

Book Review

– *The Temptations of Trade. Britain, Spain, and the Struggle for Empire*, by Adrian Finucane. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

The early eighteenth-century *asiento* trade is primarily known for the impetus it gave to the British trans-Atlantic slave trade, but it entailed much more. In *The Temptations of Trade*, Adrian Finucane focuses on the broader picture. Under this treaty which was part of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, British ‘factors’ serving the South Sea Company were allowed to settle in various places of Spanish America in order to foster legitimate inter-imperial trade and to counter smuggling. Living in cities from Havana in the North all the way down to Buenos Aires in the South, these factors had unique opportunities not only to facilitate trade, but equally to observe the workings of Spanish American trade, governance, military defence, and also the cultural dynamics of local societies at large. With ups and downs – several short wars – the basics of the treaty endured until the mid-eighteenth century, when the system collapsed.

All of this history is about globalization, and the complex interplay between commercial and geopolitical interests – under what conditions do states prefer international cooperation to further their commercial objectives, or conversely, do they decide to go to war to the same ends? Finucane provides detailed information on recurring debates about such issues in both states and their colonies. This book rightly underlines that it is incorrect to think of states as monoliths. Many of the factors representing Great Britain were just as much working for their individual gain rather than in the interest of their faraway metropolis, and so did the wide array of buccaneers and smugglers active in Atlantic waters at the time. Operating in these complex worlds of inter-imperial rivalries, individuals pursuing their own economic interest constantly undermined the delicate balance struck by their metropolitan states in Europe. As Finucane rightly observes in the Prologue to her book, ‘Empire was not only a project of European nations, but a kind of strategy for some groups of subjects who could take advantage of the places that governments could and could not assert power over land and trade, making their own fortunes by valuing pragmatism over ideology’ (p. 1).

But even if this is a relatively short text – barely over 150 pages, excluding references – and even if the book is well-written, the overall argument is rather

straightforward and so often repeated in the book that one wonders whether Finucane could not have distilled more insights instead from the apparently rich archival sources she consulted. As it is, the book offers many valuable insights on the webs of information and on tensions inherent in inter-imperial economic rivalry and cooperation, but in the end there is less than one might have hoped for when it comes to a truly social and cultural history of British-Spanish encounters in the Americas. Certainly there are great vignettes of factors. Thus we have Lionel Wafer – buccaneer surgeon, author of the influential *New Voyage and Description of the Isthmus of America* (1699). Or Thomas Dover – South Sea Company agent, physician, privateer, would-be scientist. And the Scottish physician John Burnet, equally interested in the sciences and entertaining a wide web of scholarly connections, and eventually crossing over to the Spanish side, receiving a state pension and serving as *médico de cámara* to the Spanish King Philip V. And there are a couple of such men more. But one would have hoped to read more about what these men had to say about local cultures, beyond economic and geopolitical concerns.

The burgeoning field of Atlantic History is all about entangled histories, about cross-imperial connections, and a turn towards the social and cultural dimensions of the early modern Atlantic world. *The Temptations of Trade* clearly links up with this historiography and does this particularly in highlighting cross-imperial economic dynamics – even if there might have been more to say about other imperial actors, particularly the Dutch and the French. In the end however, and in spite of Finucane’s promise to work ‘through a biographical lens’ (p. 18) and in spite of the good use she makes of the writings of some of these British factors, this book is less about cross-imperial *cultural* encounters than one might have expected – and has hardly anything at all to say about European encounters with Amerindians and Africans. Perhaps the source material simply did not allow this, but this remains unclear. As it is, the book certainly makes a welcome contribution to the extant historiography, but most of all to the political history of British-Spanish relations in early-modern Spanish America.

Gert Oostindie,
KITLV/Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies
Oostindie@KITLV.NL