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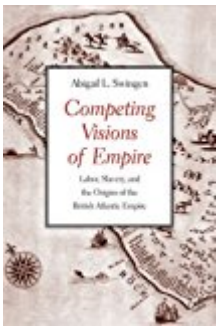

Abigail Leslie Swingen. *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 288 pp. $85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-18754-0.

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Commissioned by David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

This book begins by posing a simple yet ambitious question: "Why did England establish and maintain an empire in the Americas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries?" (p. 1). Over the following seven chapters, Abigail Swingen provides an answer by illustrating how slave labor spurred the economic development of West Indian colonies, and in turn how this growth led the colonies themselves to become increasingly central to debates about politics and political economy in England. In 1650, where this book begins its story in earnest, demand for colonial labor was met mainly through voluntary migration, indentured servitude, and convict transportation. As Swingen demonstrates, the flow of a workforce to the New World was therefore highly dependent on shifting and diverse views on the demography of England, as well as how to deal with undesirable portions of the domestic population. In the 1710s, the book's endpoint, debates over how to supply labor to the West Indies focused almost exclusively on how to best organize the African slave trade. By then, all sides in these discussions took for granted that a steady supply of enslaved Africans was necessary for the success of plantation economies and the imperial project more broadly. *Competing Visions of Empire* shows how, in just over half a century, England went from being a bit player in the transatlantic slave trade to exporting tens of thousands of enslaved Africans to the New World annually.[1]

As Swingen convincingly argues, this increased reliance on slave labor to support a growing plantation complex was not the result of developments in the colonies alone. Rather, the English state, always on the lookout for new and enhanced revenue streams, was central to promoting slavery as a means of making West Indian islands valuable parts of the national economy. Its commitment to slavery was not the outgrowth of an ideological consensus, but emerged through the cut-and-thrust of debate with various stakeholders in the West Indian trade. These included planters, merchants, investors, privateers, and politicians. Though the "competing visions of em-

pire" articulated by each of these interest groups would shift in response to political events, by the 1660s two overarching positions had emerged that would remain relatively consistent well into the eighteenth century. On one side, plantation owners and their allies sought a political alliance and military protection from the English state, but vigorously opposed commercial regulation. They believed it their right to trade with merchants of all nations, and that open trade was the only way to ensure a steady supply of affordable African slaves. Against this view, the later Stuart monarchs and metropolitan officials worked to reign in the autonomy of colonial elites and to bring imperial trade under the aegis of a centralizing state. Scholars of British imperialism in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries will be familiar with these battle lines.

Those who controlled imperial policy in London employed a variety of strategies in seeking to strengthen metropolitan influence over colonial trade and assemblies. Most significant was their attempt to control the supply of slaves (and the government's cut of the slave trade) through the Royal African Company, created by Charles II in 1660 and headed by his brother James. Over three chapters, Swingen examines debates about the organization of the company and its two successor African Companies from the Restoration to the Glorious Revolution. She contextualizes these discussions within wider disputes about politics and political economy occurring on both sides of the Atlantic, showing how disagreements over the companies' mandates and structure helped solidify competing views as to the purposes of empire. Despite the hopes of successive administrations, no iteration of the African Company was able to maintain a profitable monopoly on the slave trade for long. Interlopers were a constant presence, and planters took advantage of moments of political turmoil in England--such as the Exclusion Crisis--to push for more open trade. The book concludes by documenting the growing consensus in the decades after 1688 in favor of deregulation, as well as the efforts of the African Company to maintain its viability in the face of increasing competition.

Competing Visions of Empire makes a valuable contribution to a number of areas of study. By showing how colonies were integral to state-building efforts and debates during the latter half of the seventeenth century, Swingen offers a useful counterbalance to a large body of scholarship that privileges a nationalist or three-kingdoms approach to the political history of the period. The book's transatlantic perspective also produces insights into a variety of ongoing debates that will speak to specialists in this field. These include the conclusion that Cromwell's Western Design was influenced by a cabal of advisors who championed an expansive vision of a commercial empire much more than the Lord Protector's own providentialism. For Atlanticists and early Americanists, the book shows not only how policies passed in London impacted colonial development, but also how political disputes in England spilled over into the colonies. This was especially true in the politically charged years surrounding the Glorious Revolution. Scholars of British imperialism in later eras will be interested to learn the extent to which slavery was embedded in overseas empire from its very outset.

At just under two hundred pages of text, ***Competing Visions of Empire*** of necessity leaves a lot of ground uncovered. In focusing on political history, it largely sidesteps the related question, "how and why did it become acceptable for the English and other Europeans to enslave Africans?" (p. 4). As Swingen notes in the introduction, this answer involves conceptions of racial difference and other cultural prejudices in Europe, as well as the creation of ideologies, legal regimes, and systems of violence in the colonies that both legitimized and reinforced race-based slavery. More references to this wider context would serve as a useful reminder that political debates can only ever partially explain the rise of

slave societies in the Americas. Moreover, rival imperial powers only enter the story as economic or military competitors; they almost never appear as sources of lessons about colonial development from which the late-arriving English could learn. One wonders, for instance, what English observers made of the Portuguese slave trade to Brazil, which surpassed the volume of the English slave trade in the majority of years covered by this study.[2] One also wonders the extent to which slave uprisings and resistance factored into the debates that Swingen analyzes. The conclusion provides only a brief chronological summary of the book, which is disappointing since the arguments it examines would shape the trajectory of the British Empire until at least the era of the American Revolution.

This desire for a wider lens, though, should not detract from the significant accomplishments of this book. *Competing Visions of Empire* provides a compelling argument, is deeply researched, and is written in an accessible and engaging manner. It should be read by all those interested in early modern English politics and the formation of Britain's Atlantic empire.

Notes

[1]. Voyages: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, www.slavevoyages.org (accessed November 19, 2016).

[2]. Ibid.