

Review Essay

Merchants Revisited: Long-Distance Traders and the World they Made

Eastward of Good Hope: Early America in a Dangerous World. *By Dane A. Morrison*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021. 314 pp. Hardcover, \$57.00. ISBN: 978-1-42144-236-5.

Merchants: The Community That Shaped England's Trade and Empire, 1550–1650. *By Edmond Smith*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. 376 pp. Hardcover, \$32.50. ISBN: 978-0-30025-795-3.

Quakers in the British Atlantic World, c.1660–1800. *By Esther Sahle*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2021. 208 pp. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-78327-586-1.

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Reviewed by Hannah Knox Tucker

When faced with Esther Sahle's, Edmond Smith's, and Dane A. Morrison's recent books on English and American merchants, their activities, and their communities, a reader with any level of exposure to the field of early modern and early republic business history might legitimately ask, do we really need more? Historians have so completely associated early modern economic activity with merchant activity that many have deemed the period an era of "merchant capitalism." The field is full of excellent studies and one might rightfully ask whether historians such as Jacob Price (*Capital and Credit in British Overseas Trade* [1980]), David Hancock (*Oceans of Wine* [2009]), Cathy Matson (*Merchants and Empire* [1998]), and Francesca Trivellato (*The Familiarity of Strangers* [2009]), among many others, have not plumbed the depths of the subject. Scholars of the Black Atlantic have also increasingly questioned the legitimacy of projects that continue to render the violence of slavery ancillary to discussions of business practice. To some extent, genuine historical engagement with merchants must reproduce the views of colonizers and enslavers to make the people whom it studies legible to modern audiences. This reproduction does damage as it illuminates, and business historians must engage this critique directly to maintain the legitimacy of their projects. In a

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crowded field with foundations that are seriously challenged by an emergent strain in this historical discipline, it is worth skeptically asking what three additional studies can add.

Sahle, Smith, and Morrison justify the legitimacy of their projects by orienting their early modern concerns toward interrelated long-term trends. Sahle suggests that long-distance trade and the institutions that supported it produced global inequality. Smith's *Merchants* also stresses the influence of trading institutions on modern concerns but focuses on the process of globalization. Morrison suggests that modern American xenophobia has its roots in the early republic when Americans engaged broadly but fearfully with the rest of the world. While none of the three engages the critiques levied by scholars of the Black Atlantic like Jennifer L. Morgan (*Reckoning with Slavery* [2021]) directly, all three justify their project of studying the empowered through their subjects' enduring influence on disempowered people, broadly defined.

For Sahle, the crowded field provides no hindrance, only justification for the study undertaken. Quaker merchants' uniquely honest business values, marital endogamy, fear of community censure, and strict internal discipline made them particularly reliable and, thus, sought-after business associates, so the story goes. According to Sahle, this historiography consistently gets Quaker business practices wrong—a sweeping claim and one that readers should approach with skepticism. However, Sahle convincingly dismantles each of these entrenched arguments. She argues that the historical notion of a superior Quaker business ethic and punitive censures flowed from an evidentiary approach that took Quakers' espoused values at their word and failed to compare Quakers with other businesspeople. Sahle shows that Quakers and non-Quakers viewed covetousness as a danger that ebbed away over the eighteenth century, undermining the notion of a distinct Quaker business ethic. Using monthly meeting records from Philadelphia and London, Sahle convincingly demonstrates that Quaker sanctions of business offenses and marital endogamy in both cities remained low until the 1750s, increasing thereafter in both places. Contrary to the literature that claims these sanctions operated as a powerful deterrent that encouraged honest business practice, she argues these sanctions never became comprehensive or permanent oustings.

The strength of Sahle's work is also its limitation. Sahle provides readers with a well-supported economic and social history of a religious community with limited religious history. She identifies a significant turning point in enforcement after 1750 designed by Quakers to repair the community's reputation. They hoped this repair would positively influence individual Quakers' personal and commercial prospects.

