

## BOOK REVIEW

*The European Seaborne Empires: From the Thirty Years' War to the Age of Revolutions*,  
by Gabriel Paquette (New Haven, CT: Yale U.P., 2019; pp. 298. \$35).

Gabriel Paquette has produced a masterful overview of the European seaborne empires from their advent to about 1800. Less interested in the cultural history of empire, Paquette focuses on their structure and function, especially as it related to politics, economics and society. An expert on Iberian overseas engagements, Paquette offers a survey of the main Western European rivals in this sphere—not only Spain and Portugal, but also Britain, France and the Dutch Republic. He offers brief summaries and his own assessment of numerous recent historiographical trends, presenting clear and concise arguments in favour of his views. The book will serve well students seeking to familiarise themselves with the global history of the initial centuries of European expansion, as well as scholars familiar with aspects of this history but wanting a broader perspective.

The book is divided into three parts. The first section includes an introduction, a chapter discussing definitions and historiography, and an excellent overview placing the advent of these empires in a global context. The second section reviews the creation and history of these empires to the eve of revolution (chs. 3–5). He begins with the Iberians, moves on to the involvement of others in such projects, and then carries the history up to the eve of the age of Revolutions. After a series of thematic chapters, he returns to the chronological narrative in Chapter Twelve, canvassing the events of the Age of Revolutions. The thematic chapters (chs. 6–11) cover a variety of topics, from political economy to labour regimes and the role of creolisation. Paquette moves easily across cases to provide a clear sense that seaborne empires faced parallel challenges and employed shared strategies. This section makes clear that, although the details differed, Europeans drew on a common set of expectations and learned from each other's efforts. Often taught in terms of their differences, the seaborne empires, Paquette shows convincingly, shared many significant similarities. Although he might seem to be following John Elliott's magisterial study of the Spanish and British in the Americas, Paquette manages to account for difference of scale and lags in chronology in a way that Elliott's attempt at a closer comparison sometimes fails to do.

The book strongly asserts the case for the lesser importance of these overseas empires both at the start of the period in question and for most of the time under consideration. The idea that European expansion reshaped the world quickly and thoroughly is so entrenched that Paquette's note of caution is salutary, especially for the students who will benefit from this book. Emphasising terrestrial empires—including Chinese, Safavid and Russia—as the more powerful and influential entities, he escapes the triumphal narratives that marked many earlier efforts to write the history of particular empires. His dedication to the proposition that these empires only gradually grew in might and reach carries through the work. In Chapter Eleven he notes

the contingent nature of European efforts to project authority, which gave rise to the continual need for allies and collaborators. Seaborne empires did not succeed without supporters on the ground, whether Indian elites who worked with British authorities or indigenous leaders willing to abide within the Spanish system in the Americas in exchange for some protections for their communities. Europeans did not simply conquer and subdue to their will, as negotiation and uncertainty shaped their efforts.

He makes a similar point about the need to revise the national narratives about the revolutions that occurred at the end of the period, which are often seen as the inevitable outcome of a constant striving for autonomy. His narrative eschews the triumphal tone, and indeed analyses the limits of the revolutions, both individually and taken as a whole. His epilogue follows from his insight that these revolutions did not uniformly transform their worlds, as he lays out the continuities and discontinuities that shaped the period that followed them.

This overview is reasonable, clear and full of insight. Given Paquette's vast reach—into periods and places he knows less well than his areas of expertise—his measured analysis saves him from over-reaching. A few errors crop up, as one would expect in such a capacious text. Those my areas of expertise allowed me to recognise were generally unexceptional. For instance, Paquette can be forgiven for describing Oliver Cromwell as the lead author of all the political changes in England, including those attributable to the Commonwealth government he displaced; he only repeats a generalisation often repeated by authors who should know their mid-seventeenth-century English history better than Paquette can be expected to do. Such minor missteps remind us to check the details we learn from broad histories of this sort. At the same time, we can rely on Paquette for a thoughtful overview of the complex story of a few centuries of European seaborne empires. I will certainly recommend the book to students or others trying to come to terms with this far-flung—if perhaps less important than we sometimes assume—history.

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