-81926-8.



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David Ormrod's book is an exercise in comparative history, grounded in careful empirical work, which has big claims to make about the place England holds in the development of the modern world. Such claims are currently unfashionable among specialists in early modern English history, overshadowed by a concern with the "otherness" of the early modern past, or devalued by the prevailing scepticism about grand narratives in general, and narratives about the development of modernity in particular. It is axiomatic in many other disciplines, however, that the English "case" represented an important divergence in the early modern period. All cases are unique, of course, but the uniqueness of the English experience during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is frequently taken to be of crucial importance for understanding the modern world and its origins. For these reasons this book may be read more by social scientists than historians, which is a shame because it is an outstanding example of thoughtful empiricism, with much to tell us both about the particularities of English life and about the po-

tential significance of such a study to an understanding of ourselves in time.

The central concern of the book is with the system of exchange in the Baltic and North Sea between 1650 and 1770. This double sea (in Braudel's phrase) is here seen as an economic region as important in the world-system as the Mediterranean. Within this economic area there were core and peripheral areas, and the flow of goods and capital was regulated by rival entrepreneurs. The overall case is that there was in this period a decisive change, as London supplanted Amsterdam as the leading entrepreneur, and in the process established a new kind of economic primacy.

Empirically, the argument rests on a careful analysis of the structure, financing, and organization of the key commodity trades within the North Sea and the Baltic. Piecing together the disparate secondary work with the surviving papers of English and Dutch merchants, customs records and English pamphlet discussions, Ormrod offers a careful analysis of the export trade in English woollens; the substitutions of domestic and Irish

linen for imports; the growth of English re-exports; the English and Dutch grain trades; and the export of English coal to Holland. Along the way we learn much about shifting patterns in the production, trade, and consumption of these key commodities, and the study will be resorted to for reference by many scholars not primarily interested in the thesis being advanced. Ormrod's primary purpose, however, is to show that the decline of Amsterdam as the dominating staple market of the region was the net effect of changes in *each* of these trades. Moreover, in each case complex factors were at play, among them the contingent effects of warfare and diplomacy or the comparative advantage accruing from particular technological innovations. This is not therefore a simple argument, still less a determinist or reductionist one. Despite the complexities, however, Ormrod traces in each case an important marginal effect arising from the greater regulatory coherence of English policy and the greater effectiveness of the English state. Holland's relative decline ("loss of leadership" as Ormrod, following David Landes, notes, is actually a better characterization) arose from a complex of factors but among them was the relative weakness of the Dutch state. Mercantilism is back, and this time it affects businesses.

On the basis of this subtle analysis of marginal effects, Ormrod goes on to make much larger claims. Most importantly, he argues that the English case represents not just another shift in the world economy, but a change in the ways in which primacy within the world economy was achieved. The shift from Amsterdam to London was at the same time a shift from a city-based to a nationally-based dominance: London was the leading city of a national economy, and dominance within the world economy thenceforth took that form. Secondly, in the reorientation of the Dutch staplemarket English state power was a significant marginal factor: the shift towards London represented the first example of the comparative advantages available to national states. Moreover,

the effects of this change were atlanticized; London's dominance within one region became the basis for domination in a larger slice of the world economy: "It was the mercantilist state which decisively shifted the balance of power and influence towards London, through the creation of a *national* entrepôt within an imperial trading network" (p. 337).

In some cases there is perhaps a mismatch between Ormrod in cautious empirical mode and these more expansive claims. In particular the relationship between the rise of London in the North Sea/Baltic area and in the Atlantic might have borne closer scrutiny. Ormrod suggests that the flow of Dutch capital into the English trades in the former freed up English capital which fostered further growth in the latter (p. 333), an observation which might prompt much closer consideration of what must have been a very complex relationship. The respective chronologies indeed suggest such complexities, since London was a major Atlantic port well before the mid-eighteenth century, where Ormrod would seem to place the achievement of primacy in the North Sea/Baltic. Perhaps advantages flowed in both directions. Similarly, Ormrod might have done more to anticipate objections from the (possibly more numerous) historians ready to emphasize the Atlantic and Indian trades as crucial to English development on the basis of "leading sector" arguments. Put another way, the Atlantic figures rather more prominently in the conclusion than in the text and Ormrod's case here might be said to be not proven. The structure of the book also creates some repetition and the thematic approach is not complemented by the sort of chronological overview which would allow the reader to grasp the overall story more easily.

These criticisms, however, should not obscure what has been achieved. This is a major study of several crucially important trades, based on a mature command of sources in England and Holland. It is also a significant contribution to the litera-

ture on world systems. Much of the discussion is (unavoidably) technical and the book would be hard going for most undergraduates. However, Ormrod makes a substantial case, of real significance, which deserves a wide readership among specialists in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English history, and all those with an interest in the history of the modern world economy.

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