eral-purpose technologies necessary to sustain rates of productivity and economic growth comparable to those achieved during the early post-World War II decades and again during the information technology bubble that began in the early 1990s. I have also argued that the defense efforts and wars in which we have been engaged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries—and in which we are likely to be engaged for the next several decades—are unlikely to induce the development of new general-purpose technologies.

The ability of the United States to sustain rapid productivity and economic growth in the future will require the design and implementation of civil institutions capable of mobilizing the necessary scientific, technical, and financial resources. As of yet, however, the United States has demonstrated little capacity to mobilize and direct public resources for the generation of new commercial general-purpose technologies. Unless it does so, I am forced to conclude that when the history of American technology development in the next several decades is eventually written, it will be written in the context of slower productivity and economic growth than the relatively high rates that prevailed in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s and during the productivity bubble that began during the early 1990s.

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4 For the best single account of the development of the Internet see Thomas P. Hughes, Rescuing Prometheus (Pantheon, 1998).

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**ONLY CONNECT: THE RISE AND RISE (AND FALL?) OF ATLANTIC HISTORY**

Trevor Burnard

Stocks in Atlantic history are high. “We are all Atlanticists now,” declares David Armitage with blithe disregard for the perils of hubris. The topic has developed the type of institutional apparatus that signals it is more than a passing fancy. Courses on “The Atlantic World” abound; positions in Atlantic history have been advertised at an increasing number of institutions; and postgraduate programs for Atlantic history specialists are now appearing. Atlantic historians gather at conferences at exotic locations around the world; research centers with an Atlantic focus are created every year; and funding opportunities to do Atlantic history are becoming more frequent. Perhaps most telling, major universities, research libraries, and scholarly organizations have begun to treat Atlantic history as a subfield, making it possible for a cadre of historians to advance their careers, meet lots of agreeable people who share their own predications in interesting and stimulating places, and network through joint participation in seminars and fellowships.

The Atlantic way allows budding historians a multitude of new research and job opportunities. This is a remarkable turnabout, considering the dim prospects facing English-speaking historians of the early modern era in the late 1970s. For a graduate student in early American history, topics and areas that had previously been at the cutting edge of scholarship were now passe. The scholarship of the 1960s and 1970s led away from a broadening vision. The work of scholars influenced by the *Annales* school was extraordinary, ushering in a golden age of scholarship. But a major failure of social history in all its multitudinous varieties was a loss of focus. Historians concentrated so intently on the details of small-scale communities that, as Bernard Bailyn put it in an extremely influential 1982 jeremiad, previously “discrete and easily controllable” fields of knowledge had become “boundless” and “incomprehensible,” the “wider boundaries” unclear. Historians coming into graduate school from the late 1970s into the mid-1980s were confronted by a bewildering number of studies of small-scale communities in early America, most of which were individually excellent but, taken together, generally led to confusion. To adapt the old joke told about either economists or lawyers, one could lay down side by side a host of community studies of New England towns and never come to an agreement.

Similarly, 17th-century British history was becoming ever more myopic, introspective, and
irrelevant. Indeed, scholars of the English Civil War undertook the discipline-destroying act of claiming that the object of their study—the English Revolution—did not really exist. It seemed as if there was nothing interesting left to be said about either early modern Britain or colonial America. Branching out into Atlantic history or the related New British History was a way of escaping intellectual stupefaction. It also gave aspiring academics an entrance into a still fiercely contested job market. In part, Atlantic history has developed out of the relentless need for scholarship to be about new and unexplored fields. In part, also, it has been an understandable response by historians—as attuned to market possibilities as any other group of professionals—to the changing market of academic scholarship and employment.

What I have said thus far may strike readers as unduly cynical in its emphasis on the career-enhancing potentialities of Atlantic history. But the institutional apparatus that has accompanied the advent of Atlantic history as one of the more important historiographical developments of recent times did not develop just because it met the needs of a generation of historians anxious to be established in a dynamic new area. Atlantic history has real intellectual clout. It has reinvigorated the histories of early America and Latin America. Its principal theme—that the Atlantic from the 15th century to the present was not just a physical fact but a particular zone of exchange and interchange, circulation, and transmission—is a conceptual leap forward. True believers in the approach argue that Atlantic history, with its emphasis on movement, fluidity, and connections between nations, peoples, and events, shows how the modern world was made. The idea of Atlantic history as a field of historical inquiry that is “additive,” or more than the sum of an aggregation of several national or regional histories, pushes historians toward both methodological pluralism and expanded horizons. In short, my comments on the career-enhancing possibilities of Atlantic history may be cynical, but they are not the result of skepticism about the utility of Atlantic history as a method or as a subject of inquiry.

