

Canny, Nicholas; Morgan, Philip (Hrsg.): *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World, 1450-1850*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011. ISBN: 9-780-199-210-879; 671 S.

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Atlantic History is an organizing concept for the study of the Atlantic Ocean rim. It emphasizes inter-regional and international comparisons and draws attention to historical phenomena that transcended national borders. It is the history of discoveries, of the building of overseas empires such as the Spanish, the Portuguese, the first British and the French, of migrations including the forced migrations of African slaves, of new and old economies, of the so-called Atlantic revolutions and nation-building, of the exchange of knowledge, mentalities and goods, and of perceptions. Furthermore, Atlantic History is about the effects all of this had on peoples, societies, politics, economies, the environment and cultures, not only in a circum-atlantic perspective but also for the so-called back-countries. Atlantic History studies innovations, transport, media, processes of the building of knowledge, of ideologies, of identities and discourses. The field of Atlantic studies has been very productive for about a generation now. It has generated original studies, new ways of looking at familiar objects and also tools for looking at objects hitherto overlooked by traditional, nation-centred historiographies. It has also generated much methodological reflection. The field of Atlantic History is vast. It goes without saying that one handbook cannot possibly cover the kaleidoscope of themes and problems.

The *Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World* represents the most recent attempt to provide an overview of this very Atlantic World.¹ The editors, Nicholas Canny, emeritus professor of history and former academic director of the Moore Institute at the National University of Ireland, Galway, corresponding member of the British Academy and a member of the European Research Council, and Philip Morgan, Harry C. Black Professor at Johns Hopkins University and Harmsworth Visiting Professor at Oxford Universi-

ty in 2011/12, are a fine team for any such undertaking. While the former is the specialist of colonialism in the British Isles with an equally impressive expertise of Atlantic migrations and the history of the First British Empire (Canny edited the first volume of the *Oxford History of the British Empire* in 1998), the latter has (i.a.) written the most comprehensive analysis of slave life in the British colonies in America. Beyond their specializations, both are two of the very best *connaisseurs* of the vast field of Atlantic History.

The editors have chosen a meta-structure or meta-history: the „plot“ (Hayden White) is about the Emergence, Consolidation, Integration and Disintegration of the Atlantic World. The latter, thus, transforms into a being, some kind of Atlantic Leviathan; the Atlantic World becomes an organism. The editors claim that, between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries several Atlantic worlds emerged that were, later, „absorbed into a larger unit of interdependency until a single functioning Atlantic world [...] flourished through much of the eighteenth century“ (2). „[...] the interconnectedness of this world explains why challenge and collapse in any given part usually led to significant disruption of neighbouring areas, if not the entire system“ (2). While this master narrative is certainly appealing, while interconnectedness and reciprocity are indeed major features of the Atlantic world, one could wonder whether the fashioning of one Atlantic system does not go too far.

Part I, the Emergence of the Atlantic World, covers the following topics, themes and geographic areas: Chapter one deals with early Iberian explorations and conquest on the West and North Coast of Africa, Madeira, the Canary Islands and the Azores. It makes evident that Columbus' „discovery“ of the Americas has to be seen in the context of the Iberian (*re-*)*conquista*, so late medieval Christian attempts to explore and conquer the world south and west of the Iberian peninsula. David Northrup's *Africans, Early European Contacts, and the emergent Diaspora* covers early African slavery in the Atlantic in

¹ Other synoptic works include Jack P. Greene, Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Atlantic History. A Critical Reappraisal*, Oxford 2009, or Bernard Bailyn, Patricia L. Denault (eds.), *Soundings in Atlantic History. Latent Structures and Intellectual Currents, 1500-1830*, Cambridge 2009.

