Advancing Empire: English Interests and Overseas Expansion, 1613-1688

In this impressive and well-researched book, L. H. Roper offers an innovative examination of the 17th-century English global empire to establish exactly who directed English colonial expansion during its nascent years. Through nine detailed and beautifully written chapters, Roper surveys the full scope of English overseas interests – in America, Africa, and Asia – convincingly arguing that private interests were the primary agents behind English colonial expansion before (and after) the Glorious Revolution of 1688. In so doing, Roper challenges interpretations that posit the early modern English state as the principal instigator of colonial initiatives and emphasises the continuity in the way English overseas interests were advanced during this tumultuous political period. This central argument is an important original contribution and the global scope of the book is another key strength. By analysing English overseas expansion across and beyond both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean Worlds, Roper skilfully shows the interconnections between distant colonial enterprises and deconstructs the geographic divide that often emerges in discussions of the English (later British) Empire. This inclusive approach makes the book particularly well-suited as a resource for undergraduate teaching, but the central premise of the volume and its focus on several overlooked episodes in 17th-century English colonisation has much to offer scholars of imperial and economic history.

The central crux of Roper’s argument, set out in the introduction, is that a group of aristocrats and merchants – many of whom were Protestant dissenters – ‘assumed the primary responsibility for advancing seventeenth-
century English commercial and territorial activities’ (p. 2). During this period, Roper maintains that the English state played a ‘consistently reactive role’ in the conduct of overseas trade and colonisation as ‘the fiscal limits under which the state operated prevented it from taking a lead’ and thus, in many cases, the state issued Charters to particular groups and individuals in an attempt to advance and regulate overseas expansion (p. 3). While Roper does not expressly make the connection, this view concurs well with Sheilagh Ogilvie’s hypothesis that the central reason why early-modern European states granted exclusive commercial rights and privileges to chartered companies (and merchant guilds) was because these organisations solved particular problems encountered by rulers.(1) Yet, in other respects, Roper’s study questions how ‘in control’ such states (at least in the English context) were in the development of European maritime empires. Indeed, although Roper acknowledges the increasing power of the 17th-century English state, they doubt whether this intensified the state’s ability to direct overseas trade and colonisation or even if the way the English conducted their overseas interests notably altered after 1688 as it ‘remained essentially the same’ (p. 14). By this, Roper means that often competing private individuals and groups advanced empire as they furthered their own territorial and commercial agendas (p. 3). Crucially, these operators were central to ‘the progress of state and empire during the seventeenth century’ as they directed state behaviour and subsequently facilitated the increasing role and power of centralised administration or, in other words, those outside government were central to ‘state formation’ (pp. 3, 9). This is a compelling argument that makes clear the fluid relationship between state and private interests for English overseas expansion in the 17th century.

In chapter one, Roper provides a useful outline of early 17th-century English overseas activities, which provides the necessary context for understanding how the careers of his ‘colonial-imperialists’ unfolded. By 1610, Roper contends that specific individuals had discerned that overseas trade and colonisation could be used to advance their positions both financially and politically (p. 17). The two most notable of these were Robert Rich, Earl of Warwick who ‘had his fingers in all of the proverbial overseas pies’ and used his ‘extensive web of mercantile, clerical, and political clients … to promote his fiercely anti-Spanish views’ (p. 27), and Sir William Courteen who envisioned the restoration of English fortunes in the East, lent substantial sums of money to the Crown and other aristocrats, and whose agents are credited with introducing slavery to Barbados with slaves taken from Guiana. Both Warwick and Courteen encountered various setbacks and Roper is quick to emphasise the need to consider failure to ‘obtain a comprehensive sense of the history of the English Empire’ (p. 16). Indeed, there is a tendency among historians of empire to overlook the importance of failure, but Roper’s study provides a good contrast to the highly successful merchants explored in David Hancock’s Citizens of the World.(2) In addition, Roper correctly notes that outside of Robert Brenner’s Merchants and Revolution, the careers of key London merchants with Calvinist religious views – including Maurice Thompson, Thomas Andrews, Samuel Moyer, William Pennoyer, Rowland Wilson, and John Wood – have rarely received the attention they deserve.(3) Within the English Empire, these individuals built upon the early plantation system founded by the Warwick and Courteen groups.

