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978-1-107-02014-6 - Britain's Oceanic Empire: Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds, c. 1550–1850

Edited by H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke and John G. Reid

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[More information](#)

1 Introduction: Britain's oceanic empire

H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid

In the mid-eighteenth century, some Britons who looked outward to the wider world discerned a transoceanic imperial presence that was global in both its ambition and scope. Long-established patterns of settlement and commercial activity had created extended regional networks of colonies and trading posts; worldwide warfare against the French and Spanish had projected the military and naval reach of the state far into the western and eastern hemispheres; and maritime exploration promised to open yet more spheres of British influence. These myriad overseas enterprises had become a single, if as yet only loosely integrated, empire and observers emphasised the strength, status, and comparative advantage that such developments afforded to Britain. In some imaginations, Britain now possessed a global empire, an accomplishment celebrated widely in architecture, song, verse, and visual art.¹ Other Britons, however, perceived the nation's overseas activities quite differently – as haphazard, scattered, and unconnected – and saw not one coherent empire but instead several discrete areas of influence, each of which possessed its own distinctive forms and defining characteristics.²

These divergent eighteenth-century interpretations of British overseas activities manifested the palpable uncertainty in how to interpret – and by extension govern – the diversity of enterprises that the English, Welsh, Irish, and Scots had established, many of which seemed quite incommensurable: an eighteenth-century logwood camp on the Miskito Coast of Central America differed greatly from the vibrant port city of

¹ Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture, and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995); Linda Colley, *Britons: forging the nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992); H. V. Bowen, 'Perceptions from the periphery: colonial American views of Britain's Asiatic empire, 1756–1783', in Christine Daniels and Michael V. Kennedy (eds.), *Negotiated empires: centers and peripheries in the Americas, 1500–1820* (New York, 2002), pp. 283–300.

² The interpretations of British expansion offered in *OHBE*, vol. I: Nicholas Canny (ed.), *The origins of empire* (Oxford, 1998) and vol. II: P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1998) tend to favour this perspective.

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[More information](#)2 *H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid*

Boston, Massachusetts; the cosmopolitanism of Bombay, administered by the East India Company, was a far cry from Trinity, Newfoundland, dominated by the Lester family of Poole, England. By the end of the eighteenth century, British imperial outreach extended into all oceanic regions, and had achieved significant, albeit circumscribed, territorial footholds on all the world's inhabitable continents. Encountering indigenous societies that varied enormously in culture, demography, politics, and economy, the British presence was expressed in diverse combinations of commercial engagement, resource exploitation, and settlement.

Scholars who endeavour to reduce to order the complex patterns of British overseas engagement have traditionally reinforced those eighteenth-century commentators who saw overseas enterprises as haphazard, scattered, and unconnected, as discrete arenas of action on the global stage rather than mutually reinforcing and interlocking developments. British America has long been interpreted through the lens of self-governing settler colonies, a perspective that highlights the proto-national elements of expansion that eventually produced movements for independence.³ Interpretations of the early modern British presence in Asia, in contrast, have centred on the commercial penetration of the East India Company into Asian markets, and the Company's ascendancy over its Portuguese, Dutch, and French competitors, thereby reinforcing analyses of Britain's rise to dominance in global trade.⁴ Framed in these ways, British America and British India cannot be treated according to any common standard, and represent parallel rather than intertwined courses of expansion during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁵

In recent decades, however, Atlantic history has tempered the emphasis on settlers in British imperial history and instead counsels greater scholarly attention to developments in maritime spaces and

³ While historians have attempted to mute the teleological bias that the reality of the American Revolution creates, it is nonetheless difficult to completely avoid. See, e.g., Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and center: constitutional development in the extended polities of the British empire and the United States, 1607–1788* (Athens, GA, 1986); Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of happiness: the social development of early modern British colonies and the formation of American culture* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Alan Taylor, *American colonies* (New York, 2001).

⁴ K. N. Chaudhuri, *The trading world of Asia and the English East India Company, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 1978); Holden Furber, *Rival empires of trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis, 1976); Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian trade and revolution of the seventeenth century: the East India companies and the decline of the caravan trade* (Chicago, 1974).

⁵ See Robert Travers's chapter in which he discusses the impact of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historiography on imperial history.

