

Swarthmore College

Works

History Faculty Works

History

7-1-2017

Review Of "Selling Empire: India In The Making Of Britain And America, 1600–1830" By J. Eacott

Robert S. DuPlessis

Swarthmore College, rduples1@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to these works benefits you](#)

Recommended Citation

Robert S. DuPlessis. (2017). "Review Of "Selling Empire: India In The Making Of Britain And America, 1600–1830" By J. Eacott". *William And Mary Quarterly*. Volume 74, Issue 3. 560-563.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/496>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by . It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

and England in the entire enterprise, as well as their extensions and colonies in the New World. It also explains the deep impact of Asian goods and people, especially in Spanish and Portuguese America, where repeated contact with “the East” was an integral part of three centuries of history. Indeed, the central role of the Acapulco-Mexico City-Veracruz route, and the complexity of alternate and often illegal routes and activities in Spanish-language sources, might have been given more play in the book. The book’s specific contribution is not only its attention to that history, but also its inclusion of North American reception of Asian goods and artistic technologies.

CLARA BARGELLINI

Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México

Jonathan Eacott. *Selling Empire: India in the Making of Britain and America, 1600–1830*. Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2016. 472 pp.; 25 halftones, 7 figures, notes, index. \$30.00 (paper).

This is a book about storied empires, the figments of the imperial imagination—“America the India” and “India the place”—making and breaking worlds around them. The book spans centuries, but the story isn’t linear. It is a story, in fact, of a feedback loop: a set of memes that travel through sinuous and mazelike circuits, turning the dreams of empires into nightmares. It wasn’t India, but the idea of India—“in the grandest policies and close to skin in the most intimate places” (4)—which drove the British empire in America to become what it became: a real-life version of the imaginary India that Britons had envisioned in the seventeenth century. The grand and intimate vision of India was a sustaining dream of progress; British imperialists kept reaching for it every time they started to stumble, and, strangely, it did stabilize them. The book, however, is not a progress narrative so much as a century-spanning shadow play of America the India and India the place. The final characters of this epic pantomime are the missionaries who traveled to India from a cotton-fueled nineteenth-century America—trafficking as well as embodying Hakluyt’s dream from centuries ago.

The book begins with the original dream, in which Britain ruled America as a colony and traded with an independent India. The dream, as we learn in chapter 1, produced extravagant schemes to

make the cottons, silks, and spices grow in America as they did in India. Could Virginia be a “second India,” asked Thomas Abbay in his dedication to John Smith’s 1612 *Map of Virginia* (14)? Readings of Hakluyt, Purchas, and Middleton set the stage for the “calico invasion” of the late seventeenth century. The trading of calicoes in Africa and America created both a fashion and an empire. It also made British weavers, threatened by their Indian competitors, riot against “Calico madams.” The Calico Acts (1700 and 1721) set in place a new dynamic, as Eacott explains in chapter 2. The second act, which banned the sale as well as import of the fabric in Britain, allowed the East India Company to trade it to America. Combined with the company’s American monopoly, the prohibition of calicoes in Britain produced an inflammatory situation, setting off new debates in the colonial moral economy. It wasn’t just India that was changed by these debates—in fact, as Eacott goes on to show, the American Revolution sprang from them.

It is a strange omission of eighteenth-century historiography that the period between the 1720s and 1770s is rarely examined as a whole. The third and fourth chapters of this book incorporate the events that mark this extremely busy period into a convincing timeline of a continuous arc of intra-imperial legislative deliberations. The Calico Act was a splendid addition to the imperial state’s regulatory machine. The British lawmakers yanked and pulled at this chain for decades, tweaking the regulations in response to new pressures, constraints, and events in the political timeline of empire and the legislative timeline of the law in the period leading to the Seven Years War. Successful enforcement was an imperial aesthetic. The justice that was served had to be displayed as well. As elephant shows were held in London and banyans banned at Harvard’s commencement, the English Parliament went to work writing laws which made the point that colonies were subservient to metropolitan governments. That by itself wouldn’t be so surprising if it wasn’t for how “India the place” kept on turning into “America the India.” From the place of calico in the Sugar Act of 1764 to the parallels between the Regulating Act and the Tea Act, both in 1773, Eacott doesn’t miss a detail. Historians of India, Britain, and America will have to engage with this argument deeply, but so will scholars of legal history and the English Parliament in the eighteenth century.

