John Nelson Merchant Adventurer: A Life between Empires


John Nelson was an entrepreneur born in the mid-seventeenth century—a man, in Richard Johnson's words, "operating ahead of the government and settled society from which he came," who "responded to conventions and conditions derived from several different and often competing cultures." For Nelson, this meant trading out of Boston to the French and Indians of Canada, pursuing his family's dreams of the proprietorship of Nova Scotia, and promoting schemes of espionage and military conquest on both sides of the Atlantic. In the course of a long and adventurous life, Nelson served as middleman between Canada and New England; led an uprising that toppled the royal government of Massachusetts in 1689; and passed years in French prisons, including the Bastille, and then at court in London as a player in the complex European diplomacy of the time. Nelson's career reveals in bold colors the political and economic pressures exerted upon colonial America by the expansion and bitter conflict of European empires—he himself complained of being "crushed between the two Crowns." Yet it also shows how one man fashioned a life as "spy, speculator, multinational merchant, memorialist, politician, prisoner, parent, friend, and gentleman." Gracefully written and widely researched, the book is both a fine example of the new Atlantic history and a vivid recounting of the fortunes of an exceptional individual.

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