Abigail L. Swingen

Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2015. xiii + 271 pp. (Cloth US\$85.00)

Abigail Swingen refrains from making any direct claims as to the importance of slavery for the development of the English domestic economy. Instead, she shows how a long train of powerful seventeenth-century actors ventured to define slavery as central to national prosperity. Policymakers and special-interest rent seekers debated over which component of the Atlantic economy offered the greatest financial return to the nation, with some claiming that England would most benefit from conquering Spanish territories or by capturing Spanish galleons, while others agitated for a slave-based plantation economy. Still others, who were either part of or affiliated with the Stuart household, championed the trade in African slaves as England's most profitable overseas option. In executing her analysis of these positions, Swingen follows an ambitious transatlantic research agenda that scrutinizes correspondence, legislative debates, meeting minutes, and pamphlets in order to expose the dialectical relationship between competing imperial visions developed in the metropole and the hard realities taking place in the colonies. These overseas ambitions, she stresses, were not simply cooked up in a London vacuum, but were formed in light of shifting domestic concerns, international affairs, reports from the colonies, and the ideology (and/or greed) of policymakers.

Like many political histories of the period covering the Commonwealth through the Glorious Revolution, the narrative put forth in *Competing Visions of Empire* is dense and the analysis emphasizes historical contingency, where no single, overarching model can explain the supremacy of one policy direction over another; the political instability of the later Stuart era forced various actors to tweak and shift their imperial plans to suit domestic political realities. In the broadest terms, however, Swingen argues that what gave focus to the post-Restoration imperial debates was the African Company and its privileges, utility, and strategic role. She tells us that not only did the Duke of York (later James II) hope to benefit personally from the profits generated from a monopoly over English and Spanish American slave markets, but that the Stuarts also sought to use the company's exclusive chartered rights as a tool to wield tighter political and economic control over the colonists in the West Indies. This royalist agenda was aided and abetted by the Privy Council and the Lords of Trade, but in the colonies the settlers showed both resentment and hostility toward the Crown and toward this joint stock company. Labor-hungry planters, for example, were particularly vexed by the *asiento* trade, which they viewed as siphoning off the slave supply and thereby driving up their own

labor costs, while Jamaica-based buccaneers resented the Crown and company's efforts to establish peaceful trading with Spain and the Spanish colonies.

What is of particular interest for Swingen is the range of political-economic doctrines held by imperial stakeholders. Those who supported the Stuart agenda generally claimed that such authority would dampen destructive competitive forces in the Atlantic basin. For example, the African Company's privileges were said to promote market stability and prosperity in an otherwise stateless and anarchistic trading zone. Monopoly (or technically "monopsony") power was said to have been necessary in order to centrally manage coastal forts and slave castles, frustrate other European powers, and prevent the local African traders from playing off English traders from one another. The company's position, of course, was challenged by the early advocates of an "integrated" plantation empire—mainly of planters and merchants who bore the burden of these company privileges. This opposition argued that national interest was best served by policies that supported the development of cash-crop production rather than through the monopoly profits of a single company; planters argued that cheap slave labor—supplied by independent merchants (known as "separate traders")—would stimulate home economic growth far more effectively than the African Company.

While Swingen is careful to avoid anachronistic economic terminology, such as "mercantilism," *Competing Visions of Empire* identifies the development of a more-or-less cohesive imperial policy that was firmly planted in policymakers' minds by the early decades of the eighteenth century. Colonial and British historians will be struck by the longevity of the "integrated" colonial model, first put forward by planters and merchants in the seventeenth century and repeated by this same coalition well into the nineteenth century. But the message of this book is directed to an even broader audience, identifying the culpability of English and British *government*—from the Cromwellian era to the dawn of the long eighteenth century—in orchestrating one of the most brutal labor regimes in the early modern world: royals, nobles, and well-to-do commoners are implicated by Swingen as the architects of Britain's slave system.

David B. Ryden

Department of Social Sciences, University of Houston-Downtown,
Houston TX 77002, U.S.A.

rydend@uhd.edu