

Advancing Empire: English Interests and Overseas Expansion, 1613–1688. By L. H. ROPER. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 314 pages. Cloth, paper, ebook.

Reviewed by Abigail L. Swingen, *Texas Tech University*

Can an empire exist without the direct involvement of a state? Can an empire exist without an underlying imperial ideology? According to L. H. Roper, the answer to both questions is an emphatic “yes.” In *Advancing Empire: English Interests and Overseas Expansion, 1613–1688*, Roper argues that the roots of England’s overseas imperial exploits are to be found in the activities of “a cohort of aristocrats and merchants” (2) who were at the forefront of commercial endeavors around the globe in the 1600s. By and large these men “held heterodox Protestant religious beliefs” (2), but their motivations in overseas trade and colonial expansion were not driven by ideology. Furthermore, the commercial networks created by these “private interests” (2) in the early 1600s provided the backbone of imperial administration well into the late seventeenth century. Roper emphasizes the purely “reactive role” of the English state in imperial affairs throughout this period, arguing that “the Crown delegated extraordinary powers” (3) in terms of both trade and colonial governance. When the state took an interest in colonization and overseas trade, it was usually in response to the perennial need for revenue. There was no overarching imperial agenda emanating from the government, or even from the private merchants and aristocrats that Roper focuses on, “since self-interest propelled [their] activities” (9). Rather than viewing the seventeenth century as a time of dramatic change and upheaval, Roper emphasizes continuity in terms of English commercial overseas interests and the absence of imperial governance. Profit seeking was the only real motive. In decentering the state from the narrative of England’s imperial history, Roper hopes to recenter other entities such as charter-based corporations, proprietary colonies, and merchant networks.

Many of the men upon whom Roper focuses in the first part of the book will be familiar to those who have studied England’s most prosperous overseas merchants of the early seventeenth century. Roper challenges Robert Brenner’s characterizations of these men as “new merchants” and “interlopers” (112) in established trades.¹ As Roper argues, the definition of an interloper in a given trade was extremely fluid. A merchant might participate in illegal trade in one area but be a full legal participant via a monopoly corporation in another. This is an important point for him because the scholarship has traditionally drawn too sharp a distinction between

¹ Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London’s Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Princeton, N.J., 1993).

“monopolists” and “interlopers” (72) in this merchant community in order to emphasize conflict, upheaval, and change among those responsible for spearheading colonization.

Roper emphasizes two other arguments about the empire that the aristocrats and merchants created. First, he stresses that from relatively early on, their trading and colonizing interests assumed a global scope. From the beginning of the 1600s, English overseas merchants and their aristocratic allies wanted to build colonies and expand trade not only in North America, the Caribbean, and West Africa, but also in South and Southeast Asia. Like other historians, Roper frames this global economic interest in terms of international conflict, especially with the Dutch in Asia. As Roper argues, English merchants understood their own overseas interests as inherently interconnected. Second, African slavery was central to this integrated world of trade from very early in the seventeenth century. Accordingly, in addition to analyzing such corporations as the Virginia Company and the East India Company, as might be expected, Roper also focuses on the lesser-known Guinea Company and the English involved in the transatlantic slave trade from the early seventeenth century. Thus the turn to the use of enslaved Africans in English colonies in the mid-1600s was by no means an “unthinking decision” (68) but one carefully considered and aided by merchants with significant interests in overseas trading and colonization enterprises, including such men as Maurice Thompson, Sir Nicholas Crispe, and William Pennoyer.

These are compelling arguments and important historiographical interventions, particularly about the centrality of slavery to the early English Empire. Unfortunately, they get obscured by Roper’s desire to deemphasize not only the role of the state in the early English Empire (which is justifiable), but also any possible role ideology might have played in persuading the aristocrats and merchants to make the decisions that they did. Instead, Roper insists that England’s seventeenth-century empire was not based on an ideology of “territorial conquest,” nor was it “militaristic and brutalizing to its subjects” (10). The latter point seems out of place for a book that rightly highlights the key role African slavery and the transatlantic slave trade played in the development of the English Empire. Downplaying any ideological component of empire building also seems especially odd because in the first chapter Roper argues that the aristocrats and merchants involved in overseas trade and colonization were deeply informed by their social and political experiences and worldviews. So though he notes that these men tended to be shaped by their Puritan, anti-Spanish, and proslavery beliefs, he then denies that such positions influenced their politics, actions, and ideas about imperial expansion and overseas trade. And although Roper is willing to label these men “colonial-imperialis[ts]” (39) throughout the book, that term is not interrogated. To have done so would have meant to concede points about the significance of imperial ideology (or the role of ideology in general) that Roper is unwilling to make.

