Review Articles

The Disposal of Atlantic History

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The Atlantic in World History. Karen Ordahl Kupperman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. x + 155 pp. (Paper US\$ 19.95)

A Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820. John K. Thornton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xviii + 543 pp. (Paper US\$ 29.99)

Few readers of this journal need to be introduced to the concept of “Atlantic history,” which over the past few decades has either taken specialists in the early modern field by storm or run roughshod over them, depending on one’s point of view. Assiduous scholars have traced the origins and/or antecedents of the concept/approach/perspective known to us today as Atlantic history as far back as the late nineteenth century, but these same scholars and virtually everyone else in the early modern field would agree that the concept really came of age beginning in the 1990s. This being the case, it might be fun as well as illuminating to proceed analogically and apply to Atlantic history the divisions established by Jaques in his famous “seven ages of man” speech in Act II, Scene 7 of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*. Once we do, we find that we can state with some confidence that Atlantic history is past its infancy and “whining school-boy” period, and is today in its third (lover) age of life, that is to say, “sighing like furnace.” Readers with good memories of their own school-day readings may recall that in Jaques’s speech the age informed by love is followed

immediately by a fourth (soldier) age. In this period, humans are “full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel, seeking the bubble reputation, even in the cannon’s mouth,” which sequence, if followed in this case, should make for increasingly lively debates in the years ahead!

If I was a bit harsh in 2002 when I wrote—with a nod to a formulation by Robert Reich—that Atlantic history was “one of those rare ideas that moved swiftly from obscurity to meaninglessness without any intervening period of coherence,” I believed at the time and continue to believe that this idea is hard to catch hold of, much less to pin down (Coclanis 2002:170). For the record, let me state that I am persuaded that Joyce Chaplin is correct in arguing that *the* “Atlantic Ocean” itself is a meaningful rather than anachronistic concept for students of early modern history (Chaplin 2009). Many authors, including Karen Ordahl Kupperman, have pointed out that during the early modern period, this ocean was often divided up into a discrete North Atlantic Ocean and a South Atlantic Ocean (or Aethiopian Sea), indeed, in some cases, into as many as five bands of seas. That said, Chaplin makes sense in arguing for the gradual emergence of a shared sense of the bounds of the “everyday Atlantic” during the early modern period. By this, she means that quotidian maritime experiences—travel, trade, storms, acts of depredation, etc.—led interested/knowledgeable/experienced parties to consider the Atlantic to be one ocean well before the nineteenth century.

To affirm that the concept of an Atlantic Ocean is meaningful does not, however, commit me in a logical sense to affirm that Atlantic *history* is as well. Even as Atlantic history rides high, other scholars have also expressed their doubts about Atlantic history, for various reasons and on sundry grounds. For example, a number of scholars have questioned whether there was in the early modern period sufficient unity between and among the peoples from the four continents rimming the Atlantic Basin to justify treating it as an integrated unit. Some of these scholars continue to believe that narrower conceptual/organizational schemes—focused around ethnic, national, or imperial lines—make better sense when considering the societies of the Atlantic Basin during the early modern period. Others privilege Atlantics “of different hues,” as Philip D. Morgan and Jack P. Greene have suggested, most notably White (European/Euro-American) or Black (African/African American) Atlantics, with some on the left—Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker come immediately to mind—listing toward a “Red” Atlantic comprised of workers, subalterns, and proles from Old World and New whatever their particular ethnic or national origins (Morgan & Greene 2009:6; Linebaugh & Rediker 2000).

Still others, myself included, believe that during the early modern period the “Atlantic World” cannot easily be hived off from people, plants and animals, pests, products, processes, and proceedings originating or associated primarily with other parts of the planet, not only in Asia, but also in “non-Atlantic” parts of Europe, Africa, and the Americas. To these scholars, Atlantic history *qua* concept (or, even in more relaxed form, *qua* perspective) is for many, but not all purposes less helpful in analytical terms than are other organizing schemes—global history among them.

