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Title

Abigail L. Swingen. *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. 288. \$85.00 (cloth).

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0bk0r2wk>

Journal

Journal of British Studies, 55(1)

ISSN

0021-9371

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Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.1017/jbr.2015.222

Peer reviewed

Abigail L. Swingen. *Competing Visions of Empire: Labor, Slavery, and the Origins of the British Atlantic Empire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi + 271.

Abigail Swingen's important new book reminds us that the British Empire was by no means a foregone conclusion in the late seventeenth century: there were some who were convinced that the empire impoverished rather than enriched England. Furthermore, among those who supported the empire, there were a range of views on how the empire should develop and how it should be governed. Swingen sets out to trace these arguments, and to show that at the center of the argument about the empire were questions of labor, and especially slave labor. In so doing, she connects the debates about the nature of empire, and of labor, to changing political contexts in London. She takes up Christopher Brown's challenge to provide "a political history of slavery" (p.6), arguing that the expansion of slavery, and the English state's relationship to it, made critical contributions to the development of imperial policies.

Swingen structures her argument chronologically, which underlines the contingent nature of all the arguments about empire. These are initially "visions" of empire, not ideologies: they are not necessarily consistent and they shift in response to events of all kinds. After an introduction which places her work historiographically, Swingen begins with the broad question of unfree labor. The first plans for colonization relied not on slave labor, but indentured servants. But it became evident that white servants were not available in large enough numbers to people the colonies. Even the transportation of convicts probably provided no more than 10,000 servants in the second half of the century, while some 200,000 slaves arrived in British colonies during that same period. Swingen traces one attempted shipment of convict servants to show how difficult the process was. While many causes contributed to this pattern, Swingen focuses on the consequence: the growing involvement in the English state in imperial affairs, and ultimately, in the slave trade. The Western Design, Cromwell's plan to

seize part of the Spanish empire, marks the British state's first significant engagement in imperial affairs; while the expedition ended up with Jamaica rather than Hispaniola as the English colony, the need to promote settlement and agriculture on a sparsely populated island made the question of labor a central one for the state – a question that did not change with the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy. One of the things that Swingen's account most dramatically shows is the broad continuity of personnel in London dealing with imperial affairs. From the Restoration forward, the British state was deeply involved in imperial policy, and Swingen shows that imperial policy cannot be separated from domestic concerns. The debate that persisted through that time was between the interests of the planters, who sought free trade in slaves, and the interests of the different monopoly suppliers of slaves. Swingen argues convincingly that the African Company and its successor, the Royal African Company, were effectively royal agents: Charles II's brother, James Duke of York, headed both companies, and their membership was tightly connected to the royal circle: while, for instance, the Earl of Shaftesbury had held stock in the Royal African Company, both he and his secretary, John Locke, sold their shares when Shaftesbury fell out of favor. The ways in which empire was implicated in political disputes also affected the crown's management of conflicts with the islands. Following the Glorious Revolution, the years of argument had led to one shared conclusion, that slavery was central to the Empire, and the empire was integral to British economic success. The end of this early period of imperial development emphasizes this, with the South Sea Company's pursuit of the *Asiento*. Yet Swingen shows that the dominance (and failure) of the South Sea company took place in the context of vigorous debate.

Swingen's signal achievement is to demonstrate that the process by which empire became a central part of the British state was closely tied to understandings of, and markets in, slave labor. This process was both political and intellectual, as participants in the debates made

arguments about the nature of political economy, though such arguments aligned with very practical economic interests. To put it another way, both political economy and imperial ideologies were always grounded in material and political interests. In addition, she argues convincingly that it is not useful to think about these arguments taking place between metropole and colony: the colony had representatives in London, and the Royal African Company had representatives in the islands. The arguments were primarily in London between people with strong political networks there.

This is an extremely important book. It constitutes an significant contribution to understanding how Britain became an imperial power. And it is a book that makes it impossible to think of slavery as an accident or a side show, but rather was something embedded in the empire from the beginning. As a reader, I occasionally wished for a less rigid chronological and topical structure, because that sometimes obscured the broader themes Swingen address. Also, this is a study of politics and arguments within the elite: actual slaves, and slave rebellions, for instance, are very much offstage. I occasionally wondered how the integration of slaves as subjects, not just objects of trade, would have changed the argument. And I would have loved to have Swingen reflect on the implications of her findings for contemporary arguments about reparations for slavery, for instance. But to ask for that is to ask for a different (and much more difficult book.) By placing slavery at the center of British imperial policy, Abigail Swingen's work shifts our understanding of both the late Stuart state and the early history of the British Empire.

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