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Review/Reseña

J.H. Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492-1830*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

Writing of Two Worlds

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John Elliott has succeeded in a Herculean task. In writing a comparative study of England and Spain in the Americas from the moment of discovery through to the final political break, he of necessity confronted and absorbed many literatures. Beyond this, he did what we comparativists know to be a delicate, indeed nearly impossible task: he wrote a readable book even as he wove back and forth between his two subjects paragraph by paragraph rather than chapter by chapter. He wrote in such a way that audiences who were deeply familiar with one of his subjects but not at all with the other could understand the foreign territory and yet not feel bored while in the more familiar terrain. I am not one to gush—and certainly did

not expect that this project would make me gush—but truly he has done what few scholars could do.

Elliott has in fact done what few people of any stripe manage to do in their lives: he has rethought former opinions and opened himself to change. I heard him give a lecture on the beginning stages of this project in 1990 when he was in America for a year, and though his comparative comments were interesting, they contained some of the expected stereotypes which tend to be repeated whenever the subject of England vs. Spain is addressed. *Responsibilities at Oxford*, he explains in his introduction, meant that he largely put the project aside for the next seven years. But it clearly continued to percolate, for the 400 pages he then sat down to write a decade later contain no stereotypes or trite repetitions. By then, he had absorbed all that is good about our post-modern scholarly world and combined it with all that was good about the rigorous and detailed training of his own youth to come up with a product that is truly admirable.

It was clear to Elliott from the beginning that too many of his potential readers in both worlds –those who know English America and those who know Spanish America—are invested in believing that their area (or their players) was (or were) unique. So the perspective he takes in his book –in general—is a profoundly needed one: that is, that the two worlds had more in common than we might expect, given how differently they turned out, and given how much we have loved to invest their origins with those differences. In the first pages of the introduction, even before the opening of chapter one, María Díaz going to Mexico and Thomas Shepherd going to New England write of their nearly identical feelings as they make landfall in the New World. And it only gets better from there, as Elliott’s analyses grow richer and deeper as he proceeds.

He says immediately that there are, of course, elements he has left out. “While well aware that some of the most exciting scholarship in recent years has been devoted to the topic of African slavery in the Atlantic worlds and to the recovery of the past of the indigenous peoples of America, my principal focus has been the development of the settler societies and their relationship with their mother countries. This, I hope, will give some

coherence to the story” (xviii). He makes a choice he must make, given the enormity of the task, and given his own background and training, and thus he does right. Yet if the book has any weakness it is in this very area: it is not that he should have written a different book on a different topic. Rather, it is that in making the settlers the protagonists, he introduces an analytical problem by the later sections of the book, when the populations of the two worlds have become so different. In one place, the settlers of whom he speaks *are*, essentially, the people, the indigenous having been killed or driven away, and the Africans being a distinct minority. In the other place, however, his settlers are only a tiny fraction of the world they have made. Thus nothing is parallel anymore, and analytical problems arise by the end. Still, it was a choice he had to make, and it certainly does not harm the first half of the book in any way.

The first chapter opens with the unexpected –but apt–pairing of Hernando Cortés of the expedition to Mexico and Christopher Newport of the Jamestown venture. As I have recently published books that look week by week and even day by day at those two forays, I might be expected to be as critical of this section as other experts will be of other sections. I say, however, that he knows the literature thoroughly, with only the most minor of lapses. He sees entrepreneurialism everywhere, not only on the part of the English, and he recognizes a desperate desire to find silver mines and hardworking Indians on both sides, not only on the part of the Spanish. It was just that the Spanish were luckier in what they actually did find. “If, then –as the Cortés and Jamestown expeditions suggest– many of the same aspirations attended the birth of Spain’s and Britain’s empires in America, accidents both of environment and timing would do much to ensure that they developed in distinctive ways” (28).

As the colonial projects unfold, Elliott does not give way to the usual assertions that once the Puritans were on the scene, they of course formulated a world that was entirely different due to their purported cultural penchant for egalitarianism and respect for the human soul. The Spaniards, too, Elliott argues, were interested in forming communities of fellow citizens. It was just that the bonanza-like quality of the wealth and tribute-paying Indians they found caused them to forget. And even in New

England (not to mention Jamestown), the profit motive was present alongside the desire to build a community. Indeed, those Puritans who went to Providence Island, off the coast of Nicaragua, made very different decisions than their brethren in New England, for their environment allowed them to. “By 1641, when its eleven-year existence was abruptly terminated [by the Spanish], the Providence Island colony had become an authentically slave society—the first such in British America” (103). No, the real difference between the development of English and Spanish America lay not in cultural differences between the settlers but in their early relationship with the Indians. The Spanish dreamed of incorporating the sedentary, organized indigenous whom they met both as laborers and as members of the church. The English, having found that such dreams went nowhere in the world of semi-sedentary or even nomadic Indians they found in the northern country, created barriers and frontiers instead. This central difference was to have long-lasting effects.

