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Introduction

David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick

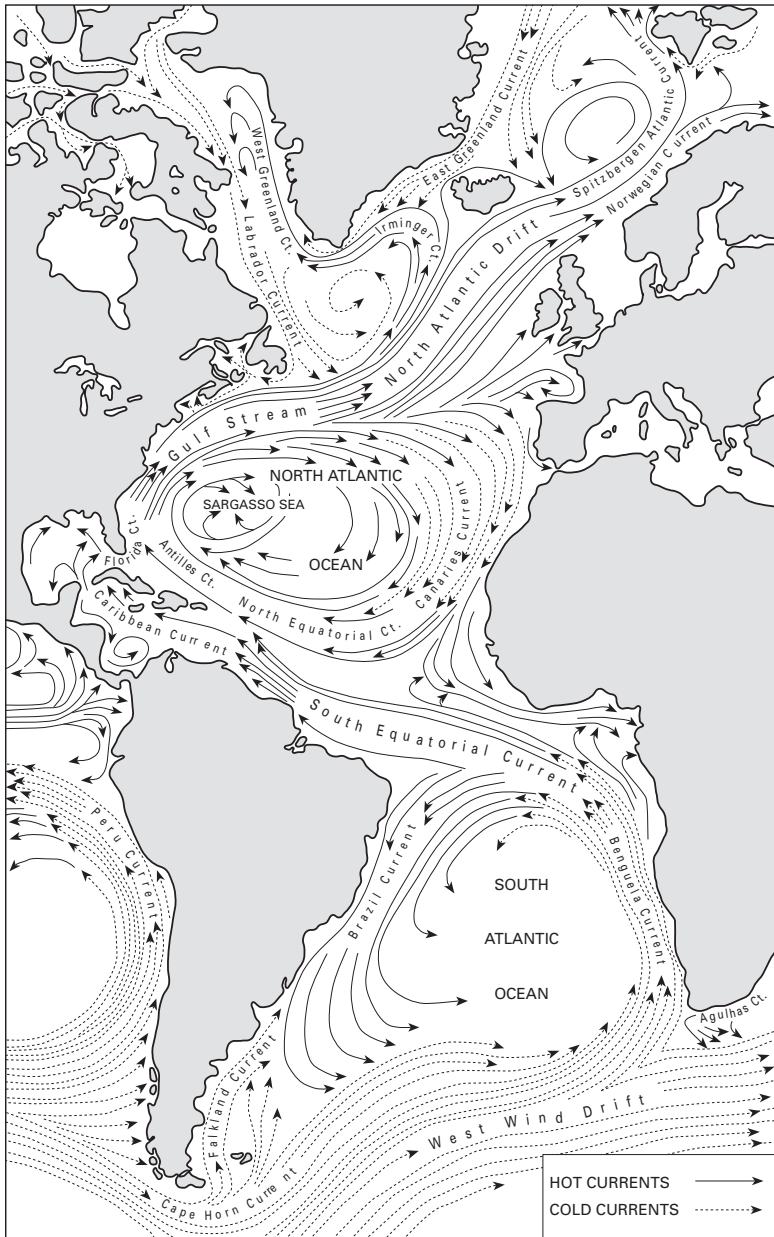
Contributors will understand that we are established, not under the Meridian of Greenwich, but in Long. 30° W.

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

I

The British Atlantic world was created by kaleidoscopic movements of people, goods, and ideas. Networks of kinship and exchange bound together expanding communities of settlement and trade, their geography patterned by the circulation of the winds and currents of the north Atlantic. 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.

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. But although the essays collected here touch on the history of Britain's Atlantic empire they are concerned with a phenomenon both larger and less easy to delimit: what J. H. Elliott terms below 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.' This includes, but also takes us beyond, institutional and political histories, drawing us towards studies of connection, identity, and solidarity in their broadest senses. 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



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

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 towards 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. 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 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 these networks were indistinct and shifting these connections can still be traced. They in turn provide a meaningful context for comparative history: it 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, they should inspire 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. This 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*). In pursuing these agendas the essays also 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*).

