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Introduction

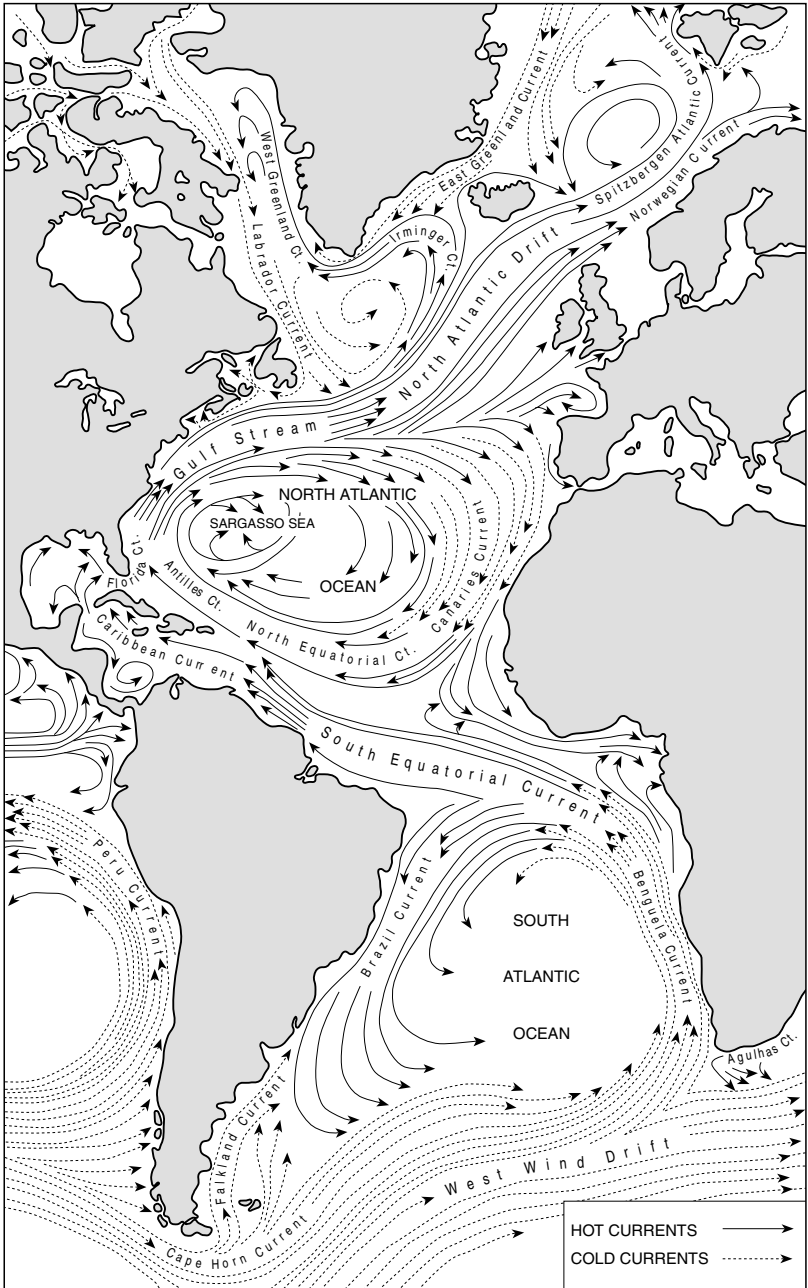
David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick

Contributors will understand that we are established, not under the Meridian of Greenwich, but in Long. 30° W.

Lord Acton, Letter to the contributors to the
Cambridge Modern History (1898)

I

Beginning around 1500 kaleidoscopic movements of people, goods, and ideas through the Atlantic basin created networks of kinship and exchange, which bound together expanding communities of settlement and trade. This new social and economic world was mostly a European creation – it was Europeans who first crossed the Atlantic and then bound its societies into a common network of exchanges, though Africans would be dominant numerically in transatlantic migration, and the societies of native peoples would be those most dramatically altered by the encounter. Europeans had greater power to shape the resulting contact than Africans or Indians and this distinguishes the European experience in the Atlantic from that in the Indian Ocean in the same period. In the Atlantic, Indians and Africans and European settlers, traders, and migrants encountered foreign and exotic societies and were forced to come to terms with challenging physical and social environments. In doing so they reinvented themselves, and contributed to the reinvention both of the societies they encountered and of their home cultures. In the centuries following the first European contact, the Atlantic saw what J. H. Elliott here calls the ‘creation, destruction and re-creation of communities as a result of the movement, across and around the Atlantic basin, of people, commodities, cultural practices, and ideas’. Their geography was patterned by the circulation of the winds and currents, reinforced by patterns of trade and political authority, serving to divide to some extent



Map 2 The major Atlantic currents, adapted from Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675–1740* (New York, 1986), p. 8.

the north from the south Atlantic. One such community was that of the British Atlantic world.

