From about 1400 to 1900, the Atlantic Ocean served as a major highway, allowing people and goods to move easily between Europe, Africa and the Americas. These interactions and exchanges transformed European, African and American societies and led to the creation of new peoples, cultures, economies and ideas throughout the Atlantic arena. *The Atlantic World* provides a comprehensive and lucid history of one of the most important cross-cultural encounters in human history. The European drive to expand, as well as the creative ways in which the peoples living along the Atlantic’s borders were able to adapt and co-exist, sustained the growth of empires, economies and trade in the Atlantic World.

The forty maps, sixty illustrations and multiple excerpts from primary documents serve to bring the history to life.

Thomas Benjamin is Professor of History and a member of the Center for Transnational and Comparative History at Central Michigan University. He is Editor-in-Chief of the three-volume *Encyclopedia of Western Colonialism Since 1450* and co-editor of *The Atlantic World in the Age of Empire*. 
The Atlantic World

Europeans, Africans, Indians and Their Shared History, 1400–1900

Thomas Benjamin
Central Michigan University

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Thomas Benjamin
Frontmatter
More information
This book is dedicated to Leslie B. Rout Jr. (1935–1987),
jazz musician, fiery iconoclast, historian of Brazil and Spanish America,
professor, mentor and friend.
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Preface

My studies have taken me to very interesting places and pasts in the Americas, Africa and Europe. Like many Latin Americans, West Africans, Europeans and Americans today, I am something of a citizen of the Atlantic. That is, I have been crossing the Atlantic by sea and by air for many years to study, visit and live in Latin America, Europe, the Caribbean and, much less, West Africa – at least so far. The idea for this book came from my students when I was Professor of American Studies at the University of Groningen, The Netherlands, in 1989–90. When I returned to Michigan I created a new course called “Atlantic World in the Age of Empire.” I taught this course throughout the 1990s and read as much of the abundant historiography and relevant printed primary sources related to these times and places as humanly (meaning matrimonially) possible. In 1999–2001, thanks to a sabbatical leave and a Research Professorship from Central Michigan University, I put together two years of uninterrupted research and writing. Research for and rewriting of this book continued for several more years, and I devoted entire semesters and summers to work on this book in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007.

Some brief remarks on terminology are warranted. In this book, I often refer to Europeans, Africans and Indians or Native Americans. Rarely if ever did these peoples think or refer to themselves in those terms. In their perceptions, they were Extremadurans (today’s Spaniards), Zealanders (Dutch), Angoumois (French), and so on; they were, at least in European terms, Fante (Gold Coast, today’s Ghanaians), Efik and Igbo (Benin, today’s Nigerians) and Kongo and Mbundo (today’s Congolese and Angolans), to mention only a few; and Mexico or Nahua (today’s Mexicans) and Guarani (today’s Brazilians, Paraguayans and scattered other nationals). The term “Indian” or “Indio” is today politically incorrect in many circles. Of course, it is a misnomer, in the sense that Columbus believed the people he came upon in the Caribbean were Asians, that is, what we would call today East Indians. Historians can hardly avoid the term because the documents and printed sources from that past – European sources, to be sure – are suffused with the term. I employ it as well as the term “Native American” and, of course,
local and self-descriptive names. We in the United States still live in “Indian
Country,” if the souvenirs sold in powwows mean anything.

There is a problem in referring to those Africans and their descendants in
Africa, the Atlantic islands and the Americas who were so unfortunate to
become slaves. This stark word, this adjective, implies that the condition of
slavery defined their very being. In fact, these people were captives in Africa
and during the middle passage and enslaved Africans on plantations and in
cities. Historical sources and documents use many words, terms and names
we would never use today. I quote from slave traders and slave masters of
centuries past to create some sense of the rough and ugly nature of this age
and these people.

