B. Bailyn: Atlantic History. Concepts and Contours

In 1997 I attended the Atlantic history seminar at Harvard organised by Bernard Bailyn, to the members of which this book is dedicated, and which has had a massively important role in promoting and stimulating the study of Atlantic history. Over two weeks we heard papers of great richness delivered on diverse subjects and from numerous perspectives, which all fostered energetic discussion. At the end of the seminar Bailyn said that we had learned seven things, and he was right. I cannot now remember the seven things, but I have a clear memory of trying without success to collapse those seven into a smaller number, or to expand the list. Bailyn’s capacity for empirically-based, pragmatic but systematic thought is formidable, a commitment to values of Anglo-American scholarship which are not fashionable, but which in the work of a great practitioner can be extremely powerful. Bailyn is clearly one such, and this work demonstrates it.

For Bailyn ‘History is what happened, in act and thought; it is also what historians make of it’ (p. ix). In part one of the book Bailyn lays out an intellectual history of the subject; part two offers an analysis of what we now know about the history of the Atlantic. His account of the origins of Atlantic history is, of course, particularly strong on the American context, but is not limited to that. In his view, the key academic interventions responded to earlier work by Lippmann in 1917, but were concentrated in the post-war years—Hoffman, Hayes, Bellot, Godechot, Godinho and Palmer. These interventions are described alongside the contemporary political context of post-war transatlanticism—the Marshall plan, the Truman doctrine, NATO and a small circulation, but still influential journal, the Atlantic Community Quarterly. He gives ample space to a discussion of the post-war, perhaps cold war, context of the emergence of Atlantic history. But Bailyn is in the end convinced that it owed as much to the internal dynamics of historical scholarship: for Godechot and Palmer, for example ‘their view, however uncomfortably close to the great politico-ideological concerns of the post-war years, had developed not abstractly or deductively but empirically, from their own documentary research.’ For them and others, ‘the external, public orientation of historians’ thought merged with the internal propulsions of scholarship, the inner logic of historical inquiry.’ (p. 29-30).

Turning to an account of the internal dynamic of academic history, Bailyn does not see Atlantic history as an aggregation of national histories, or as enriched versions of imperial history or the history of discoveries, but as a consequence of the rapid and exciting development of demographic and economic history in the post-war period, and of the internal propulsion of intellectual history which led Pocock, for example, to begin work on the intellectual history and historical consciousness of the entire Anglophone world (p. 53). His own history of the Atlantic is built not only on an interest in American revolutionary politics but on a profound knowledge of the movements of people and goods which tied together societies around the Atlantic and these networks came into view as a result of wider developments in historical scholarship. ‘However reflective of its own environment and responsive to social pressures and rewards,
[historical scholarship] has its own logic, its own natural sequences, often dialectical; it has its own evolutionary process impelled forward by the sudden punctuations of seminal discoveries and interpretations.' (p. 30).

In part two Bailyn sketches an outline of early modern Atlantic history. The object of the study is a community comprised of societies linked by overlapping and intersecting networks. This is not to be approached as a matter of network or systems analysis, however, but as history: 'history has its own elemental method, its basic principle of organization, which is narrative in the largest sense—chronological, developmental, transformative: the story of growth, change, and evanescence.' (p. 60) He traces three broad phases of development, not synchronous in all regions but consistent in their outline and pattern of progression. In a first phase Europeans, Africans and natives of the Americas interacted in marchlands regarded by all parties as barbarous—where the standards of civil life recognised internally by these groups did not apply. There was no permanency in property relations, political authority, legal forms or territorial claims and warfare was unrestrained—here above all was the barbarity recognised by all since the rules of warfare previously observed by the participants among themselves were abandoned in brutal inter-cultural encounters.

There followed a second phase in which a stable pan-Euro-Afro-American economy developed, linking the fates of widely dispersed communities, a system somewhat obscured by mercantilist theory, interstate rivalry and national historiographies. Settlers also established relations with other groups which entailed differing degrees of negotiation, force, coercion, exploitation and ill-faith, but which fostered greater stability and security. This supported social and cultural integration, not least through the networks of religious association which spanned the Atlantic, and gave rise to Creole elites which absorbed the political values of metropolitan societies and reflected back upon them.

In the final phase Creole elites led movements for political independence based on political values which were now truly pan-Atlantic in their reach. Thus, although his narrative is underpinned by a knowledge of the movements of real people and actual commodities through the Atlantic basin, Bailyn in the end returns us to the trans-Atlantic intellectual community with which he started. Knowledge fostered by these movements fed the intellectual life of Europe, and that was fully shared by the Creole elites who led the political revolutions of the later eighteenth century.

For Bailyn, it seems, the early modern Atlantic is in the final analysis defined by shared political values, not by networks of trade and migration which, after all, took people and commodities far beyond the societies of the Atlantic community. Since the Enlightenment, and particularly since the nineteenth centuries, the societies of the Atlantic world have followed divergent paths, and become part of a global world system even though the values championed by the Creole elites of the eighteenth century persist as a shared heritage. The Atlantic world as it stood in the age of revolutions has now passed 'But in the prior centuries [the societies of the Atlantic world] formed a distinctive regional entity, bearing the indelible imprints of both the settlement era—violent instability, cultural conflict and alienation, racism, and brutal economic dynamism—and the ideals of the later period—self-government, freedom from arbitrary power, and sense that the world lies open for the most exalted aspirations. It is this—the fusion of exploitative economic force, ruthless but ingenious, oppressive but creative, and the shared idealism of the Enlightenment—that is the ultimate and permanent legacy of Atlantic history in the early modern years'. (p. 111). Palmer and Godechot are vindicated; those who would globalise early modern Atlantic history are offered a counter-argument.