At moments, more traditional analyses make their appearance in the midst of the narrative, but then the more complicated perspective returns. Elliott argues at one point, for example, that it was because the Anglican Church was still relatively weak and failed to transfer any real authority across the Atlantic, that “no systematic programme was developed for Christianizing the Virginia Indians” or other Native Americans in North America (72-73). This seems to miss entirely the very different situations that existed in the two New Worlds, regardless of the relative strengths or weaknesses of the European churches, but then Elliott catches himself and puts in the rest of the story that he has taught himself to know so well:

The fact that New England was still a frontier society with relatively few Indians living within the borders of the settlements made conditions very different from those that prevailed in the Spanish viceroalties. It was one thing, for instance, to establish a college for the sons of an old-established indigenous nobility [who had always lived] in the urbanized environment of Mexico City, and quite another to persuade young Massachusetts Indians to abandon their open-air existence for the sedentary life and unfamiliar diet of a colonial grammar school.

As he summarizes this section, Elliott does the opposite of closing with the usual clichés. Instead, he offers his readers a surprise, but one that resonates beautifully with the evidence we have just read for ourselves. The English, he says, lacked confidence (87). The Spanish were sure that their lives, their culture and their religion would appeal to the Indians. Because of their very different reality, the English remained insecure, hostile and suspicious. This is hardly the usual message attendant upon comparisons of the Iberians and the Anglos; it is indeed refreshing.

Having finished with the third of the book about the initial “occupation”, Elliott turns next to “consolidation”. The Spanish, so often accused of ineptitude, here are seen exploiting resources with remarkable efficiency; indeed, it was the English who were slow to follow, but not for lack of trying. The “independent fiscal base” for exploitation simply was not there as it was for the Spanish (139). Without silver and without tribute-paying Indians, the colonial government had to pay for itself, and that meant a much more limited colonial government. Because England therefore had a lesser ability to hold sway across the ocean, the North American colonies evolved in several arenas “from below”, as it were, contributing mightily to the people’s sense of “English liberties”. Here the analytical problem I mentioned begins to rear its head a bit. That exploited Indians were the heart of the population of Spanish America remains clear, and that this affected the social hierarchy in that region is never entirely lost. But the notion of “English liberties” has to some extent taken on a life of its own in the other sections; that the population in the north was literally composed of relative equals begins to disappear, and a cultural proclivity for freedom begins to seem like the explanation for the world that emerges there, especially if one were to begin to read in this part. In the Spanish arena, the world of the colonists is mixed with the world of the Indians and the Africans, but in the English territories this is not so; thus as we are essentially talking about different sets of people and yet treating them as though they were entirely parallel. Still, the important point remains that Elliott has not treated “a love of liberty” as an inherent Anglo characteristic that was entirely absent from Spaniards, but rather has delineated its evolution.

It is in the last third of the book, about the processes of “emancipation”, that the analytical problem appears most strongly, but Elliott remains aware of it and handles it as well as possible. This part is a detailed study of politics, policies and personalities, during the period when both the Spanish and English empires face similar crises, with both sides given equal attention and the thoughtful men of both worlds given their due. Here, certainly, though, the fact that the men operated in profoundly different social and political worlds, based on the make-up of the population, is sometimes lost sight of. Yet the thread never entirely disappears. In explaining the greater degree of violence in the revolutions of the southern world, for example, the author quotes the contemporary Henry Clay: “Could it have been believed, if the slaves had been let loose upon us in the south, as they had been let loose in Venezuela; if quarters had been refused; capitulations violated; that General Washington, at the head of the armies of the United States, would not have resorted to retribution?” (393).

In his concluding remarks, Elliott summarizes clearly and cogently the train of events, or of causes and effects, that led in one place to a repressive society and in another to values and aspirations revolving around notions of freedom, clearly reminding the readers that these results were not inherently attached to one European culture or another. In fact, in a humorous and yet deadly serious line, he asserts: “If Henry VII had been willing to sponsor Columbus’s first voyage, and if an expeditionary force of West Countrymen had conquered Mexico for Henry VIII, it is possible to imagine an alternative, and by no means implausible, script” (411). Since Elliott is ultimately speaking seriously, this is a courageous statement, flying in the face, as it does, of many people’s cherished beliefs. But on p.411 of such a work, Elliott has earned the right to make the statement.