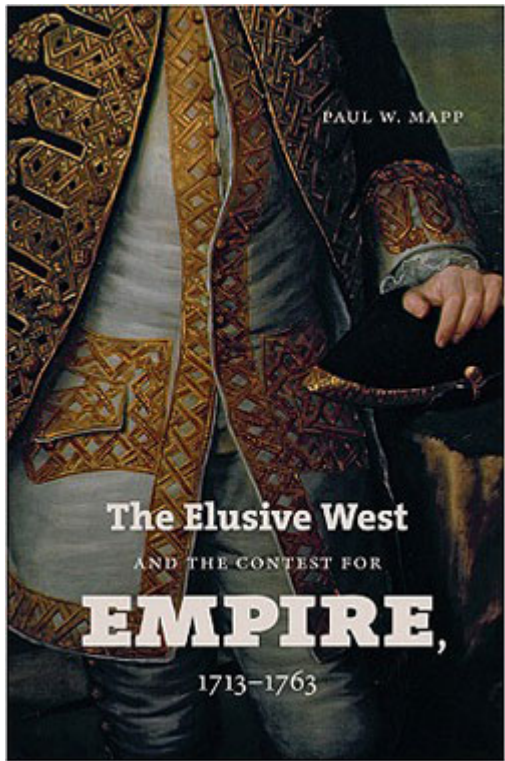
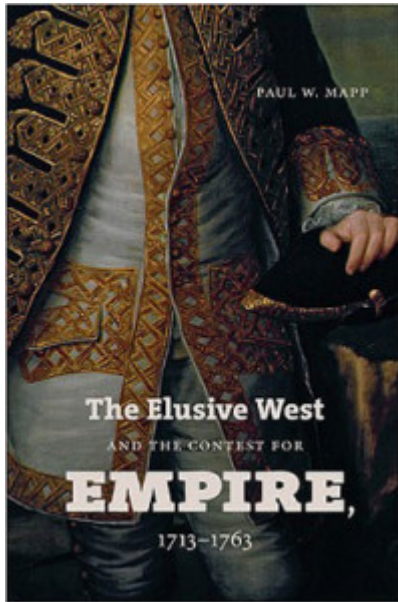


The Great American Question Mark



In early America, everything was empire, and empire was everything. The great European imperial powers of the eighteenth century—Britain, Spain, and France—made competing claims to the Americas, and the health of those colonial ventures figured prominently in how those empires viewed their positions in the world. To control the New World was to control the whole world, and each nation had its own reasons for establishing a presence in the Americas, from the religious to the economic. However, for both day-to-day operational value and long-term imperial planning, the most valuable commodity for these imperial powers was information. In *The Elusive West*, Paul W. Mapp considers how geographical information about the American West shaped imperial policy and relations between 1713 and 1763. This period, between the Treaty of Utrecht and the Peace of Paris, was marked by dramatic shifts in power. France went from dominating the fur trade and holding a significant amount of land in its possession to being effectively removed from the continent; Britain grew from a handful of small colonies on the eastern seaboard of North America to the dominant power on the continent. At the heart of Mapp's book is a reconsideration of the origins of the Seven Years' War. That great imperial battle has traditionally been seen as originating from British encroachments on French territory in the Ohio River Valley, but Mapp convincingly argues that scholars need to look farther west for a clearer picture of what was really happening between the imperial powers.



Paul W. Mapp, *The Elusive West and the Contest for Empire, 1713-1763*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 480 pp., \$29.95.

Mapp begins his book with the Spanish empire of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. The Spanish were the consummate world explorers, who in the 1500s “threaded the Straits of Magellan, circumnavigated the globe, traversed the Isthmus of Panama, crisscrossed the Andes, strode the causeway to Tenochtitlán, descended the Amazon, and ascended the Paraná. Yet Idaho remained elusive” (41). Spanish experiences in Mexico and South America, where the Incan and Aztec empires had already done much of the groundwork needed to understand the physical and human geography, were not mirrored in the western regions of North America. The landscape was often unforgiving, making exploration difficult, and when the Spanish attempted to get help from the many Native groups in the region they were often met with silence or hostility. Even when Natives were willing to help out, their own ignorance of the land and the language barrier meant that they yielded little useful information for Spanish explorers. This ignorance about the geography of the West was a continual roadblock for the Spanish, keeping them from settling the area as rapidly or completely as they did in other regions of their American empire.

