

13 ✨ Imperial Rivalries

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Figure 13.1. Herman Moll, *A Map of the West-Indies or the Islands of America in the North Sea; with ye adjacent Countries; explaining what belongs to Spain, England, France, Holland &c. also ye Trade Winds, and ye several Tracts made by ye Galeons and Flota from place to place; According to ye Newest and most Exact Observations By Herman Moll Geographer* (London, 1715). 59 × 102 cm. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

The Caribbean Sea is not only at the geographic center of the Americas; it was the genesis point and heart of the vast Spanish empire in the hemisphere. In the middle of this center—as displayed in *A Map of the West-Indies*, engraved in 1715 by the German-born English cartographer Herman Moll (fig. 13.1)—lies Jamaica. Look closely and you will see the word “English” inscribed on the blood-red-fringed island. For the map’s eighteenth-century audience, that word was more than mere matter of fact; it was a colorful statement, a rallying cry, the heart of the matter.

The map’s maker, Herman Moll, was born around 1654 in Bremen and in the 1670s settled in London, where he lived until his death in 1732. Over the course of

that long half century, he became one of the most prominent geographer-cartographers of his day. By the time he published his first major work, *A System of Geography; or, A New & Accurate Description of the Earth in All Its Empires, Kingdoms and States*,¹ in 1701, Moll’s London friends had evolved into an important social and intellectual group. They met primarily in London’s coffeehouses, did business together, and sought to influence public opinion and political policy (sometimes with success). Moll’s circle included writers like Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, the philosopher John Locke, historians like Thomas Johnson and David Jones, and some of the leading engravers, publishers, geographers, and antiquarians of the day. It is perhaps most relevant to *A Map of the*

West-Indies that Moll's circle also included men with extensive travel experience in the Caribbean, most notably the buccaneers William Dampier and Woodes Rogers.²

Moll's magnum opus first appeared in 1715 and featured thirty maps sold separately and also bound into an atlas titled *The World Described. A Map of the West-Indies* was one of the thirty. Aside from being a magnificent example of Moll's distinctive style, the collection saw dozens of editions over the next forty years.³ Thus, its two-sheet engravings were widely seen and known by those who charted England's imperial course in the eighteenth century.

Although the map could inspire many pages of analysis, I would like to point out three ways in which it acts as a window onto the Caribbean in 1715, revealing the perceptions of the region by Moll, his circle, and influential Englishmen at the time.

First, through the use of colored fringes around territorial claims, Moll's *West-Indies* shows immediately how much the Caribbean and circum-Caribbean had changed over the preceding century. The sea had gone from being "a Spanish lake" in the sixteenth century to being a Spanish-French-English-Dutch imperial meeting place and battleground in the early eighteenth. From the Spanish viewpoint, the century before 1715 showed how resilient the empire was. Despite the onslaught of three new empires based in northern Europe, and despite the weakness of the Spanish monarchy (Charles II's directionless reign of 1665–1700, followed by the humiliating War of the Spanish Succession in 1701–1714), Spain had held on to the vast majority of its American possessions—and all its truly lucrative ones.⁴ But from the English perspective, the story was a still-unfolding one of Spanish decline and loss, marked by Moll as a kaleidoscope of colors stretching across the region from Guyana to Texas.

The French splashing of blue (in Moll's palette) began in 1635 with the seizure of Martinique and Guadeloupe; the western end of Hispaniola was effectively French after 1665 (recognized as Saint-Domingue by treaty in 1697); and by the second decade of the eighteenth century they had worked their earlier forays into Louisiana and their acquisition of the mouth of the Mississippi in 1700 into a province stretching from Texas to Florida and a thousand miles north. The Dutch, meanwhile, were permanently established by 1616 on the coast of Guiana, where Dutch-French-British competition would lead to

a trio of non-Spanish colonies (Moll writes "English and Dutch" under "Suriname," but gives the whole coastline, up to and down the Orinoco, his Dutch green); in the 1630s the Dutch presence spread across a rash of small islands in the Antilles—from Aruba and Curaçao to St. Maarten and Saba. The English, meanwhile, had seized their own rash of islands between 1609 and 1632, from Bermuda to the Leeward Islands (Antigua, St. Kitts, and Nevis, with others added later) to Barbados; their presence in the Bahamas grew gradually after the 1640s; Jamaica was taken in 1655; while their North American colonies crept down to the Florida frontier.

