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Review by Charles R. Foy

REORIENTING BERMUDA'S PLACE IN THE 18th CENTURY ATLANTIC

Michael J. Jarvis, *In the Eye of All Trade: Bermuda, Bermudians, and the Maritime Atlantic World, 1680-1783*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2010. 684 pp. \$65.00.

Every Early American historian must determine the appropriate perspective to frame the story of European settlement of the Americas. For decades Frederick Turner's choice of viewing American history by looking west from the Appalachian Mountains dominated the historiography. More recently, Daniel Richter provided a different frame to tell the story of early America by having his readers facing east from the Jefferson Memorial Arch in St. Louis. Michael Jarvis' magisterial *In the Eye of All Trade* does not place the reader on solidity of a mountain range or upon the steel and concrete of a national monument's observation deck. Nor does he urge us to look in one direction. Instead, readers of *In the Eye of All Trade* are asked to consider the myriad of connections Bermudians created within the Atlantic history from the unsteady wooden

deck of a Bermudian sloop. While this may strike some as an unorthodox choice, Jarvis' choice of perspective is truly inspired. It ensures that as readers are taken into uncharted waters they are moored by the books' two central ideas; that the Atlantic world's "defining characteristic" was motion, and that Bermuda's maritime economy was "at the center of England's emerging Atlantic system" (9, 11).

To reorient readers to Bermuda's important place within the British Atlantic Jarvis turns the map of the Atlantic on its side. This reorientation emphasizes that although Bermuda occupies less than twenty-one square miles, its location "along a continuous curving arc of islands and coastline stretching from Newfoundland to Tobago" placed it within relatively short sailing voyages from all points in the western British Atlantic (4-5). When combined with the prevailing currents and trade winds, Bermuda's location resulted in nine out of every ten ships sailing between the West Indies and Europe or North America to pass the island, placing it "in the eye of all trade." This reorientation by Jarvis serves to emphasize the centrality of Bermuda in the British Atlantic. It also furthers his purpose of providing a detailed maritime social history that considers both how the ocean shaped Bermuda and how Bermudian connections throughout the Atlantic basin influenced life on the island.

Jarvis proceeds to use this new perspective to explore six key characteristics of Bermudian life: its transition from a tobacco society to a maritime society; the island's unique system of slavery; the emphasis placed on kinship connections and communal activities; Bermudian exploitation of the Atlantic's natural resources; the effect of Bermuda's maritime economy on its residents; and the impact of the American Revolution on Bermudian society.

In the book's first two chapters Jarvis considers the initial development of Bermuda, its operation by the Somers Company and the island's becoming a royal colony. Although initially successful as a tobacco colony, Jarvis demonstrates that the collapse of the tobacco market in the 1620s and 1630s was a blessing in disguise causing Bermudians to diversify their economy. Doing so fostered maritime connections with North American and other West Indies colonies. And because of limited land many Bermudians moved to other colonies, beginning the formation of networks of maritime trade that would sustain Bermuda to the end of the eighteenth century. In telling the story of a transition away from tobacco to the sea, Jarvis emphasizes it was a shift that took place without "direction, promotion, or supervision" from London, was due to choices of Bermudians as to how best to prosper on an island that did not have large plantations, and was made possible by Bermudians integrating slaves into the maritime economy (73).

With an increased emphasis on maritime activities agriculture became marginal, as short trips to North American ports enabled Bermuda to regularly obtain provisions. The switch to a maritime economy also resulted in Bermudians imposing strict conservation measures and cultivating cedar trees for use in the island's shipbuilding industry. By building distinctive, fast sloops, honing navigational and piloting skills, and keeping costs low by using slave labor aboard their ships, Bermudians flourished and made their island into what Jarvis terms a "great paradox: the island was a vibrant commercial and communications hub and yet virtually invisible and easily missed within Great Britain's sprawling empire" (183).

In Bermuda's new maritime economy it was labor, not land that was key. As the island's fleet increased slaves became increasingly critical to the island's shipbuilding

industry and came to comprise a majority of many Bermudian ship crews. Slave hiring was key to the success of this new maritime economy as it provided elasticity to seasonal shifts. Hiring out led to many whites depending upon slave labor for much of their household income, particularly those whom did not own land. Smuggling, an important component of the island's economy, was assisted by the use of all black crews who could not testify against their ship captain or owner. Thus, Bermuda's slave system with its mobility and non-agricultural labor more closely resembled slavery in ports such as New York than slave societies in the Caribbean.