After his thorough description of the problems faced by the Spanish, Mapp turns to the French. While he touches on far more than could be reasonably covered in this review, one of the standout segments of the chapters on the French concerns the experiences of French cartographers in Russia and China. He uses the wealth of information obtained in these areas as a contrasting backdrop for the paucity of knowledge the French were able to acquire about the American West. He describes Jesuit missionaries who surveyed China in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and French cartographers who traipsed across Russia gathering mounds of accurate geographical information. The ease with which this information was obtained was not mirrored in North America; as Mapp details in several chapters, the French blundered about in the American West, rarely acquiring useful or accurate information from the

indigenous inhabitants, and their mental and physical maps remained muddled and useless for much of the eighteenth century. It is during his discussion of the challenges the French faced in North America that an organizational issue becomes apparent, as Mapp begins to retread ground from earlier in the book. Because he takes on each imperial power sequentially, some of the common problems faced by explorers, such as the difficulty of communicating accurate geographical information with Indians, are restated in detail, essentially replacing the name of one power for another. "In a manner reminiscent of Spanish scouts in the Southwest" (212), is how one sentence starts, and similar ones are peppered throughout the chapter. While his thoroughness is impressive, it makes an already long book even longer, and bogs down his argument in content he'd already covered earlier in the book.

Much of the Spanish and French sections of the book deal with the many indigenous peoples that inhabited the land the Europeans coveted. Thoughtfully analyzing indigenous historical actors has long been a serious problem for histories of early America, but Mapp's book is a wonderful example of how that continues to change. When possible, he is careful to delineate *which* indigenous group was involved with the European imperialists—Pimas, Apaches, Assinboines, and Crees, among others, are the actors throughout the book, not simply the generally unhelpful and historically inaccurate "Indians." Furthermore, the indigenous actors in the book, like those Europeans seeking their help, were not all-knowing when it came to geographical information. The most important parts of their world were local, and "after hundreds of miles, southwestern Indians, too, would likely have been following unfamiliar trails, encountering outlandish peoples, and hearing strange tongues" (84). The Americas were peopled by myriad different groups of people—linguistically, politically, and culturally diverse—and the reader is lucky to have a researcher as skilled as Mapp to help navigate the complexities of European-Native interactions.

Much of the last third of the book is spent analyzing how British designs on Spain's Pacific holdings and their encroachment on French territory created tension between the three imperial powers that finally boiled over in the 1750s, resulting in the outbreak of the Seven Years' War. Mapp convincingly shows that there was much more to the start of the war than the French trying to expel British traders and settlers from the Ohio River Valley. The search for a Northwest Passage from Hudson's Bay, George Anson's actions in the Pacific, which included attacking a Spanish galleon and sacking a port town in Peru, and other British machinations worried both the Spanish and French. The French were willing to go to war over British actions throughout the continent and in the Pacific, but the Spanish pursued a policy of neutrality for as long as possible, fearful that allying with the French would be seen as an open invitation for French explorers to continue pushing westward. Given that the Spanish in the 1750s *still* weren't entirely sure what the western half of North America looked like and what it contained, they were hesitant to let other empires freely poke about. This neutrality ultimately benefitted Britain, who was able to fight against only the French for most of the war. In a sense, Spain unwittingly played the anvil to Britain's hammer, and French imperial

designs for North America were effectively flattened by the time the war ended. For Mapp, uneasiness and confusion about what the potentially valuable lands in the American West held not only led to the start of the war, but also continually influenced imperial policy throughout it.

Mapp's book is heavily argument-driven, with narrative threads being spun out briefly to illustrate points, but rarely followed for more than a paragraph or two. While it would be unlikely to captivate those looking for a good yarn, Mapp's fluid, clear prose is a pleasure to take in and the overall organization of the book makes it compelling in a way that doesn't depend on narrative. It is certainly a long, dense book—the first line frames it primarily as a study of the Seven Years' War, but it takes more than 300 pages to get to that conflict. It takes nearly 200 pages before the reader gets to the Treaty of Utrecht, which ostensibly *starts* Mapp's story. That being said, it's ultimately a treat to read and his larger arguments do hinge on a particular understanding of how three very different empires operated in the New World, and the first half of the book is indeed necessary for a full understanding of the second. Thoroughly researched, clearly written, and forcefully argued, Mapp's book is a major contribution to the history of eighteenth-century European imperialism, and a novel refiguring of the history of the Seven Years' War.

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