John E. Willis, Jr., 1688: A Global History

H. Loring
and think about. Harris has a very interesting grasp of world history.
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A first impression of John E. Wills, Jr.’s *1688: A Global History* is its resemblance to travel writing. With ease and a degree of informality, the author conveys us anecdotally across the world’s cultures, from the maritime colonies of Latin America, Africa, and East and South Asia, through the imperial centers of China, Japan, and Europe, with concluding segments in the varied realms of Islam. Between Europe and Islam, we encounter the European thinkers, e.g., Newton, Leibniz, Locke, et al., whose new science and rationalism will eventually undermine and drastically alter the courses of traditional societies.

Professor Wills enlivens the reader’s global journey with insightful narratives. In the court of the new Qing (Manchu) Dynasty, the brilliant Kangxi emperor strains the patience and stamina of courtiers with extremes of funerary ceremonies to honor the grandmother who nurtured and sustained him. The Russia of Peter I takes dire measures against the “Old Believers” whose fanatical resistance threatens the Westernization that Peter deems essential to the achievement of parity with the West. At Versailles Louis XIV gains absolute power by enmeshing noble magnates in ceremonial activities; as they vie for royal favor, their powers dissipate. Along with the great ones, the author presents also many of the lesser known and obscure figures of the late 17th Century.

There is an African chief on the Congo River who enters history because he wrote (or dictated) a letter in Portuguese to a Capuchin priest, identifying himself by a name in Portuguese; this document implies a revelation of two hundred years of Portuguese trade and cultural penetration of that part of Africa. In Siam, a Greco-Venetian adventurer, who calls himself Constantine Phaulkon, gains for a few perilous years the royal favor, and controls the trade of the kingdom, favoring independent English merchants (he had been in the employ of the English Company), to the frustration and detriment of the great Dutch East India Company. Phaulkon isn’t exceptional: everywhere Europeans can be found playing influential roles. The Scottish General Patrick Gordon leads a Russian army; the Tyrolean Jesuit Eusebio Kino extends Catholic missions beyond Mexico into Arizona; other
Jesuits gain influence in China as royal astronomers and mathematicians; the English pirate-explorer-naturalist William Dampier visits Australia and publishes the first important book on that continent; William Penn plants his Quaker colony along the Delaware River.

Certainly *Visit to a Diverse Planet* would serve as an alternate title. Wills superbly conjures up the multiplicity of cultures, while carefully presenting the universal contemporary outlook that anticipated a future replicating the present. But alongside such myopic expectations, he also depicts a world poised on the brink of vast changes:

... Our expectations of change, our sense of the possibility of basic improvement of human life, our fundamental impatience with authority and tradition had just begun to be expressed by a few European intellectuals.

[They] were right ... in sensing the possibilities of fundamental transformation .... (p. 4)

1688 is comparative in its temporal contrast of 1688 with 2005. We know that Lockean rationalism and Newtonian science wait further along the time line for all societies (and seem still to be waiting for some societies). Wills enumerates these future prospects:

... in retrospect we can see in the world of 1688 signs of the basic shifts that created our own very different world: the rise of science; the growth of cities and commerce; government policies promoting economic growth; an immense variety of writing and publishing ...; some ... reinterpretations of the great religions; protests against slavery and the subordination of women. (p. 4)

However, beyond this rather unemphatic glimpse of future possibilities, comparisons are not systemic. No civilizational theories or models add deterministic color to this history. In the cross-sectional perspective of this book, historical processes are not in focus; nothing is portrayed as rising-and-falling, growing-and-decaying, or merging into a central system or global society.

Instead the main interest of this book lies in its flavors, its tastes of cultures, its stories of individual travails, the beauties of creative achievements (poetry is quoted frequently), its you-are-there immediacy. Thus the chapter entitled simply “Mecca” carries us intimately through the stages of the hajj (pilgrimage). Wills vividly demonstrates
the exalted status of the hajj, the highest (earthly) goal in Islam. In Mecca the pilgrim “encountered his faith in all of its purity and intensity.” (p. 269) Here during Ramadan in a cave outside Mecca, the angel Gabriel had dictated the Suras of the Quran. Figuratively, as well as literally, there is nowhere else to go; this constitutes the final submission to the will of God, and the ultimate arrival at the state Christians would translate as Grace. For this one possible step beyond the mundane, the pilgrim put on a prescribed white garment that covered the middle and draped the shoulder (women’s garments covered much more). All austerely dressed alike, they proceeded into the spiritual democracy of the ceremonies focused on the Ka’aba, the House of God erected by Abraham (led by hired guides). In the vast crowds gathered October 6-7, 1688, the pilgrim groups paused at the various holy sites in the sacred enclosure or Haram, but were always ready to hurry into any sudden opening in the crowds that led to the Ka’aba for the experience of kissing the Black Stone. After further days of ceremonies and purifications, the pilgrims transformed Mecca into a great market as they offered for sale goods brought along to finance the journey. Briefly this chapter evokes scenes and realities of a past that deeply influences the present.

H. Loring


This book contains the proceedings from a Pan-Igbo National Seminar and workshop organized by a Cultural Heritage Center in Uwani, Enugu, Nigeria. So its overall academic quality, coherence and so forth are less than one might expect from pure research institutions. Many of the 14 authors are professors from seven named universities, but some are headmen, chiefs, or other governmental officials. In a similar vein, the printing quality is not the best. However, those reservations noted, this book was a wealth of information on its intended subject, and while the authors were not all 100% pedigreed scholars, they were all very sincerely and earnestly trying to share the essences of Igbo life with a larger world. In that task they succeeded.

The chapters proceed from history, through language and literature, social organization to ‘fine and applied arts.’ The most interesting chapters to me, and the ones I will use in class, looked at how the Igbo people try to transmit wisdom across the generations. Along the way one encounters some very interesting asides, as when Chibiko Okebalama