The second revealing characteristic of Moll's map relates not to the past or present, but to the future. One of Moll's oldest friends was Dampier, who since the 1690s had sat with Moll in Jonathan's and other coffee-houses sharing tales of his buccaneering and navigating experiences around the world. Moll drew the maps for Dampier's books, contributing to both men's fame. Dampier's interest in and knowledge of tides and winds is reflected in the details of Moll's *West-Indies* map, as is the buccaneer's preoccupation with imperial interests. Moll's audience was likely to be familiar with Dampier's voyages, and very likely to remember the Battle of Vigo Bay—when, in 1702, Anglo-Dutch ships captured the heavily laden Spanish treasure fleet (*flota*) off the Spanish coast. With the possibility of more such triumphs in mind, Moll made his map of the Caribbean into a buccaneer's manual, complete with trade wind arrows, five "Tracts made by ye Galeons and Flota from place to place," and inset maps of the five most important Spanish ports in the West Indies: St. Augustine (Florida), Veracruz (Mexico), Havana (Cuba), Portobelo (Panama), and Cartagena (Colombia) (fig. 13.2).

Significantly, Moll chose five Spanish ports (not English or French ones), and he emphasized the location of castles, forts, and watchtowers, with sea depths also marked (see chap. 17). Four of the five ports were identified as stopping points for the Spanish flota. Indeed, Moll's "Tracts" were treasure fleet routes, showing: (1) the entry into the sea of "the Gallions from Old Spain," (2) details of the Cartagena–Panama run, including how many days the flota typically stayed in those ports and in Havana, with (3) the Cartagena–Havana route passing close to Jamaica, (4) the run "of the Flota from la Vera Cruz to ye Havana, occasioned by ye Trade Winds," and (5) most important of all, the return route to Spain.

North of where the Bahamas appear on his map, Moll wrote, “The Gallions and Flota usually Joyning at the Havana, the whole Armada Sails for Spain thro this Gulf.” The Florida Strait, between the peninsula and the Bahamas, is “The best Passage of all the Islands.” Moll’s text refers to the safest way through the shoals and islands, but his subtext is an “X marks the spot” statement; this is where the treasure is.

Seeing Moll’s *West-Indies* as a treasure map places the captions within Spanish provinces in a different context. Rather than simply descriptive (“Cacao Plantations” in

Costa Rica and Guatemala), the captions hint at the richness of lands ripe for the taking, or at possible strategies of attack (“These Rivers almost meet; both of them are Navigable, and all the Cannon and stores for Acapulco are carried from ye Nort [*sic*] to ye S. Sea by them”). The ultimate mainland prize is “the City of Mexico in New Spain,” depicted in all its silver-funded architectural glory in an inset engraving (fig. 13.3).⁵

Moll’s bird’s-eye, east-looking view of the island-capital was frequently copied and updated during the seventeenth century—a version painted onto tile can



Figure 13.2. Detail, Moll, *A Map of the West-Indies*. Insets of five Spanish ports (Vera Cruz, Havana, St. Augustin, Cartagena, Porto Bella).

Figure 13.3. Detail, Moll, *A Map of the West-Indies*. Bird’s-eye inset of Mexico City.



be seen at the Franz Mayer Museum in the city today. Moll no doubt copied this from an earlier map, as this is the only bird's-eye inset in *The World Described*, and the key has been copied (with a few errors) from a Spanish original. Although Moll's map mixes recognizable detail with imaginative filler, it does accurately depict some of the better-known monuments whose construction was funded by Mexico's famous mines (such as the Palacio Real and the cathedral) and highlights the importance of the water supply, foregrounding the city's aqueduct.⁶

The third and final characteristic of the map is its reflection of the limitations of Moll's sources and his grasp of the details of the region. In 1717 he boldly accused his rivals of selling "Confusedly and Poorly engraven" maps that were "so far from being Correct, that the fundamental or Projection of their Principal Maps is Notoriously False." Yet, despite his skill and panache, Moll himself was at the mercy of his sources, and perhaps just as significant, he had an agenda that may have led him to unwittingly make his own "Errors and Dangers."⁷ He was a little premature in some of his English claims; for example, the Bahamas were not entirely "red" by 1715, with Spain retaining nominal possession of the whole chain until 1783. On the other hand, Moll was unaware of English activities along the mainland coast, most notably that of Central America. He might justifiably have placed splashes of red on the coasts of New Spain south of Campeche, around the northeast corner of the Yucatán, in Belize and its offshore cays, and along the Honduran coastline down to the Mosquito Shore.⁸ His rendering of Mexico City is somewhat fanciful (fig. 13.3), although not as far removed from geographic reality as his toponyms for the Yucatán Peninsula.⁹ And his distance-depth statement, claiming that one can take a sounding in the Gulf of Mexico "and as many Fathom as you find, so many Leagues you are from ye Shoar," is navigational fantasy.¹⁰