I have been working on this book for about ten years, and I have depended
upon the kindness of many old friends and quite a few new ones. This
history is based on an extensive reading of other books, both the classic his-
tories of the early modern era as well as the most recent relevant scholarship
on Europe, Africa and the Americas. I have also examined a considerable
number of the printed sources from this era. In my years of reading and
research, I have been assisted by the helpful and knowledgeable staffs at
the following research institutions: The John Carter Brown Library, Provi-
dence, Rhode Island; The William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michi-
gan; The Clark Historical Library, Mt. Pleasant, Michigan; The Library
Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; The Lilly Library, Bloomington,
Indiana; The National Library at the National Autonomous University of
Mexico (UNAM), Mexico City; The Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois;
and the university libraries of Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant;
The University of Chicago, Hyde Park, Illinois; Michigan State University,
East Lansing; the University of Groningen, The Netherlands; The University
of São Paulo, Brazil; and The University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

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In his preface to *The Muqaddimah*, one of the great works of history, Ibn Khaldūn refers to his book and its arguments. “I treated everything comprehensively and extensively and explained the arguments and reasons for its existence.” He recognized that no author has all the answers. “As a result, this book has become unique, as it contains unusual knowledge and familiar if hidden wisdom. Still, after all has been said, I am conscious of imperfections when I look at the work of scholars past and present. I confess my inability to penetrate so difficult a subject.” I, too, am conscious of the imperfections of this book. Like Ibn Khaldūn, I know that the Atlantic World is a vast and difficult subject, and that I have not penetrated all of the important topics, issues and problems of Atlantic history. In history, we have no access to complete truth; as Michael Stanford writes, “we must keep an open mind, recognize the fallibility of our beliefs, be always keen to widen our knowledge, and be ever ready to see the possibility of truth in an unwelcome fact or unconvincing opinion.” My wife, Sharon Lee House, recognizes the fallibility of my opinions and truths all the time. Since that Sunday, late last century when we were married in the parish of Saint Michael on the island of Barbados, we have had many occasions when we both needed open minds. Her occasional skepticism and steady emotional sustenance in Barbados, Veracruz, Southampton, Bruges, São Paulo, Accra, Mount Pleasant, Anna Maria Island and other havens and hideaways have helped me chart my course in life.

TB

Anna Maria Island
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Introduction

The idea of an Atlantic World has blossomed in recent decades as a way to encourage all of us in the Americas, Africa and Europe to examine, teach and write about our localities, provinces and nations from wider and comparative perspectives. This is a good idea but we need to remember that the Atlantic World is, in fact, a useful and interesting historical concept more than a self-evident historical reality. Cosmopolitans – that is, the well-traveled worldly type of the early modern era – never employed the term or viewed the societies and peoples perched around the Atlantic Ocean as a larger coherent whole. Yet as the saying goes, what we see often depends upon where we stand. The Chinese published a guide to the Atlantic Ocean in 1701 that described the peoples of Europe, Africa and the Americas as “the people of the Great Western Sea.” It is often strangers from afar who see a unity, however tenuous and feeble, that is indistinct to those within.

This book focuses on the connections, interactions and exchanges that crisscrossed the Atlantic Ocean beginning in the fifteenth century. These attachments and engagements transformed European, West African and Native American societies and also created new peoples, societies, cultures, economies and ideas throughout the Atlantic littoral. The past that is under consideration here was vast, protracted, multitudinous and extraordinarily complex. How could it be otherwise, with a historical palette that brings together so many distant lands, so many and various societies and cultures and nearly five centuries of uncountable individuals, events and stories? The past is largely without form or meaning in the absence of historians. They frame the subject, discern patterns, tell a story and give it significance. It is the task of historians to select among the infinite number of facts and abundant accounts to craft a history of past worlds. This history, as all histories, is an interpretation. It defines the Atlantic World and tells its story through the lens of three overarching themes.

The first theme emphasizes the importance of Western Europeans in expanding beyond their homelands into the Atlantic Ocean and onto its many islands and shores. It may seem Eurocentric to some historians and readers to begin on this note as Europe has long been portrayed as the most
prominent actor in this drama. But as Philip Curtin, the highly respected historian of Africa, has written, “in fact Europe was the most prominent actor.” European maritime prowess, according to Curtin, “was the decisive factor shaping the Atlantic world.” Europeans were the first to transform the Atlantic Ocean from a great and seemingly impassible barrier into a highway of trade and communication. European mariners and traders as well as colonists, soldiers and missionaries spanned the ocean on behalf of princes, merchants, the church and, of course, their own private interests. Europeans created the shipping lanes, maritime empires and commercial systems that tied every place together. And it was Europeans, and their American cousins, that invented the ideas and led the revolutions to collapse the Atlantic empires.