Yet others complain that the current popularity of Atlantic history—popularity bordering on fetishization at times—has often led to serious distortions in historical understanding and explanation. To cite but one example from Europe: some exceedingly important (if rather more prosaic) European trades—the Baltic grain trade and the barge trade on the Rhine, most notably—have at a minimum suffered from relative neglect as a result of scholars’ haste to focus on splashier developments in the Atlantic Basin. Taken together, the above quibbles, cavils, demurrers, and qualifications regarding the utility of Atlantic history have led some scholars, including some basically sympathetic to the Atlantic conceit, perforce to issue a kind of Scotch verdict—not proven—when assessing whether or not Atlantic history as concept, approach, or perspective adds interpretive value when considered in a net rather than gross sense. In my view, it is likely that more and more will do so in the future. Hopefully, this shift will come sooner rather than later—during something akin to Shakespeare’s fifth age of man, which is characterized by justice and wisdom, rather than age six, senescence, or, alas, age seven, “one of second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”

In light of the above remarks, it might at first glance seem odd for me to write a review essay in the field of Atlantic history. Although I am certainly critical of some of the excesses of the Atlanticist project and although I am probably associated rather more with the field of global history, let me point out for the record that I have edited a book in Atlantic history, regularly participate in conferences and symposia devoted to Atlantic history, and am a frequent contributor to scholarly volumes relating to Atlantic history. President Lyndon Baines Johnson’s famous quotation regarding FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover might provide useful explanatory context at this point: “It’s probably better to have him inside the tent pissing out, than outside the tent pissing in” (Halberstam 1971). Without further ado, let us move on to another, more seemly task, to wit: a discussion of two important, but very different new books in Atlantic history.

The fact that the authors of these two books, Karen Ordahl Kupperman and John K. Thornton, are both eminent Atlantic historians, but Atlanticists who differ rather dramatically in background, training, interests, foci, and

orientations, testifies to the capaciousness of the field. Kupperman, Silver Professor of History at New York University, is an American who trained at Cambridge. She has written and written well about many topics in Atlantic history, but approaches the field primarily as a historian of English/British America. Although she has successfully integrated Africans, African Americans, and especially Native Americans in her many works, she would likely be situated by most specialists in the White Atlantic grouping, deeply steeped, as she is, in English/British archival and printed source materials emanating from or intermediated via Brits and Anglo-Americans.

John K. Thornton, who teaches at Boston University, is positioned elsewhere on the Atlanticist spectrum. Also an American—and, like Kupperman, from a military family—Thornton took his Ph.D. from UCLA, where his area of specialization was African history, particularly the Kingdom of Kongo in west central Africa. This kingdom's closest European relationship was with Portugal, and Thornton's expert use of Portuguese source materials in studying Kongo (and other parts of Portuguese west central and southwest Africa) has long been a hallmark of his scholarship. Although his work, as it developed, encompassed other parts of Africa—and, increasingly, other parts of the Atlantic world—Thornton's "Atlantic hue" would be considered "Black" by most scholars, his fundamental operating frame originating in, though hardly limited to Africa.

If their Atlanticist orientations (a.k.a. hues) differ, Kupperman and Thornton share certain scholarly traits: They are both prolific; they are both versatile, writing on numerous themes and areas; they have both won well-earned prizes and awards for their scholarship. As prominent senior scholars with distinguished publication records and numerous accolades to their credit, they are, in other words, ideally suited to write syntheses of the Atlantic history field, to which syntheses—Kupperman's *The Atlantic in World History* and Thornton's *Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820*—we now turn.

Kupperman's brief survey—the text of which is only 124 pages—is part of Oxford University Press's New Oxford World History series. This series is nothing if not ambitious: Now nearing completion, it will ultimately run to thirty chronological, thematic/topical, and geographical volumes. According to the general editors of the series, Bonnie G. Smith and Anand Yang, volumes in the series differ from earlier "world histories" by being comprehensive; by stressing "connectedness and interactions of all kinds—cultural, economic, political, religious, and social—involving peoples, places, and processes"; by emphasizing comparisons; by offering multiple perspectives, including the perspectives of "ordinary people"; and by analyzing the roles of both local and global factors in major historical events. And, I might add, by doing all of these things succinctly in short books.

So how does Kupperman's contribution to the series stack up? Does it meet the above criteria? More importantly, does it enrich our understanding of Atlantic history specifically and history generally? To foreground things: *The Atlantic in World History* is a lively and interesting interpretive synthesis; it is thoughtful throughout and replete with insights; it is perforce selective and perhaps even a bit unbalanced in coverage; it is a book too short for its own good. Sometimes, less is in fact *less*, and more is *really* more.