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areas with small or no white settler populations, such as the Caribbean colonies, the Hudson Bay fur trade, and West African slave trading factories.⁶ Similarly, interpretations of the British in Asia now address a broader spectrum of issues ranging from trading and cultural connections with East Africa and South-East Asia to the tensions arising from overlapping legal jurisdictions of the Mughal empire and the East India Company.⁷ As Atlantic historians track the careers of British pirates into the Indian Ocean, and scholars of the East India Company calculate the economic impact of cowry shells from the Maldives and cotton from India on the transatlantic slave trade, questions about the linkages between British developments in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds are raised with ever greater frequency and insistence. As Linda Colley noted in a 2006 article on Atlantic history, the 'biggest flaw in the mighty conception of Atlanticism' lies in its inability to account for developments elsewhere in the world, most notably in Asia, but also in Africa and the Pacific.⁸

In bringing together multiple authors to engage collaboratively with this issue in a scope that would have been beyond the compass of any one or two scholars, our project design intentionally accentuated themes that were not specific to the establishment of overseas settler societies by British subjects. Priority went to themes that provide multiple vantage points on the impacts and consequences of British expansion, including the perspectives of British newcomers overseas and their native hosts; of metropolitan officials and royal agents seconded to far-flung territories; of individual adventurers and corporate enterprises; of both voluntary and involuntary migrants; of settlers and sojourners. As well, the themes of sovereignty and law, governance and regulation, diplomacy and military relations, and commerce address processes of expansion that influenced circumstances wherever the British went. Not specific to British American settler societies or the East India Company in Asia, they were experienced by diverse peoples who found themselves pulled within British spheres of influence. The evidence regarding these

⁶ See, e.g., various collections on Atlantic history: David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick (eds.), *The British Atlantic world, 1500–1800*, 2nd edn (Basingstoke, 2009); Jack P. Greene and Philip D. Morgan (eds.), *Atlantic history: a critical appraisal* (New York, 2009). For a broad analysis, see Stephen Hornsby, *British Atlantic, American frontier: spaces of power in early modern British America* (Hanover, NH, 2005).

⁷ E.g. Alison Games, *The web of empire: English cosmopolitans in an age of expansion, 1560–1660* (New York, 2008); Robert Travers, *Ideology and empire in eighteenth-century India: the British in Bengal* (New York, 2007); Nandini Bhattacharyya-Panda, *Appropriation and invention of tradition: the East India Company and Hindu law in early colonial Bengal* (New Delhi, 2008).

⁸ *New York Review of Books*, 22 June 2006, 45.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid*

processes and the interpretations that different contributors bring to bear on them provide divergent, though not mutually exclusive, answers to the central question of the book: Were British practices in Asia and the Atlantic so different and distinct that they must be seen conclusively as separate worlds, or can – or even should – they be interpreted as parts of one overarching world of activity and interaction?

Part I of the volume has chapters on the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds which emphasise the British patterns of trade and navigation that emerged over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Stephen Hornsby in the chapter on the Atlantic distinguishes between a metropolitan pattern comprising ‘a spatially extensive network of commercial circuits and nodes spread across the Atlantic, a centralised British state, and formidable naval force’ and a colonial pattern comprising ‘staple territories, agricultural frontiers, and port towns along the eastern seaboard, considerable local political control, and weak military power’. The Atlantic circuits of the metropolitan pattern included the Newfoundland fishery, the West African slave trade, the Caribbean sugar islands, the Hudson Bay fur trade, and trade with Portugal and its dependencies. Huw Bowen in his chapter on the British in the Indian Ocean world effectively adds a sixth metropolitan circuit to Hornsby’s five: the South Atlantic through which East India Company ships sailed to and from the Indian Ocean. For the British, the South Atlantic was conceptually linked to the Indian Ocean world more than to the Atlantic world, in part because the Company controlled as a provisioning station the island of St Helena, long Britain’s single Atlantic claim south of the Equator. Bowen underscores the difficulty of understanding the internal dynamics, tensions, and shifts in the British empire over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries without understanding how the British constructed, maintained, protected, and increasingly linked maritime circuits in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and how they used them to expand into the Pacific Ocean. The maritime spaces that Hornsby and Bowen describe were overwhelmingly male and transitory. In the mid-eighteenth century, 150 years after establishing commercial bases around the Indian Ocean, there were still fewer than five thousand British subjects living in India. In contrast, more than two million lived in the American colonies. Thus while British circuits in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans were complementary and interlocking, the demographic dynamics of British settler populations in the littoral societies were profoundly divergent.

