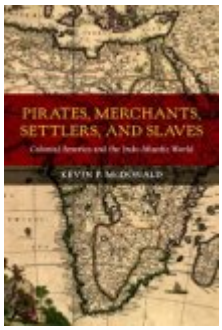
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Kevin P. McDonald. *Pirates, Merchants, Settlers, and Slaves: Colonial America and the Indo-Atlantic World.* California World History Library Series. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015. 224 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-28290-2.

Reviewed by Karwan Fatah-Black

Published on H-Diplo (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

For New York merchants in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the slave trade with Madagascar had the advantage of being outside of the charter area of the Royal African Company and having lower prices for slaves than the West African coast. Added to this it provided the opportunity to supply East Indian luxuries directly to New York, rather than via the East India Company. This saved plenty of time and money for the customers in British America. Of course London officials attempted to restrict such trade. However, as Kevin McDonald's *Pirates, Merchants, Settles and Slaves: Colonial American and the Indo-Atlantic World* demonstrates, even Captain John Evans of the *Richmond,* who had to patrol the waters around New York, supplemented his wages by smuggling East Indian wares. And besides, even if Evans had wanted to stop the smuggling, the geography of New York's Hudson estuary made it virtually impossible to do so. Because of the difficulty in patrolling the region and the profit to be made, pirates and traders arriving in New York from Madagascar received a warm welcome from the highest authorities in the colony.

A crucial node in the Indo-Atlantic network of New York was the Anglo-Dutch Frederick Philipse (born Frederyck Flypsen). Arriving in New York when it was still called Nieuw Amsterdam under the Dutch, he worked his way up from being a carpenter in the service of the Dutch West India Company to heading a globally operating trading and shipping fleet. Philipse engaged in salvaging operations (an ideal cover for piracy) as well as legitimate trade and logwood shipping. His ships traveled to places as distant as Honduras, Madagascar, and Hamburg. He headed an informal empire through his family ties and engaged in illicit activities, which earned him the title of "undoubted king of the pirates" (p. 51).

By studying the trade connections that ran via Madagascar between New York and the Indian Ocean, McDonald opens a world that defies modern categorization. It is a world that is not "Atlantic," but can best be described as Indo-Atlantic.

And although he does not make it explicit, the ventures he describes are not just British, but might well be described as Anglo-Dutch. The actors he traces are pirate-merchants; they combined legitimate activities with piratical ventures. Those who can clearly be categorized as pirates, such as the notorious Captain William Kidd, also used legitimate systems of connection and control to manage their globe-spanning enterprises.

Outside the reach of "kings and companies," as the Atlanticist formulation goes, an informal trading empire was created that directly connected colonies across imperial boundaries without passing through the metropolitan "core." Goods and people, as McDonald shows, moved directly from the production centers in the Indian Ocean to the Anglo-American colonies. McDonald emphasizes that this included the movement of slaves to the Atlantic. The implication is primarily that it adds to a growing literature which emphasizes the informal and web-like structures that propelled European colonization and European empire building in the early modern period.

McDonald argues that the Atlantic and Indian Oceans were more connected than historians have hitherto acknowledged and that "pirates" were especially well situated to connect both oceans. Because of this, they are an ideal subject through which to explore the blurred boundaries typical of the "first global age" and of early modernity. The project is therefore an attempt to weave together stories that are often treated separately: those of Atlantic sailors, American settlers, and East African slaves.

Surprisingly, Madagascar seems to be understudied by scholars both of the Atlantic world and of the Indian Ocean. McDonald reconstructs the place the island held in the imagination of the Europeans who tried to trade and settle there. Successful settlement by the English on the island proved difficult. After several failed attempts, settlements by pirates marauding in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean were more sustainable. Partly this was because the political situation on the island had changed and the pirates were able to benefit from the fragmentation of political power at the end of the seventeenth century. From New York, merchants now decided to supply these settlements with provisions in exchange for East Indian wares and slaves. Piracy and intercolonial smuggling were a more durable basis for settlement than utopian settlement schemes.

A fascinating story that McDonald adds to this history of intercolonial smuggling is the role of the enslaved New Yorker Thom Hicks, who operated as broker for Philipse in the Indo-Atlantic trade. This was at least in part because Philipse trusted the slave more than free whites to represent his interests. Hicks was not unique; other slaves also performed tasks for which principals in New York wanted people they could trust.

The micro-histories explored in the book can certainly be generalized and applied to the wider Atlantic-centered historiography on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This seems especially valid with regard to literature that treats North American Atlantic history. It is primarily the Anglophone scholarship on colonial America and the early republic that remains rather parochial and "terracentric," even though globe-spanning inter-oceanic interactions clearly helped shape US history. The connections between the "discrete ocean regions" were obvious to contemporaries, and contemporary historians need to begin focusing more on the people who worked on the seas in the "Indian Ocean world" and "Atlantic world," as these were well-traveled shipping lanes that were already connected by explorers, trade routes, migrations, and European institutions.

Throughout his book McDonald insists on using the term "pirates," even though this has some clear drawbacks. He acknowledges that it is a loaded term with many mistaken associations. He himself falls victim to these stereotypes when he sees in the use of skulls and bones on Malagacy graves a reference to pirates when it was just a

symbol commonly used on graves in the period. A more fitting alternative might be “free agents.” Free agents can be loosely defined as people acting outside state-chartered, company-directed, or ecclesiastically ordained prerogatives. By studying the free agents who operated outside or alongside official institutions, historians are increasingly finding that they have often been too concerned with institutions and have neglected unofficial connections and exchanges.

As is reconfirmed by McDonald, the back-and-forth conquest and reconquest of colonies between European powers amplified inter-imperial integration. In the context of close-knit competing colonies it proved far more lucrative to cooperate than to compete across imperial boundaries imposed from Europe. For the Portuguese Empire we know that there were many direct connections between the colonies in Africa, South America, and Asia that were not controlled by the European metropole. Even though Asian goods formally had to go through ports in England, the Netherlands, and Portugal before being shipped off to the Atlantic colonies, creating direct connections that evaded the rent-seeking metropolitan authorities was clearly beneficial.

When speaking of connections in global history, we are immediately forced to consider the nodes of intersection, which can be individuals, institutions, or geographical locations. Urban centers and especially ports are obvious examples in the case of the Atlantic world, but literature shows the importance of sites for pilgrimage, royal courts, and oasis. The nodes in the story of McDonald are pirate settlements on Madagascar and in New York, along with individuals such as Fredrick Philipse and Thom Hicks. Together these form a network that forces us to rethink the categories that we use to understand the “first global age.”

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

Citation: Karwan Fatah-Black. Review of McDonald, Kevin P. *Pirates, Merchants, Settlers, and Slaves: Colonial America and the Indo-Atlantic World.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=44009