



## BOOK REVIEW

RADBURN, NICHOLAS. *Traders in Men. Merchants and the Transformation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 2023. xii, 341 pp. Ill. \$35.00. (E-book: \$35.00.)

Slavery and human trafficking are not generally considered points of pride in the history of Britain and its overseas empire, but they were certainly central to constructing that empire between the seventeenth and early nineteenth century. By purchasing captive African children, women, and men, and shipping them in chains to the Americas and Caribbean, British traders helped create the Black populations of the western hemisphere as well as the racial inequality that continues to plague many Black people throughout the English-speaking world. For the millions of victims involved in the British slave trade, it was an experience of prolonged, multi-generational human suffering and racial violence. For the merchants who bought and sold human beings, however, Britain's slave trade was a business. Nicholas Radburn's book tells the story of this business, from the perspective of the merchants who devised ways to make it lucrative for themselves.

The central argument of the book is that merchants – British, African, and American – developed successful strategies for deriving profits from the slave trade by steadily increasing the numbers of people trafficked over the course of the eighteenth century, and by finding the most efficient ways to exploit the labor of those people once they had been forcibly relocated in the Americas. Slave traders developed highly efficient methods of human trafficking that enabled the “spectacular growth” of the slave trade and “transformed the British Atlantic world”. These merchants' business activities directly contributed to enlarging British and African ports and advancing “the frontier of slavery” through the British Americas. This is a top-down narrative focused on elites' economic strategies. The book describes how elites in Britain, the British Caribbean, North America – and to a lesser extent West Africa – maximized their profit-earning abilities at the expense of nearly three million captured and enslaved African people over the course of a little more than a century. The book is unprecedented in its focus exclusively on merchants and highlights the collective responsibility of these individuals for much of the human suffering that occurred because of the British slave trade.

Following an introduction, the book is organized geographically, with chapters focusing on Britain, Atlantic Africa, the middle passage (two chapters), and British colonies in the Americas. An epilogue highlights the acceleration of British slave trading during the last three decades prior to the British Abolition Act (1807), noting that this was the most lucrative period in the history of the trade, when slave traders amassed immense fortunes that dwarfed those of the previous era. The book includes five appendices providing references to particular slave ship voyages and newspaper announcements of slave sales.

Radburn departs from more recent trends in the study of the transatlantic slave trade by focusing only on the British trade in the North Atlantic. Most of the pathbreaking work in the field in recent years has paid careful attention to the importance of the massive slave trade that occurred in the South Atlantic, particularly that to Brazil and Cuba. *Traders in Men* is concerned only with human trafficking aboard British ships, and thus provides only a partial picture of how roughly thirteen million African people were taken across the Atlantic during the entire history of the transatlantic slave trade. This approach limits the extent to which Radburn can explain the African merchants' side of the slave trade, which was shaped in distinct ways by Portuguese and Brazilian traders' activities on the West African coast.

While Radburn's inclusion of African merchants in the narrative helps illuminate the ways in which African elites participated in the trade, the book oversimplifies the networks of slave trading and the ways in which captives were obtained in Africa during the eighteenth century. Historians, including Patrick Manning and Paul Lovejoy, have demonstrated the complex nature of African institutions of slavery and the phases through which the slave trade evolved within Africa over time. They have also shown that there were vast differences in the nature of slave trading between African regions. Key to these processes were political transformations through which various types of African states took control over people and territories that became sources of captives for the transatlantic slave trade, and other instances of political fragmentation that also resulted in the capture of people who were sold. African political history is nearly absent from Radburn's narrative, which misleadingly credits African merchants, brokers, or middlemen with the production of captives. The description of the African trade is further confused by the author's repeated references to Africans turning their "homes" into slaving ports (i.e. p. 20). The use of the term "home" in discussing African ports suggests that African merchants somehow compromised their personal lives in order to conduct the slave trade in ways that British merchants did not, a claim that should have been clarified or corrected.

The book's argument about the experiences of enslaved Africans in the Americas highlights aspects of the American trade that may have received less attention in the past but may be overstated. Radburn convincingly demonstrates that slave traders typically bought and sold enslaved human beings according to the latter's physical characteristics, including age, sex, and physical health. However, the significance of these decisions at points of sale in the Americas would not have been as enduring as the book suggests. Radburn's claim that "enslaved people's physical condition was a powerful determinant of their experiences and fates in the Americas because of the ways that slave traders organized sales" (p. 159), which is the main argument of Chapter Five, seems to overlook the tremendous suffering experienced by all enslaved people *after* the point of sale and for the remainder of their lives, and which was likely passed on to future generations of Black Americans.

This book will be very useful to those interested in British colonial economic history, the economic history of the British slave trade, and business history. Unfortunately, sources cited are grouped into long footnotes at the end of each paragraph, making it difficult to determine which sources have been used for

particular pieces of information. The absence of a bibliography is also a disappointment for those interested in the sources used for this book.

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