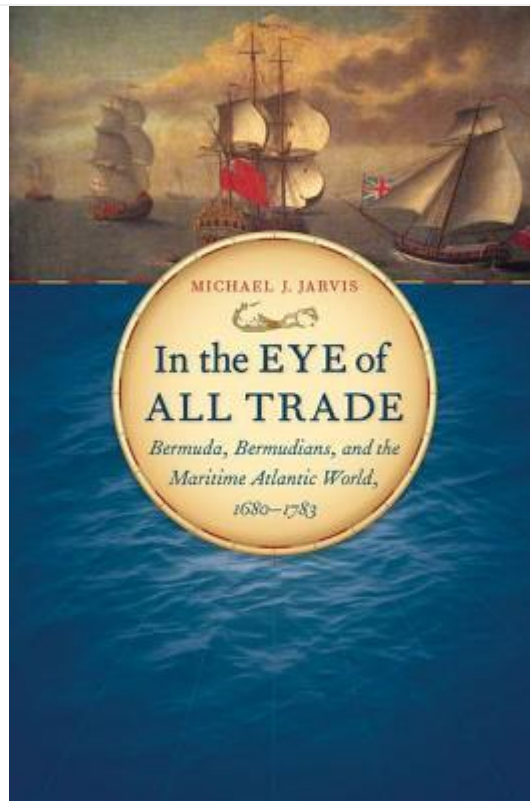


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783



Volume 44 (2011)

Reviewed Work(s)

In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783. By Michael J. Jarvis (Chapel Hill: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press). Pp. 684. Cloth, \$65.00.

Most students of history are probably more familiar with Bermuda as the inspiration for William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or for its fine cedar furniture than they are with its place in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British America. A quick glance at a map reveals a lonely island situated approximately 600 miles off the Outer Banks of North Carolina, nearly 3,500 miles from London, and just over 900 miles from the Bahamas. Bermuda's position along major oceanic currents made it a convenient rest stop for transatlantic sojourners headed to North America, the Caribbean, or Europe in the early modern period, a role that historians have been content to assign to it. Indeed, the last major monograph to explore the island appeared over sixty years ago. In 1950 Henry C. Wilkinson published *Bermuda in the Old Empire: A History of the Island from the Dissolution of the Somers Island Company until the end of the American Revolutionary War, 1684-1784*, a work concerned with major figures involved in island politics and the maritime trade.

[1] Despite scholars' adoption of Atlantic history over the last two decades, a trend that has shed considerable light on the early history of the Caribbean, they have tended to sail past Bermuda for seemingly deeper historical waters.

Michael J. Jarvis argues that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Bermuda has received little scholarly attention because historians have followed the lead of imperial administrators who largely ignored the island and its inhabitants for much of the period. Jarvis contends in his new work, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783*, that Bermuda disappeared from the imperial radar because islanders did not contribute any of the normal extractive commodities to the mercantilist economy. Unlike the Canadian and New England cod fisheries, Chesapeake tobacco farms, South Carolinian rice plantations, or West Indian sugar islands, Bermudians stopped sending agricultural produce across the Atlantic after soil exhaustion and a saturated market made tobacco farming an

unprofitable venture in the early eighteenth century. Bermuda became an atypical colony at a time when the British began asserting greater control over their Atlantic economy. As London focused its attention on growing North American and Caribbean markets, Bermudians fell off the imperial map.

In Jarvis's view, historians of British America have perpetuated this neglect by privileging the transatlantic connections between Europe, Africa, and the Americas while remaining preoccupied with the large ships that ferried people and goods across the ocean. He argues that the binary nature of a transatlantic outlook obscures the historical spaces in between these links, areas in which Bermudians operated their famous sloops with great success. Jarvis embraces David Armitage's call for an Atlantic methodology that emphasizes circum- and cis-Atlantic approaches[2], asking, "What did early America look like from the deck of a ship, and how might this perspective change the ways we understand it?" (1). His answer blends environmental, cultural, and economic history, in an important and much needed contribution to the historiography of British America. It is also a model for future Atlantic scholarship.