The language used to describe Atlantic history is revealing about its appeal. The words that come up most frequently when Atlantic history is described are “movement,” “diversity,” “complex,” “networks,” “creation,” “negotiations,” “enlargement,” “dynamic,” “permeable,” “multiple,” “invention,” “exchanges,” “broadening,” and, above all else, “connections.” By contrast, other types of histories are “narrow,” “technical,” “isolated,” “domestic,” and “static.” I have listed them in this way, without attention to grammar, in order to capture the sort of ambition that modern politicians use to reflect the political and cultural tone of the post-Cold War world.

For the aforementioned Bernard Bailyn, a leading proponent, the advantage of Atlantic history as a field is that it provides a way for historians, increasingly Balkanized into smaller and smaller subfields, to “put the story together again.” Historians of the Atlantic world can talk about the “rise of the West” and the foundations of the modern world in a sophisticated fashion, one suitable for a contemporary audience convinced of the virtues of diversity and the reality of social and historical fluidity. For this reason, Bailyn stresses the roots of Atlantic history in a specific political moment in the history of the United States immediately following World War II. The idea of Atlantic history, he argues, came from a reformulation of Wilsonian universalism among Americanists of an internationalist mindset who concentrated on fostering links in an “Atlantic community” of countries with a common heritage of “Western Christendom.” In the same way that Atlanticism provided a common focus for internationalists of that period, so now Atlantic history offers historians an escape from the self-defeating tendency to study smaller and smaller units unconnected with larger processes. Atlantic history allows historians to concentrate on the dynamic aspects of the past and become “narrators of worlds in motion—worlds as complex, as unpredictable, and as transient as our own.”

For some historians, however, the motivation to do Atlantic history is very different. Many practitioners find attractive what critics of Atlantic history usually consider the greatest weakness of the field: the absorptive capacity of Atlantic history to soak up all manner of different concerns into one very loosely interconnected system. Contra Bailyn, they do not want to put the story of the rise of the West back together again (even though some share Bailyn’s concerns about lack of coherence). The last thing these Atlanticists want is a retreat into Eurocentrism, which seems like a new way of promoting imperialism without mentioning its name. Instead, they celebrate marginality rather than integration and focus on disaggregation as much as aggregation.

We can see these impulses at work in the reminiscences of Jack Greene about the origins of the first and most influential of Atlantic programs, the program in Atlantic History, Culture, and Society at The Johns Hopkins University. Greene was encouraged to found this program because of his seething discontent in the late 1960s with “the narrow Eurocentric” character of his institution. He was especially concerned with the lack of attention given to the black experience, which he knew was at least as important as the white experience in shaping the contours of early American life. He was determined to expand his department’s geographical coverage into Third World areas such as Africa and Latin America. Atlantic history was convenient shorthand to articulate this broadening of scope.

Greene was especially influenced by the work of the sociologist Edward Shils, who articulated in 1961 a distinction between centers and peripheries. What made Shils’s work a valuable analytical tool was his emphasis on how authority between center and periphery had always to be negotiated rather than imposed. Moreover, authority did not always move from center to periphery but often traveled the other way around. As Greene saw it, center-periphery theory helped to demonstrate how peripheral areas could enjoy considerable autonomy and independence from the center.

One of the notable features of current Atlantic historiography is how much attention it gives to places like Providence Island near Nicaragua, Bance Island in West Africa, St. Eustatius, Novia Scotia, Barbados, and Vila Boa de Goias, near modern Brasilia. A criticism sometimes made about Atlantic history, usually muttered sotto voce at conferences, is that one of its purposes seems to be to find the most insignificant places and claim earth-shattering importance for them. In a lot of ways this unfair criticism is justified, because Atlantic historians argue that it is at the peripheries that the true lineaments of Atlantic history can be discerned. In small places, the impact of the collision between various worlds can be most clearly measured. If Atlantic history has a one-sentence credo, it is D.W. Meinig’s contention that it comprises the study of “a sudden and harsh encounter between two old worlds that transformed both and integrated them into a single New World.” The sum of the connections, Atlantic historians contend, is greater than the parts. David Hancock, for example, argues for what he calls a spider’s web approach in Atlantic history. He sees the Atlantic world as a complex, non-linear, largely self-organizing system.

