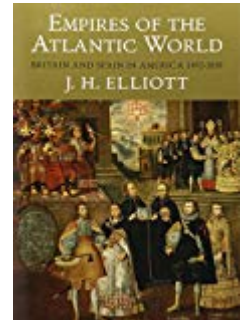


**John H. Elliott.** *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. XXI, 546 S. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-12399-9.



**Reviewed by** Jeremy Black

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Comparative history provides a vital qualification to the habit of national exceptionalism seen all too frequently among those who write about particular countries. It is also rarely done well. There are particular problems in engaging with more than one historiography, and also serious methodological issues in the comparative project. These problems have ensured that relatively little comparative history encompassing Britain has been successfully accomplished. The appearance of this impressive work by one of Britain's leading historians is therefore particularly welcome. The overwhelming theme is one of the accidents that ensure different paths, rather than any innate exceptionalism. For example, J. H. Elliott argues that, although the Cortés and Jamestown expeditions suggest that many of the same aspirations attended the birth of Spain's and Britain's empires in America, nevertheless accidents, both of environment and of timing, would do much to ensure that they developed in distinctive ways. For both empires, there was a need to establish an equilibrium between their own developing needs and aspirations, and those of the metropolitan societies from which they had

sprung. Comparisons are also traced through the treatment of the native peoples and the exploitation of resources. As Elliott notes, both imperial powers were operating within the same set of assumptions about the proper relationship of overseas settlements to the mother country, one in which the interests of the settlements were ruthlessly subordinated to those of an imperial metropolis out for resources to help it in the power politics of the period. Political, social, and religious organization are then all discussed.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Elliott argues, ideas and practice in British North America had jointly set in motion a dynamic that, once unleashed, could mount a powerful challenge to the exercise of power and privilege by the few. This, however, had other consequences as well. Indeed, as far as common purpose against France in the 1750s is concerned, "the idea of unity was not one that came instructively to societies born and bred in diversity" (p. 297). Elliott suggests that exasperation in London went hand in hand with relief that the colonies would therefore

be unable to co-operate against Britain, although that theme was not a strong one in the 1750s.

Elliott claims that forces capable of mounting a comparable challenge to the power of oligarchy were not evident in Spanish America. Indeed, the instructive chapter on sacred space, a most valuable inclusion, leads to the conclusion that uniformity of faith had given Spanish America an inner cohesion that eluded the British colonies and then to the question whether such a society could adjust to new ideas and whether that of British America, with its diversity of creeds, could achieve stability.

The section on emancipation presents social stresses, divergent senses of identity, and empires in crisis in part due to the pressures of war finance. It is instructive to contrast the suppression of Tupac Amaru's rising in 1781 with the success of the American Revolution. Contrasts are taken forward into a discussion of the early history of the United States of America. Conceptually, the closing assertion is arresting: "Behind the cultural values and the economic and social imperatives that shaped the British and Spanish empires of the Atlantic world lay a host of personal choices and the unpredictable consequences of unforeseen events" (p. 411). An impressive work, the paperback edition is now released. Hopefully French America can be brought into the equation by another scholar of Elliott's skill and thoughtfulness.

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