Review Essay

Principles and Agents: The British Slave Trade and Its Abolition. *By David Richardson*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2022. 384 pp. Illustrations. Hardcover, $38.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-25043-5.

Envoys of Abolition: British Naval Officers and the Campaign Against the Slave Trade in West Africa. *By Mary Wills*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. 256 pp. Illustrations. Paperback, $49.99. ISBN: 978-1-80207-771-1.

Humanitarian Governance and the British Antislavery World System. *By Maeve Ryan*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2022. 328 pp. Hardcover, $50.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-25139-5

Reviewed by Matthew David Mitchell

The care that David Richardson took, both in titling and in sub-titling his new book on Britain's transatlantic slave trade, is quite evident. This is not just a book on the abolition of Britain's slave trade, with a bit of material on Britain's previous conduct of its slave trade as a more or less unconnected prologue. This is a book about both things—"the British slave trade" and also "its abolition"—and it takes seriously the idea that the way in which the slave trade was ended had everything to do with how it had been conducted. And Richardson's presentation of both things bears out the double meaning of "principles/principals" in the before-the-colon title. The conduct of the slave trade, in his view, largely was an attempt to manage this particular manifestation of the classic "principal-agent" problem. Abolition, similarly, was a matter of principle, but the various sets of agents that carried it out related to that principle in diverse ways. Where Richardson shows these motivations for the political movement that eventually secured the Abolition Act in 1807, Mary Wills does so for the naval officers tasked with interdicting the transatlantic slave trade after that date, and Maeve Ryan does for the often self-interested agents of the Crown whose business was to resettle the Africans on captured slave ships within the bounds of the British Empire.

Richardson's interpretation of the British slave trade focuses primarily on what we might call the Liverpool period: from 1750, when entrepreneurs from that port usurped the dominance that Bristol's slave traders had enjoyed in the 1730s and '40s; to 1807 and the passage of the Abolition Act. He argues that two main innovations allowed the Liverpudlians to enter this market at this late date and achieve dominance over all other European buyers of slaves on the coast of West Africa. First, they were early to recognize the combination of efficient credit-enforcement institutions with a strong and constant supply of enslaved Black bodies that had come to exist at Bonny on the Bight of Biafra, and they therefore invested heavily in building relationships with that port's most influential African traders.

Second, and in keeping with the book's title, the Liverpudlian slave-ship owners inserted new language in their contracts with both the captains they employed and the colonial American factors that sold the enslaved persons their ships brought via the Middle Passage. For earlier slave-trafficking concerns, most notably the Royal African Company, the problems of opportunistic behavior among the managers of their trade in Africa, along with the difficulty of remitting the profits of slave sales from America back to England, constantly bedeviled their operations and eventually made it well-nigh impossible to trade profitably. But the later Liverpool-based traders, argues Richardson, were able to manage their principal-agent relationships with both parties much more advantageously.

Richardson, it might be noted, mostly ignores an additional area of innovation emphasized by Anne Ruderman (*William and Mary Quarterly* [April 2020]) and myself (*The Prince of Slavers: Humphry Morice and the Transformation of Britain's Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1698–1732* [2020]): the cost-efficient collection of information on what European and Asian imports African traders wanted in exchange for their slaves. Having the right goods allowed a slave ship to acquire a full transatlantic cargo of enslaved African persons as quickly as possible, thus drastically speeding capital turnover and reducing financial losses to slave mortality. That said, this particular set of trading principles had been largely worked out by the London-based slave traders that vanquished the Royal African Company in the first three decades of the eighteenth century. This earlier phase of innovation in the trade can bear more attention than Richardson gives it; nonetheless, a later set of innovations must have been responsible for the rise of Liverpool's slavers. Richardson's identification of Bonny as a key supply point, and of better management of principal-agent relationships with ship captains and American slave wholesalers, is solidly convincing.

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Regarding abolition, Richardson cites sources dating back as far as the 1690s—including the plays of Aphra Behn, the novels of Samuel Richardson, and the moral and economic philosophy of Adam Smith—to argue for a "humanitarian revolution" throughout much of the eighteenth century (p. 248). One of the results of this cultural turn was that by 1780, "slavery had become wholly repugnant on moral and economic grounds to probably the vast majority of British intellectuals" (p. 132). Indeed, "[i]t was interrelationships among" the various "economic, religious, and philosophical ideas about slavery . . . ideas that made the intellectual assault on slavery so profound and ultimately impossible to resist" (p. 134). Acknowledging the earlier work of David Brion Davis on the subject (*The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* [1975]), Richardson advocates for a move beyond the opposition between moral and economic causes for abolition that has characterized studies of British slave trade abolition since Eric Williams's publication of *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944. In this reading, the work of the more formal abolitionist movement that coalesced in the establishment of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade in 1787 was to harness the already existing "antagonism toward slaving felt by large sections of British society"—antagonism based on both economic and moral concerns—to a savvy political strategy that would deliver the desired legislation (p. 135).

