Globalization has carried everything before it, reaching even those areas of history that have traditionally been most resistant to widening their horizons beyond the purely parochial and the national to embrace a larger, more cosmopolitan, world. Its consequences have been felt with particular forcefulness in early modern European history. This is hardly surprising. The great age of European overseas discoveries, of the Renaissance and religious reform, have made the early modern period a strong, although increasingly controversial, candidate for pioneering preeminence as the fount and origin of a global approach. Nothing more vividly symbolizes the dawn of this new age than the global circulation of silver from the mines of the New World of America to the treasury of the emperors of the Ming dynasty. This is literally a narrative that runs from Peru to China and back again from China to Peru.

The transformations that occurred in European and non-European polities and societies, however, in the early modern centuries were not confined to the new global networks which were in process of creation. This was an age not only of the practice of empire but also of the development of the whole concept and perception of empire. Empire was becoming global, and primarily in Europe as European states followed the pioneering example of Portugal and Spain, first in establishing commercial enclaves and settlements, and then in
outright territorial acquisition as they set out to conquer and colonize lands that belonged to others, replacing, where it seemed necessary or desirable, their indigenous rulers and elites, and imposing on them their own methods of government and bureaucratic apparatus. The fruits of empire, in the form of sugar, spices, and other luxury items for which Europeans rapidly developed a craving that proved insatiable, inevitably heightened the interstate rivalries that had long been a feature of European civilization. As they eyed with envy the apparently unending flow of the world’s riches into Lisbon and Seville, the rulers of other states saw no good reason why they, too, should not cash in on a share of the spoils. Empire, whether commercial or territorial, unlocked the gates that led to prosperity, power, and reputation.

But empire itself could all too easily lead to a further aspiration, the aspiration after universal monarchy. This became apparent when the Emperor Charles V successively gathered into his own hands different forms of domination over extensive areas of territory in Europe and overseas, along with lordship over a wide variety of polities and peoples. A group of his counsellors actively encouraged him to strive for the goal of universal monarchy, gathering beneath his imperial rule all the peoples of the world to become, in the words of Hernán Cortés, “monarch of the world.” Charles’ dominance, however, was based on problematic foundations. He held his position because he had been elected Holy Roman Emperor, and election, and, with it, transmission from father to son, was by no means automatic but was subject on each occasion to contingency and circumstance. By Habsburg family agreement Charles’ younger brother, Ferdinand, was destined for the imperial title, leaving Charles’ son, Philip, as heir to most of his territories but without an imperial title to accompany his patrimonial inheritance. There were some around him who wanted to confer on him the title of “Emperor the Indies,” but Philip II, when he succeeded to his father’s patrimonial inheritance in the 1550’s, would have none of this. As a stickler for protocol and decorum he viewed the Holy Roman Empire as the one and only legitimate European empire. A different justification was required for his world-wide dominance. As a result, his empire became la monarquía española, the Spanish Monarchy, also known as the Catholic Monarchy. This formulation emphasized what Philip himself saw as its principal justification, the salvation of the Roman church from Protestantism and heresy, the defense of Christendom against the Islamic Ottoman empire, and the evangelization and conversion of the world.

Given these sixteenth-century forerunners of a global approach, it has not been difficult to slot imperial history perceived in global terms into a contemporary historiographical framework of globalization. In the course of this process the very concept of empire naturally underwent profound changes as theory
and practice themselves changed in response to changing times and demands. One important consequence has been that empires have ceased to be regarded as exclusively European in their origins and practice and have come to be seen as representing a much wider geographical phenomenon, as the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mogul Empires, and New World empires, like those of the Aztecs, the Incas, or the Comanche testify. More importantly, empire and imperialism have taken on a different coloring. For a long time, the dominant historical approach tended to encourage historians of empire to concentrate on imperial policies devised in European imperial capitals, and to follow the attempts of imperial officials to implement them on the ground. Although empire always had its domestic critics whose standpoint made them more attuned to local responses, the reactions of societies and peoples directly or indirectly affected by policies devised half a world away were in general deemed to be of less historical interest than the character and impact of imperial policies and of the officials responsible for their implementation.