Chapters two, three, and four focus on the expansion of English interests in America, Africa, and Asia respectively, exploring the way in which London-based operators developed an array of overseas initiatives up to the outbreak of civil war in England in 1642. Considering the complex evolution of English activities in each of these distinctive regions, Roper was prudent to spread this analysis across three separate chapters. While much of the content explored in the second chapter (America) will be familiar to many readers, Roper nonetheless offers several valuable contributions. The most important is perhaps the observation that the ambitions of Anglo-American colonial-imperialists and their metropolitan counterparts to extend their own personal estates ‘provided the basis for the formation of a halting yet palpably coherent set of overseas interests’ as these initiatives in turn promoted the expansion of English territorial and commercial interests (p. 39). Roper shrewdly points out that many of these initiatives were enacted without Crown involvement – such as the establishment of Agawam, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Haven, and Long Island – and in some cases ‘occurred without the knowledge of, let alone direction of Charles I and government’ (p. 46).

The near ‘irrelevance’ of the 17th-century English state in overseas trade and colonisation is further emphasised in chapter three on the ‘Guinea trade’. The examination of Maurice Thompson’s dealings in the
slave and plantation trades suggests a more fluid relationship between chartered interests and apparent interlopers than is generally acknowledged (p. 74). More controversial is Roper’s claim that greater English involvement in the Guinea trade from the 1630s onwards (and hence the increased availability of slaves) stimulated the cultivation of new plantation crops, particularly following the rapid depreciation in tobacco prices (p. 75). While this discussion could have been phrased more effectively, it seems that Roper is suggesting that increased slave supplies enabled planters to diversify their crops and boost yields, rather than the traditional view that the introduction of labour-intensive crops drove demand for slaves and thus the expansion of the slave trade (p. 67). This is an interesting argument that challenges the established view that ‘planter demand’ ultimately controlled the rise of the plantation system.

Roper’s analysis of English activities in Asia (chapter four), once again demonstrates the importance of private interest groups in advancing English overseas initiatives. Giving much needed attention to the Courteen Association – an institution that the historiography of English imperialism has largely ignored – Roper argues that this group brought transformative results to the 17th-century English Empire. The Association ‘breathed some new life into the East India Company’ by encroaching upon its chartered rights and through various proposed schemes ‘marked the first practical English attempt to integrate operations in Africa and Asia’ (pp. 100–1, 106). While the Association successfully leveraged Royal support (Charles I personally invested £10,000) and received some privileges, this was another case of the state reacting to private overseas initiatives rather than instigating its own. By the late 1640s, Maurice Thompson and his associates had obtained control of the Courteen venture and, by advocating the ‘Dutch manner’ of establishing factories and colonies, set about carrying on the fight with the East India Company over the direction of English interests in the East Indies (pp. 110–1). As Roper aptly comments earlier in the chapter, the 17th-century Anglo-Dutch rivalry is rarely accorded the same significance of its Anglo-Spanish or Anglo-French counterpart yet this rivalry was truly global in its scope.

Chapter five revisits the debate over the extent to which the Civil War transformed English commercial and imperial policy. Roper is sceptical of claims that label these changes as ‘revolutionary’ and suggests that Robert Brenner drew too firm a line between the established leadership of the City of London and the interloping ‘new merchants’ (such as Maurice Thompson) who supposedly ‘took control of the city’s government and used their accumulated wealth and power to transform the English sociopolitical landscape by 1653’ (pp. 112–3). These merchants, as Roper argues, had already ‘assumed power within the shell of the old regime’ and so the new Interregnum English state merely ‘enabled them to further overseas ambitions that they had already been pursuing’ (p. 116). Therefore, Roper maintains that ‘the patterns of commerce, territorial expansion, and imperial administration … established prior to 1641 remained essentially in place’ (p. 129). Bar attempting to extract revenue from the tobacco trade or providing the final court of appeal for colonial issues, ‘the metropolitan government – whether royal or parliamentary – played practically no role in these developments’ (p. 130).

More evidence for the marginal role played by the Interregnum government in English overseas expansion is provided in chapter six. Roper maintains that the Revolutionary government did not, in fact, inaugurate an ambitious project of empire-building but rather allowed Thompson and other politically connected merchants to assume leadership of advancing English colonial interests. For instance, Thompson and his associates formulated the 1651 Navigation Act and presided over the so-called Assada initiative, which aimed (unsuccessfully) to integrate English operations in the Eastern and Western Hemispheres through the creation of a settlement at Assada (Nosy Be) off the coast of northern Madagascar (pp. 147–51). From this, Roper concludes that an enduring feature of English ‘mercantilism’ – a notoriously tricky concept to define – was that the state ‘became involved in overseas trade and colonisation only when the promulgators of those activities solicited its involvement’ (p. 149). An ‘enduringly symbiotic relationship between public and private interests’ therefore characterised 17th-century English overseas ventures, yet the activities of Thompson and other ‘new modellers’ further blurred the lines between ‘private’ and ‘public’ so that ‘they became the state’ in overseeing colonial affairs where they had expertise (p. 160). The Interregnum did not then mark a revolutionary shift in the conduct of English overseas interests, but Roper acknowledges that their improved access to state power brought about greater coordination between the ‘new modellers’ and
English overseas policy (p. 151).