Jarvis demonstrates that Bermuda becoming a maritime hub relied upon extensive kinship networks. These groups of family members built and bought sloops and schooners, raised capital, recruited ship crews and gathered goods to be shipped. In the era before widespread use of insurance by the island's fleet, these kinship networks helped spread the risk of maritime endeavors. The kinship connections also extended onto Bermudian ships. Jarvis, through a precise and careful detailing that characterizes his scholarship, provides rich evidence of how almost every Bermudian ship had pre-existing kinship, household or neighborhood connections. These connections crossed racial lines as slaves frequently worked alongside their white masters on board Bermudian sloops. But what is most remarkable about Jarvis' consideration of kinship networks is his showing how Bermudian emigrants to other colonies assisted Bermuda's maritime economy. In case studies of Bermudians emigrating to the Bahamas, South Carolina, Virginia and St. Eustatius, Jarvis provides solid evidence of colonial settlements that provided commercial and kinship connections that enabled this small island to flourish as a maritime economy.

With their maritime skills, unique slave system and extensive kinship connections Bermudians were, as Jarvis convincingly demonstrates, able to exploit maritime hinterlands to supplement their intercolonial trade and shipbuilding. They did so by raking salt from the Turks and Caico, salvaging shipwrecks, harvesting timber in Central and North America, turtling in the Cayman Islands, privateering and whaling. Such activities, while marginal to many colonial economies, were “absolutely vital” to Bermuda’s maritime economy (250). These Atlantic maritime hinterlands drew large numbers of people together and linked regional economies from which Bermudians greatly benefited. Jarvis illustrates this well through his discussion of the Bermuda sloop. No single item illustrates so well the importance of the Atlantic Commons to Bermuda’s economy. A critical component of Bermuda’s maritime economy, these fast and durable sloops contained a variety of elements from Bermuda’s extensive exploitation of the Atlantic: based on Dutch design they were built with North American cypress and pine as well as Bermudian cedar, and often contained rigging from shipwrecks, smuggled Dutch or Russian canvas as sails, and iron from North American furnaces. Constructed with such a variety of elements from throughout the Atlantic, these sloops carried salt, turtles, whale blubber and plunder that enriched Bermudians.

In Chapters Five and Six Jarvis ties together his history of Bermuda by analyzing how its maritime economy shaped its society on shore. Most eighteenth century ports had skewed gender ratios, but Bermuda’s was particularly high-in 1727 one-third of its households were headed by women. With many of the island’s men away at sea, Bermudian women took on considerable responsibilities, often being involved in creating goods for export that tied them into the Atlantic economies that their husbands worked in.

While assuming a number of traditional male roles, Bermudian women, white and black, came to rely upon each other. The irony of this situation was, as Jarvis notes, that maritime activities led the island's men to not engage in traditional male social duties, "to protect, regularly provide for, and personally govern their "dependent" wives, children and slaves" (303). At the same time the connections Bermudians had throughout the Atlantic enabled many islanders to own consumer goods that others in the Atlantic of similar wealth did not.

With the American Revolution significant changes came to Bermuda. The island's reliance upon trade with North American colonies was disrupted. With the influx of British military forces and Loyalist privateers using the island as a base for operations, the nature of Bermuda's economy was dramatically altered. Jarvis meticulously describes the divisions among the island's residents, many of who favored the American cause. As they had earlier in the century in creatively using the Atlantic Commons to craft a dynamic maritime economy, Bermudians responded to the war with inventiveness. They used privateering and sale of goods to the British military to reconstruct their economy. In the years after the Revolution, shipbuilding, military provisioning, cod fishing and whaling sustained the island.

In the Eye of All Trade is a welcome complement to Dan Vickers' work in demonstrating the central role small ports on the geographic periphery of the Atlantic had in the development of British America. As Jarvis so well demonstrates, for most Bermudians, and for many other British colonists, the ocean was where they sought sustenance, identity and a way of life. Having spent twenty years painstakingly researching colonial Bermuda Jarvis has produced a wonderfully written narrative history

worthy of its lengthy gestation. His emphasis on Bermudians' adaptability to their isolated location stands as a useful reminder of how many early British settlers saw areas often referred to as "frontiers" or "borderlands" as central to their lives and economic well-being.