English colonization of Bermuda began as an accident. In the summer of 1609 the Virginia Company- owned *Sea Venture* wrecked on the island's reefs on its way to resupply the Jamestown colony. Permanent settlers soon followed as word reached England of a lush island with no native population, a stark contrast to the difficult environmental conditions and the Powhatan Indians that the English encountered in Virginia. Jarvis argues that Bermuda's healthy environment and lack of aboriginal peoples was critical to its long-term success (33). Though epidemics ravaged the island from time to time, the generally agreeable atmosphere prevented significant loss of life. And with no native islanders to offer resistance, Bermudians rapidly began to develop their colony.

The Somers Island Company, formed in 1615 to manage the colony and promote its settlement, segmented the landscape into narrow parishes in ways that gave every landowner access to the water, but also reinforced a close sense of community among the islanders. In addition, the Company encouraged public works projects supported by internal taxation levied by an assembly. Islanders cleared cedar trees to make way for tobacco fields, using knowledge gained from stolen West Indian and

Spanish American slaves to cultivate a profitable crop for transport back to England (26-27). Ironically John Rolfe, a passenger on the *Sea Venture*, may have conducted some of his initial tobacco experiments while on the island, later carrying his ideas to Virginia and laying the foundation for that colony's economic triumph.

The success of tobacco cultivation in the Chesapeake coupled with soil exhaustion on the island doomed Bermuda's prospects as a major tobacco exporter by the early 1620s. Bermudians then began a process of agricultural diversification while Company investors sold their shares to island landlords, but Company directors failed to see the writing on the wall. They continued to push for a mercantilist tobacco economy at a time when islanders increasingly adopted a free-trade attitude toward the mainland colonies and the English and Dutch West Indies. The Crown resolved the tension between the two parties in 1685 by revoking the Company's charter and appointing the island's first royal governor.

For Jarvis the extension of the Crown's authority over Bermuda was a critical moment in the island's history and helps to explain why scholars have overlooked its place within the eighteenth-century British Atlantic. In light of their failure to produce an exportable commodity for the mother country, London left Bermudians alone in favor of more profitable ventures elsewhere. Bermudians took advantage of this newfound autonomy by turning to the sea and transformed their agriculturally based economy into one dependant on maritime trade. Salvaging operations and piracy injected hard money into the Bermudian economy, replacing tobacco as the medium of exchange and promoting an increase in consumer spending (80-84). More importantly, Bermudians used the money to build ships.

Conservation laws passed by the colonial assembly in the early eighteenth century led to cedar reforestation on many of the old tobacco fields. Running counter to early modern ideas of improvement that encouraged individuals to work the land, Bermudians deliberately maintained cedar stands and sustainably harvested the trees to construct their sloops. Cedar proved to be a light but durable wood that resisted water rot, enabling the islanders to build fast vessels that could last for decades. White Bermudian captains and their families tended to own the sloops they commanded and used their slaves to man them, thereby saving on the cost of a hired crew. Bermudian sloops soon became the

carrier of choice for merchants working the intercolonial trade, favoring their speed and Bermudians' knowledge of the ocean to transport numerous commodities between the North American mainland and the West Indies. Bermudian captains also doubled as merchants, a role that Jarvis argues business historians have missed in emphasizing professional traders (156-158). Moreover, he notes that economic studies that "focus on what and how much was carried (using shipping destinations) rather than who was carrying it (according to ship registries) also miss the extent of Bermudian involvement in British American trade" (133).

Bermudians then did not have a transatlantic perspective that encouraged affection for Great Britain, but a circum-Atlantic point of view that stressed loyalty to family and local colonial markets. Jarvis's treatment is particularly fascinating for the ways in which he depicts Bermuda as a microcosm of the British Empire. Bermudians developed their own extractive mercantilist economy, passing protectionist trade laws even as they smuggled goods to the Dutch West Indians in violation of the Navigation Acts. In addition to serving the intercolonial carrying trade, Bermudians worked what Jarvis terms the "Atlantic commons" (chapter 4). These commons were spaces contested by the European powers operating in the British Atlantic as well as areas contested by individual British colonies. Besides salvaging shipwrecks, Bermudians harvested salt from the Turks and Caicos Islands, an item they sold to North American fishermen and meat producers. Their presence on the islands brought them into frequent conflict with both Spanish authorities and the British-held Bahamas. Bermudians also procured timber from the Cayman Islands and the coast of Belize, bringing them into competition with their British brethren. Notably, Bermudians established small enclaves or colonies in places such as Norfolk and Charleston, extending kinship networks onto the mainland and creating new opportunities while still maintaining their sense of being Bermudian (360, 372-372).

