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*The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans
in an Age of Expansion, 1560-1660*

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Alison Games. *The Web of Empire: English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion 1560-1660*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2008. Pp. ix + 381. \$35.00 hbk.

This is a splendid book. In lucid, modest, and incisive prose, Alison Games proposes a study of the careers of Englishmen abroad – soldiers, colonists, merchants, diplomats, clerics, and other travellers – as a way of understanding how the “weak state” England was “grew to become a powerful kingdom of global reach by 1660” (7). Many of these careers spanned multiple regions, a fact familiar to attentive readers of Hakluyt or Purchas but not always sufficiently appreciated; individual or collective experiences in one region could and did inform plans and actions in others spatially and culturally remote from the first. Drawing on a deep array of print and manuscript sources, Games follows the migratory paths not only of men but also of ideas about colonization and foreign relations from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, from the Ottoman Empire to Virginia, from North America and the Caribbean to Ireland, to name only a few routes of transmission.

The book’s title suggests a particular interest in the “series of learned behaviors” Games characterizes as cosmopolitanism, a “willingness to learn and adapt” within local contexts and the resultant ability to collect and disseminate local knowledge along the routes of an “interlaced and expanding global network” (10-11). While there were “many cosmopolitanisms,” and these might coexist with tendencies to xenophobia or violence as opportunity served, some degree of adaptation and accommodation was necessitated by realities on the ground in many of the regions where sixteenth-century Englishmen learned to travel and trade. Games argues that cosmopolitanism might have resulted from early modern England’s inability to project its power overseas, but that practically speaking it “facilitated survival and success overseas” for the private and public undertakings of that state (10). As the state grew stronger over the course of the seventeenth century, England’s relations with its colonies and trading partners became more coercive, but the strategy of imposition led to some short-term failures in the period of the Commonwealth and Restoration.

This summary oversimplifies a book that itself refuses to oversimplify its wealth of heterogeneous evidence. While explicitly articulating an argument that intervenes in major discussions on the prehistory of empire, the book is structured not so much by stages of that argument as by a survey of evidence defined and organized around the categories of region and profession. The argument emerges as the historical focus of successive chapters shifts forwards, and never seems to narrow or foreclose the book’s very broad purview.

The Web of Empire begins with two chapters focused on Continental travel and Mediterranean trade in the 16th century, as the defining context for the overseas enterprises that followed. Three chapters focus on particular regional enterprises in Virginia, Madagascar, and Ireland. (Games’ focus on a later period of English relations with Ireland departs from “the conventional story of English territorial expansion,” identifying Ireland less as an originary model for enterprises elsewhere than as a case in which a stronger England drew on the *existence* of overseas colonies to mobilize new powers of coercion). These chapters devoted to regional enterprises alternate with others devoted to three professional categories of Englishmen abroad: merchants, government appointees, and clergymen, following up on the Elizabethan editor Richard Hakluyt’s observation that “a souldier observeth one thing, and a mariner another”

("Epistle Dedicatorie," *Principal Navigations* [1600]). Games' observations on the migratory careers and diverse experiences of English clerics struck me as especially useful and fresh.

While this summary description gives a sense of a book's method, again, it falls short of indicating the full breadth of materials on which the book draws. The chapter on merchants pays particular attention to England's short-lived trading mission to Japan (1613-16); the chapter on Ireland looks at Cromwell's efforts to create a reverse migration of clergymen from New England; experiences in the Caribbean conditioned expectations in Madagascar. It is a tribute to Games' skill and conceptual acumen as a writer that one never feels lost in the details: the book is characterized by lucid organization and exposition, from the structure of chapters down to the level of individual paragraphs, which balance the details of particular lives against the larger realities towards which they point

The Web of Empire made me want to know more about the collective and individual enterprises on which it draws; one regret was the absence of a bibliography, which leaves the reader trolling through endnotes for titles. As an appreciative reader of Games' *Migration and Origins of the Atlantic World*, I was delighted to see the strengths of that earlier book translated to a broader demographic and geographic canvas, and expect to be drawing on *this* book for years to come.

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