

THE BRITISH ATLANTIC EMPIRE BEFORE THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

**Edited by
PETER MARSHALL
& GLYN WILLIAMS**



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Peter Marshall
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Glyn Williams

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Preface

The dynamism within the American colonies in the fifty years or so before the outbreak of the crisis of the 1760s that was to lead to the Revolution has never been in doubt. Recent historical writing has amply demonstrated it. Population grew, new land was settled, economies expanded and diversified, social structures became more complex, colonial assemblies won more power and new political ideologies were formulated. By contrast, British imperial influence on the colonies has often been portrayed both as somewhat ineffectual in practice and as tradition-bound and unchanging in its aims, at least until the period of the Seven Years' War. This is the picture that emerges from the deservedly classic accounts of the imperial system written by Charles M. Andrews, George L. Beer and Lawrence Harper. They described how the institutions of trade regulation and constitutional supervision were devised in the later seventeenth century and pointed out the relative lack of institutional change before the 1750s. A number of recent scholars have, however, suggested that lack of institutional change does not necessarily mean that the imperial system was either static or ineffectual. It seemed to us that it would be valuable to devote an issue of this Journal to a reassessment of the imperial system before the revolution.

The articles written at our invitation suggest a number of ways in which the 'imperial factor' was of real importance in colonial life and show that there was dynamism on the British side as well as in the colonies. The links that bound mother country and colonies together were much more varied than the formal channels of authority set up in the previous century. For instance, both Professor Steele and Professor Olson show how London's spectacular growth enabled London-based interests, commercial, religious and ethnic, to exercise a powerful influence in the colonies. They stress that colonial elites were generally more inclined to cooperate with British interests than to oppose them. Three contributors concentrate on the important consequences for the colonies of the increasing scale of imperial warfare. Dr. Pencak and Professor Greene expose the political and social strains produced by war; Professor Gwyn emphasises economic opportunity. Finally, Dr. Langford shows that English Whig doctrine was not inert. Ideological change took place on both sides of the Atlantic, as the Americans were to discover in the 1760s. Although none of these scholars would deny that important changes in British attitudes to the colonies took place in the Grenville era, they make it clear that Anglo-American relations developed on both sides of the Atlantic throughout the eighteenth century. Braudel's famous phrase applies to this as to an earlier period, 'L'Amerique ne commande pas seul'.

P.J.M.
G.W.

The Empire and Provincial Elites: An interpretation of some recent writings on the English Atlantic, 1675–1740

by

I.K.Steele

Amid a fiery blaze, visible sixty miles at sea, ‘Some gentlemen took care to preserve Her Majesties Picture that was in the Town-House’.¹ It was a small gallantry, to be expected of men of their rank in the Queen’s dominions, but not quite what we have come to expect in Boston, Massachusetts in 1711. These gentlemen, like those who passed a New Hampshire law requiring all members of their House of Assembly to wear swords,² were among those who were turning colonies into English Atlantic provinces. Yet their story belongs too easily and too exclusively to American colonial rather than British imperial history.

A whole certainly can be much less than its parts if the whole is the written history of the first British empire. Fifty years ago *The Cambridge History of the British Empire* was launched with a spacious and well-manned volume entitled *The Old Empire from the Beginnings to 1783*,³ and the ‘imperial school’ of American colonial history was flourishing. Although two generations of scholars have revolutionised every aspect of this subject—including its boundaries—this has been accomplished with little deliberate interest in the history of the first British empire as a whole.⁴ The habit of drawing Clio in national costume seems as ubiquitous as ever, and the empire is easily seen as an unusable past or a mild embarrassment to its successor states. The neglect of this subject owes even more to the fact that the new ways in history are specialised and comparative. Scholarly attention has been shifting from structures to functional units, from theory to practice, and from the general to the particular. These trends have meant that the first British empire has continued to attract less scholarly interest than have its successor states.

A review of some recent literature from the perspective of the English Atlantic empire draws attention to several themes, and concentration upon the lifetime 1675 to 1740 brings ‘provincial’ themes into sharpest focus. By 1675 the English Atlantic political economy was well beyond the pioneer dispersal stage, and patterns of much subsequent development were already present. This was the lifetime between the founding of the Lords of Trade and the Cartagena expedition. It was the long lifetime between the founding of the Royal African Company and the Stono rebellion, or between the founding of the Royal Observatory and Harrison’s solution to the problem of longitude. This was also the span between Wycherly’s *The Country Wife* and Thomson’s *Rule Britannia*, and between the Atlantic mission of George Fox and that of George Whitefield. Despite the well-known centrifugal tendencies that operated in this period, colonial fathers could die in 1740 without hearing a whisper of the coming of the American Revolution. In this provincial lifetime the integration, specialisation, and

interdependence that grew in London's more immediate economic, social and political hinterlands⁵ was carried to the Atlantic colonies with notable success.

