JAMES WALVIN

RETHINKING ATLANTIC HISTORY

Shaping the Stuart World 1603-1714: The Atlantic Connection. ALLAN I. MACINNES & ARTHUR H. WILLIAMSON (eds.). Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006. xiv + 389 pp. (Cloth US\$ 135.00)

Slavery and the British Empire: From Africa to America. KENNETH MORGAN. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. x + 221 pp. (Paper US\$ 32.00)

Although an important debate continues about the concept itself, the use of “the Atlantic” has embedded itself in scholarly vernacular. The scholarly output directly spawned by an engagement with the concept continues apace. That ocean, and the peoples who lived and traded along its edges, and who finally moved across it, have provided an important geographical focus for some major reconsiderations of modern history. Prompted by the Macinnes/Williamson volume, I returned to my own undergraduate and graduate notes and essays from courses on Stuart Britain: the Atlantic was totally absent – not even present as a distant speck on our intellectual map. We studied, and debated, the formal histories of migrations to the Americas (i.e. European migrations) but there was no mention of Africa or Africans. And no sense was conveyed that the European engagement with the Americas (in their totality – as opposed to North America) was a two-way, mutual force: that the European world was influenced, indeed shaped in many critical regards, by the Americas: by the land, the products, the peoples, and by the markets of that hemisphere. At its most obvious in the ebb and flow of peoples, even that eluded the historians I encountered as a student. It was as if we were talking about a different cosmos; few moved beyond the conventions of European migrations westwards and little attention was paid to that most dominant of migrations – the enforced African migrations to the Americas.

Today, it all looks so different. Moreover it looks all the more important the more we know about it. Nor is it any longer satisfactory merely to think of this as a matter of demography. The cultural patterns – ideas, imagin-

ings, aspirations, and its writing – that flowed from the engagement with the Americas were varied and profound. This collection of essays confirms and advances that simple point. It was, as the editors state early on, an impact that was pervasive as well as material. The ambition and achievement of this volume is that it rejects an older insularity of approach and outlook to produce an integrated collection that provides a genuine re-evaluation of the shaping of the Stuart World.

Its range is impressive – from visionaries, schooled in new, distinctive Scottish learning, and anxious to create a new civility and learning on both sides of the Atlantic, through to the more mundane mechanics of British intrusions into the Spanish Americas. There are, en route, a string of subtle, revisionary essays, none more interesting than the one by Steve Pincus on the Revolution of 1688 in the context of European Catholicism. But it is the ebb and flow of ideas and cultural influences, east and west, across the Atlantic, that emerges as a dominant theme in the overall collection (and spelled out here in Section Two, “Transferring Texts and Traditions”). On the back of the more obvious commercial and demographic movements, there was a less immediately obvious, but no less influential, transfer of books and learning, religious debate and philosophical speculations. And in the ferment of political and biblical debate at the heart of the British seventeenth-century revolution there lay a growing awareness, argued most forcefully by North American thinkers, that America had its place in what the editors call a “divine master plan.”

Yet it remains true that the clearest and most obvious model of transatlantic influence was the commercial and economic. The lands of the Americas, tapped by local or imported, free or enslaved labor yielded commercial bounty that seduced people who were inclined to trade and venture overseas. The celebrated Scottish commercial presence of the eighteenth century emerged from the example of (and in collaboration with) the Dutch pioneering trading systems in the seventeenth century. The diversity of commercial and trading settlements (and the range of European settlements) varied greatly, and the degree to which geophysical circumstances determined those differences needs to be explored further. We know that Boston developed a very different polity and commerce from Barbados. But what is interesting is the manner in which these, and other, nodal points of seventeenth-century development interacted with each other, and came, in time, to sustain and need each other: the flow of goods and produce between and within the settlements of the Americas was as striking and important as the better-known movements east and west across the Atlantic.

Running through the riches on display in these essays, major themes emerge, such as the nature of relations (which differed across time) between European settlers (or traders) and the indigenous people throughout the Americas. Attitudes to the indigenous peoples ranged from the violently

aggressive to the benign and humane. But what happened to those people became the stuff of national propaganda by the end of the period, as each country boasted its own colonial virtues over the vices and shortcomings of its European rivals in the Americas. Nevertheless, whatever theories and ideals flowed from European intellectual debate, the reality, on the ground, in the islands or on the American mainland, soon differed sharply. It is true that disease accounted for the worst onslaughts on the peoples of the Americas, but it is hard to avoid the brutality visited on them by Europeans of all stripes and religions.