The four chapters on sovereignty, law, governance, and regulation in Part II shift our focus to an analysis of how the British established control, and often sovereignty, over diverse extra-European spaces, both

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the physical spaces of the oceans and land and the bodies of subjects, which were their own form of imperial space. Ken MacMillan emphasises the plural expressions of legality and sovereignty in the Atlantic world and, in particular, the diverse elements of English expressions of 'reciprocal sovereignty', in which a subject's allegiance to the monarch was reciprocated by the crown's legal obligation to provide protection to both the bodies of subjects and the land they occupied overseas, protection that ranged from provision of governance, to diplomacy with foreign powers, to military action. In the Atlantic basin, reciprocal sovereignty assumed diverse forms depending on the terms under which a colony was established, external threats, and the form of governance under which a subject was operating. At times, the powers assumed by an overseas enterprise threatened the ultimate sovereignty of the crown, and during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the metropolitan government implemented practices such as the review of colonial legislation and the establishment of the Board of Trade as ways to undercut threats and establish greater uniformity in British practices in the extra-European world. The result, MacMillan shows, was the emergence of what might be called a 'transoceanic imperial constitution' – one that applied not just in the British Atlantic world, but to the British in the Indian Ocean world.

Robert Travers in his analysis of sovereignty and law in British Asia begins with this idea of a transoceanic constitution and points out the importance of recognising how commonalities in royal charters or letters patent for English enterprises in the Atlantic and Indian oceans established similar legal and constitutional relations between the crown and subjects engaged in overseas enterprises. These arrangements, however, provided such flexibility for adaptations that they were at once a great strength as British enterprises were being established and a great weakness as divergent adaptations threatened to erode the 'connective tissue of empire'. Indeed, as Travers argues, 'the proliferation of little unregulated sovereignties' was a danger the Company officials in India feared in the weakening of Mughal power and critics of the Company in Britain perceived in the growing scope of corporate governance, parallel developments which reached crisis proportions after 1765. In their attempt to gain control over diverse sovereignties, the British aspired to establish imperial rule on the 'ancient constitution' of Bengal, while at the same time they disparaged Indian systems of law and governance as prone to barbarian and absolutist tendencies, and emphasised the need for law to be grounded in secular judicial sensibilities rather than religious ones, such as Islam and Hinduism. By the nineteenth century, British rule in India had become a civilising mission, setting it apart

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Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid*

from settler colonies and exaggerating differences of the prior two centuries and thereby eclipsing similarities. Travers ends his chapter with a discussion of 'legal ricochets', precedents that originated in Indian cases but had impacts in North America, not just in the eighteenth century, but down to the present – a cautionary reminder that the ties between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds have been more significant than we might realise.

The importance of the constitutional continuities between the Atlantic and Asia are reinforced by Philip Stern who traces the complex political history of the East India Company and its governing powers. By the terms of its 1600 charter, its jurisdictional authority over English subjects reached from the Cape of Good Hope to the Strait of Magellan, and included Englishmen in ships as well as in Company establishments on land. The question is not whether the Company had governing powers, but how its expanding and often conflicting governing powers were renegotiated over two centuries with the crown and Parliament, and often in response to the challenges posed by British subjects, other Europeans, and Asians. The Company initially drew on governing conventions of both corporations and ships and gradually supplemented them with institutions and practices modelled on English municipal and county government, but modified for Asian circumstances. The Company, however, argued that the use of English law and institutions was not mandatory, but simply a convenient model, a contention that became harder to defend in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, as its territorial control increased and metropolitan officials sought greater standardisation of governing forms throughout the empire.

The chapters by MacMillan, Travers, and Stern analyse how ideas of law and sovereignty originating in England were projected into both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean basins. Jerry Bannister, however, rhetorically flips that construction in his chapter entitled 'The oriental Atlantic', suggesting how ideas we associate with the 'Orient' are appropriate in the 'Occident'. Many of the peoples in the Atlantic world – both natural-born subjects and non-British – who found themselves subject to British jurisdiction experienced it as disciplined and coercive, if not despotic. By the mid-eighteenth century, the centralised projection of British power into the extra-European world was more extensive in geographic and demographic scope than 'the decentralised opportunism typically associated with British commerce', or the North American colonisation of the seventeenth century. Bannister's assessment requires that we consider as a whole diverse parts of the empire that previous scholars, working within nationalistic frameworks, held