Most Englishmen lived in London's provinces, whether in rural England, provincial towns, or transatlantic colonies. The county, town, or colony was the context within which most of life was lived;⁶ with the 'English nation' as a general boundary between friends and enemies and a metaphor for the public good. Compared to the lifetime before 1675, migration within England, between England and the colonies, or even between colonies, was less endemic⁷—with the notable exceptions of the city of London, the colony of Pennsylvania, and the forced migration of Africans to the New World colonies. English population grew very little, grain prices were modest and quite stable, and no crises of subsistence occurred there or in the colonies.⁸ In these respects, too, the comparisons with the previous lifetime are striking. The mortality crisis of the 1640s, the economic and political problems of the 1620s and 1640s, and what historians have called *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, 'the storm over the gentry', or 'the general crisis of the seventeenth century',⁹ all point to the tensions and disruptions that prompted internal migration, migration to continental Europe, and a major early Stuart migration to the new world. Studies of county life in this earlier lifetime have confirmed the general picture, but have also documented the strength of provincial life, and its power to resist centralisation by early Stuart or Cromwellian government.¹⁰ Social history, especially local studies of villages, cities, and counties, have challenged the historical assumptions of a unified England with outlying colonies. London's provinces existed in some variety on both sides of the Atlantic, and the new world provinces were not automatically different for being united to the metropolis by water rather than by land.

Appreciation of the links between various aspects of life is one of the special challenges of historical study, and a tendency towards 'total history' has long been part of British imperial history.¹¹ Yet a scholar's assumptions, research subjects, methods, and preoccupations all tend to emphasise one aspect, be it economic, or social, or political, and to regard the other two as subsidiary subjects if not dependent variables. This exploration of the provincial life of the English Atlantic is organised to focus, in turn, upon each of these aspects.

The century after the restoration of Charles II has special attraction for economic historians concerned with the origins of industrial development and 'modernisation'. E.A. Wrigley's suggestive model, outlining the importance of London's growth in England's economic unification,¹² can usefully be extended to include the English Atlantic. If the agriculture, industry, and crafts of England were being transformed to respond to the phenomenal growth of the London market, the economic survival of the transatlantic provinces depended upon the development of marketable staples or related activities. London was the major source of credit, the major market, the logical entrepôt, though this natural preference had to be reinforced by war, by trade legislation, and by colonial administration. Economic specialisation in the colonies presumed maritime access to markets, and also presumed sea-borne sources of most needed goods. Thus interdependence grew with specialisation and economies of scale: plantations were among the prototypes of industrial production, profitable but vulnerable elements in the emerging English Atlantic economy.

Although the economic history of the English Atlantic has not been subjected to recent synthesis,¹³ the field has been ably surveyed in the broader comparative studies by Ralph Davis and K.G. Davies.¹⁴ The best short economic histories of pre-industrial England, including those by C.Wilson, L.A.Clarkson and D.C.Coleman,¹⁵ are forced, by the recent riches of their field, to adopt a customs officer's perspective on the 'foreign plantations'. Studies of overseas trade and the shipping industry all assert the importance of the staple trades in the English re-export trade and in ship utilisation.¹⁶ Yet the colonial staple trades are now likely to be seen primarily as sources of profit for London merchants and the English government, and are seldom credited with transforming England to anything like the degree claimed by some pamphleteers at the time and some historians since.¹⁷

By 1675 those who had migrated to escape the Old World were succeeded or outnumbered by those who intended to reap the harvest of the New World. Effort to improve upon a rude sufficiency drew colonists into the English Atlantic market economy.¹⁸ The wilderness may well have been a subsequent source of colonial uniqueness, but it was at the edge of the real development of these provinces. Access to sea-borne commerce was more advantageous to colonists than to most other Englishmen.

