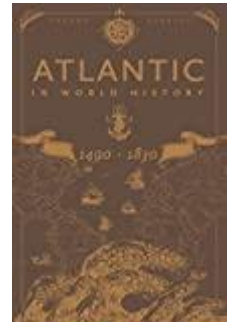




Trevor G. Burnard. *The Atlantic in World History, 1490-1830*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 344 pp. \$34.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-350-07352-4.



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Atlantic history as a construct for studying the eras of exploration, colonization, and revolution began nearly twenty years ago, yet defining this organizational category and the bounds of its scope continue to plague historical scholarship. On the outside, it seems quite straightforward from a geographical point of view by encompassing the continents that border the Atlantic Ocean and the trade and cultural exchange across and around the Atlantic. From a historical perspective most Atlantic world studies concern events and circumstances dating from the travels of Christopher Columbus and to the mid-nineteenth century. Yet this definition seems inadequate. In historians' efforts to employ this tool of analysis aimed at breaking down national boundaries, concrete meaning and definition can often be lost. Trevor Burnard's *The Atlantic in World History:1490-1830* succeeds in addressing many of the common issues that have plagued scholars of the Atlantic world, particular those who have attempted to explain it to and explore it with undergraduate and graduate students. His book offers a

historiographical examination of Atlantic world history with an emphasis on those scholars who raise up histories and peoples that have often remained on the periphery.

Each section of the book adopts a different organizing principle, allowing Burnard to move through time, space, and themes to assist the reader in explore the Atlantic world from an interdisciplinary perspective. Employing the work of scholars from a variety of disciplines, he writes a coherent story of the Atlantic world that is well grounded in secondary research. The ocean unites the various locales surrounding it, but this geographical unity is also compounded by the common history of the Atlantic basin. This ambitious book pushes beyond the more typical points of view often on display in Atlantic history to place greater emphasis on Native American and African narratives and highlighting those scholars doing this work. Each section of the book looks to each of the four continents surrounding the Atlantic to ask how the people of that place experienced the Atlantic world during the given time period or un-

der the particular political, economic, or social circumstances. This approach allows Burnard to create a history of the Atlantic that avoids many of the pitfalls of previous attempts at defining and explaining Atlantic history.

The title of the book itself illuminates how Burnard intends to explain the concept of Atlantic history. He sees the Atlantic as integral to understanding the larger topic of world history. As he states, Atlantic history does not stand alone but resides “alongside the development of hemispheric and continental history and the growing interest in world or global history as exciting new frames of reference” beyond the traditional national or imperial histories (p. 5). Beginning with a short section on history and historiography, Burnard writes for both scholars and the more casual students of history. He effectively outlines the field’s major controversies such as its tendency toward Eurocentrism and accusations that the field of Atlantic history is so broad and inclusive that the term threatens to lose all meaning. These issues related to Atlantic history clearly remain front and center throughout the book and are evident from not only the argument he makes but also from the very organization of the book.

The next section examines the Atlantic across time. Burnard begins with the Columbian Exchange but expands it to highlight the movement of food, goods, and diseases between the so-called Old World and New World. Expanding on the concept first introduced by Alfred Crosby in *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (1972), he highlights how early travel from Portugal to Africa first in search of gold and later for establishing sugar plantations led to trade patterns that moved goods, food, and people from continent to continent. Such an approach pushes the beginning of these world-changing exchanges further back than Columbus’s travels. Burnard does not, however, overstate the level of African integration into the Atlantic world at this point in history. As he moves through this

chronologically organized section on history, he demonstrates the increasing role that Africa and Africans played in the development of the Atlantic world and how Africa came to shape world history through African involvement in the Haitian and Latin American revolutions of the nineteenth century.

In the book’s third and perhaps strongest section, Burnard examines the Atlantic from a geographical perspective. While the Atlantic washes up on the western edge of Africa, most places and people of Africa were detached from the ocean for centuries. Yet, this “continent least affected internally by Atlantic connections was also the continent that was most influential in shaping the Atlantic World” through the violently disruptive experiences of transatlantic slave trade (p. 140). Prior to the advent of global human trafficking, trade in Africa primarily occurred through its “extensive river and lagoon system ... using canoes rather than building ships for ocean sailing” (p. 141) or through localized exchanges along the continent’s western coastline. With the changes that occurred around the Atlantic basin, connections broadened and increasingly pulled vast areas of Africa into the Atlantic world through international trade of people and goods. These changes did not end with the decline of slavery in much of the Western Hemisphere either. Once impacted by and connected to the Atlantic world, Africa was forever changed by the events of the nearly four hundred years on which Burnard focuses.

In much the same way that Burnard pushes the influence of the Atlantic further inland in Africa, he also highlights areas of Europe that often take a backseat to the usual Atlantic world power brokers of France, England, and the Iberian Peninsula. He ushers the Netherlands and Scotland to the forefront and argues that these two nations benefited exponentially from the rise in Atlantic exploration and commerce. Referring to Eric Hobsbawm’s argument that a “general crisis of the seventeenth century” occurred as a result of

massive European population decrease and continent-wide economic decline, he posits that the Netherlands' recovery from the Great Crisis and its economic ascendancy resulted from innovations in production and the invention of cost accounting. However, while the economic influence and power of the Netherlands grew during this era, it was Scotland that made the greatest transformation; and this metamorphosis occurred because of Scotland's intentional efforts to tie itself to the Atlantic world. The environmental, social, and political crises that Scotland encountered in the seventeenth century propelled it toward union with England and Wales to form Great Britain and opened up greater opportunities within Scotland and for Scots who chose to migrate to North America.

As Burnard turns his attention to South America and the Caribbean, he continues to dwell on areas and factors that have received less attention. He covers topics such as the impact of insects on scientific research, the role of smuggling as a force in both economics and politics, and the ways natives were able to leverage their resources to exert power amid colonial challenges. Finally, this section concludes with a comparative analysis of the plantation economy and systems. Drawing on work from Philip Curtin, David Eltis, and Marcus Rediker, Burnard examines the interplay between economics, politics, and social structure to show commonalities across locales where human bondage drove the economy. While this section will be familiar to anyone who has followed this historiography, it provides a concise description of how slave systems in South America, the Caribbean, and North America were working toward the same goals with similar techniques.

The fourth and last section of the book is organized around themes. While all of these will seem familiar to those acquainted with the Atlantic world, they provide a conclusion that demonstrates the unity of the region during the selected time period. Burnard focuses on the

themes of war, the exchange of goods and ideas, and the development of the Atlantic world as an international force. Although these themes are obvious conclusions about the Atlantic world, Burnard continues his work of illuminating lesser-known stories within these themes. When one considers the place of war within the Atlantic world, the revolutions of America, Haiti, France, and Latin America immediately come to mind, but this account moves beyond those eruptions of violence to dwell on ways war and violence impacted native populations from the arrival of Spanish explorers seeking to spread Christianity to European clashes over control of trade routes and colonial possessions. Native peoples found themselves physically caught between warring parties or torn between previously made alliances as they sought to use the fighting for tribal gain.

The strength of *The Atlantic in World History* is its synthesis of both the most important historical and geographical scholarship on the Atlantic but also its ability to draw the reader to think more broadly about how this era shaped world history. The book is manageable for undergraduate and graduate students while also offering scholars new ways to think about the Atlantic. Burnard's work renews the usefulness of the Atlantic as an analytical framework as he expands its literal and figurative boundaries.

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