What, then, has been the impact of the “Atlantic turn” on historical study? In one area, the influence of Atlantic history has been undeniable. Early American history and Atlantic history have become almost synonymous. Early Americanists were always likely to be receptive to Atlantic history because of their tendency to see developments in colonial British America as
bound to developments in Britain. It was a short step from being interested in the social and economic comparisons that could be made about Britain and colonial America to looking at what things connected the two areas and other societies on the various continents bordering the Atlantic Ocean.

Paradoxically, while the notion of bringing disparate continents together under the Atlantic rubric has breathed new life into the study of colonial America, it has also turned that field into something of a ghetto. The new focus on things Atlantic has led to significant disengagement between early American historians and early modern British historians. Such a sweeping statement needs to be qualified by acknowledging that in one important arena, 18th-century British history, the historical connections between America and Britain have increased rather than decreased. The most influential historians of 18th-century Britain—Linda Colley, Kathleen Wilson, J.C.D. Clark, John Brewer—have written important books on Britain that have an explicitly transatlantic focus.

Yet 18th-century British history has always been a less crowded and less influential field than that of the 17th century. There the decline of interest in American history among British historians has been palpable. In the heyday of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure the linkages between the study of colonial British America and 17th-century England and Scotland were frequently made, to the extent that investigations into social structure in both Britain and America were part of a single project. These occur no longer. The disengagement has been particularly apparent on one side of the equation: English social historians no longer read the social history of the early colonies, even when it has direct implications for English social history. For example, Jim Horn’s Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake has attracted virtually no attention among English social historians, despite its title, its extensive recreation of the social structure of the English West Country, and its enthusiastic reception by early American historians. Moreover, the leading journals in 17th-century British history show little to no interest in America. Journals with a broader ambit, such as Past and Present and The Historical Journal, ignore early America and the Atlantic world entirely.

Neither has the Atlantic world had much impact on U.S. history. Most work on early national and antebellum American history is resolutely focused on the history of America as a nation-state. As Joyce Chaplin argues, the best studies by mid-career historians of the Revolutionary period now tend to be about the early republic rather than the Revolution and are self-consciously indifferent to Atlantic perspectives. The field of the early republic, she suggests, exerts a gravitational pull on colonial American and Atlantic scholarship. Atlantic history not only fades the further we go beyond 1789, but comprises an ever diminishing portion of the avalanche of scholarship produced by American historians of all time periods. Even the history of the American Revolution is not well integrated into the Atlantic world. Differing emphases of interpretation and approach now make colonial and Revolutionary American history almost two separate entities.

In sum, the response to Armitage’s boast that “we are all Atlanticists now” must be “no, we are not.” Some of us are Atlanticists, but many more historians, to whom Atlantic historians ought to feel a link, have no interest in the intellectual agenda set out by Atlantic historians. The relative lack of interest shown in Atlantic history by other historians should dampen our enthusiasm for making a whole-scale conversion to the delights of Atlantic history.

So proceed with caution before jumping on the Atlantic history bandwagon. It promises much as a field, but questions hover over whether it can deliver on that promise. For my generation of historians, the Atlantic history movement has been a positive good, allowing us to travel to interesting places, meet like-minded people, and do work that is innovative and which does not replicate narrowly the work done by our social history predecessors. The danger for the next generation of historians is what happens when the bar is raised, when work in Atlantic history has to be genuinely transatlantic, necessitating an in-depth knowledge of several cultures and several languages. Will early American historians feel comfortable marooned from their compatriots who do United States history or early modern European history, and will they be happy being located in the institutional ghetto—fabulous as that ghetto may be—that contains Latin American, African, Asian, and world historians? In short, if you are part of the early Americanist majority that keeps Atlantic history afloat, keep hold of your stocks in Atlantic history, but make sure you diversify sufficiently to avoid being hurt in the crash that follows a heady boom.

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