This world of traders, settlers and migrants is clearly an historical phenomenon of considerable significance, but its boundaries are extremely difficult to draw. Within its limits an empire took shape and that empire itself became the means to shape the development of a specifically British Atlantic world. Shared language and law, as well as political participation and loyalty to the Crown, bound together societies that claimed a common identity or political liberties, although the local variations in each of these things made that common identity unstable. Reinforced by trade and kinship connections, however, these connections did constitute a distinctively British Atlantic within the wider networks of the Atlantic world, or the globally ramifying British Empire. The development of these networks is best understood in terms of what David Hancock has called ‘self-organising complexity’ – sometimes prompted by governments, sometimes exploited by them and sometimes in defiance or in spite of them, but never limited to their jurisdictional boundaries.

Although the chapters collected here touch on the history of Britain’s Atlantic empire, they are concerned with a phenomenon both larger and less easy to delimit. To the west, British people moved into a middle ground of negotiation with an Indian world; to the south and west they entered onto the margins of the Hispanic world; to the north they encountered the francophone Atlantic; and in the south and east their dealings in the slave trade entailed a sustained engagement with African polities. And, of course, competition among European states made the Atlantic an issue of European significance too. Moreover, the influence of these movements was felt beyond the limits of the British presence, reaching toward the centre of the African and North American continents; and the British Atlantic world felt the effects of pressures emanating from well beyond the limits of direct trade and settlement. And by the later seventeenth century at the latest, the values and connections, which bound together a British Atlantic, extended also to the Indian Ocean (although there the British traders were more supplicants than masters of the encounter). Clearly, the British Atlantic was only a part of a wider Atlantic and, since all seas are one, the larger Atlantic world was itself not a bounded social system.

The British Atlantic might be, therefore, an imprecise geographical expression, but it was a real social phenomenon. Over time, identifiable networks of trust, trade, and kinship grew up between

British people moving in this larger Atlantic world. Even though the spatial boundaries of such networks were indistinct and shifting these connections can still be traced. They in turn provide a meaningful context for comparative history: a British Atlantic world is not an arbitrary creation of historical scholarship but corresponds to real networks of social, political, and economic connection in the past.

Many of the chapters of this book pursue this kind of Atlantic history: learning both what was general and what was particular by placing differing local historical experiences in a larger, comparative, context. Most of the comparisons are internal to the English-speaking Atlantic; however, we hope they will inform further comparisons with other Atlantic histories – Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, or French – which can only be undertaken when those histories have all been mapped as the history of the British Atlantic world has been here. Although not all topics would merit (or even suit) such comparative treatment all of the time, we hope that it is clear that this comparative approach (what Armitage terms trans-Atlantic history) can be enlightening for practitioners of many varieties of history.

Such comparisons will depend on further histories conducted at the local level which set particular places in their more general Atlantic contexts (what Armitage terms cis-Atlantic history). Here, perhaps, we are writing history in rather than of the Atlantic. And the choice of which history we choose to write in an Atlantic context problematizes the boundaries of the subject. To claim, for example, that a British Atlantic existed bound together by shared values carries a political charge, and delimits a different subject from the analysis of a red or black Atlantic: whose Atlantic? Whose values? Our answer to that question, no less than ‘whose United States?’, raises important framing questions – about the spatial and geographical limits of the study, and of its thematic content. For most Atlantics, 1500 is an important starting point, but for others 1800 is not the best place to end the analysis. And, of course, from the perspective of some societies bordering the Atlantic – from Indian country facing east, for example, or from the perspective of the Eurasian world island – these new Atlantic exchanges figure much less prominently. Some cis-Atlantic approaches serve to diminish our sense of the importance of these new connections.

