A Tale of Two Conquests; An epic history compares the British and Spanish colonies in the New World.

The Washington Post

June 25, 2006 Sunday, Final Edition

The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: Book ***World***; T08

Length: 1216 words

Byline: Reviewed by Ilan Stavans

Body

EMPIRES OF THE ATLANTIC ***WORLD***

Britain and Spain in America 1492-1830

By J.H. Elliott

Yale Univ. 546 pp. $35

Our current debate about immigration isn't only about clamping down on the U.S.- Mexican border. It's also about what it means to be an American after 9/11 and about how the nation is revamping the concept of citizenship. And it's an opportunity to reassess, yet again, the relationship between the United States and its neighbors to the south, a chance to reflect on the role of Hispanic culture in the English-speaking ***world***. For those eager to understand the historical context behind these issues, I know of no more comprehensive, readable source than J.H. Elliott's Empires of the Atlantic ***World***. While its focus might appear remote and its contemporary implications tenuous, the patient reader will be rewarded with a feast of insights.

Elliott taught for years at Oxford, where the bulk of his career was devoted to the study of imperial Spain and its quest for gold and power in the Americas. But nothing he has done so far has the scope of this book. His premise is clear-cut: What we need isn't a hemispheric but a fully continental account of the so-called ***New World***. How was it that the Mayflower immigrants established the foundations of a prosperous, representative federal system, while the Iberian conquistadors failed to foster an atmosphere where democracy could flourish? How did the Protestant and Catholic churches approach the aboriginal population? What separated the paths of ***two*** liberators, George Washington and Simón Bolívar? If 1492 is to be seen as a benchmark -- the moment at which the Americas were abruptly introduced into the modern age -- why is it that, more than five centuries later, the division endures between the haves and have-nots, between industrialized and underdeveloped nations?

Much of the difference was clear from the start. The ***British colonies*** were built as a ***New*** Canaan by settlers who believed in a fresh beginning; their drive, ultimately, was to create a ***new*** nation that would supersede the mother country. On the other hand, the ***Spanish*** effort in the Americas was seen as a mere feeder for the crown; the sense of loyalty and dependency permeated every aspect of colonial life.

Elliott structures his material in three stages: occupation, consolidation and emancipation. He starts with the assumption that "emigrants to the ***New World*** brought with them too much cultural baggage for it to be lightly discarded in their ***new*** American environment." He's inspired here by a dictum from the philosopher David Hume: "The same set of manners will follow a nation, and adhere to them over the whole globe, as well as the same laws and languages. The ***Spanish***, English, French, and Dutch ***colonies***, are all distinguishable even between the tropics." Nationhood, in other words, is destiny.

Elliott proceeds to ***compare*** the motives and methods of the ***two*** civilizations -- a fairly ambitious endeavor, which he tackles by ***comparing*** historical periods, luminaries and motifs. For instance, he equates early on the conqueror Hernán Cortés and the explorer Christopher Newport, the architects who "laid the foundation of the empires of Spain and Britain on the mainland of America." The former, coming from feudal Spain with some 200 soldiers, used gifts to court the Aztec ruler Montezuma, eventually taking him into custody in 1519; the latter, perhaps aware in 1606 of what Cortés had accomplished, took another route, becoming the captain of a ship bearing ***British*** settlers who would found Jamestown. The difference is crucial: Cortés wanted glory, while Newport was, in Elliott's words, a "planter" -- that is, a plantation settler, which at the time of the Tudors and the Stuarts meant a colonist.

That difference between settlers and conquerors was slowly pushed to its extremes. The Thirteen ***Colonies*** envisioned themselves as a response to the intolerance in the ***British*** motherland and thus as an improvement on European ways; the ***Spanish colonies***, on the other hand, were a bounty for the Iberians to plunder.

So much information might overwhelm a less talented storyteller. But Elliott compartmentalizes his themes: social hierarchies, economic structures, politics, culture and the overall connection of the settler societies to their European parents. The storyline gathers momentum as each of these ***colonies*** recognizes its individuality and the fight for autonomy and legitimacy begins. The chapters contrasting the efforts of emancipation are stellar. Much as the United States was defined by a set of values and aspirations that, during the Civil War, threatened the fabric of the republic, so in Latin America democracy was held hostage by oligarchies embracing the feudal form of power that existed in Spain in the 15th century.

Obviously, in a project of this magnitude, important elements are likely to be left out: References to the Portuguese settlements in Brazil, by Elliott's own admission, are almost totally absent, as is the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He argues that his topic is exclusively "the development of the settler societies and their relationship with the mother countries." But don't omissions of such magnitude distort the overall picture?

Likewise, nothing in Empires of the Atlantic ***World*** is strictly novel; scores of scholars have navigated the same channels. (Elliott is prompt to credit his forerunners; indeed, the notes and bibliography sections in his book run to more than 100 pages.) His originality, if it might be called that, lies in his comparative approach. For Elliott, comparative ***history*** is not made of parallel narratives but of a single, majestic outline with multiple subplots, such as the divergence in agricultural, economic and educational styles between the ***British*** and ***Spanish*** in the ***New World***, the uses of the Enlightenment, and the role and treatment of Jews.

Unfortunately, these pages have a triumphalist tone that's worrisome. Elliott talks of the "enormous problems" and "massive mistakes" of the ***Spanish*** crown and its adventures in the ***New World***, adding that "given the scale and complexity of the challenge that faced them, it is surprising that the Spaniards realized as much of their imperial dream as they did." On the other hand, he depicts the English colonists as having had "more freedom of manoeuvre to make reality conform to the constructs of their imagination." I don't think Elliott is aware of this lapse; after all, he seems to perceive himself as a strict practitioner of cool, scientific ***history***. Still, the reader cannot avoid hearing doom in his voice: Ah, the ***Spanish colonies*** were driven to disaster from the start, were they not? Ironically, this feeling gives urgency to his narrative. And as the United States ponders the impact of its more than 42 million Latino citizens, a sudden reexamination is taking place in the ***New World*** -- which, of course, has lost all its newness. Today, the descendants of Cortés and Newport are commingling in one habitat and, in the process, becoming a single entity. *

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (78%); EMIGRATION (78%); DEVELOPING COUNTRIES (76%); TYPES OF GOVERNMENT (76%); LANGUAGE & LANGUAGES (75%); ***HISTORY*** (75%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (70%); INDIGENOUS PEOPLES (70%); PROTESTANTS & PROTESTANTISM (64%); RELIGION (64%); CATHOLICS & CATHOLICISM (50%)

Organization: YALE UNIVERSITY (84%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (95%); SPAIN (90%); MEXICO (79%); UNITED KINGDOM (78%)

Load-Date: June 25, 2006