The second theme argues that the remarkable growth of Atlantic trades, colonies, economies and empires was the result of the creative and adaptive interactions among Europeans, Africans and Indians. As Europeans reached the many shores of the Atlantic Ocean, they would never have thrived, or in many cases survived, without the cooperation, trade, labor and knowledge of Africans and Indians. History can be both cruel and beneficent, noted John Stuart Mill, and in this Atlantic age we see something similar, a paradox of partnership and exploitation. It is a paradox, at least to us in the present, to see partnership and exploitation existing side by side. African princes and merchants raided and captured Africans from other regions and ethnic groups and partnered with European traders to sell them into the Atlantic slave trade. Native American kingdoms and chiefs allied with European war bands to make war against other, more powerful native confederations, states and empires. In most slave societies in the Americas, free men of color served in militias to defend that colony from rival European empires and the greater threat, slave revolts. In Spanish American estates, Hispanicized Africans and blacks supervised the labor of dependent Indian laborers. Unlike Western Europeans, West Africans and Native Americans rarely saw themselves in a manner we would today call a pan-racial or ethnic identity. Africans and Indians many centuries ago lived in worlds of many different groups, languages and cultures and, as a result, it was a dangerous world of enemies near and far. Europeans were willing and able to take advantage of these rivalries. At first, Europeans were relatively weak in Africa and the Americas but in time they became more and more powerful and wealthy, which tilted the balance from partnership to exploitation. However, Africans and Indians were rarely simply victims of Europeans. They resisted and fought back, negotiated the demands put upon them and carved out meaningful lives, whatever the circumstances. Individuals and groups make history acting in their perceived interests, and in the context of specific circumstances that provide limited options. We in the present may not always fully understand or approve of their choices. The English historian Geoffrey Elton was impressed by the “magnificent unpredictability of what human beings may think and do.” We all should be.

The third theme maintains that this Atlantic system had a beginning and an end. We might call this pattern, using an old historical figure of speech, a rise and fall. Of course, the rise is easy to recognize and characterize. Prior
Map 1: The Fifteenth-Century Atlantic.
to the fifteenth century, the peoples, societies and polities in the Americas, Africa and Europe had little or no contact with one another. The European voyages of exploration in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the expansion of transatlantic trade, expeditions of settlement and conquest, along with crucial African and Indian interaction with Europeans, made possible everything that came later. The idea of an end or a fall is more difficult and controversial in several ways. Why should we consider an end to this Atlantic system at all? Goods and people crisscross the Atlantic Ocean today in ships and airliners, and our family and friendship connections, commerce, diplomacy and more are conducted instantaneously from continent to continent by phone, fax and e-mail. If we accept the idea of a limited chronology, then the problem becomes determining the end. Historians have offered different possibilities: was it the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Spanish-American Revolutions, the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade or the end of New World slavery?

It makes sense to differentiate the early Atlantic from our contemporary Atlantic. That earlier Atlantic was tied together in ways that were unique to that age and that no longer exist. Transatlantic empires, the slave trade and a commodities trade made possible by African slaves in New World plantations were just some of the most important connections. In that earlier Atlantic, unlike our Atlantic today, West Africa, South America and the Caribbean were particularly important to the functioning of the international economy and the struggles between the great powers. Four times more Africans than Europeans had migrated – that is, had been transported involuntarily – to the Americas in that earlier Atlantic. In that earlier age, those European immigrants and their progeny who lived in the Americas by and large believed they lived in one of several “New Guineas” – that is, an Africanized part of America – or in “Indian Country.”