Sahle attributes the increase in monitoring to a mid-eighteenth-century religious reformation and a politically motivated public relations disaster in Pennsylvania amid the mid-eighteenth-century wars that encouraged Quakers to punish wrongdoing and vociferously advocate for their honesty publicly. A reader might expect Sahle to explore this reformation in depth, given the significant causal role she ascribes to it. However, this is not the work's goal. While Sahle acknowledges that many Quakers embodied deep and genuine faith, she addresses it quickly and leaves the causes and complexities of the reformation to past and future religious historians. Her clearly defined study provides these religious historians with an opportunity to enrich their studies with enviable temporal specificity. She takes on an entrenched and widely reproduced interpretation of the relationship between Quaker religion, business, and community and turns it on its head, demonstrating that a widely reproduced argument in a crowded field doesn't necessarily make it true.

While Sahle presents a skeptical assessment of the influence of one (Quaker) community, Smith argues for the centrality of another (English commercial) community. In Smith's telling of England's business beyond its shores between 1550 and 1650, neither the feeble state nor the swashbuckling individual should claim significant influence. Instead, Smith argues that a robust commercial community of merchants, ruled by widely understood but constantly evolving guidelines, led England to its prominent place in the global order. For Smith, the corporation was an "innovative business model" that funneled mercantile skill toward prosperous ends (p. 7). Simultaneously conservative in mitigating risk and innovative in their pursuit of new opportunities, these corporations jealously guarded their proprietary rights, arguing for their maintenance as a mechanism to ensure reliability and quality at the expense of broad access. These corporations existed to advance the interests of their generality. To that end, English corporations formed and enforced tough rules of conduct designed to ensure reliability. Corporate bodies inculcated these rules in apprenticeship and punished violations with authority largely unquestioned by the nascent state. Smith argues that for merchants used to negotiating foreign circumstances to extract English profits, imperial efforts seemed like a natural extension of their prior work. As a result, merchants became influential first movers in Virginia and Irish colonization efforts.

Smith produces a successful work of economic culture. He is at his best as he articulates the training and corporate governance that made men from an isolated island come to see unnatural record-keeping practices, extended absences, regular proofs of trustworthiness, and soft negotiation skills as essential. It is perhaps peculiar that a work so focused on globalization should be so distinctly English and

inward-looking, but Smith succeeds in demonstrating that this inward economic culture facilitated globalization and empire on a mass scale. Smith's merchants see the broader world as an opportunity but, as he succeeds in explaining the humdrum practices and cultural forces that facilitated their successful global trade, he may underemphasize the risk, uncertainty, misunderstandings, abject failure, and fear that accompanied early globalization—a choice no one could accuse Morrison of making.

Morrison takes his readers on a world tour of the Ottoman Empire, China, India, and the Great South Sea as seen through the eyes of fearful early American venturers. Unlike Smith, who views English merchants as adept navigators of unfamiliar spaces, Morrison emphasizes that American merchants, mariners, missionaries, and sojourners navigated these spaces by developing and communicating powerful stereotypes. They defined themselves and their republican virtues in opposition to these stereotypes. Morrison argues that early Americans saw sojourns abroad as opportunities to make their fortunes in spite of the widely disseminated caricatures of declining Ottomans, corrupt Chinese, Indian inequality, and South Sea cannibalism. These stereotypes allowed early Americans to view their successes as further evidence of their own resilience and demonstrated their ability to cope with perceived barbarity. In turn, contemporaries could easily shift blame from Americans onto the natural and artificial dangers they all encountered. Morrison argues that direct personal travel and indirect travelers' accounts made the wider world a regular, influential, and dangerous presence in the minds of early Americans.