As explored in chapter seven, the Restoration did not herald the decline of Thompson’s or other Protestant dissenters’ involvement in English overseas expansion. Most of these individuals, many of whom had been among Parliament’s most active and consistent supporters, escaped punishment upon Charles II’s return. Indeed, Roper takes issue with the view that the Restoration saw the English state become ‘increasingly involved in initiating and pursuing, as well as defending, English overseas interests’ (p. 175). These changes, according to Roper, should be viewed as incremental rather than transformational as ‘the restored monarchy inherited a greater capacity to oversee matters from its predecessors, while the definition of what constituted a state matter had widened’ (p. 175). Even after May 1660, colonial initiatives ‘still stemmed from people outside the government’ (p. 180), although the creation of the Council of Trade and Plantations (made up of aristocrats and merchants) perhaps marked a more formal relationship between state and private interests than was previously the case. Although Charles II and his brother James, the Duke of York, established the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa at the end of 1660, this did not act to coordinate and centralise the English Empire, but rather divided English commercial and colonising activities in Africa and America from those in Asia, terminating the idea of an integrated empire in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans (p. 186).

Chapter eight further challenges the extent to which the restored Stuarts supposedly attempted to create a ‘centralised overseas territorial empire’ and ‘a modern absolutist state’ (p. 212). Roper emphasises that in the disputes between the Crown and New England, it was actually Anglo-Americans – disgruntled with the leaders of Massachusetts – who solicited the Stuart state to investigate the colony’s issues. In addition, Roper deconstructs the notion that the Francophile Stuarts were the sole architects of the anti-Dutch policy that the English state pursued after 1660, as ‘the clamour for a second Anglo-Dutch War came primarily from the promoters of English overseas trade and colonisation’ (p. 203). While the restored monarchy ‘readily sympathised’ with the anti-Dutch position, such views had, for many years, circulated among the promoters of English imperial expansion.

In the final chapter, Roper offers several critical reflections on the conduct of English overseas interests after 1688, stressing the continuities in these affairs despite the change in regime. For example, there was ‘surprisingly limited personal turnover in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution’, the royal prerogative remained the basis for imperial administration, and colonial-imperialists continued to spearhead English territorial interests (pp. 248–52). To discern whether 1688 brought about ‘a new empire’, the concept of modernity in English state formation is explored, which is succinctly summed up in the question ‘what was actually modern about Restoration England?’ (pp. 234–5). Roper further critiques historians’ preoccupation with the Royal African Company as a critical instrument in the entrenchment of African slavery in the Americas, arguing that long before the reorganised Company received its Charter in 1672, slavery had become ‘the preferred solution to the American problem of labour supply’ (pp. 220–1).

Advancing Empire provides a persuasive interpretation of the importance of private enterprise for English overseas expansion in the 17th century and the central role metropolitan merchants and colonial imperialists played in extending the transoceanic influence of the English state. Roper advocates a longue durée view of the advancement of English colonial initiatives. Despite repeated political upheaval, Roper shows how continuity was more significant than ‘revolutionary’ change in the development of the 17th-century English Empire: private entrepreneurs used their overseas exploits to foster the colonial agenda of the Interregnum state, while the Restoration government borrowed its imperial framework from the Commonwealth and largely implemented new plans at the behest of those with private overseas ventures. After 1688, private interests continued to exert a strong influence over the direction of colonial affairs, initiating further expansion in the administrative capabilities of the English state.

If there is one shortcoming to this excellent monograph, then it is perhaps the occasional missed opportunity to make more connections to wider imperial historiography. In Capital and the Colonies, Nuala Zahedieh contends that the seventeenth-century English state lacked the means to enforce legislation intended to exclude the Dutch from an intermediary role in England’s Atlantic commerce. Instead, Zahedieh emphasises
the importance of those who participated in these activities and the efficiencies they achieved in finance, manufacturing, shipping, and distribution in a highly competitive commercial environment. This interpretation accords well with Roper’s view that private merchants did not necessarily need to employ the apparatus of the state to further their own interests and develop English overseas commerce. Advancing Empire could have considered where it lies in relation to Peter Cain and Antony Hopkin’s ‘Gentlemanly Capitalist’ thesis, particularly as it is maintained that the mutual relationship between private enterprise, colonial expansion, and state formation continued into the 18th century. This is, however, a very minor criticism. Roper has produced an accomplished book that has much to offer those interested in state formation, political economy, overseas trade, and the development of the English/British Empire.

Notes


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