The more traditional style of imperial history had little time for the resistance of subjugated populations to the imposition of colonial rule or for the ways in which they took advantage of the opportunities or the deficiencies in the apparatus of government to manipulate it to their own advantage. The subjugated or oppressed nowadays tend to be depicted either as agents of their own survival or as passive victims of imperial exploitation, or frequently as both at once. There can be no doubt that this redirection of historical interest, epitomized in Miguel León-Portilla’s compilation of texts emanating from the indigenous peoples of central America, Visión de los Vencidos (1959) has led to an enormous enrichment of the more conventional forms of imperial history. It has made possible enlightening attempts to reconstruct the spiritual, mental, and ritual worlds of native Americans, and the manner of their lives in the pre-conquest and post-conquest periods. These attempts have themselves been enriched by other disciplines beyond the standard confines of political, social, and economic history, drawing in particular on anthropology, ethnohistory, and the history of literature and art.

The writing of imperial and global history has been heavily influenced, and to a considerable extent shaped, by the historical trajectories of the Spanish

---

1 It is a pity that the title chosen for the English translation of León-Portilla was not Vision of the Vanquished but the much less evocative The Broken Spears (London, 1962). Nathan Wachtel, on the other hand, had no hesitation in calling his impressive study of Peruvian reactions to the Spanish conquest La Vision des Vaincus (Paris, 1971), and the English translation followed suit as The Vision of the Vanquished (Hassocks, 1977). Tribute should also be paid to Eric R. Wolf’s pioneering study, Europe and the People Without History (Berkeley, 1982), which marries history and anthropology on a global scale.
and Portuguese empires as Europe's first truly global empires, the two of them trading, settling, and conquering in America, Africa, and Asia. As they moved from continent to continent and region to region, Portuguese and Spanish emigrants, settlers, and adventurers wove complex networks linked by shared interests and concerns. These networks embraced merchants and mariners, members of the religious orders and clergy, along with royal officials drawn from all ranks of the social hierarchy. These networks in turn interacted or fused with pre-existing local networks, or ones that developed in response to the appearance of outsiders whose presence offered local elites valuable opportunities for personal or collective gain. Perhaps the most spectacular and effective of all such networks was the one created and developed by the trade in enslaved peoples. Increasing numbers of men and women who had been bought or captured in West Africa were transported to Lisbon and Seville, or were shipped across the Atlantic in horrifying conditions to provide an additional supply of labor and to make up for the loss of indigenous populations drastically diminished by successive pandemics. New networks in turn were generated by new and changing circumstances. The Portuguese, because of the foothold they established in Africa, were at the forefront of the slave trade.

When the Spanish and Portuguese crowns were united in 1580 beneath a single ruler, Philip II, as a result of the extinction of the native Portuguese Avis dynasty, Portuguese crypto-Jews and conversos, converts to Christianity tainted in the eyes of Old Christians by their impure Jewish lineage, seized the opportunity to escape the confinement of Portugal imposed on them by royal policy. They were quick to cross the frontier into Spain, where they hoped the Inquisition would be less obtrusive than its Portuguese counterpart. From Seville many of them crossed the Atlantic to Spanish America, while others exploited their entrepreneurial and financial skills to penetrate the Spanish fiscal system, or to become bankers and asentistas, negotiating asientos, or contracts, with the Spanish crown. This placed them beside the Genoese bankers on whom the Crown had become dependent for loans, and for advancing the money on the strength of the large quantities of silver anticipated from the arrival of the annual treasure fleets returning to Seville from the Indies. Without these advances the crown would have been unable to pay its armies and maintain its other costs. Meanwhile, other Portuguese Jews and conversos quietly infiltrated much of Seville's transatlantic trade, working in collusion with colleagues in the viceroyalties of New Spain (Mexico) and Peru and at the Spanish court.

Clientage and patronage, along with the corruption that inevitably accompanied them, were integral to the functioning of the Spanish and Portuguese imperial enterprises. With vast distances between the imperial capitals of
Lisbon and Madrid and the different component parts of their respective empires, and no less vast distances, too, between the component parts themselves, the two imperial governments relied for their operation on a high degree of devolution. This might well bring many outposts of empire close to autonomy, at least in practice. But the formalities had always to be observed, and self-government was, at least nominally, self-government at the king’s command. The tyranny of distance in a premodern era of communication allowed for nothing else, as future European imperial powers following in the wake of the Iberian empires would discover for themselves.