Morrison undertakes a vital agenda that explores how print culture and more personal reports forged, distorted, and reproduced news from abroad into ossified stereotypes that justified American xenophobia and colonization. A full introduction elaborating the book's short preface and a clearer organizational structure in each of his geographically themed chapters might have clarified Morrison's analytical goals. Fear, for example, plays a powerful role in his narrative. As he puts it, "in its relationship with the wider world, the new nation was as much a republic of fear as it was a republic of letters" (p. 236). Yet fear does not receive the theoretical attention that would strengthen the case for its causal role in shaping Americans' sense of themselves and their place in an emerging global order. Engaging directly with theoretical work on the topic of emotions from Barbara Rosenwein ("Worrying about Emotions in History," *American Historical Review* [2002]) and early American emotions histories from scholars like Nicole Eustace (*Passion is the Gale* [2008]) and Peter Silver (*Our Savage Neighbors* [2008]), whom Morrison cites but does not engage deeply, might have provided Morrison with firmer

theoretical foundations on which to build his argument. Nonetheless, he succeeds in providing a compelling caution against business histories that might be tempted to describe globalizing traders as cosmopolitan and overlook the widespread fear and stereotyping that accompanied profitable travels abroad.

Methodologically, these three books represent the extremes of approaches that business historians use to engage a shared subject: merchants. Unsurprisingly, given its publication in the Economic History Society's People, Markets, Goods series, Sahle's book takes an economic and social history approach. She translates qualitative material into quantitative data to trace critical turning points in Quaker monitoring and discipline. Smith and Morrison use personal and corporate papers and, particularly in Morrison's case, literary sources to support their more cultural approach. Together, the three reveal the continually widening sets of approaches necessary to propel the discipline of business history: Sahle by applying an economic/social history approach to a classic question of religion, and Smith and Morrison by applying cultural approaches to globalization, a more classically economic concern.

As Sahle's and Smith's work makes clear, the role communities and their values played in economic activity remains a lively field for debate. Smith argues that "England's commercial development was a cultural and social phenomenon as much as an economic one" (p. 4). Sahle presents a more skeptical account of the influence of the Quaker community on business practices but acknowledges that the broader Anglo-American commercial community shared commercial values. Smith's and Sahle's outpourings of ink on the connection between community and economy encourage renewed engagement with a seemingly well-worn topic in the early modern context. While a broad historical narrative sees the early modern period as the beginning of a period of transition between traditional community-oriented production and individualist capitalist production, no consensus has emerged about the extent to which community-oriented economic bodies helped or hindered that transition. These studies encourage a renewed focus on when and how commercial communities, and communities with commercial concerns, grappled with individualism.

Smith and Morrison reignite debates around what it meant to be a force of Euro-globalization. The authors situate their historical actors in the world beyond the familiar Anglo-Americas, as "citizens of the world," to borrow from David Hancock (*Citizens of the World* [1995]). Yet from this same position, the authors' accounting of their historical actors' orientation diverges. Smith recounts a story of merchants who built partnerships abroad that privileged local cooperation and understanding, albeit in the service of English profit. Morrison presents the

story of outward-oriented sojourners who encountered that broader world with dismay and derision. There is truth in both positions, for Morrison notes that some sojourners built meaningful connections abroad and Smith observes that finding Englishmen well equipped to build local partnerships proved a struggle and consummate uncertainty plagued commerce. In presenting interpretations with divergent emphases, Smith and Morrison invite further study of the impact of global interaction on domestic culture.

Each study challenges a central tenet of inherited wisdom essential to our understanding of globalization and inequality. Together, these three books suggest that while an influential religious community did not set the terms of its members' business practices, increasingly powerful commercial communities did. These practices facilitated globalization, but these encounters may have intensified early Americans' xenophobia instead of encouraging a cosmopolitan sensibility. As our societies increasingly question the impact of an individualistic, adaptable, and globally influential capitalist system, studies that successfully question inherited wisdom about the timing and character of commercial change become increasingly essential. Perhaps these authors represent the beginnings of answers a long business history could provide.

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