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[More information](#)

separate, so that we can recognise the commonalities among the subjugation of Africans, Aborigines, Acadians, *Canadiens*, and Irish Catholics, or the gunboat diplomacy along the coasts of Africa, Asia, and north-west North America, or the coercive labour regimes of the Caribbean, Newfoundland, and the Royal Navy. Developments that were seen as incommensurable from the vantage point of scholars studying colonial New England or Virginia are not incommensurable in Bannister's rendering. Nor, he argues, were they necessarily seen as incommensurable by metropolitan officials, or by North American colonists considering revolution who feared that the rights and privileges they had enjoyed for decades were being dangerously eroded. Bannister's analysis prompts the recognition that the Atlantic world that gave rise to the modern era, with its wars of independence and the abolition of the slave trade and then slavery, was also an Atlantic world of centralised power and coercion that is normally associated with 'despotic Asian' governance. We must then ask whether, on balance, the British Atlantic and British Asia were really so different.

Part III, with chapters on Anglo-indigenous military and diplomatic relations, highlights how much negotiations with non-English peoples obliged the British to accept a wide range of compromises and accommodations. In many instances the Irish, Amerindians, and Asians resisted, rejected, or rebelled against the terms of subordination and subjecthood British imperial officials expected of them. Wayne Lee offers a powerful analysis of English military relations with the Irish and Amerindians over three centuries, with a particular emphasis on imperial reliance on indigenous military skill to control territory and people. He eschews a simple dichotomy between conquerors and the conquered to examine the diverse ways that the English were obliged to incorporate Irish and Amerindians into their military forces as clients, mercenaries, allies, and subjects. The necessity of imperial armies negotiating for military services with the people they set out to subdue had a tendency to qualify conquest and facilitate and legitimise the retention of considerable autonomy by the 'conquered'. Over time, imperial consolidation involved the integration of colonised peoples into regular military forces, and by the mid-eighteenth century, some Irish were serving overseas in the British army and Royal Navy as subjects. In the case of Amerindians, however, almost none served under British command or beyond the territory they recognised as homeland, a measure of how much they retained their own sense of autonomy.

Eric Hinderaker, in his chapter on Anglo-Amerindian diplomatic relations, argues that for most of the seventeenth century the English were unable to establish stable diplomatic relations with indigenous

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Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid*

Americans. The consequences for both sides were destructive and costly wars. Hinderaker argues that stable and strategically useful relations first emerged in New York in the 1670s between English officials and the Haudenosaunee, or Five Nations Iroquois, as diplomacy became a necessary alternative to warfare for the English, French, and diverse Amerindian nations. By the early eighteenth century, widely utilised diplomatic protocols, many of them drawn from Amerindian practices, became accepted as the terms upon which negotiations were held. British objectives were threefold: land for settlement; military allies to fight against other Europeans and their indigenous allies; and a recognised overlordship by one powerful Amerindian nation or confederacy, such as the Iroquois, over smaller nations, such as the Lenni Lenapi. Native peoples, for their part, sought fair trading practices, restrictions on colonial expansion, and protection of their lands. By the mid-eighteenth century, native peoples were again vulnerable, manifested by British officials willing to sacrifice native needs for other geopolitical concerns and by the press of Anglo-American settlers into the trans-Appalachian west.

In India, the English encountered a diplomatic world defined by the Mughals using Indo-Persianate protocols, to which the East India Company had to adapt. As the Company's economic and political power grew, it often hired Indian career diplomats to negotiate with Indian princes beyond its zone of influence and thus to project its power ever further into Indian society. In his chapter on diplomacy in India, Michael Fisher analyses the shifts in asymmetrical diplomatic power from Mughal-centred to British-centred imperia, as the Company co-opted Mughal diplomatic practices and added its own residents. Although British military successes in the 1750s and 1760s mark the beginnings of colonialism in India and resulted in the Mughal emperor granting the Company the *diwani* in Bengal, Fisher shows how important diplomacy was to the consolidation of British power in diverse Indian principalities, and in turn how Indian princes sought to use *wakils*, the traditional diplomats in India, to retain a modicum of external control. The British, however, increasingly required *wakils* to act through the British residents in each principality, thus undercutting the autonomy and independent authority of Indian diplomats and the princes they served.