But Bermudians were the victims of their own success. In Jarvis's estimation, their achievements contributed to the decline of their maritime empire. While they built and crewed their own vessels Bermudians also constructed sloops for sale to other colonial merchants, turning a handsome profit but counterproductively placing highly

desired ships in the hands of competitors. Mainland colonies such as Virginia began challenging Bermuda's hold on the intercolonial trade after the Seven Years' War when plummeting freight prices opened windows of competition. Virginians produced more ships than Bermudians by the 1770s by tapping the forested hinterland that the finite Bermudian resources could not match (379).

The imperial crisis of the 1760s had little effect on the Bermudians, but the growing controversy between Great Britain and her colonies threatened the carrying trade by 1774 when the Continental Congress authorized a ban on British trade goods. In 1775 the Bermudian assembly dispatched Henry Tucker to negotiate with the Congress for an exemption in exchange for military provisions, such as gunpowder and salt. For Jarvis, this decision is indicative of the precedence Bermudians gave to the well-being of their families over the empire. Though Tucker struck an agreement with the American rebels, Bermudian loyalty to their American cousins – many of them Bermudian by birth – was not to last. The British navy cracked down on Bermudian smuggling after 1776 by deploying warships to patrol the island's waters. By 1779 the navy had succeeded in suppressing the illegal trade and devastating the local economy to such an extent that Bermudians turned to privateering, preying on American vessels to feed their families. The loss of the American colonies cost Bermudians their largest customers and forced them to adapt once again to a new political reality. After the war the British established a significant naval base on the island. Many white and black Bermudian men, long accustomed to living on the sea while their women and children remained at home, returned to their families to work in new industries supporting Britain's enhanced military presence on the island.

In the Eye of All Trade challenges historians to search more carefully for histories hidden in plain sight. Jarvis convincingly argues that Bermuda and Bermudians played a critical role in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British Atlantic, only to be swept aside by imperial planners and later historians alike because it did not fit the colonial mold. Bermuda's geographic location relative to the North American mainland and the Caribbean, as well as its proximity to strategic ocean currents, helped Bermudians to transform their island into a nexus of commercial activity as they adapted to environmental and political contingencies.

Readers unfamiliar with early modern sailing vessels occasionally may find themselves lost at sea when encountering some of the technical details related to ship configurations that Jarvis chose to include in his work, but the author conveys his larger points with clear and engaging prose. Finally, Jarvis's intervention into the Atlantic World historiography shows the possibilities of circum- and cis-Atlantic approaches. In exploring what early America looked like from the deck of a ship and the ways in which those views shaped Bermuda, Jarvis skillfully weaves together a history that spans empires, cultures, and geography using probate records, port registries, personal letters, and material culture. The result is a complicated story that provides greater clarity to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British America's fluid nature.

James Patrick Ambuske

University of Virginia

[1] Henry C. Wilkinson, *Bermuda in the Old Empire: A History of the Island from the Dissolution of the Somers Island Company until the end of the American Revolutionary War, 1684-1784* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

[2] David Armitage "Three Concepts of Atlantic History" in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic World, 1500-1800* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 11-30.



Published by



[View all posts by](#)

Book Reviews

18th century, Bermuda, Capitalism, Global History

COMMENTS ARE CLOSED.

FIND US ON:

» [Facebook](#)

» [Twitter](#)

ADMIN:

» [Log in](#)

» [WordPress.org](#)

PROUDLY POWERED BY WORDPRESS | THEME: BASKERVILLE 2 BY ANDERS NOREN.

UP ↑