Just as Richardson recognizes the intimate connection between the conduct of the slave trade *before* 1807 and the story *of* 1807, so Mary Wills and Maeve Ryan in their respective works demonstrate that the implementation of abolition *after* 1807 is also integral to that story. What is more, just as the principals in the business of slave-trafficking needed slave-ship captains to serve as agents for their interests, so the principle of abolition needed agents to put it into practice. In *Envoys of Abolition*, Mary Wills focuses on one particular set of these agents: the officers of the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, as revealed primarily in their own letters and other writings. Her title hints at the strangeness of their situation: serving mostly in the decades of peace after "the glory of battle and victory at Trafalgar" (p. 4), they found themselves in a role that demanded the skills of the diplomat and administrator much more than the mastery of naval maneuver and gunnery. Not every officer was equally committed to the task of interdicting the slave trade. Some of them, to whom Wills devotes a chapter, made significant contributions to the continuing development of anti-slavery culture in Britain. Others were prone to complain about the boredom, the endemic illnesses, and the lack of career advancement at what was widely considered the worst station in the Navy.

No matter their inclination to the work, certainly its most striking aspect was the conduct of captured slave ships and their inmates from their place of capture to the maritime courts that would decide their further disposition, the subject of the book's most important chapter. The most usual trip, from the waters of the Bight of Benin westward to the Liberated African Department at Freetown in Sierra Leone, averaged sixty-two days. This was a length of time comparable to the Middle Passage itself, and in many ways the conditions were not far different once a British prize crew took over a slave ship, despite the relish with which British officers ceremonially broke the shackles from the captives and threw them overboard. Short rations, overcrowding, and deadly disease were endemic, and naval officers were easily able to rationalize the use of corporal punishment to maintain order among their nominally free charges. As observed in an 1827 parliamentary inquiry quoted by Wills, naval officers "'have it not in their powers to alleviate . . . the sufferings of the Negroes, which for a long time after capture, they are compelled to witness, and in which they too often largely participate'" (p. 105).

In Maeve Ryan's view, this was no accident, for "early nineteenth-century abolitionism" as well as "present-day understandings of 'humanitarian[ism],'" inescapably involved "a characteristic willingness to deploy power without consent in order to implement what practitioners believe to be protections and improvements in the lives of the victimized and vulnerable" (p. 9). The British Antislavery World System that Ryan identifies in her title, and whose many agents and overlapping agendas she surveys throughout her book, was one in which those it liberated were "[n]o longer bound for the Americas," but instead "bound *to* the British empire" (p. 2) (emphasis mine). And that empire claimed the right to relocate them wherever it, not they, might choose. Most often that was Sierra Leone, but it could be any number of other literal or figurative islands in "Britain's 'archipelago' of liberated African establishments" or other sites of resettlement: the Bahamas, the Cape Colony, the South Atlantic island of St. Helena, or even India (pp. 11–12).

Moreover, the status of those so relocated fell a long way short of free labor on mutually agreeable terms. Upon their arrival in the corner of the British Empire selected for their resettlement, liberated Africans could be indentured as apprentices for up to fourteen years. Indeed, the abolitionists involved in the governance of Sierra Leone both before and after 1807, including Zachary Macaulay, Thomas Babington, and William Wilberforce, "derive[d] immense direct and indirect profits" in selling the indentures of liberated Africans delivered to the colony by Royal Navy vessels (p. 10). As one of their detractors put it, abolition's most visible agents were willing to "connive at the virtual enslavement of the

liberated Africans" (p. 37). Conscription was an alternative to apprenticeship, chosen by the British authorities for 3,608 liberated Africans between 1808 and 1833 and an indeterminable number thereafter (p. 205). Ryan devotes a particularly interesting chapter to these persons and what the available sources indicate about their attempts to reclaim their personal agency, even as the empire that liberated them then attempted to convert them into agents of its own purposes. An epilogue offers a searching yet measured critique of the present-day "international humanitarian order" and its roots in the British imperial system of anti-slavery, even as Ryan acknowledges the modern structure's more positive elements as "a noteworthy achievement" (p. 229).

Taken together, these three valuable books recall a suggestion I made in a review of an earlier book (James Walvin, *Crossings: Africa, the Americas and the Atlantic Slave Trade* [2013], accessed 11 June 2023, https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1553). Rather than an endpoint, 1807 was a midpoint in the long historic arc of Atlantic slavery. We might also, and somewhat paradoxically, think of that momentous year as a *low point*. The single year 1807, after all, saw 99,897 enslaved Africans embarked in African ports en route to the Americas, more than any other previous year. And while two subsequent years (1817 and 1829) would see embarkation numbers in excess of 100,000, Parliament's decision in 1807 to turn the power of the British Empire against the slave trade nonetheless represented a deep and broad conviction among the British public that the trade must end (Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, accessed 11 June 2023, https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database#tables). Yet the establishment of true freedom, as ever, was elusive, and depended on the complex interplay of motives and agendas among those who served, willingly or unwillingly, as agents of the principle of abolition.

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