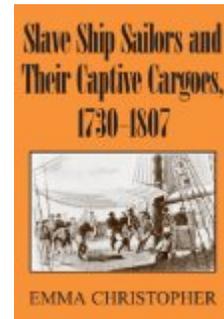


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Emma Christopher. *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. v + 241 pp. \$21.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-67966-4.

Reviewed by Amy Mitchell-Cook (Department of History, University of West Florida)
Published on H-Atlantic (November, 2006)



Ambiguity and the Middle Passage

Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807 is a broad attempt to understand the sailors involved in the transatlantic slave trade as well as the slaves they transported. Emma Christopher of Monash University highlights the complex interactions between white sailors, free blacks on land and at sea, and enslaved Africans and African Americans. Ambitious in scope, the book offers a solid introduction to the transatlantic slave trade from the perspective of its most intimate participants: the sailors and their human cargoes.

Christopher points out that most historical scholarship concerning the middle passage often focuses on the slaves themselves, with only a passing interest in the men hired to sail the ships. As such, *Slave Ship Sailors* extends the work of historians such as Jeffrey Bolster, Marcus Rediker, David Roediger, and David Eltis, to name but a few.[1] She brings together several areas of study, such as African American history, the Atlantic World, and maritime history, to put a human face on the transatlantic slave trade. In some ways she successfully accomplishes her goal, though at times she falls short of making a convincing argument. Perhaps this is due to the book's breadth and the lack of previous work devoted directly to her topic of interest. Despite these gaps, the book does present a unique perspective on the slave trade and is a work of scholarship that will further this area of study.

Christopher first examines the men and the ships they sailed. Within this broad topic, she suggests that "this book explores how slave trade sailors expanded their cries for liberty because of their working conditions

and terms of employment" (p. xvii). The argument, however, is lost in secondary threads of racism, class struggle, and the slave trade itself. A discussion of enlightenment and other movements would help situate the language of freedom and liberty in a stronger historical context. She discusses this theme periodically, but it rarely solidifies into a primary thesis.

In addition, she fails to heed her own warnings, that "much of popular history, literature and even art of the trade unambiguously posits seamen as abusers" (p. 3). She goes to great lengths to prove that sailors in the slave trade were abusive and cruel; in fact, she argues that they were much more brutal than sailors in other trades. Such arguments would be reinforced if she contrasted them with the general conditions on board, say, an eighteenth-century merchant or naval vessel. Contemporary accounts suggest that brutality and violent behavior occurred on all types of ships. A comparison to other vessels which demonstrated the slave trade's uniqueness in areas of violence, pay, and conditions would create a more dynamic interpretation. In addition, numbers or percentages concerning slave revolts, deaths, and floggings would add much to this research. Many of her arguments are applicable to other trades, not just slavery, and should be placed within a larger framework of maritime industry.

A second theme concerns commoditization, both of sailors and of slaves. Christopher supports this area more fully and utilizes material from several historians to present a well-rounded discussion. Sailors in general

lost a level of freedom, as the need for profits took precedence. Bad food, hard labor, and harsh conditions made the sea a last option for many. Christopher's arguments about liberty appear briefly in sailors' personal accounts, where they often viewed themselves as imprisoned or enslaved. Some men, however, chose the seafaring life freely and never left if for a "better" occupation. Her assertion that "only needy or imprudent men would enlist on a slave ship in a junior position" (p. 29) would be better supported with additional evidence and an explicit comparison to other areas of sailing.

The most alarming criticism is the overwhelming sense of presentism that pervades Christopher's research. She does acknowledge that the past was "a harsher, crueler place than denizens of the twenty-first century would tolerate" (p. 94). But, she seems to ignore this throughout her discussion and presents especially sadistic episodes in an effort to prove her point. Such violence pervades eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maritime accounts. Christopher's twenty-first-century sensibilities seem to prompt an overemphasis on the cruelty of the slave trade and cloud her analysis of how individuals perceived slaves. Slavery as understood by those in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was much different than society in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The "heinous acts" of the slave trade were not necessarily seen by contemporaries as such. Arguments of cargo versus human were not valid to many, and the sailors should not be condemned for acting appropriately within social standards of their time.

Despite these gaps, Christopher does much to add to our understanding of the transatlantic slave trade. Building on Jeffrey Bolster's work, Christopher brings to light the multiracial complexity of seafarers and how this had special resonance within the slave trade. Africans played a pivotal role in transatlantic slavery, both in port and on ships. Although black sailors were present in all areas of maritime culture, their place on slave ships was often ambiguous and sometimes blurred the line between slavery and freedom. Despite the potential threat to their freedom, black sailors often went to sea for the same reasons

as their white counterparts, occupying the same social level. Their situation is often overlooked by other historians, and the author does well to situate their ambiguous place on board slave ships.

Christopher utilizes several official primary sources, including Admiralty records, Board of Trade papers, and Treasury documents. Other primary sources include eighteenth-century newspapers such as the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Royal Gazette*. In addition, she draws upon several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century published narratives of the slave trade and abolition. Her use of secondary sources presents a strong overview of literature concerning the slave trade and pulls together threads of information to give voice to the sailors and slaves who operated in the transatlantic slave trade.

Despite the gaps, *Slave Ship Sailors* is an important work for understanding the transatlantic slave trade of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Christopher's research adds a new level of understanding that complicates simple designations of free/slave, black/white, and person/cargo. Undergraduate and graduate students will find this book an interesting addition to courses concerning African-American history, slavery, abolition, maritime history, and the Atlantic world, to name but a few. While the book has minor shortfalls, they are not fatal and often open the door to further discussions or research that will be valuable to future analysis of this subject.

Note

[1]. See Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); and David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-atlantic>

Citation: Amy Mitchell-Cook. Review of Christopher, Emma, *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. November, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12479>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.