Bryan Jr. on Strang, ‘Frontiers of Science: Imperialism and Natural Knowledge in the Gulf South Borderlands, 1500-1850’

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Reviewed by Jimmy L. Bryan Jr. (Lamar University) Published on H-Diplo (July, 2019)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)


The Pursuit of Natural Knowledge and Empire in the Gulf South

Philosophers and scholars as early as Francis Bacon (attributed, 1597) have understood that *scientia potestas est*—knowledge is power. As James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew reveal in the introduction to their anthology, *Science and Empire in the Atlantic World* (2008), Bacon had early recognized the convergence of the acquisition of knowledge with the pursuit of empire. Later generations of historians may have forgotten this maxim, presenting the age of New World exploration as either romanticized quests to chart new geographies or as unfortunate enterprises that happily facilitated the advancement of science. In recent years, however, a cadre of Atlantic world scholars have recovered Bacon’s insight. Along with Delbourgo and Dew, Londa Schielbinger, Jorge Cañizares-Esquerra, Arndt Brendecke, and others argue that knowledge was an exploitable resource that fueled European empires in Africa and the Americas. They further illustrate that “natural knowledge” was a commodity generated, contested, and bartered locally by native peoples and colonial agents within the fringes of imperial influence.[1]

With *Frontiers of Science*, Cameron B. Strang applies these lessons to the region of North America that would become the US Gulf South. He ranges geographically from Florida to Texas and temporally from the sixteenth-century Spanish *entradas* to the 1830s Second Seminole War. Strang’s work is expansive and rooted in thorough research in Spanish, French, British, and US archives. He distinguishes between “natural knowledge”—the wisdom of nature—and science, which represents a learned, systematic method of acquiring and understanding information, including natural knowledge. He also emphasizes “local knowledge” employed by indigenes, slaves, and colonial settlers.

The author convincingly demonstrates that the Gulf South, like other parts of the Atlantic world, witnessed the collisions of imperial and local agents in a contest that centered around the acquisition and exploitation of natural knowledge. Strang shows how the dissemination of ideas, the cataloging of data, and the innovation of new skills occurred within a “polycentric web” (p. 23) that bound metropolis to borderland. European and US regimes used natural knowledge to expand into and seek control of the Gulf South, while Native Americans, African American slaves, creoles, and colonial...
settlers used it to subvert imperial forces. This pursuit of knowledge was not an altruistic endeavor. It was not the fortuitous byproduct of empire. Along with violence, Strang confirms, natural knowledge was the essential instrument of empire. “If there is a unifying thread that runs through the history of natural knowledge in America,” Strang concludes, “it is not the influence of liberty but the persistence of imperialism” (p. 344).

To illustrate these findings, Strang employs the case-study approach, selecting examples from across a three-hundred-year span. Spanish adelantados and Franciscan missionaries in Florida relied upon the patronage and cartographic knowledge of indigenous groups. Spaniards and natives both invested prestige into rare items that led to a “shared ambition” that generated a “web of exchange that blurred Indian and Atlantic networks of knowledge and power” (p. 73). The experiences of Antonio de Ulloa, the Spanish naturalist and governor of Louisiana, along with slaves Carlos and Cipion confirmed that “no group, including the Spanish Empire, was powerful enough to access, share, verify, and apply power-promoting knowledge in isolation” (p. 127). The examples of William Dunbar and Thomas Power revealed that shifting loyalties and shifting boundaries not only created environments of innovation but also of rampant self-interest.

As the United States entered the Gulf South in the early nineteenth century, its agents perpetuated the same processes of their imperial forebears, but they placed a greater emphasis on racial hierarchies. They used science as a crucial marker of difference. Strang explains, “To a striking extent, Anglos argued that the potential to do science ... was a key criterion for evaluating which groups were intellectually fit for citizenship and which groups ought to be excluded, enslaved, or evicted” (p. 208). Further, Gulf South naturalists like Dunbar, Charles W. Tait, and Timothy A. Conrad used their resources as slave-owners to sponsor astronomical observations, geological surveys, and other programs to obtain and exploit natural knowledge. Strang concludes Frontiers of Science in 1846 with an epilogue that discusses the founding of the Smithsonian Institution as a symbol of US scientific and imperial achievement.

Cameron Strang’s Frontiers of Science arrives at a fortuitous moment in the historiography of US empire. With David Bernstein’s study of Native American influences on the cartography of the Great Plains and Jason W. Smith’s work on US naval scientists, Strang contributes to a discourse that charts the many intersections between natural knowledge and the imperial United States.[2] He also joins David Narrett, Laurel Clark Shire, Dawn Peterson, and others in relocating the Gulf South as the sight of imperial/colonial contestation between European and US agents and a myriad of local interests.[3]

Strang brings to this discussion careful analyses of rich archival sources and a broad chronological view. In so doing, he confirms that US expansion was a part of a larger continuum of empire that produced messy borderlands. More than peripheries, these regions alloyed local experience and expertise with scientific methodology to generate new and valuable knowledge in healing, nature, cartography, astronomy, geology, and other fields. Frontiers of Science is an important contribution to the histories of knowledge and empire.

Notes

[1]. James Delbourgo and Nicholas Dew, eds., Science and Empire in the Atlantic World (New York:


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