Kupperman's book consists of five substantive chapters, along with a two-page introduction and a three-page epilogue. It should also be noted, though, that it includes some very useful "back material" in the form of a chronology, notes, suggestions for further reading, and an annotated list of helpful websites. Regarding matters of organization and coverage: in her thoughtful introduction, entitled "Thinking Atlanticly," Kupperman highlights several key themes that readers will encounter repeatedly as they read on—most notably, the permeability of the colonial empires and the importance of the breaches made therein; the "webs of interdependence" that, willingly or otherwise, affected all Atlantic peoples; and the high levels of risk and uncertainty that permeated the Atlantic world during the entire early modern period.

The first chapter treats Europe's outward thrust in the medieval and early modern periods and the (often strange, even outrageous) attempts by Europeans to comprehend the discoveries that resulted from said thrust. Chapter 2 focuses on pre-contact societies in Europe, Africa, and the Americas, and the beginnings of regular transoceanic contact among them. Chapter 3 discusses the settlement of the Americas by Europeans and Africans. Chapter 4 addresses the material bases of the colonies established by Europeans in the Americas, with an emphasis on commodities ("Foods, Drugs, and Dyes"). And the final chapter deals with the maturation of these colonies in the eighteenth century and their various roads to independence. In the brief epilogue, Kupperman offers readers a provocative little meditation on the elusive, ever shifting, highly contingent meaning of the Atlantic and its history.

In many ways, Kupperman's synthesis represents the regnant view regarding the Atlantic world. Most scholars today stress the theme of permeability and emphasize imperial breaches, for example, and her belief in the many structural/functional similarities and more or less symmetrical power relationships among European, Native American, and African societies interacting in the Atlantic world is at once standard and comforting to modern sensibilities. Those familiar with her earlier work will not be surprised to learn that Kupperman employs early travel accounts and narratives to excellent effect, nor to find that she proves herself yet again a master of the telling vignette. Where she falters is in her inability in this volume intelligibly to trace, let

alone explain change over time in the Atlantic world—surely the “stuff” of history—probably because of the constraints of the series format. Shortly after Kupperman introduces the *dramatis personae*, gets the colonies in the New World established, and briefly discusses the types of commodities the colonies produced, we find said colonies mature and the colonists with new senses of identity, which led some of them to get involved in movements to sever ties with the geopolitical entities that established colonies in the first place. If it's Tuesday, this must be Toussaint or Bolívar, as it were. Or, to revert back to Shakespearean imagery: another chapter or two, my kingdom for another chapter or two!

Perhaps Kupperman could pinch some text from Thornton's mammoth *Cultural History of the Atlantic World, 1250–1820*, a work as dense as the Atlantic is deep. Fortunately for readers, Thornton's volume—I use this particular noun intentionally here—is loaded with valuable information (drawn from sources in a half dozen languages) and rich insights, rendering worthwhile the tough passage through it. Thornton tells us in his preface that his study grew out of his lecture notes for a course in Atlantic history that he began teaching in the mid-1990s. Over time he added more and more material to these lectures, and began to formalize them by producing a complete written text, adding footnotes, employing scholarly sources rather than reference works, etc. By 2010, after a decade and a half of effort, he had succeeded in turning his notes into perhaps the most comprehensive study we have on the cultural history of the Atlantic world.

Thornton covers essentially the same period as Kupperman, and treats a number of the same topics and themes, albeit in far greater detail. His book is divided into four parts, comprising eleven chapters. Part I consists of a single chapter in which Thornton traces the early probes into and ultimate mastery of the Atlantic. In the three chapters in Part II, he fills in the European, African, and American “background” necessary to understand “the nature of encounter and its aftermath.” The “encounter” itself and its aftermath are covered in Part III. In Part IV Thornton describes the manner in which culture—broadly conceived to include language, aesthetics and the arts, and religious traditions—changed as a result of the encounter, and quickly runs through the Age of Revolution in the Americas, c. 1775–1825. He covers each of these topics and themes with great deliberation and method (a bulldozer in low gear might be the proper image here), leaving little unsaid or undisturbed. Important new findings crop up frequently, often in the middle of potted, textbook-like discussions of familiar subject matter.