It is too easy, of course, to quibble with the accuracy of Moll's *Map of the West-Indies*. Furthermore, none of its quirks and errors detract from its beauty, elegance, and effectiveness as a portrait of a venerable but vulnerable empire (the Spanish) at the potential mercy of an enterprising empire on the rise (the English). Certainly the map is descriptive, illustrating the inroads that non-Spaniards had made in the Caribbean in the century before 1715. But, arguably, Moll's map aimed to be more than that—to call Englishmen to arms, to inspire them to ponder how much further the imperial transition

could go and how much more of the world's richest empire could be theirs.



Notes

1. This global geography, accompanied by Moll's own maps, presented readers with a vision of politics and space as closely interwoven.

2. "Moll's circle" was defined by Dennis Reinhartz; see his "Shared Vision: Herman Moll and His Circle and the Great South Sea," *Terrae Incognitae* 19 (1987): 1–10; and *The Cartographer and the Literati: Herman Moll and His Intellectual Circle* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); also see Diana Preston and Michael Preston, *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind: Explorer, Naturalist, and Buccaneer: The Life of William Dampier* (New York: Berkley Books, 2004), 230, 239, 245.

3. Some editions contained a few more or less than thirty maps; most editions included Moll's 108-word subtitle; see Reinhartz, *The Cartographer and the Literati*, 34.

4. A fine summary of this period is Henry Kamen, *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492–1763* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 381–476.

5. The British notion that Mexico was ripe for the taking, due to its weak defenses and discontented native population, was an old English chestnut; Drake and Raleigh had suggested it to Queen Elizabeth, Thomas Gage suggested it to Cromwell (see chap. 26), and it appeared with regularity in memos and policy statements throughout the eighteenth century; captured Spanish reports detailing the vulnerability of the coasts encouraged such plans (such reports are preserved in the National Archives at Kew and the British Library in London).

6. Compare Moll's 1715 inset to the earlier bird's-eye view of Juan Gomez de Trasmonte's 1628 *Forma y Levantado*, Nettie Lee Benson Library, University of Texas at Austin, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/benson/historicmaps/maps14.html>. The two maps show the city expanding to reach the aqueduct as the lakes begin to vanish. Many of the same buildings and fountains are still visible. For discussion of Mexico City's water supply and drainage, see chap. 11.

7. From an announcement advertising *The World Described* (including *A Map of the West-Indies*) that Moll wrote into the corner of his 1717 road map of England and Wales (copy in the British Library; also see Reinhartz, *The Cartographer and the Literati*, 35).

8. Moll does, however, include notice of the British allies in Central America, the "Moskitos," at a time when they were resisting Spanish colonial rule (see chap. 15). On Belize, see Narda Dobson, *A History of Belize* (Port of Spain, Trinidad: Longman Caribbean, 1973).

9. For example, Merida and "Campechy" are sufficiently

well marked, but “Chynchanchy” is located on the wrong side of the peninsula (assuming it means “Chichén Itzá,” unless “Mensch Eeters” does), and “Linchanchy” may be a heavily distorted “Dzindzantun.”

10. Reinhartz identifies the distance-depth claim and the treasure fleet “tracts” as originating in a 1705 French map, in *The Cartographer and the Literati*, 43.

Additional Readings

Elliott, John H. *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

Kamen, Henry. *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power, 1492–1763*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

Moll, Herman. *A System of Geography: Or, A New & Accurate Description of the Earth in All Its Empires, Kingdoms and States*. London: Printed for Timothy Childe, 1701.

Preston, Diana, and Michael Preston. *A Pirate of Exquisite Mind: Explorer, Naturalist, and Buccaneer: The Life of William Dampier*. New York: Berkley Books, 2004.

Reinhartz, Dennis. *The Cartographer and the Literati: Herman Moll and His Intellectual Circle*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.