terms of diplomatic relations and commercial exchanges from an African and European perspective. Neil L. Whitehead investigates early Native American and European encounters in the western Atlantic World. Unfortunately, he leaves out major publications on the problems of perceptions and discourses being formed, on the blurring of old world knowledge and mythology and new world experiences, which could have contributed to a better understanding of the specific character of early encounters.² Chapter five deals with seafaring, i.e. ships, major currents and the evolution of navigation, chapter six with knowledge and cartography in the early Atlantic period. Chapter seven explores the emergence of ethnic, racial and religiously motivated violence in the early Atlantic which led to the extermination of entire peoples, chapter eight is a fine analysis of the effects European encounters with the „new world“ had on the development of human senses and the arts. Stuart B. Schwartz' contribution *The Iberian Atlantic to 1650* and Wim Klooster's *The Northern European Atlantic World* conclude the first part of this handbook. Both attempt to provide – in a chronological and far too schematic way – the most important steps in the fashioning of a Southern and Northern Atlantic World.

Part II provides a synopsis of the so-called Spanish, Portuguese, British and French Atlantic World and then moves on to a chapter on *Native Perspectives from New Spain, Peru and North America*. The last chapter of this section, by David Eltis, presents the state-of-the-art on African slavery in the Atlantic world from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century.

The third section of *The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World* moves away from looking at the Atlantic from an imperial history perspective. Part III, *Integration*, is about themes: such as the *Ecological Atlantic*, about plants, bacteria and viruses, landscape and ecological and climate change, *Movements of People, Trade and Commodities, People and Places* (read: settlements and new societies), *Law, Warfare and Religion*. While many of these chapters move beyond the imperial/national paradigm, some do not succeed in encompassing their topics in a sufficient way. Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Native American

and African religions are almost entirely absent from Kenneth Mill's chapter on *Religion in the Atlantic World*. Chapters 26 to 28 are the most interesting in this section: Anthony Pagden's *The Challenge of the New* deals with perceptions and discourses of cultural encounters and their effects on peoples in all parts of the Atlantic World; Susan Scott Parrish analyses the emergence of *Science, Nature and Race*. She revises some of the more stereotypical assumptions of the rise of biologist racism. Tamar Herzog, finally, challenges many of the concepts used so far; concepts such as „Europeans“, „Indians“, „Africans“ and other categories of belonging. Herzog is digging into the problems and effects of denominators being forced on a great variety of diverse peoples and individuals.

Part IV, *Disintegration* covers the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It includes a chapter on *American Indigenous Peoples and the Atlantic World*, the American and Haitian Revolutions, nativism in Spanish America, Africa in the later Atlantic World, a chapter on abolitionism, on the economic impact of the Atlantic system and concludes with Emma Rothschild's reflections on late Atlantic History.

The Oxford Handbook of the Atlantic World covers indeed a wide range of topics and themes – or the most integral parts of Atlantic History. My overall impression is, however, that most of the contributors look at Atlantic History as the history of early modern colonial empires. Many essays are written from the author's expertise in the history of one of those empires; only a minority of the contributors move beyond the imperial or national paradigm and focus, in a consistent way, on interconnectedness and reciprocity, on multiethnic, multinational and multi-religious groups such as pirates or early island societies who shaped the Atlantic as much – or even more so – than nations and empires. While it is de rigueur to look at the Spanish, Portuguese, English or French Atlantic world, one could have wished for a greater awareness of the difficulties Euro-

² See Anthony Pagden's chapter in this volume and the literature cited there. See also Gordon M. Sayre, *Les Sauvages Américains. Representations of Native Americans in French and English Colonial Literature*, Chapel Hill 1997.

pean and colonial governments had in establishing national borders, legal, social, economic and cultural boundaries– not only because of inter-imperial competition but because of peoples and transformations in the Atlantic world which ran counter this very concept. The concept of a Spanish, Portuguese, English and French Atlantic was – at times – more about discourses; in some periods of Atlantic History it was more an idea or wishful thinking than anything else. One could also have wished for more chapters on new world societies, mixed societies in terms of „race“, religion and culture, on syncretism and hybridity, on communication, media, exchange and perceptions. All in all, though, this handbook is an impressive attempt to encompass the Atlantic World. It will inspire future generations of Atlanticists and further research on a truly fascinating subject.

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