All the themes mentioned above, along with many others, and not least the evolution of racially mixed colonial societies arising from the cohabitation or intermarriage of creole settlers of European origin with Native Americans and growing numbers of Africans, are examined exhaustively in five recent surveys purporting to sum up the state of the art in the early modern field. The precedence of Spain and Portugal as pioneers of empire has encouraged historians to examine and analyze with special intensity the intentions behind the acquisition of their overseas possessions, and their failures and achievements. This explains the proliferation in recent times of publications devoted to their study. The five volumes here under review are examples of this proliferation. Containing as they do innumerable references to “networks,” “agency,” and – with the occasional detour to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* – “colonialism” and even “coloniality,” they are illustrative of the vast number of publications on the history and character of the Portuguese and Spanish empires now pouring from the presses. They can also be safely used to illustrate the present state of play in the fields of global and imperial history as viewed from an Iberian perspective.

Apart from their shared vocabulary, they also have in common the fact that they are edited volumes of essays by multiple authors. Two of them possess all the characteristics of handbooks, designed for consultation rather than sequential reading, although none of the four volumes really lends itself to this. The two handbooks are *The Routledge Hispanic Studies Companion to Colonial Latin America and the Caribbean (1492–1898)*, and *The Oxford Handbook of Borderlands of the Iberian World*, another in the massive Oxford Handbook series, this one over nine hundred pages long. Where consultation progresses into actual reading the Oxford volume wins hands down. In the Routledge Companion smooth reading is constantly interrupted by the insertion in the text of bibliographical references, sometimes several of them in a single paragraph, although each essay ends with a bibliography of works cited. The Oxford Handbook, by contrast, places the references as endnotes at the end of each
chapter. It also contains invaluable maps, which are unaccountably not to be found in the Routledge Companion.

The three remaining works under review are *Iberian Empires and the Roots of Globalization*, *The Iberian World 1450–1820*, and *Monarquías Ibéricas em Perspectiva Comparada*, the latter published in Lisbon but containing essays in Spanish as well as Portuguese. As is to be expected, all five volumes extend over a wide range of subjects and cover a vast amount of ground. The editorial introductions offer, as they should, useful, if sometimes opaque, guidelines to the principal topics discussed. Some of these topics are treated at a level of detailed examination that they rarely receive. The Oxford *Handbook*, for instance, takes us to borders that few historians visit, and emphasizes above all the porosity of frontiers and boundaries painstakingly delineated on maps commissioned by government ministers and royal officials in Lisbon and Madrid, but bearing little or no relation to the contested space in regions of which they knew little or nothing. *Monarquías Ibéricas*, on the other hand, focuses on institutional history and is divided into four parts, the first giving a general overview, and the other three devoted respectively to civil, military, and ecclesiastical administration. *Iberian Empires and the Roots of Globalization* is more concerned with the character and development of Spain’s and Portugal’s overseas territories, and especially with the treatment of slaves, the impact of the Inquisition, and questions of religion, caste, and race. It should be said that all five volumes contain some illuminating essays, but it would be invidious to pick out a few chosen examples from such an army of contributors.

In spite of the wide coverage, there are some notable absences. This may not be the place to look for the kind of approach represented in the 1956 article by R. D. Hussey, “America in European Diplomacy, 1597–1604,” although, on the other hand, negotiations between the Portuguese authorities in the state of Goa and neighboring rulers and authorities, or between European missionaries and Japan’s regional lords, do at least receive a mention. There are, too, possibilities for comparative history that are not as fully explored as they might have been. This would include comparisons between the domestic histories of Spain and Portugal resulting from their acquisition of overseas empire, and between the two empires themselves. One volume does, however, rise intelligently to the challenge, although, as one of the book’s two dedictees, I mention it with some diffidence. This is *The Iberian World*, whose three editors have expert knowledge of the internal history of Spain and Portugal. They treat the two countries not as frozen at a particular moment in time, but instead as countries evolving and changing over the course of three centuries.

---

They show the same kind of sensitivity in their treatment of the Asian and American empires, while their historiographical awareness enables them to contextualize with confidence, and to select authors who sing from the same song sheet as themselves.