Discovery and development of a marketable staple product was crucial to the shape of colonial societies, as H.A.Innis, M.H.Watkins, R.F.Neill, R.E. Baldwin, and D.C. North have emphasised.¹⁹ Ironically, the first of the staples Innis studied, *The Cod Fisheries*,²⁰ could support contrasting economic and social structures in Newfoundland and New England. The English Newfoundland fishery remained West Country based into the eighteenth century, with international rivalry and fishing interests both helping to retard settlement on the island itself. C.Grant Head has emphasised the increased role of the 'wintering people' in the onshore fishery after the 1730s, and the shift of West Country fishermen from the onshore fishery to the formerly French-dominated Banks fishery proper.²¹ In contrast, New England fisheries supported local village life from the beginning, but could reach out to Canso or Newfoundland with minimal local commitments. As the most perishable and difficult staple to regulate, fish was not susceptible to the entrepôt market structure of other colonial staples. However much it might be prized as a nursery of seamen and a source of foreign earnings, the fishery remained a staple of limited fiscal potential and administrative interest.²²

Like the Newfoundland fishery, the English fur trade could operate as an English-based extraction trade or as a colonial traffic supporting a major colonial town like Albany. E.E.Rich's institutional study is the basis for the more recent work on the Hudson's Bay trade.²³ A.J.Ray and A.Rotstein have explored the price mechanisms and Indian perceptions of the trade,²⁴ and G.Williams has documented the continuing lure of the North-West Passage through the eighteenth century.²⁵ Although the northern English approach to the fur trade generated little local development beyond the Bay factories, the New York fur trade was funnelled through the substantial town of Albany in the new world, and was free of monopoly in its English markets even after fur was 'enumerated' in 1722. The economics of the Albany fur trade have received attention recently,²⁶ though less than have other features of the life of the Indians who traded at Albany.²⁷ The fur trade and the fish trade have been the basis for a staple theory of

economic growth, yet the range of possible economic structures, the limited ancillary trades, and the comparatively small scale of both trades make them poor examples of the English Atlantic staples.

The sugar trade, that prize of English Atlantic commerce, has long been blessed with good economic historians. The foundation works of Richard Pares put him in a category by himself,²⁸ and the comprehensive volumes by Noel Deerr²⁹ have also survived as major reference works, as has Frank Wesley Pitman's strangely-titled *The Development of the British West Indies, 1700–1763*.³⁰ R.S.Dunn's scholarly and well written *Sugar and Slaves*³¹ is a comprehensive study that includes a sound synthesis of the economic aspects of the rise of the planters in the later Stuart period. The economics of integration are more extensively traced in R.B.Sheridan's *Sugar and Slavery*. Sheridan divides West Indian economic historians into 'neo-Smithian' critics of the value of colonies and 'neo-Burkean' advocates of the conviction that empire paid.³² However strange it might seem to apply a neo-Burkean lable to a Marxist argument that English industrialisation owed much to the profits of the sugar trade, this debate goes on, with Sheridan as a self-proclaimed 'neo-Burkean'.³³ But whatever the contentions on that issue, all are agreed that the sugar trade was the exemplar of imperial economic integration accomplished in the lifetime after the construction of the Navigation Acts and the agencies for their enforcement. The loss of the European re-export trade in sugar was a significant blow early in the eighteenth century, but the trade to England itself grew favourably. The sugar trade rested firmly on credit from the Royal African Company, London merchants, and affluent relatives.³⁴ Those colonists who could command the most metropolitan credit on the best terms (for land, slaves, and sugar equipment) won against their less cosmopolitan neighbours.³⁵ This capital and labour intensive trade was firmly bound to the metropolis.

The shuttle of the English sugar fleets to and from the English islands was neither the beginning nor the end of the sugar trade. The loggers, fishermen and seamen of New England; the farmers, millers and merchants of New York and Pennsylvania; these were all linked to the trade in much lighter bondage than that of the African slaves. Richard Pares and Byron Fairchild have sketched aspects of the lumber and provisions trade to the English sugar islands.³⁶ The slave trade has had considerable treatment;³⁷ the Irish provision trade to the islands,³⁸ the molasses trade, and the rum trade from the islands have also had their historians.³⁹ Studies of the development of merchant elites in Boston and Philadelphia⁴⁰ suggest the important place of the West Indies trade in the creation of these dynasties. J.F.Shepherd and G.M.Walton, as well as D.C.North and R.P.Thomas,⁴¹ have found that shipping promoted New England capital accumulation, and the Massachusetts shipowners have been studied intensively.⁴² For North American merchants, the sugar colonies were a major avenue of profit, especially prized for bills of exchange on London: New England trade directly to England was in furs, skins, train oil, masts and naval stores, but these returns did not cover the cost of English and European goods imported from the metropolis.⁴³