The subject of this synoptic Atlantic history 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 which can be followed. The essays 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, exotic encounters, or of particular groups or institutions, for example. The essays here cover some, but not all, of the most important ways of approaching an Atlantic history.

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. In our view, the time is not ripe for a comprehensive treatment of Atlantic history in its fullest sense: this 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 essays here introduce students to what Elliott has called ‘one of the most important new historiographical developments of recent years.’

II

For historians of early, or colonial, America the shift to an Atlantic perspective is a familiar historiographical maneuver. It has already borne considerable fruit, and there is a growing appetite for this kind of work among both faculty and students. Elsewhere the potential of these approaches has been less fully realized. A number of English political historians have placed the seventeenth-century civil wars in a British context, turning their attention to the political and religious connections between the three kingdoms of Britain and Ireland. But this political history of the British Atlantic archipelago is episodic and has not been accompanied by an attempt to establish a wider social and cultural history of the kind Atlantic approaches would encourage.

For English social historians in particular it has been presumed that the turn to the ‘New British History’ has little to offer. The concentration on village studies, and more recently micro-histories, has emphasized the relatively narrow geographical bounds of the

lives of ordinary people, and this has militated against a widening of the focus of social histories. But this is not an inescapable framework of analysis. Recent studies of industrial villages – not least the study of *Whickham* in County Durham co-authored by Levine and Wrightson – point to the integration of English villagers into larger webs of exchange. Those webs embraced the Atlantic, and the inventories of the middling sort of the later seventeenth century bear witness to the social and geographical spread of the fruits of empire. Moreover, along with these goods went subsistence, or betterment migration: long-distance migration within England (as also in Scotland) fed larger westward movements.

The economic history of the seventeenth century is only now taking a cultural turn, but an obvious direction for that turn is towards an examination of the implications of the diversifying patterns of consumption made possible by international exchange through the Atlantic basin. This was taken for granted in older histories of the ‘commercial revolution’, but more recently economic histories of this period have concentrated on the domestic economy, and particularly demographic and agrarian history. Eighteenth-century economic history, however, is now concerned much more with consumers and the goods that they sought, a concern which is necessarily alert to the importance of wider networks of exchange. The seventeenth-century origins of the world are widely acknowledged, but generally little studied, at least in England. A history at once British and Atlantic can do a great deal to elucidate these linkages, both forwards and backwards in time.

There are also signs that the traditional concerns of Irish, Welsh, and Scottish historiography may be proving too constraining for the current generation of historians. These national historiographies have been shaped by a concern with the relationship with England. This was, perhaps, a product of the predominance of political and constitutional history at the times when these agendas were set. More recent social, economic, and cultural history has, as in all national historiographies, been less concerned with the grand narratives of constitutional history. The result is a body of work which sets the religious history of the Irish peasantry, or the transformation of Highland culture, in a comparative perspective, offering the possibility of an integration of these histories into the mainstream of European historiography. This has, by the same token, made these historiographies more alert to the potentialities of an Atlantic approach. Merchants and migrants from all three kingdoms, and

from Wales, helped to make the empire, and those societies were in themselves made and remade by the empire over the course of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In short, although there is a growing body of work from an Atlantic perspective, there is much more potential to be realized.

III

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 essays 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 essays 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 essays by Games and Zahedieh. These essays are the most circum-Atlantic in their approach. Ideas, tastes, and fashions circulated along with these movements, of course. Pestana's essay 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.

The Atlantic world was bound together in part by shared identities, then. Issues relating to collective identities are the subject of the essays 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 essays 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. In each case they confront the impact of an Atlantic perspective on well-developed but often nationally based historiographies.

These essays seek in differing ways to evoke a sense of an Atlantic world, bound by the movement of people, goods, and ideas. The final three essays (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 essay 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 essay which, in one sense, offers an overview of how these various studies might be seen to be components of a larger Atlantic history. In his afterword, Elliott places these essays 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. Clearly there is more to be done and the difficulties confronting this approach to the study of the past are considerable. But it is equally clear that the potential dividend is formidable.

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m = map; *n* = endnote (indexed for background information only, not for citations); *t* = table

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