Book Reviews

Joseph C. Miller (ed.)


Ever since David Armitage asserted, over a decade ago, that “we are all Atlanticists now,”¹ there has been no shortage of hefty monographs and edited collections aimed at defining the parameters of this increasingly popular historical subfield, produced by its leading exponents—Bernard Bailyn, Jack P. Greene, Philip Morgan, and Nicholas Canny. Readers of this journal might wonder, as I myself did, whether Princeton’s contribution has arrived rather late to the party, and thus if it has anything new to offer either to self-proclaimed Atlanticists or to those outside the field. The Companion describes itself as “the first encyclopedic reference work” and “the first comprehensive reference guide” (p. vii) to Atlantic history, and it is its focus on reference rather than historiography that gives it such relevance in what seems like an increasingly overcrowded scholarly specialization.

The first section—only fifty of its more than 500 pages—is divided into four tightly written chapters, each focusing on a century between 1500 and 1900. The discussion of each century refers to its most salient contributions to the development of the Atlantic world: Joseph C. Miller’s analysis of the sixteenth century centers on “specie, sugar, and slaves” (p. 16), Karen Ordahl Kupperman narrates the seventeenth century with regard to “expansion and consolidation” (p. 26), Vincent Brown discusses “growth, crisis, and revolution” (p. 36) in the eighteenth century, and Laurent Dubois focuses on “consolidation and refiguration” (p. 46) in the nineteenth. It is worth noting that while Miller and Kupperman, who recently retired after long, distinguished careers, represent

the founding generation of Atlanticists, Brown and Dubois are part of the next one, which has built on its predecessors’ innovations and expanded the field in a number of ways.

This passing of the metaphorical torch from one academic generation to its successor is one of the real strengths of the Companion—a contrast with many syncretic volumes that tend to commission essays from long-established stalwarts of a particular area of study. The latter portion of this book, constituting 95 percent of its content, consists of alphabetically organized entries that “examine specific participants and strategies central to the dynamics of the Atlantic World” (p. x), some focused on particular historical periods and others looking at phenomena that span all four centuries. Approximately 125 individual entries, running on average 2,000–3,000 words, examine topics relating to economics, culture, politics, law, migration, science, technology, religion, warfare, and overarching concepts such as empire, ethnicity, and race, as articulated within the history of the Atlantic world. Each entry offers a brief overview of the main ideas, events, actors, and overall significance of a topic (e.g., the Columbian exchange, family networks, Mami Wata, or the Seven Years’ War), followed by a brief bibliography that includes both classic works and exciting new scholarship. For example, the one on African religions in the Americas cites both Melville Herskovits’s seminal 1941 study The Myth of the Negro Past and Diana Paton and Maarit Forde’s 2012 edited collection Obeah and Other Powers, and the one on capitalism includes David Hancock’s 2009 Oceans of Wine in conjunction with the path-breaking studies of Eric Williams, James C. Scott, and Sidney W. Mintz. But what makes this compendium particularly vibrant is that it includes, in addition to senior figures such as Ida Altman, Seymour Drescher, Gad Heuman, and Londa Schiebinger, many recently-tenured scholars who have been publishing cutting-edge studies on the topics they cover—e.g., Jennifer L. Anderson on forest resources, John Donoghue on class, William A. Pettigrew on commercial law, Philip J. Stern on trading companies, and Kelly Wisecup on European healing. The centrality that Miller and his associate editors (Brown, Dubois, Kupperman, and Jorge Canizares-Esguerra) have awarded to early and mid-career scholars allows this Companion to fulfill two of its stated goals: “to present what the field has achieved after 30 years of work” (p. viii), including the latest contributions to this field, and also to inspire current undergraduate and graduate students, both by showcasing the seminal works of Atlantic history and by attesting to this subfield’s continuing intellectual vitality as it passes into the hands of the next academic generation. In so doing, the Companion to Atlantic History lives up to the promise of its title, offering its readers not only an intelligently structured and comprehensive work of reference, but a clear sense of the continuing conversa-