Before 1740 the English colonies did not have extensive trade beyond the empire, though there were beginnings that deserve more study than they have received. The trade in fish to Mediterranean Europe was a direct trade that could be profitable but was

subject to heavy competition. The trade to the foreign West Indies was more lucrative, especially to the French islands. By the 1730s two new trades from North America to southern Europe were growing in importance. These were the rice trade from South Carolina, which stayed with English carriers by prescription even though the trade was direct,⁴⁴ and the grain trade,⁴⁵ which was destined to become a more important source of profits for New York and Philadelphia merchants. Despite these initiatives, which can easily be exaggerated by hindsight, the English empire was, to a noticeable extent, bound together by the needs and opportunities of the sugar trade during the provincial lifetime discussed here.

Tobacco, the other great staple of the English Atlantic, generated less intercolonial trade than did sugar, but was responsible for more international traffic in Europe after re-export from Britain. J.M.Price has unravelled the complexities of the marketing of tobacco, initially in its connection with Russia, but most recently and masterfully in its links to the French tobacco monopoly.⁴⁶ The market crisis of the 1670s had accelerated the shift to slave labour and larger holdings, which in turn financed the rise of the gentlemen planters. As A.C.Land's research has suggested, the tobacco economy was financed on networks of local debt, much of it ultimately owed to English creditors.⁴⁷ By 1740 the shift to Glasgow as the main British entrepôt was a signal of changes in colonial tobacco marketing and credit arrangements. While the London-based agency system still prospered, this new element of consequence was changing the nature of the marketing of Chesapeake tobacco.⁴⁸

The slaves, who grew much of the tobacco—and even more of the sugar and rice—have been the focus for much recent economic history of both slavery and the slave trade.⁴⁹ Eric Williams' ranging and provocative *Capitalism and Slavery*⁵⁰ is still a legitimate starting point for recent debates on the origins of racist attitudes,⁵¹ the rate of return in the slave trade and slavery,⁵² and the abolition movement.⁵³ *The Royal African Company*, by K.G.Davies, is a thorough study of the monopoly company that flourished and failed under the last Stuarts. The African involvement in the slave trade was a significant omission in the Williams thesis, and this aspect of the trade has been illuminated by the works of I.A.Akinjogbin, P.D.Curtin, K.Y. Daaku, D.Forde, A.J.H.Latham, R.Law, M.Priestley, W.Rodney, and R.P.Thomas with R.N.Bean.⁵⁴ The scale of the forced migration of Africans to the new world has been carefully charted by Curtin⁵⁵ and this black maritime trade has been surveyed by D.P.Mannix, M.Craton, and Bean.⁵⁶ London's dominance in the slave trade, as in the tobacco trade, would lessen before the middle of the eighteenth century, but Liverpool and colonial slavers were of little consequence in the lifetime before 1740.⁵⁷ English dominance in the English Atlantic slave trade served to reinforce the economic powers that integrated the colonial staple trade into a unified and interdependent economic unit.

Whatever the motives of migrants, the initial economic development of colonies involved grafting these areas to existing economies by the production of marketable staples. It was natural that migrants turned to their own metropolis for needed goods and for the credit to acquire land, labour, and equipment to create returns which paid for imports. The trust that was necessary for business was easier to give to those who share

the same family, the same religion, the same language and, when all else failed, the same laws.

Yet such natural inclination did not dominate all colonial Englishmen. Dutch initiative in English colonial sugar development was a clear and early indication that Dutch credit, shipping, and processing industries offered English planters better terms than their own country could. In the third quarter of the seventeenth century English governments consistently and decisively used laws, wars, and elaborate enforcement agencies to exclude the Dutch from what were certainly not to be 'foreign plantations'.

The rather futile debate over the primacy of merchant wealth or state power in the development of these economic policies has calmed.⁵⁸ C.D. Chandaman's *The English Public Revenues, 1660–1688*⁵⁹ documents the fiscal value of the customs revenues on tobacco and sugar, important income for Charles II and especially James II. Their drive for tighter control of the colonies can now be seen as efficient royal estate management. James II was the last king to control the customs revenues collected in England, revenues which financed expansion of his army. Pursuit of permanent colonial revenues was not so decisively checked after 1689, remaining an active political issue into the eighteenth century.