Among the most assertive sections of this collection is the engagement with Ireland, and Ireland's role in the broader Atlantic story. The editors are especially at pains to challenge what they see to be dominant trends in the modern historiography – particularly the sense that Ireland was a laboratory for subsequent British colonialism. I remain unsure how far it is possible, as they see it, “to disengage colonialism as a feature of governance from plantations as a form of settlement” (p. 20). Still, their caution – supported by the essays – about the study of Ireland in the broader history of Atlantic settlement is important and well made.

Here, and elsewhere, the volume addresses specific issues within the broader study of colonial settlement and trade. Time and again I was struck by the influence of climate and geophysical conditions as a critical determining factor in the nature of colonial settlement and government. The harsher (more tropical) the setting, the harsher the nature of work (and survival) and the greater the reliance on enslaved (rather than free or indentured) labor. Yet even that model has exceptions (the early days in Barbados, for example). But whenever major tropical or semitropical export staples were developed, the nature of production shifted towards the plantation – and to Africa for labor. The rise of tobacco and sugar swiftly relegated ideals of moderate treatment (of labor), of considerate governance – and indeed of humane sensibility. When brutal exploitation of land and peoples yielded such well-being to the colonizers, who, until the late eighteenth century, cared too much? Worries about the grim stories from the enslaved Americas (and from the slave ships) seemed merely incidental when set against the thriving economies of the colonial powers. Nonetheless, the caution, regularly repeated by the editors, about the recent over-emphasis on a restricted view of plantation settlement is important.

And so too is their reminder of the continuing power and influence of both Spain and the Netherlands. Although it has been customary to think of Spain as a greatly reduced power by, say, the mid-seventeenth century (compared to the emergence of British power in the Americas), that view has serious flaws. It is no accident for example that, on the eve of abolition in 1807, the British were shipping substantial numbers of their enslaved Africans via their own islands and onto Spanish settlements in the Americas. Similarly,

the Netherlands cast a long shadow across the history of Atlantic trade and settlement (and much further afield as well of course). Here, however, we have an important assertion of the role of cooperation and mutual benefits between the Dutch and the British (and others as well). Though rivals (and at times enemies), the British and Dutch often helped and benefited from each others' experience in trade and finance.

One important group to emerge from these scholarly contributions is the Scots. Their networks, theologies, education, and intellectual traditions infiltrated the world of the seventeenth-century Atlantic. A century later, they had formed a critical elite on both sides of that ocean. Long before the Act of Union, the Scots had infiltrated the wider European and Atlantic trading systems with their own commercial and personal networks, which effectively formed a web linking the Caribbean to the Baltic. Here was a particular version of the Stuart world – appropriate enough when we recall who the Stuarts were and where they came from.

Kenneth Morgan had established himself as a major historian of Britain's Atlantic empire. His earlier work on the history of British trade, on Bristol and on Quakers, in books and seminal articles has provided rich material for all scholars of the Atlantic community and economy. Here, in *Slavery and the British Empire*, he deploys his usual skills – of precise exposition based on a deep understanding of the arguments (themselves located in his mastery of archives on both sides of the Atlantic). The end result is an excellent volume – and not one easily managed. It is concise (on topics that are not easily presented in concise form), and well-written, and it has something new to say on all his chosen themes. It is an unusual book in that it is important both for scholars in the field and especially the students trying to make sense of the history of British slavery. Morgan has given shape and coherence to material that has expanded at an extraordinary rate over the past twenty years, and yet he never trivializes in the process of writing a compact study. It is a book which manages to be both a survey of the wider scholarly field, and an original argument in itself. It confirms, yet again, the centrality of slavery and the slave trade in the shaping of the history of the Atlantic world.

JAMES WALVIN
Department of History
University of York
Heslington, York, YO10 5DD, U.K.
<jameswalvin@aol.com>