This earlier Atlantic came to an end over a prolonged period of time as a result of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Spanish-American Revolutions, the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the end of New World slavery. It came to an end also because there were no liberal revolutions in Africa in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. “Europe and the Western Hemisphere, profoundly linked to the peoples of West Africa,” writes Bernard Bailyn, “have taken different paths in many different spheres since the age of the Enlightenment, and in the course of the nineteenth century they became part of a global world system.” Ultimately, that earlier, more coherent Atlantic region came to an end because everything became faster and the world became smaller. Just about everything just about everywhere has become interconnected, intertwined and interactive.

This earlier Atlantic is called the Atlantic World in this book following the lead of the French historian Fernand Braudel. In his classic histories *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949) and *Civilization and Capitalism* (1979), Braudel referred to the Mediterranean as a Welttheater, that is, a world-theater. By this, he meant “not merely the sea itself but the whole area stimulated by its trading activities,
whether near its shores or far away. I have treated it in short as a world in itself.” The Atlantic basin, littorals and substantial parts of adjacent continents were, from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries, in many ways a world in itself, and so the term is warranted. After the Second World War, journalists, intellectuals and historians began to refer to a contemporary Atlantic community and look at the past and see an Atlantic civilization. J. H. Elliott employed the term “Atlantic World” in 1970, and he showed a clear appreciation of the wider context of the Atlantic World – Europe, Africa and the Americas – as a whole. Also in the 1970s, the appearance of world-systems theory provided a perspective of a widespread system of interaction, exchanges and information – which embraced regional systems of interaction – that extended beyond the political boundaries of any state or empire.

I would hope that Atlantic World history should give nearly equal weight to Western Europe, West and Central Africa and the Americas, including the Caribbean, and never venture too far from the ocean. Furthermore, this history does not delve excessively into the history of the American colonies, pre-Colonial Africa or early modern Europe. These histories we have in abundance already, and increasingly historians of these regions are writing their histories in light of Atlantic perspectives. We should also realize that this Atlantic World was both a world in itself to some extent and part of the wider world. European mariners reached the edge of the Indian Ocean before they found their way to the Americas. A Portuguese fleet on its way to India reached the coast of Brazil in 1500. The Atlantic World is not all we need to know about the early modern history of the world; it is a part of world history, and it needs to be integrated into the histories of the Indian Ocean, the China Sea and the Pacific Ocean.

More than fifty years ago, Braudel wrote: “I hope too that I shall not be reproached for my excessive ambitions, for my desire and need to see on a grand scale. It will perhaps prove that history can do more than study walled gardens.” As someone who has studied my own walled gardens, I developed an irrepressible urge to write a total history of a great ocean and its surrounding peoples, kingdoms, traders, empires and more, something Clifford Geertz has called an “impossible book.” So be it. A difficult project for me need not be difficult for my readers to read, understand and, I hope, enjoy. In writing this book, I have been inspired by Pedro de Cieza de León’s address to his readers in his 1552 chronicle, The Discovery and Conquest of Peru: “And, good and honorable men, this you will comprehend and learn without knowing it when you see the modesty and simplicity of my style, which seeks neither verbosity nor flowery words nor other rhetoric, and only wishes to relate the truth with sincerity because I believe that good writing must be like one person conversing with another – and as one speaks and no more.”

This volume is divided into three parts, each with narrative and thematic chapters. Part I, “The Ocean Shall Unloose the Bonds of Things,” examines the origins of the Atlantic World in four chapters: Chapter 1 describes the isolated lands and peoples perched around the Atlantic Ocean prior to the European voyages of exploration. Chapter 2 explores the European opening
of the Atlantic Ocean in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Chapter 3 analyzes the alliances and conquests that allowed the Iberians to forge empires in Africa and the Americas. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the early Atlantic World, an Iberian Atlantic World, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Part II, “Europe Supported by Africa and America,” evaluates the more complex Atlantic World of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the French, English and Dutch entered the arena as privateers, settlers, shippers, slave traders, planters and, more than anything else, enemies of Spain. The five chapters of Part II examine some of the most important issues of Atlantic history in some detail. Chapter 5 concentrates on the first battles of the Atlantic, the era when France, England and the Netherlands brought the Iberian dominance of the Atlantic to an end and created their own Atlantic maritime empires. Chapter 6 contemplates how the five European empires, agents, settlers and missionaries in the Americas interacted with the many and very different Native American societies. This chapter investigates how these different Europeans produced different types of colonies and transformed native societies in various ways. Chapters 7 and 8 consider the Atlantic slave trade and New World slavery. These subjects appear in all of the earlier chapters in reference to broader issues, but here they are examined in their own right and, sometimes, in considerable detail. Chapter 9 analyzes the complex relations between men and women – mostly European men and African, Native American and European (and Euroamerican) women – and how these partners created new societies and transmitted many of the basic characteristics of European culture to the Americas.