The implications are truly astonishing. If the East India Company as monstrous tyrant became an American revolutionary trope, if the Hastings

trial was compared to Shay's rebellion, it wasn't because India was a distant comparison or locus of imaginary solidarity: India, it seems, was inside America. America was made up of stories about India—maybe not entirely, but at a degree that hasn't been realized. The American dream was a reversal, in its original form, of the British dream of India. In this inverted ideological structure, finances were also significant. In any case, the crises of the East India Company worked out really well for America. For John Brown, the new situation meant that he could "profit from an empire that Americans had fought to leave by working with Britons desirous of profiting off their own Asian empire" (258).

As for Britain, it's not as if it suffered. The independence of the United States was excellent news for British manufacturers. The trade that was lost by the American Revolution was regained later by industrialization. The British responded to the loss of the colonies by emulating Indian cotton with American raw materials. The rise of America as a competitive force was accompanied by the resurgence, in the Board of Trade's London proceedings, of old debates from the 1680s. American independence brought missionaries to India. The conversion of Indians to Christianity was not unrelated, as Eacott argues in the final chapter, to the biggest conversion of all: "the conversion of America into a cotton cultivating power, an India, not in name, but in the raw material that it provided" (436).

Properly speaking, the book is an epic: four centuries, four continents, comparative, global, and interimperial. The book derives its power from its methodological rigor, its interdisciplinary tool kit, and its firm control over narrative form. All are necessary in order for Eacott to find, as he does, in pictures of hookahs and palanquins, the transfer of imperial imaginaries from one continent and century to another. But the triangulated fate of continents wouldn't appear with such clarity if it wasn't for Eacott's unflinching attention to non-events and strange omissions. "Notably," he observes, "Congress did not create a monopoly company and did not agree to significant incentives for American merchants to obtain India goods from India itself as opposed to from Europe" (275). By comparing what happened to what didn't, Eacott explains the ironic reversals that marked the transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. "The empire's development," he observes in the conclusion, "did not always follow the path its schemers expected, and yet it ultimately fulfilled most of

their big expectations" (443). The British empire was a miracle of history—except for the fact that it didn't exactly make itself.

Selling Empire is a long book, but it has to be read in order, from start to finish. It is not a book you can dip into—you have to follow the argument as it unfolds progressively so that the "system we create with our ideas" appears in contrast to all the other historical processes—lawmaking, mythmaking—that it systematizes (443). The three empires in the title of this book are spinning worlds inside each detail: unremarked shifts in the percentage change of drawbacks to be charged on calico in the Sugar Act of 1764; the appearance in a simple phrase like "variety of fashionable and high quality goods" of the emerging aesthetic of the imperial supply chain; Spanish overtures to the American revolutionaries, offering to capture East India ships; and—decades later—American ships during the Napoleonic wars carrying silver in and out of India—under the pretense of neutrality. It is through these details that *Selling Empire* supplies the reader, in every paragraph on every page, with a way of thinking between and across the scales of historical experience. Not one detail is insignificant.

FARID AZFAR
Swarthmore College

Marguerite S. Shaffer and Phoebe S. K. Young, eds. *Rendering Nature: Animals, Bodies, Places, Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. 406 pp.; 54 black-and-white images, notes, index. \$55.00.

Americans often view nature and culture as separate and opposing realms, with nature as a pristine, timeless sanctuary from the human world. Yet this belief emerged only recently, in response to environmental transformations of the industrial revolution. Many scholars have questioned this nature-culture dichotomy by examining the myriad entanglements between nature and culture. In particular, they have explored the ways that cultural constructions of nature shape environmental use. Ironically, through these studies the nature-culture dichotomy has been contested but also perpetuated. Nature always has a material presence—despite cultural constructions of nature, a material nature still exists, however perceived. However, even the idea of the Anthropocene as a geological period in which human activities have become akin to forces of nature assumes the existence of a preindustrial nature unaffected by human actions.