The gradual substitution of Indian diplomatic practices with British ones was perhaps as corrosive a form of imperialism as outright conquest. Similarly, British military commanders diminished the authority of traditional Indian military officials as they integrated Indian troops into the British army. As Douglas Peers notes in his chapter

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

on the military in India, by the late eighteenth century the British were unusually dependent on sepoys to maintain imperial control. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, unrest among the sepoys festered, sometimes with explosive incidents, until tensions erupted in the Rebellion of 1857. To explain those developments, Peers analyses shifts in British notions of governmentality relative to the military, especially after the reorganisation of the army in 1796. In particular, the British implemented regulations and policies that emphasised discipline and loyalty to a national or supranational entity, rather than personalised discipline and loyalty owed to commanding officers and to traditional military practices. Peers's analysis of that shift when seen against a similar shift in diplomatic practices underscores how the imposition of seemingly objective and uniform standards was a powerful tool of modern imperialism, to a great degree because it was such an intangible force against which to resist. Similar reforms had been attempted decades earlier in Ireland, and there, too, soldiers resisted the undermining of their traditional loyalties. Significantly, Amerindian warriors avoided being under British military command, so nothing similar happened in North America among Amerindians, though colonists disliked British military practices. From an imperial perspective, the changes in Ireland and India were an improving rationalisation of practice; from an indigenous perspective, they represented the insidious destruction of pre-existing social and cultural relations.

In Part IV, attention shifts to commercial and social consequences of the British presence in North America and India. The British long understood their empire as predominantly commercial, with British ships manned by British subjects sailing the high seas to bring back the world's exotic goods. Indeed, as Trevor Burnard argues in the last chapter, the early modern British sought out tropical and semi-tropical markets and lands for plantations so that they could supply products from hot climates. If we look at the linkages that particular commodities created – cottons from India being traded to Amerindians and Africans, sugar from the Caribbean and tea from Asia transforming English habits, or cowry shells from the Maldives in the Indian Ocean being used as currency in West Africa – then the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds seem one interconnected world. But if we look at the intercultural nature of commercial relations, rather than the products of commerce, and at the impact of British commercial practices on indigenous societies in Asia and North America, then the worlds look quite distant one from the other. The three chapters on commercial relations emphasise the impacts of commerce on Asians and Amerindians, rather than

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Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *H. V. Bowen, Elizabeth Mancke, and John G. Reid*

on how the British created an empire and a domestic culture that drew on a global array of goods.

Of particular concern for scholars of early modern India is the impact of colonialism on Indian society and economy in the mid-eighteenth century. Lakshmi Subramanian's chapter focuses on commercial disputes tried in the mayor's court in Bombay. The Company's rise to power in the 1760s enhanced the importance of the city for merchants from western India, and many relocated there, or at least sent a member of the family or firm to reside there. Subramanian analyses how Indian merchants utilised the mayor's court and English legal practices, often in tandem with local arbitration practices, to further their objectives. Her examination of cases involving insurance disputes shows the utility and resilience of local procedures and customs in the face of an avowed British attempt to implement English commercial and adjudicative practices when disputes arose. Yet in the realm of commerce, and property rights more generally, the British frequently deferred to Indian law, a point which takes us back to Travers's chapter and the British search for 'ancient' Hindu law. Indeed, these cases involving insurance suits show the legal edges of the 'transoceanic imperial constitution' discussed in the first chapters.

One of the other contentious scholarly issues in assessing the consequences of British colonialism in India is economic change and how quickly the British came to dominate the country economically, as well as diplomatically and militarily. In his chapter on Bengal after the British received the *diwani*, Rajat Datta argues that through the late eighteenth century large merchant firms continued to have great influence on the economy, and in many cases grew. Not until the economic recession (1818–19) after the Napoleonic Wars did the consequences of British control in South Asia make themselves widely felt in the economy.

The consequences of Anglo-Amerindian commercial relations bear little resemblance to those in India. In North America, the most critical commercial item of exchange between Indians and Europeans, Paul Grant-Costa and Elizabeth Mancke argue, was land, not furs, deer-skins, labour, or small items such as baskets. The pressure on native peoples to relinquish land to British American settlers, often through sales, was considerable, and in response natives learned to use diplomacy to try to remove land from commercial transaction through the negotiated establishment of reserves. The argument Grant-Costa and Mancke present makes North America quite a distinctive place in the development of the modern world. Nowhere else was land so intensely commercialised; indeed in most parts of the world foreigners were not allowed to own land, and overseas merchants occupied it on lease. The