Part III, “A New Order of the Ages,” contemplates the events and persons that brought the dissolution of the Atlantic World in four chapters. Chapter 10 evaluates the struggle for Atlantic – and, indeed, world – supremacy between France and Great Britain during the long eighteenth century. In many ways, this struggle was the mainspring of most of the great events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chapters 11 and 12 appraise the Atlantic in the Age of Revolution (1776–1826) and argue, following the lead of earlier historians, that all of these political and social movements were inspired by a common liberal ideology. Their leaders and followers sought liberty and equality, and for these reasons and many others we can call them Atlantic revolutions. Chapter 13 probes the century-long struggle to abolish the Atlantic slave trade and to end New World slavery. This history is not simply a story of white reformers but also one of black runaways, rebels and soldiers. Finally, a short Epilogue considers the end of the Atlantic World and the development of our contemporary modern or global world.

The Pillars of Hercules – the name given to the Rock of Gibraltar and Mount Hacho, facing each other across the Strait of Gibraltar where the Mediterranean Sea ends and the Atlantic Ocean begins – had been known since the days of the ancients as the edge of the known world. To the Greeks and the Romans, the twin rocks were a symbol of the gateway between the inner and outer worlds. The Greek writer Pinder noted that “what lies beyond cannot be approached by wise men or unwise. I shall not try, or I would be a fool.” In the ancient and early medieval imagination, the Pillars were a
forbidding *non plus ultra*, a warning to mariners not to proceed as there was literally “nothing further beyond.” Although some ancient philosophers believed seafaring and connecting the separate regions of the globe were against the natural order, Renaissance mariners transformed the oceans from impassable voids to commercial thoroughfares in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and beyond. In 1517, Charles of Ghent boarded a ship in the port of Flushing (Vlissingen) in Zeeland, in what was then the Spanish Netherlands. Charles was on his way to Spain to claim the thrones of Castile and Aragón. The ship in which he traveled had painted its sails with his new personal emblem depicting the Pillars of Hercules with a banner bearing the legend *Plus Outre* – “Further Beyond.” In removing the word *Non* – “Nothing” – from the traditional phrase, Charles declared that his empire had already gone beyond the traditional edge of the world and, furthermore, there were no limits to future discoveries and conquests. This idea expressed the self-confidence of the wider Western European culture that expanded into the Atlantic Ocean.

Not quite a century before Charles boarded his ship in Flushing, the Portuguese settled the islands of the Madeira archipelago off the coast of northwest Africa. The first boy and girl born on the main island of Madeira were christened Adam and Eve. These early colonists on Madeira and others throughout the Atlantic World later believed they were beginning the world anew. Following the discoveries of Columbus and the letters of Amerigo Vespucci, European writers and mapmakers began to refer to the Americas as *Novus Mundus*, the New World. The islands and shores of the Atlantic World were not a New World for Europeans only. The arrival of Europeans in West Africa and in the Americas transformed the lives and destinies of Africans and Indians, sometimes for better and more often for worse. To borrow a phrase, the Atlantic World became a New World for all. In all the lands touched by this great ocean, we are today living in the wake of those transformations and revolutions of long ago.

**Additional Reading**


Introduction

Douglas R. Egerton, Alison Games, Jane G. Landers, Kris Lane, and Donald R. Wright, The Atlantic World: A History (Wheeling, 2007).
Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson and Will Kaufman, editors, New Perspectives in Transatlantic Studies (Lanham, 2002).
Alan Taylor, American Colonies (New York, 2001).