Nonetheless, in pursuing these more limited agendas the chapters contribute to the accumulation of material from which we might, eventually, write another kind of Atlantic history: a synoptic treatment of the Atlantic experience as a whole (what Armitage terms

circum-Atlantic history). This history, which is definitely history of and not in the Atlantic, can be situated in relation to global history: as an emerging world system and perhaps a crucial one in the emergence of a unified world system during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dominated by western economies and states. The subject of such a synoptic Atlantic history in the early modern period would be a social system, with permeable boundaries, created by the interactions of migrants, settlers, traders and a great variety of political systems. These connections were vectors for the transmission of ideas and became the means by which identities were constructed and reconstructed. These exchanges were both complex and interdependent: to try to capture them simultaneously with a sensitivity to change over time is a daunting task.

Finding routes into this complexity is easier, however, since there are many individual connections that can be followed. The chapters in this book pursue some important connections, covering central topics such as the history of the movements of people and goods, of understandings of social difference, or of forms of political and religious connection and debate. Clearly, however, other avenues into the study of these complex exchanges could also be revealing: studies of disease, warfare, cultural encounters, or of particular groups or institutions, for example. The chapters here cover some, but not all, of the most important ways of approaching a history of the British Atlantic and concentrate on only one of its diverse communities.

What is offered here, then, is not comprehensive or exhaustive; it is intended instead to demonstrate the potential of an Atlantic approach to elements of the shared history of societies normally considered separately. The book is not a textbook but a collection of individual views of how to approach a new, expanding and very exciting field of study. The chapters here introduce students to what Elliott has called 'one of the most important new historiographical developments of recent years'.

These chapters explore a complex of evolving connections within a geographical space. The bounds of that space were the product of the connections rather than the physical geography (although the latter clearly influenced the former) and for that reason were not clearly defined. They tended also to expand over time. As Benton's chapter makes clear, the history of these connections can be placed in a much larger context, certainly by the end of the period covered here, while for other research questions the Atlantic does not shed much light on historians' concerns.

This book does not propose a paradigm of universal significance, therefore, but makes a case for a history of the British Atlantic world between around 1500 and 1800. That frame throws light on the life of communities entangled with these new Atlantic connections but also on the life of the community as a whole. Of course, the Atlantic, like any other framing device (colonial, imperial, early American, early modern, renaissance, enlightenment, Tudor-Stuart or the history of science to name a few of those which dominate the fields being touched upon here) sets limits, intended and unintended, on how historians work. Whatever its limitations, though, a new framework generates new insights, as the following chapters amply demonstrate.

II

The book is not organized in order to give a canonical account of Atlantic history or of how to approach it. Instead, by approaching the subject from a variety of angles, each chapter offers a complementary perspective on an extremely complex historical phenomenon. Nor do all the chapters conform to the same chronology. Each covers a period of time most significant for its specific topic. None covers less than two centuries, and taken together they encompass every dimension of the British experience in the Atlantic world from the immediate aftermath of Columbus's voyages to the age of abolition. The chapters in Part II explore some of the connections that helped to create the British Atlantic world. That world was bound together primarily by the movement of goods and people, the connections explored in the chapters by Games and Zahedieh. These chapters are the most circum-Atlantic in their approach. Ideas, tastes, and fashions circulated along with these movements, of course. Pestana's chapter explores how religious identities helped to forge solidarities within the broader Atlantic world and how the attempt to extend religious communities across and around the anglophone Atlantic created novel religious configurations, especially in the eighteenth century. Likewise, Delbourgo shows how what would now be called scientific conceptions shaped, and were in turn shaped by, the encounters of metropolitans and creoles with nature around the Atlantic world.

Communities formed around these networks, based on shared identities. Issues relating to collective identities are the subject of the chapters in Part III. Braddick explores the relationship between authority and notions of civility in a comparative context.

Perceptions of civility, refinement and distinction provided the basis for the creation of a political community based on a common elite identity. But the very complexity of these processes also fostered the possibility of social divergence and conflicts of political interest. These problematic issues of identity are also the subject of the chapters by Pearsall, Wrightson, and Chaplin. The larger exchanges of populations, ideas and commodities problematized many forms of identity in the early modern period. New forms of employment, and new ways of getting and spending, affected social hierarchies and gender roles, for example. They did so, moreover, in a context that brought previously quite separate ethnic worlds into closer contact; social relations, particularly those associated with forms of hierarchy and subordination, ethnic identities, and gender roles were all reconceived or solidified in the light of contrasting views of these roles. In short, the ways in which social hierarchies were experienced and imagined were affected by the diversity of experience available in the Atlantic world. Pearsall, Wrightson and Chaplin trace these issues thematically, by exploring changes in both perceptions and the realities of gender, class and racial difference. New experiences fostered new forms of knowledge, and new perspectives on received wisdom – new forms of knowledge-making. In each case these chapters confront the impact of an Atlantic perspective on well-developed but often nationally based historiographies.

