

Book Review: Lisa Bailey, Lindsay Diggelmann, and Kim M. Phillips (eds.), *Old Worlds, New Worlds: European Cultural Encounters, c. 1000-1750* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

Prior to the age of high imperialism, in the context of arduous sea and land voyages, Western Europeans encountered civilizations which refused to accept their assumptions and certainties about the world. They travelled to the Holy Land, the Near East, Africa, America, and even the Far East for a variety of reasons. Sometimes, these travels were voluntary, sometimes forced. Some sought valuable commodities or markets for their goods or investment opportunities; some wanted to spread Christianity or Western ethics, laws, and culture; some aimed for territorial conquest as a means of achieving personal glory or national prestige; and some were exiled as dissidents. On the other hand, many travelled not in person, but in imagination and intellect. They conceptualized ideas which form the crux of modern constructions such as national identity, ethnicity and the ideas about the nature of humanity. By such expansion, whether political or cultural, Western Europeans occupied and controlled the world which was shaped by those centuries of travel and encounter.

For a long time it was normal for Western historians to conduct their research purely with reference to European and American accounts when exploring the stories of European encounters with other parts of the world in the age of Columbus, in the high and late medieval eras, and in the age of improvisation. They insisted on an old paradigm of discovery which is, by and large, Eurocentric. Fortunately, times are changing. A new generation of modern historians has been trained to adopt a non-European perspective, an approach less connected with the story of Western domination. They do not merely seek to master non-European historical sources, they actually try to recapture the thoughts and the rationale for what the non-Europeans did in their own terms.

It gives me great pleasure to say that *Old Worlds, New Worlds: European Cultural Encounters, c. 1000-1750* edited by Lisa Bailey and her colleagues is a fine example of this approach which seeks to emphasize encounters and the mutual impact which European and non-European cultures had on each other. Unlike those who doubt the value of studying “encounters” from a non-European point of view and even despair of the possibility of doing so except superficially, the nine authors in this volume belong to that new generation of Western historians who believe that the effort is not only necessary but actually worthwhile. By examining key themes and moments of

contact between Europe (Old Worlds) and the rest of the world (New Worlds) from around 1000 down to around 1750, this volume shows that “curiosity, conflict and transformation could result from transnational meetings as they did in more far-flung realms.” It covers topics like trans-cultural collision between the armies of the Third Crusade and the Greek populations of Sicily and Cyprus in the twelfth century, cultural conflicts among Armenian, Byzantines and Franks in the 1200s, both real and fictional encounters between Western European and the peoples of the Orient from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, European descriptions of the New World in sixteenth-century England, how the discovery of the New World demarcates a crossroads of thoughts regarding the nature of men, how cultural transitions of any New World products (for example, tobacco) encountered conventional Old World tradition and the interrelationships between modern racism and the physiognomy of humors in the Anglo-Atlantic encounters around 1580-1720.

In each chapter all authors have made their cases forcefully and I shall not attempt to summarize their arguments in this review. What I do want to do is to endorse their plea to eschew a Eurocentric approach, to direct attention to texts and contexts which express a broader range of Western responses to novel people and cultures. This edited volume successfully gives readers a multifaceted sense of the relationship between medieval and (early) modern understandings of issues such as race, culture and humanity. Not only does it argue for the essential role of postcolonial approaches in revising a Eurocentric historiography, this book demonstrates that each encounter between cultures and people is dynamic and specific. As noted by the editors, “each (encounter) was a moment new unto itself.”

This collection, moreover, is extensive not only in its chronological range (spanning the period from the eleventh century to the eighteenth century), but also broad in terms of the sources used by the nine authors. The contributors draw on travelogues, maps, artifacts, philosophical treatises, geographies and utopian satire. Many of the sources have not been explored or have been overlooked by historians so far. For example the Norman-French account of the crusade: *Estoire de la guerre sainte* (History of the Holy War) recorded by Ambroise; the Armenian chronicle: *Patmut’iwn Aristakisi Lastivertts’woy* compiled by Aristake Lastivertts’I; and the travelogue in Mongolia: *Ystoria Mongalorum*, authored by John of Plano Carpini. Even though some materials like Marco Polo’s *Description of the World* and Pero Tafur’s *Travels and Adventures, 1435-1439*, are familiar to readers, in this volume most of them are revisited with a mix of fresh approaches.

Last but not least, one other feature of this work which deserves notice is its interdisciplinary focus. Previous scholars who have studied encounters in Eurasia have been somewhat impatient with those who study encounters in Asia or Americas. Historians, sociologists and social scientists - all have tended to concentrate on their own source materials for inspiration, or to select only a few particular works from other disciplines. In hope of breaking academic boundaries and furthering analysis “by encounters of a scholarly kind,” this collection manifests the geographical scope (stretching from the Americas, Australia, Tahiti, Mongolia, China, Armenia, Sicily to Cyprus) and brings together different experts in various professions. In short, this collection is widely open to disciplines such as history, cultural studies, anthropology and geography. Although there is inevitably more work to be done to make fuller sense of the dialogues between the “old” and the “new” worlds, I would say the chapters collected together in this volume will stimulate enough interest to continue the discourse.

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