

EUROPEAN EXPANSION OVERSEAS

(Re-write)

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When seeking a greater understanding of the intellectual, cultural, political, and economic dynamics underlying Europe's oversea expansion after 1492, there are two books which should be read - The Old World and the New, 1492-1650 by J.H. Elliott, and Trade and Dominion: The European Overseas Empires in the Eighteenth Century by J.H. Parry. Both books, when considered together, provide a comprehensive overview of how and why European oversea expansion began, and how the process continued without pause, eventually resulting in European domination of almost the entire world. This comprehensive overview is obtained despite the fact that when viewed separately, each book is remarkably dissimilar in style, content, and emphasis. Yet they uniquely complement one another in such a way as to provide an overall picture of European oversea expansion covering a period starting from 1492 until the early nineteenth century.

Elliott's book addresses the question of how Europe was effected by contact with the New World starting with Christopher Columbus in 1492. Elliott describes how the Spanish established themselves in the New World, what motivated them to expand overseas, and how they coped with what they found. It would be a mistake, however, to perceive Elliott's story as being merely a conventional account of what the Spanish did to establish their presence in the New World. Rather, it is a thoughtful, insightful, and compelling treatise on how the discovery of the New World impacted on the traditional European view of the world, and on the economy of Europe.

Elliott shows how the Spanish were amazed by what they had found and how they reacted to what they had seen, particularly the indigenous civilizations with whom the Spanish made contact and soon conquered and destroyed. According to Elliott, it took the Spanish and other Europeans a long time to fully assimilate and appreciate what the discovery of the New World actually meant in terms of the nature of the world and of man. Elliott suggests that the Europeans had great difficulty incorporating what had been found into their mental frame of reference, which was limited. Indeed, Elliott describes how the Europeans were not even certain whether the native inhabitants were human and capable of accepting conversion to Christianity. The ethnocentricity of the first European explorers, led by the Spanish, was so pronounced that it effectively limited their ability to describe what they had seen, and to view what they had seen in a more objective manner.

Thus, instead of being merely an historical study of an era in history, namely, the initial period of European exploration and conquest of the New World, Elliott's book actually is an excellent psycho-sociological account of how people coped with change, for, as Elliott shows, the Spanish were profoundly shocked by what they had found in the New World; and while they were busy quickly transforming the New World into a colonial possession, the initial contact itself had a profound effect on the Old World too. This is why Elliott's book is unique.

It provides a new and different view of an epoch in history, and does so in a manner which is both interesting and informative, as well as highly credible. The credibility of Elliott's book is difficult to doubt. It is based upon an impressive array of primary and secondary sources which provide revealing glimpses of how Europeans grappled with the problem of trying to explain what had been discovered in the New World in terms of traditional views which were woefully inadequate for the task. For instance, Elliott cites a number of sources, such as Cortes and Las Casas, which shed much light on how Europeans perceived the inhabitants of the New World and how they tried to fathom what were, to the Europeans, completely alien cultures. Interestingly, and also equally revealing, are several sources cited by Elliott in the part of the book where he shows how Christopher Columbus *was* almost completely forgotten during the sixteenth century.

Chronologically, Parry's book continues from the point that Elliott's book ends, but examines the subject of European overseas expansion from an entirely different point of view. Unlike Elliott, who showed how the discovery of the New World completely upset traditional European views of the world, Parry's main focus is on how economic factors prompted the nations of Europe to expand overseas in the quest for markets, which, in turn, led to the emergence of overseas empires as the mother countries in Europe established and maintained maritime links with their colonial possessions throughout much of the world. Parry describes the first stage of European expansion, encompassing the period of time covered

by Elliott's book, as the era of discovery and reconnaissance during which new lands were discovered and settled primarily along the coasts of South America and the eastern coast of North America. This period was dominated by the Spanish who established themselves in Central and South America while other European countries, in a desire to follow suit, established settlements in what was at the time considered the less desirable regions along the east coast of North America. But starting in the late seventeenth century, the British, French, and Dutch entered the Pacific Ocean, marking the beginning of the second stage of European expansion during which they established colonies and settlements in the Pacific Ocean, Australia, the East Indies, the West Indies, and India. Parry shows how these colonies were linked with the mother countries in Europe, and as a result they became the foundation upon which the European oversea empires developed. Parry's premise is that the European expansion into these regions was due to commercial pressure to acquire new markets for trade, and he describes the intense competition, especially between the French and the British, in the drive to open up new markets and establish domination in those far-flung regions. Parry also shows how Spanish power began to wane as the other countries, especially Great Britain, expanded into new areas overseas. This expansion inevitably led to clashes with Spain, especially in the Caribbean. Clashes occurred with the French too. During the Seven Year War, Britain and France fought for domination in North America and the West Indies.