The burdens of the Navigation Acts upon colonial development has been an enduring topic of research. Although bedevilled by the unfathomable dimensions of smuggling and illegal trade,⁶⁰ the attempt to measure the price of empire goes on. Computer-assisted research has added new dimensions to this subject, yet the new methods have tended to confirm the classic assessments of L.A. Harper and O.M. Dickerson,⁶¹ that the costs of empire for North American white colonists were modest.⁶²

Economics of development is a current concern which has drawn additional attention to the economic history of England and her colonies in the preindustrial period. Whether approached from the hypotheses of Watkins, W.W. Rostow, J.A. Ernst and M. Egnal, or North and Thomas,⁶³ the economic development of the English Atlantic in the period 1675 to 1740 did not seriously strain existing economic and political structures. The disruptions of war, the fiscal troubles of the 1730s, French colonial competition, and the problems revealed by the Molasses Act were all strains, but not evidence that the structures were themselves economically inadequate.

As relatively new economic ventures, the colonial trades were opportunities for practising new economic ideas. Commercial capitalism was less restrained by law and custom in these new areas,⁶⁴ and the social variety of the colonies adds to their interest for scholars studying cultural influences on economic activity. From an earlier academic concern with the connection between Protestantism and capitalism, recent attention has shifted to the secularising of economic virtue or revisions in the perceived relationship between the self and society. The general inquiries of S. Diamond and Richard D. Brown⁶⁵ pose questions that are receiving intriguing answers in the works of C.B. MacPherson, J.E. Crowley, J.G.A. Pocock, A.O. Hirschman and J.O. Appleby.⁶⁶

Urban studies are one of the new preoccupations of historians that promise insights for the economic history of the English Atlantic. The frontier was an influence favouring colonial uniqueness, but the towns and cities of the English Atlantic shared many problems and perspectives. Carl Bridenbaugh's *Cities in the Wilderness*⁶⁷ was a herald for

this new field. Despite the literature of the economic geographers, historians have seldom approached the analytical sophistication of J.M.Price's 'Economic Function and the Growth of American Port towns in the eighteenth century'.⁶⁸ The economic histories of important provincial ports in England set a high standard, illustrated by recent work on Bristol, Liverpool and particularly the studies of Exeter and Hull.⁶⁹ The leading towns of provincial America have also been studied, though economics is seldom the dominant theme. Studies of the economic development of the American seaboard town during rapid population growth (Philadelphia), slow growth (New York), and stagnation (Boston) would add to our understanding of development,⁷⁰ especially if English ports in similar circumstances were studied for comparison.

It was ships and shipping that laced together the ports of the English Atlantic. Studies of the shipbuilding and shipping industries have improved our descriptions of the merchant marine,⁷¹ but much more can be done with surviving records. Although economic, political and social exchanges depended upon the communication facilities of the various trades, remarkably little has been done on the pace and pattern of the distribution of news in the English Atlantic.⁷² Although Alan Pred⁷³ has demonstrated the importance of access to market news for the later growth of New York, nothing has been done to establish the routes of market news in the earlier period.

Economic attraction of colonial specialisation and interdependence lured men in England and the colonies to pursue the integration of the English Atlantic in the lifetime after 1675. There were some colonial statutes that gave advantages to their own merchants and shipowners, and there were objections to imperial legislation and its enforcement,⁷⁴ but the building of the English Atlantic economy was not seriously challenged from within. The empire was the context within which the emerging colonial elites found the resources for their own advancement.

Social history of the English Atlantic during these years has, for a variety of reasons, received comparatively little direct attention.⁷⁵ When the 'imperial school' of American colonial history prospered, social history was not fashionable, and the political economy of the English Atlantic empire easily became the whole of its history.⁷⁶ But a much more important reason why the empire is seen without social history is that much of the exciting social history of the last fifteen years has drawn attention to small communities. These 'community studies', built on parish records, local censuses, court records and town records, have tended to atomise and specify.⁷⁷ What Namier did for English political history, the new wave of local studies has done for social history. Expansive assertions about life in 'England' or 'America' are retreating before measured studies of regional differences and their transplant and adaptation to the new world,⁷⁸ and before careful specific comparisons on a world-wide basis.⁷⁹ In time, new general patterns can be expected to emerge from this detailed work, allowing better social description of larger social groupings.

English population in the century after 1650 has been explored by scholars seeking the relationship between population growth and the onset of industrialisation. The years 1675–1730 are now seen as having very little population growth.⁸⁰ For the landed and monied elites, this demographic stability brought consolidation of estates, less political competition, a trade in the export of foodstuffs, and comparative social peace. Generally