These chapters seek in differing ways to evoke a sense of a British Atlantic world, fostered by the movement of people, goods and ideas. The final three chapters (Part IV) explore the political life of that world. Mancke examines elements of the institutional relationship between early modern British state formation and empire-building by focusing on the international context within which empire-building took place. Gould examines the reverberation of political crises through the British Atlantic world from the English revolution and British civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century through to the era of the Napoleonic wars. Brown looks at the political ramifications of an issue that was wholly a product of the Atlantic world: slavery. In each case they bring a fresh, comparative, perspective to well-established fields of study and contribute to the development of an Atlantic approach to political history.

Each chapter therefore offers new perspectives on issues familiar in other historiographical contexts and contributes to a development of a genuinely inclusive Atlantic history. Each also offers a perspective from which to observe the processes that created

the British Atlantic world. The relationship between these more limited exercises and the overall project is the subject of Armitage's introductory chapter which, in one sense, offers an overview of how these various studies might be seen to be components of a larger Atlantic history. In two concluding surveys, Elliott places these chapters in the history of the British Atlantic in the context of a fuller Atlantic history, and brings to the collection insights arising from similar historiographical developments in Hispanic studies, while Benton extends the volume's reach still further, to encompass a global perspective on the emergence of the British Atlantic world, especially by linking it to parallel developments in the Indian Ocean.

In 2002 Armitage declared that 'we are all Atlanticists now'. This has been much quoted, although usually without the qualification which immediately followed: 'or so it might seem'. His chapter called for an interrogation of a trend in historical study to place more and more topics in an Atlantic frame. His dissection of the ways in which Atlantic history was being pursued, or might be, has been extremely influential, but clearly does not amount to the manifesto for all historians everywhere. Indeed, Armitage was really responding to the same problem that many critics of the Atlantic paradigm have subsequently emphasized. Enthusiasm for an Atlantic frame took off very quickly, but almost as quickly it was found inappropriate for many forms of historical writing. The rapid rise both of Atlantic approaches and of discussions of their limitations led Coclanis, one of the most stringent critics of Atlantic history, to claim that the idea of Atlantic history 'moved swiftly from obscurity to meaninglessness without any intervening period of coherence'.

We do not share this skepticism, not least because this book did not propose a paradigm. 'Atlantic history' may be an inappropriate frame for some research questions; it may be of varying significance in the hands of different practitioners; it should perhaps be seen as one tool among many. But these statements seem no less applicable to other influential framing concepts: 'American', 'imperial' or 'global', for example. While no more consistently understood or employed, perhaps, and not a 'paradigm', cis-, trans- and circum-Atlantic approaches have clearly offered fresh perspectives, and brought many benefits to our understanding. They have, demonstrably, helped some writers to escape some, but not all, the limits of national historiographies, even if they have often come up against others.

An important feature of the Atlantic as a geographical frame is that it lacks an institutional boundary. On one hand this allows us to trace transnational connections, or the outlines of a 'parochial globalism', but on the other it means that the Atlantic world lacks clear geographical limits, so that for some Atlantics, perhaps paradoxically, the Atlantic is no longer enough. Nonetheless, there were movements of people, goods and ideas through the Atlantic basin that bound together communities of British people. The history of each of these communities, of groups within them and of the political, economic and social sinews of the whole assemblage are clearly worthy of study and Atlantic approaches of the kind laid out by Armitage are not only inescapable, but actively helpful in that. It is not a paradigm, still less a paradigm of universal value, but it continues to be a framing device of extraordinary fruitfulness.

We remain convinced, therefore, that the British Atlantic world was a real social phenomenon, which is worthy of study; that its study is important in broaching some of the boundaries of national historiographies that solidified in the nineteenth century and still bear the imprint of nineteenth-century concerns; and that it can be an empirical and methodological contribution to the discussion of Atlantic, oceanic and global histories, and of the relationships between them, and other more limited geographical frames. Clearly there is more to be done and the difficulties confronting Atlantic approaches are considerable. But it seems clear that there remains a considerable potential dividend.

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