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L. H. Roper. Advancing Empire: English Interests and Overseas Expansion, 1613–1688.

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L. H. Roper. *Advancing Empire: English Interests and Overseas Expansion, 1613-1688*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Xii+302. ISBN

L.H. Roper provides an account of seventeenth century English expansion that focuses on the operation of private interests in the process. He argues that “primary responsibility for advancing seventeenth century English commercial and territorial activities” (2) belonged to a group of merchants and aristocrats in London. “Even the increased capacity of the English state to exercise power arose from initiatives from individuals outside the state” (13), he asserts. In doing so, he takes aim at much current historiography: “Atlantic world” interpretations, those that focus on the role of the state, and those that use the 17<sup>th</sup> century as a way to understand the present. Roper follows London based merchants through the century, and shows how they were involved from the earliest period of colonial settlement, played leading roles in the Interregnum, and remained driving forces behind the Empire even after the Glorious Revolution. Roper argues that the outlines of English policy were set by these merchants in the 1610s; all that changed was how much attention the state paid to imperial questions. He also points out that in terms of overseas expansion, the primary English antagonist until the 1670s was the Dutch Republic, a commercial competitor, not either France or Spain. While the book is narrative in structure, it is driven by this argument.

Roper advances his argument through a detailed examination of imperial developments, tracking the role of particular people through the process. In his first substantive chapter, he introduces Maurice Thompson, whose multiple engagements turn out to be central to activities around the world from the 1620s until his death in 1676. Thompson was engaged in trade to almost every area where English colonies or attempted colonies existed, with a specialization in

supplying colonial needs. The following three chapters focus on regions –America, Guinea, and Asia. Roper provides a compelling account of the various enterprises London merchants were involved in in multiple places. These merchants supported colonial settlement to encourage “the promotion of the cultivation of staples”(38): as a result, the supply of labor central. Whether indentured servants or slaves, bound labor was necessary. Furthermore, Roper usefully reminds readers that for all the successes of the empire, there were multiple failures, from Roanoke and Providence Island to Tangier and Madagascar. The last five chapters are primarily chronological, focusing in turn on the Civil War, Interregnum and Restoration, and Anglo-Dutch conflict, with a concluding chapter asking about whether there was a “new empire”. In these, Roper shows how the merchants we have met in the first section of the book and their successors became part of, and continued to influence, state policy. Here Roper argues that after the Restoration, the crown followed the merchants, rather than the other way around.

While Roper makes a clear argument for the significance of merchants –as opposed to the state – in the development of the colonies, the London-centric analysis occasionally loses sight of the complexities of imperial development. Early on, he notes that those involved in foreign enterprises “naturally” carried contemporary assumptions with them (5). That is true, but contemporary assumptions actually change in different contexts. Furthermore, colonial policy always involved not just merchants and the state, but merchants, settlers, and the state. Roper shows how this works, but seems to suggest stable alliances between merchants and settlers, rather than changing and opportunistic ones that reflected particular issues. In his effort to emphasize his differences from other historians, he occasionally tries to identify a distinction that is less significant than he suggests.

For instance, he argues that “commerce, as opposed to capitalism, seems to have begat American style slavery rather than the other way around”(67). At times his desire to draw attention to the role of the merchants he is following produces suggestions that have no evidentiary basis. When he points out that English access to slaves in Africa increases in the 1630s, two successive sentences include “is it not possible” and “could then”, suggesting that the supply of slaves, rather than planter demand, might have driven the cultivation of crops that needed intensive labor (75). This argument is indeed possible, were it not for extensive evidence of earlier interest in the cultivation of staple crops – as indeed Roper argues elsewhere in the book.

Roper does a great service in tracking the work of merchants, and paying attention to the ways in which they worked to create England’s empire. It is particularly significant after 1660: after all, no one doubts the role of private enterprise in the pre-1640 development of colonies. Roper’s emphasis on the importance of the Dutch as opponents into the 1670s is an important reminder of the role of mercantile conflicts in foreign policy. At the same time, by framing this as an either/or situation, the complex connections and processes of empire, particularly after 1660, are obscured. The intense focus on one particular thread of the development of the colonies blurs the others. Merchants and their allies were important, but they were limited in their impact without the support of the government. However, by following the merchants, Roper demonstrates their role in the development of the colonies. As a result, this is a book that will be read, built on, and argued with for some time to come.