The two parts of the book share methodological predispositions which will attract debate. As many readers will be quick to point out, disentangling the role of individual agency from wider structures and cultural developments is no easy task—the documentary remains left to us by a practising historian do not reveal the forces that shaped her work any more explicitly than the records of the exchequer reveal in a transparent manner the impulses behind state formation. In both parts of the book Bailyn is concerned with the frameworks within which individuals make their history (in both senses), but his view of the balance between structure and agency is a matter of judgement, not something written in the data for all to observe. All historians fill that gap, of course, but they refer to what they do in differing terms—as the use of insight, imagination or theory, for example. It is in this aspect of historical writing that Bailyn’s own brilliance is most clearly displayed—but he would clearly prefer to call this deduction than to examine the pattern of his interpretation in order to render explicit his more fundamental model of how the world works (his theory). In his view, honest empirical scholarship is what liberates us as a profession, and as individuals, from these patterning influences and presumptions, establishing some dis-
tance between historiography and ideology. In Bailyn’s hands it is a powerful case.

In pursuing this line, however, his account of Atlantic history since the 1950s is skewed towards the internal dynamics of scholarship—there is no discussion of decolonisation in the 1960s and its effects on the historiographies of the former imperial powers, for example; nor of the relationship between the contemporary prominence of globalisation in political discourse and the boom in international and transnational history. The impression is that the current wave of interest in Atlantic history is a product of the internal dynamics of scholarship working on the insights and leads offered by those whom Bailyn has identified as the founding fathers. I am less convinced, at least from the British perspective, that Atlantic history can be separated from the wider revival of British imperial historiography, and the efforts to place British history in wider geographical frames, the roots of which I would identify quite differently.

Unsurprisingly, given his methodological priorities, Bailyn’s rejection of the Annaliste approach is brisk—he discounts not only Braudel’s Mediterranea as a model for Atlantic history but also Chaunu’s stated view of his own work as Annaliste history. (p. 31-2) Braudel’s vision is ‘meta-historical, not historical, based on a formulation essentially epistemological [about different dimensions of time] not historical’. (p. 4-5). To Bailyn Atlantic history is a process, a history made by people—traders, settlers, slaves and missionaries—the story of a constantly shifting world in motion, not an inert specimen on the table, ready for dissection into its constituent strata. He doesn’t say it, but we have a sense that ‘une histoire immobile’ is an oxymoron. This is why Bailyn can commend Chaunu despite the latter’s claim to have been influenced by Braudel. Chaunu, unlike Braudel, based his account on human connections—the piles of trade data admired by Bailyn—not on a meta-historical account of the layers of time. Bailyn’s favoured geographer is Meinig, who is interested not in physical features but in the shifting human geographies created by the movement and interaction of people. Above all, his is a pragmatic, empirical vision, in which the picture is said to emerge from the wealth of data—networks and connections, not the physical environment are the focus, and they produce a history, dynamic and changing.

It is not surprising either that Bailyn’s methodological convictions are defended not in theory but in practice—the proof of the pudding is here in the eating. The second part of the book is in that sense compelling—a prodigious demonstration of the virtues of this kind of historical writing, a marvel of compression and of flexible, pragmatic and insightful reflection. Tracing networks among diverse archives escapes the limiting influence of national histories and historiographies, revealing the multilayered, polycentric connections which underlay a common history. As noted above, the most visible of these connections, and the ones that can be followed sequentially, are the movement of people and goods—and Bailyn has made signal contributions to the study of these things. This style has also been handed on to the most influential of his students—one thinks for example of Hancock’s magisterial study, Citizens of the World. In theory, of course, we might question whether what we can now observe in the documents was actually the motive force of the history being written, but in this case, surely, the things most easily traced by the historian are indeed the things most important to the historical processes under examination. But it is a practical proof, not a theoretical one; and it may not apply to other historical questions, even those relating to other aspects of Atlantic history.

This is a book not just about the two senses of Atlantic history, therefore, but about historical method. Bailyn is not monolexic and ranges far beyond his own home turf as an historian of early America. His Atlantic is a transnational and international vision of admirable, even intimidating, range. He is evidently convinced not just that Atlantic history escapes national preoccupations and limits, but that it is also, therefore, better history. In that he is surely in tune with current historiographical sympathies at large. But empiricism of the kind he champions is now often dismissed in undergraduate methodology courses as narrow and naïve. Bailyn’s commitment to empiricism is neither blinkered nor unreflective. It is, however, unapologetically convinced. Many others may share his internationalist sympathies but not this conviction, and they may as a result see the history of the Atlantic, and of Atlantic historiography, quite differently. But although Bailyn’s method and findings will not find universal agreement, they deserve universal respect. It is a formal and methodological virtue of this style of writing that it provides material with which others can work: those of more Francophone sensibility will find here much that is ‘good to think with’; fellow empiricists will find that there is much matter in it. For that, and much else, all of us interested in the Atlantic owe Bailyn a huge debt of gratitude.