Roper's rejection of the significance of ideology to empire building frames the second half of the book. In general the chapters that focus on the overseas interests and activities of the merchants in question are the most successful, while the ones that attempt to link overseas concerns to the political and social context in the metropolis are less so. This pattern stems from Roper's desire to simultaneously connect metropolitan and imperial events while at the same time downplaying any significant change in one place or the other, which has the effect of suggesting that very little transformed in either setting. For example, in a strained sequence of arguments in the fifth chapter, Roper argues that the English Civil War and Interregnum eras were perhaps not quite as revolutionary, transformative, or imperial as they have traditionally been portrayed, and indeed, the men Roper focuses on have often been presented by Brenner and others as religious and political radicals with clear imperial ambitions. But because, according to Roper, there was no real revolution in England in the long term, there was little likelihood that such men indeed held coherent radical or revolutionary views. Therefore, he further claims that programs often characterized as strong imperial centralization on the part of the Commonwealth and Protectorate governments under the direct influence of such merchants—such as the Western Design and the eventual conquest of Jamaica—were in fact disorganized endeavors unrelated to any firm imperial agenda on the part of the state.

Roper's insistence that a "haphazard approach" (180) to empire continued after the Restoration similarly leads him into choppy waters. Like many earlier historians, particularly Jack M. Sosin, he sees the restored monarchy as limping from one crisis to another, relying on overseas trade and colonies increasingly as sources of revenue but nothing more.² There was, to Roper, no agenda that drove Charles II and the Duke of York's interest in Africa or the transatlantic slave trade, which is presented as a mystery that was "perhaps" suggested to them by "their uncle, Prince Rupert" (186). Rupert very well may have inspired the later Stuart monarchs to promote African trade, but he was certainly not their uncle (he was their first cousin). It was also certainly the case that York was so concerned with trade with West Africa that he limited the East India Company's African interests and ordered that company "to hand over its African operations to" (186) the Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa in 1663. Roper presents this as evidence that, rather than centralizing England's overseas interests, "the government of Charles II severed English commercial and colonizing activities eastward of St. Helena from those in Africa and America in administrative terms" (186). This could very well be so, but it is also at least as likely that the later Stuarts had an imperial agenda that incorporated West Africa and

² Jack M. Sosin, *English America and the Restoration Monarchy of Charles II: Transatlantic Politics, Commerce, and Kinship* (Lincoln, Neb., 1980).

the Americas into one organic whole, driven by profit from the transatlantic slave trade. Similarly, after stressing the central role of African slavery and the slave trade—particularly through the creation of the Royal African Company (RAC) in the 1670s—Roper claims it would be a mistake to focus too much on the RAC because it never had a functional monopoly over the slave trade, and therefore, when its monopoly ended in the 1690s, the trade did not really expand all that much. This assertion runs counter to the conclusions of historians such as David Eltis, who have persuasively argued that English involvement in the slave trade increased at the turn of the eighteenth century, irreversibly transforming the empire.³

While pointing out a number of shortcomings in traditional interpretations of empire, Roper seems unwilling to offer an alternative understanding of England's empire that had emerged by the late seventeenth century. Continuity is the overarching theme in this book, for Roper does not see the empire transforming all that much over the course of this period, stressing instead that the merchants and aristocrats active in overseas trade and colonies in the early 1600s by and large resembled those involved in such endeavors in the late 1600s. But Roper's suggestion that "the political and economic comprehension that had governed English overseas activities" (253) did not change significantly until after 1763 would have surprised many of those living or otherwise engaged in overseas colonies in the early eighteenth century. That period was characterized by the growth of the Royal Navy, ongoing wars with other imperial powers, and the continued expansion of British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade.⁴ That said, Roper's book is an important reminder of the global nature of English overseas interests, particularly the centrality of the slave trade to those interests and how metropolitan affairs directly influenced overseas developments in the early English Empire.

³ David Eltis, "The Volume and Structure of the Transatlantic Slave Trade: A Reassessment," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 58, no. 1 (January 2001): 17–46.

⁴ John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988); William A. Pettigrew, *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672–1752* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2013); Stephen Saunders Webb, *Marlborough's America* (New Haven, Conn., 2013); Sarah Kinkel, *Disciplining the Empire: Politics, Governance, and the Rise of the British Navy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2018).