This comes as something of a relief. Although the number and variety of topics covered in the remaining four volumes under review are more than enough to cater for all tastes, the overwhelming impression they leave on this particular reviewer is one of monotony. Over and over again the same themes recur, even if in different forms, and they are liable to be introduced in a spirit of self-congratulation that grates and irritates. There are important exceptions, but too many contributors seem to assume that it was only after 1970 that imperial and global history broke free of their traditional limitations and branched out into exciting new fields. The Routledge volume, for instance, tells us that “the study of colonialism and coloniality [...] has changed dramatically within the last thirty years under the influence of theoretical positionings, disciplinary and interdisciplinary turns” (2). The word “turn” crops up at every turn. Two contributors who collaborate in this volume observe, rightly in my opinion, that “global and globalizing processes had already been at work for millennia [...] and the history of globalization begins with the intensification of such processes during the ‘long’ sixteenth century” (24). They then go on to suggest that, stimulated by the emergence of “subaltern studies,” “colonialism and protocolonialism” underwent a “spatial turn” and a “cultural turn” in the 1980’s and 1990’s (23), and even a “hemispheric turn” (25) in the 1990’s. They show no apparent awareness that Lewis Hanke was one among several distinguished historians who had long been engaged in a lively debate about whether the Americas had, and have, a common history.3

The allegedly innovative and expansive new approaches often look, on closer examination, as restrictive as the more traditional approaches that these volumes preen themselves on rejecting. At times the causes of rejection are no more than laughable, as when all the innumerable literary and art historical studies undertaken by earlier generations are cavalierly brushed aside as having little or no relevance for historians who see themselves as pioneers of the vaunted historiographical revolution of the 1970’s. But the new and supposedly transformative approach can also have serious consequences. This is particularly true of the handling of the Spanish conquest and colonization of America. Many of the contributors rightly insist on the brutality that accompanied the

---

conquest, but their laudable concern to emphasize the survival into the post-
conquest centuries of so much indigenous culture encourages them to dwell
on the continuities in the history of the indigenous peoples at the expense of
the many violent ruptures with the past. This insistence leads them to paint
a general picture of the kind presented at the beginning of this review. Yet, as
with that picture, it also encourages them to underplay the extent and gravity
of the ruptures between past and present provoked by conquest.

The continuity thesis owes much to the remarkable pioneering work of
Mexican historians, and in the United States of the late James Lockhart and his
colleagues and pupils, in mastering Nahuatl and other Central American lan-
guages, deciphering hieroglyphs, and teasing out the authentically indigenous
from post-conquest chronicles and texts, often transcribed or interpreted by
members of the religious orders and by native Americans and *mestizos* who
had been trained in missionary schools and institutions. By the time the vari-
ous codices and chronicles had been translated into Spanish, memories of the
conquest were fading, and a new generation of native Americans had emerged
which had been fully or partially Christianized. While the publication and
scrutiny of these texts have transformed our knowledge and understanding of
pre-and-post-Conquest civilization and added a new dimension to the study
of Hispanic America, their very seductiveness has weighted the scales in a way
that has generated a fresh cycle of misconceptions and misreadings. These
become all too obvious in compilations of essays by many different hands,
even when editors have intervened to introduce a measure of control.

The resulting sense of overkill makes one sigh for books with a single author,
capable of bringing a unified vision to large and important topics, and this
may prove to be a fruitful line of approach in the years ahead. An excellent
recent example of the possibilities is Giuseppe Marcocci’s *The Globe on Paper*,
which explores the impact of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and European
overseas discoveries on the writing of global history in the early modern
period. Marcocci’s book shows how much can still be done to shed new light
on the histories of imperialism and globalization, and not least in the context
of Iberian overseas empire. Numerous opportunities for comparison remain –
comparison that is not purely mechanical, but that identifies differences as
well as similarities, and then attempts to analyze and explain them. Much

---

4 Giuseppe Marcocci, *The Globe on Paper. Writing Histories of the World in Renaissance Europe and the Americas* (Oxford, 2020). This is a revised and updated English translation of his *Indios, cinesi, falsari. Le storie del mondo nel Rinascimento* (Rome, 2016), and was awarded the 2021 Federico Chabod Prize, sponsored by the Academia Lincei, for the best book by an Italian historian in any field.
more remains to be done, too, on the impact of overseas empire and the consequences for states and state competition, European and non-European, of the world-wide circulation of ideas, institutions, and practices. There is still scope, also, for critical connected histories of the two Iberian empires and the polities they engaged or competed with in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The uncovering of networks has been a revealing exercise, but networks studied in isolation are not enough. Empire is fundamentally the exercise of power, and until power is brought fully back into the equation, global and imperial history will continue to display the weaknesses all too apparent in so many of the contributions to the volumes under review.

John Elliott
Oriel College, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
john.elliott@history.ox.ac.uk