

**BOOK REVIEW**

The Overseas Trade of British America: A Narrative History

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Thomas Truxes claims that *The Overseas Trade of British America* is the first single work to bring together the whole of this trade together in one narrative (p. ix). The story does not intend to add new knowledge to the academic discussion through the investigation of new primary sources. Rather, it aims to develop a more complex and encompassing narrative of what other secondary academic publications have previously shown about the overseas trade of British America. The ultimate story is that overseas trade ‘laid the foundation for the commercial culture of the United states’, with ‘(...) Its salient features -open access, innovation and entrepreneurship (...)’. This a story that ‘(...)—continue(s) to the present day (...)’. Despite this claim of importance even for the present, the book itself has a more limited time scope, focusing on the period of British rule.

Today, the United States is a great story of global commercial success, but this would have been almost impossible to predict during the first phase of the overseas trade of British America. In the first chapter, titled ‘Tudor Beginnings, 1485–1603’, the author describes Britain’s ‘coming-of-age’ transformation from an island little engaged in commerce into a strong maritime power at the beginning of the sixteenth century. During its first contact with the Americas, made through fishing expeditions near Newfoundland, the English crown became acquainted with the commercial potential of this region. Only with the clear support of the English crown was the settlement of British subjects initiated, which would ultimately underpin the region’s later success.

Chapter two tells the story of these footholds of colonization and the economic need to develop long-distance trade for their survival. Four core regions of British interests are designated, namely Newfoundland, the Chesapeake, the English Caribbean, and New England. Until these regions found their place in international trade, however, they were struggling and needed help from foreign traders, especially the Dutch. This is where another strong theme is introduced in the book, namely, that the overseas trade of British America was never solely a British affair, but strongly dependent on international cooperation with other maritime nations. The trade of the British settlers was always international in scope and by necessity could not be limited to contact with the motherland.

Chapter three is the story of how Britain attempted to monopolize access to its colonies for British shipping, to the exclusion of other European traders. This mercantilist policy aimed



to keep out foreign traders, particularly the Dutch, in the hope that British merchants would take over trade. The subsequent commercial rivalry led to several military naval conflicts, both with the Dutch and French. Despite conflict, the Navigation Act never managed to plug all the commercial loopholes, as British colonists simply continued to depend too strongly on foreign input to keep their economy running. Chapter four examines the era of 'salutary neglect', or the period when the British state was unable to fully enforce the Navigation Act. This opened up opportunities for American colonists to reap commercial rewards with non-British traders. At the same time, such positive developments for British colonists were clouded by their consequent complicity in the Atlantic slave trade.

Chapter five shows the British colonists bringing the system of international trade to full fruition, despite the Navigation Act, leading to increasing tensions with the home country over the cost of military protection. During this period the British state was continuously busy fighting for hegemony with the French state, even as the colonists made a habit of trading with the enemy. When the military battle had been settled, the British state sought to retake control and recoup its finances, but this ultimately led to what chapter six calls 'Crisis, 1763–73'. British colonists pushed back against the British state, which had been casting its eyes on taxing the colonies. This led, in turn, to revolt and to the War of Independence, which ultimately led to the establishment of the United States. In the epilogue of this story, the United States became the home of very successful traders, as they no longer limited themselves to trade with Europe, but ventured out into the world, finally reaching, though not without struggle, their full potential.

Throughout the book smuggling and trade beyond trade with the British is seen as an essential and driving part of the trade of British America. However, in the last part of the book, this judgement is suddenly reversed and the author claims that trade with Britain had always been the most important component for British America. Of course, this is partly due to the fact that official trade with Britain is far easier to study than smuggling. This is exacerbated by the great dependency on material written in the English language, with less prominence given to literature in other languages. What is more, Britain, with its great fleet, picked off the military and merchant fleets of other European powers one by one, severely damaging their propensity to conduct trade after conflicts ended. Truxes concludes that fewer opportunities for trade with nations other than Britain existed after Independence than would have been the case if illegal trade had been substantial, as in earlier claims. This leads to the conclusion that illegal trade must have been lesser before independence than historians have argued. However, it was this same lack of available shipping from other nations, which offered new opportunities for American traders to profit as neutral traders, that provided a foundation for the much-acclaimed global importance of Americans in later years.