Particularly interesting is Parry's description of the attitudes held by the European exploiters toward their native subjects. After reading Parry and comparing what he wrote with Elliott, it seems apparent that the European empire builders who followed after the Spanish had the same ethnocentric, superior, and paternalistic attitude toward their native subjects as the Spanish had toward the indigenous populations they had subjugated during the sixteenth century, and used the same rationalizations to justify their domination over other peoples. Unfortunately, the subject is not a major focus of Parry's work and is assigned to one small chapter near the end of the book. Thus, there is some, but not very much, consideration of how the Europeans dealt with the moral implications of their acts, and only a relatively brief discussion of how the contact with different cultures impacted on European intellectual thought. Because of these deficiencies, Parry's book lacks an introspective quality which renders it somewhat banal. That is not to say, however, that Parry's book lacks interest or offers nothing of substance. Quite the contrary. A work so comprehensive, well-written, and well-researched has a great deal to offer, especially in terms of providing a greater understanding and appreciation of how such a basic and simple drive as greed could motivate people to travel half way around the world through unchartered waters in wooden sailing ships seeking new ways to make money. But a study on greed, although interesting, cannot be considered unique, although Parry does a good job in describing its manifestations. Parry's book, indeed, can

be seen as a descriptive account of how greed led to conquest, and the ingenious ways in which this was accomplished. For instance, Parry devotes two chapters to technological advances in ship-building, navigation, charting, medical care and the like which made possible the links between the mother countries and their oversea possessions. Without these technological advances, the entire maritime expansion would have been impossible. Parry also describes how industrial development gave even greater impetus to the rush to acquire new markets. As a result, Parry's book succeeds in demonstrating how greed and aggressiveness are interrelated, and how people may commit the vilest acts for financial gain and to attain economic supremacy, But although there may be some substantive value to Parry's book from a sociological or psychological standpoint, this clearly was not the author's intent. Nonetheless, Parry is in complete agreement with Elliott insofar as explaining what drove the Europeans to expand overseas. Spain wanted gold; the British, French, and Dutch merchants wanted markets. In both cases the motivating factor was greed. For illustrating this point, whether intentionally or unintentionally, both authors deserve praise.

Like Elliott's book, Parry's book is well-researched. Parry cites hundreds of primary and secondary sources to substantiate the main point of his book. Parry even cites a few sources relating to European impressions of other cultures and the issue of slavery. But clearly, Parry's emphasis is on how Europe brought change to the world through

its oversea expansion, which is a totally different theme than that of Elliott's book, and this difference is reflected by the kind of sources cited by both authors. For instance, Elliott places great reliance on primary sources by fifteenth and sixteenth century authors such as Christopher Columbus, Hernan Perez de Oliva, Francisco Lopez de Gomara, and Hernan Cortes, who all wrote about the discovery of the New World, while Parry relies almost exclusively on works which cover, from economic and political standpoints, a variety of subjects relating to European oversea expansion. Such works include those of R. Parès, L.H. Gipson, H. Carrington, and Parry himself. Different sources lead to different histories.

In conclusion, Elliott's book and Parry's book constitute two historical works, differing in style and content and emphasizing different themes. But when considered together, their differences become far less important in comparison to the composite picture that both books provide of the discovery of the New World and the European oversea expansion which followed. Elliott's book describes how Europe, during the initial period of exploration and exploitation of the New World, experienced a culture shock after indigenous cultures were found which were so alien to Europe's that the Europeans could not adequately fathom, or accept, what had been seen. Then, as related by Parry, there followed another stage of European oversea expansion marked by a world-wide mad dash for markets motivated by the most mercenary of aims, namely, to make money. Parry shows how the competition for markets was so merciless and intense that wars broke out

between the competing nations, with the losers conceding valuable colonial possessions to the winners. There is no cause to doubt the veracity of these books because the sources upon which they are based are impeccable. Thus these books can be seen as examples of excellent historiography which should be treated as important historical works that enhance our understanding of what happened and why.

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