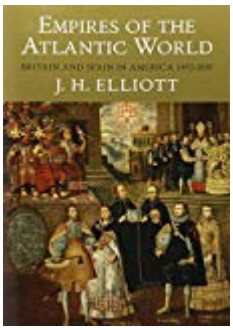
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



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 Matt Harris

Published on H-Atlantic (August, 2007)

J. H. Elliott's *Empires of the Atlantic World* compares the British and Spanish empires from the time of Columbus to the shattering of the old imperial order in the early nineteenth century. It offers a striking picture of how similar these empires were and yet how much they differed politically and culturally. To create a coherent story, Elliott divides the book into three parts: "Occupation," "Consolidation," and "Emancipation." His purpose, he acknowledges, is to compare and juxtapose the two empires, focusing on "settler societies and their relationship with their mother countries" (p. xviii).

In the first section, "Occupation," he examines the Virginia and New Spain settlements, arguing that the leaders of the Cortés and Jamestown expeditions shared similar ideas about native peoples, the environment, and the proper role of these settlements to the overseas metropolis in Europe. Both empires, he argues, shared the same assumptions about their distant colonies: they existed only to make their respective crowns rich. Where they differed, Elliot asserts, is how they occupied "American space." The British were more interested in planning migrant communities along the eastern seaboard and less interested in converting and assimilating native peoples. By contrast, the Spanish wanted to make permanent settlements in the American southwest by conquering, converting, and integrating native peoples into Spanish life and culture--much to the chagrin of critics of Spanish imperial policy.

The next section, "Consolidation," explores frameworks of government throughout North America. Here Elliott makes the compelling point that European culture had a far greater effect on colonial settlement than did the American environment. Eschewing Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, and keeping in line with recent scholarship on the Atlantic World, he argues that, although British imperial policy provided a conceptual framework for government in the colonies, colonial political leaders did more to shape colonial political structures than did metropolitan officials from London.[1] The obverse is true for the Spanish empire, Elliott asserts. He notes that Spanish officials in Spain created an empire in the Spanish borderlands that was orga-

nizationally and bureaucratically managed from across the Atlantic.

The final section, "Emancipation," is the most interesting part of the book. Elliot shows how both empires struggled to maintain order with their distant possessions. By the latter part of the seventeenth century, he writes, the Virginia settlement was plagued by Bacon's Rebellion, Massachusetts suffered from King Philip's War, and the Spanish experienced the Pueblo Revolt in New Mexico, all of which proved that empire-building in the New World would not be as easy as European officials had imagined.

What further weakened these Atlantic empires, Elliott affirms, were the imperial wars of the eighteenth century, which left both empires burdened with debt. After the Seven Years' War, British officials passed a series of reforms that were designed to raise money, fortify their empire, and reduce the debt. With the first taxes in 1764, Elliott notes, British imperial policies sparked a broad and pointed discussion in the empire about what powers Parliament had over the colonies and what powers it did not have. The inability--of both colonial elites and Whitehall administrators--to resolve those problems led to war, which culminated in 1776 with American independence.

Elliott then concludes with a section on Latin American independence, which was different than independence in the United States. Revolution in the Spanish empire was not led by disgruntled colonial elites angry with Spanish policies. Rather, Elliott argues, the revolutionary fervor in Europe did more than any other factor to foment revolution in the Latin American states in the early nineteenth century.

All told, this is an ambitious book. It covers over four hundred years, spans three continents, and touches on many colonial administrators and leaders. Despite its scope, Elliott does not include any meaningful discussion of the Portuguese settlements in Brazil, the Atlantic slave trade in West Africa, the British settlements in New York or Pennsylvania, or the Spanish settlements in the Caribbean islands. Still, Elliott succeeds admirably in what he set out to do, and that he does so with such imagination and insight only enhances his reputation as one of the leading scholars of the Atlantic World.

Note

[1]. For recent scholarship, see, for example, Mary Sarah Bilder, *The Transatlantic Constitution: Colonial Legal Culture and the Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Daniel Hulsebosch, *Constituting Empire: New York and the Transformation of Constitutionalism in the Atlantic World, 1664-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-atlantic

Citation: Matt Harris. Review of Elliott, John H. *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830.* H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13463