Parts III and IV (“The Nature of Encounter and Its Aftermath” and “Culture Transition and Change”) offer cases in point. In Part III—three chapters

comprising over 150 pages of text—Thornton first differentiates between the processes of conquest, colonization, and contact, and then demonstrates in considerable detail which process occurred where and with what result. In his usage, *conquest* denotes a situation in which “there is a switch in sovereignty between states.” *Colonization* occurred “in areas where there was no native population ... or where the indigenous population could not be conquered,” generally because it was not organized into states or states sufficiently strong to “surrender or acknowledge a change in sovereignty.” In such areas, the indigenous population was “ultimately either displaced, enslaved, or eliminated” and the area repopulated with a new population brought in from elsewhere (pp. 157–58). To Thornton, *contact* pertains to Africa and liminal areas in the Americas akin to Richard White’s “middle ground” (1991:158):

where there was no change of sovereignty, no enslavement, and little population movement. It developed in areas where Europeans met established political and social orders that they could not overcome, displace, or enslave. In this situation, Europeans were forced to coexist with another society, interacting formally and informally through diplomacy and trade.

It is tempting, if a bit snide, to observe at this point that Thornton’s schematic—as operationalized in Chapters 5, 6, and 7—is to history what parsing is to grammar, but like parsing it is instructive in many ways, allowing us to analyze, interpret, and make sense of the varied trajectories of many different places over large chunks of time. And just to be clear (rather than snide), by large chunks of time I refer to the early modern period, not to the hours it takes to slog through said chapters.

The first three of the four chapters in Part IV of Thornton’s book—on transition and change in language, aesthetic expressions, and religion in the Atlantic world—are in many ways the strongest in the study, which is not surprising as the work was intended as one of cultural history rather than political or social history, let alone economic history. In these chapters, Thornton provides exceptionally rich—and, yes, detailed—discussions of the ways in which these aspects of culture changed as a result of population movements and interactions throughout the Atlantic world during the early modern period, leading to always interesting and sometimes brilliant new forms and styles of a syncretic or hybridic nature. Writing as an economic historian, I would have preferred a still broader conception of culture—one that included *agricultural* practices and business *cultures*—but Thornton already had much on his plate and his study, as suggested above, is already plenty long as it is. In the last chapter

in this section, "The Revolutionary Moment in the Atlantic," he offers a solid, but more or less standard discussion of the ways in which the colonies in the Americas achieved independence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. With the close of this chapter, Thornton's book, perhaps out of authorial exhaustion, just stops, ending, as T.S. Eliot might have put it, not with a bang but a whimper.

Thornton, an intellectual denizen of the Black Atlantic, shares with Kupperman of the White Atlantic the belief that during the period in which the various peoples of the Atlantic basin encountered one another they were more similar than different in terms of power, technology (military and otherwise), material living standards, etc. In both cases such claims are asserted rather than argued rigorously, for neither author pays sustained, let alone systematic attention to matters economic or technological. If they had, they would have found, I suspect, that, contrary to their claims (or assumptions), the more economically advanced parts of Europe, like the more economically advanced parts of Asia (the Yangzi delta and parts of India), differed in significant ways from societies in West Africa and the Americas, with most, but not all of the differences (including differences in economic ideologies) leading to asymmetries in the power Europeans and Euro-Americans were able (and willing) to bring to bear in their dealings with Africans and Native Americans.

For starters: Angus Maddison's estimates of GDP per capita—the best we have—demonstrate convincingly that in 1500 the levels in Western Europe were already far higher than in Africa or America, with the gap widening much further by 1820 (Maddison 2007:70–71). This is not to say that the significant advantages Western Europeans (and thence, Euro-Americans) possessed in terms of GDP per capita meant they enjoyed a total monopoly on power in said dealings nor that they did what they would, only that it is naïve and somewhat tendentious to proceed as though the relationship between and among the emerging nation-states of northwest Europe, the Kingdom of Kongo and the Powhatan Confederacy, for example, should be seen as akin to mathematical identities.

This problem, I hasten to add, is hardly unique to Thornton and Kupperman. It is, in fact, largely generational, a part of the reaction, indeed overreaction of a generation or two of scholars to earlier overly Eurocentric approaches and perspectives. To grant greater narrative agency to Africans and Native Americans is one thing; to do so by neglecting or downplaying the economic/technological sinews of European/Euro-American power another. Luckily for us, this problem results in minimal—not even collateral—damage in these two studies. Very different in scale and scope, both of these books make estimable contributions to the field of Atlantic history, even if neither is concerned very much with the

manner in which power was wielded in the Atlantic world or how the Atlantic economy worked.

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