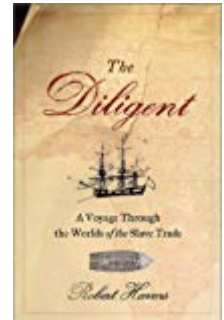


Robert Harms. *The Diligent: A Voyage Through the Worlds of the Slave Trade.* New York: Basic Books, 2002. xxv + 466 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-02871-9.



Reviewed by Thomas N. Ingersoll

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Into those Waves, Never to Return

At the end of May 1731, a sixty-nine foot, three-masted ship called the *Diligent* set out from Vannes, France, for West Africa, where its crew purchased 256 slaves, carried them to Martinique, sold them, and returned to Vannes in September 1732 with 251 barrels of sugar and some IOU's. Of the thousands of transatlantic slave voyages, this one was in no way unusual except for the fact that First Lieutenant Robert Durand kept a detailed 113-page private journal describing the trip. Combining evidence from this text with a superb array of other documentary evidence, Africanist Robert Harms provides the most vivid and useful description of a typical slave trading voyage ever written.

The *Diligent* was a bit player in the early eighteenth-century struggle to determine who in France would have the right to engage in the African trade. Vannes was a minor grain port (the *Diligent* a converted grain ship), and the trading house of Guillaume and François Billy sought to establish the principle of free trade in defiance of chartered monopolies and richer neighboring

ports like Nantes. The contest in France was wrapped up in the larger transatlantic contest of France, Britain, and Holland to break up the old Portuguese monopoly of West African trade. At the highest level of abstraction, the Billys' *Diligent* was in the vanguard of the early modern development of capitalism. In that regard, it is revealing that, like so many capitalist enterprises, the voyage of the *Diligent* was a failure because it made no profit, even though it had suffered no important obstacles.

The organization of this book is highly unusual, and may discourage some readers at first. Once I got the hang of it, I let Harms sweep me away with his storytelling. His model is a kind of serial microhistory. At each major staging point of the voyage—Vannes, the Cape Verde Islands, Whydah, Sao Tome, St. Pierre, Vannes again—he focuses his lens tightly on the history and conditions in that port. The major positive advantage of this tactic is that it reveals, as never before in such lush prose, the interpenetration of Africa and the New World, the confused and groping nature of political economy in eighteenth-century

France, the distinctiveness of the various African cultures and historic zones, the extremely complicated and volatile conditions in West Africa in the era of Dahomey's rising power, and the many ways in which the slave trade simply was not and probably could not be rational according to any "laws" of capitalism.

Disadvantages of the book's structure are that some readers will be unable to follow all the micro-descriptions of the *Dilgent's* "worlds." Just to get the ship out of port, the reader must first digest the attempt by mulatto Pauline Villeneuve to gain admission to the Convent of Our Lady of Calvary in Nantes, the defense of the French slave trade by Gerard Mellier, the Code Noir of 1685, the contest between the Jesuits and the Jansenists, conditions in Vannes, the financing of *Dilgent's* voyage, the bureaucrat Count Maurepas, and John Law's scheme and stock "bubble" in 1720. The ship first lurches into the Atlantic only on page eighty-five, and anchors off the port where it buys most of its slaves on page 199. I found this first half of the book very interesting reading because I was familiar with the material, and the book should have appeal to a very broad audience of serious scholars and non-professional readers. It might be necessary, however, to make the first half optional reading if I assigned the book in a course on the history of African Americans.

For it is the second half that most readers will find extraordinary for the way it paints conditions on the Slave Coast and the actual conduct of the trade. What is most remarkable here is the way Harms slips effortlessly back and forth between the specific course of events on the voyage, the general nature of the trade as it was conducted by the Europeans and Africans, and the full range of contingencies faced by individuals who were involved in it. At no point does the reader have the sense of being lectured to or manipulated, but the emotional impact of the details is devastating. The facts of the trade, especially the immense and constant exertion of force and terror required to get

the slaves into the ships and keep them in submission, speak quite eloquently for themselves. When Harms finally describes the ordinary slave's state of mind while being rowed through the surf toward the *Dilgent*, "into those waves, never to return" (p. 253), even a reader hardened to history's many crimes will feel the victim's desperation.

Since nothing particularly unusual happened on this voyage, Harms is able to exploit Durand's journal to its best effect, revealing the usual tediousness of the trade. For the crew it meant an endless round of maintaining and sailing the ship (or waiting for a wind), and guarding, feeding, and manhandling captive Africans. For the Africans, it meant being utterly humiliated, very crowded together, over half the time with insufficient air to breathe in a hold reeking with their own filth, waiting for an uncertain fate—some of them for many months.

Harms skillfully weaves into the story descriptions of various perils that could interrupt the monotony, borrowing examples from other voyages. Slave mutinies, pirates, deranged captains, terrible accidents—all of these did happen to these slave ships and could have happened to the *Dilgent*. In these stories, Harms introduces a collection of remarkable African individuals, like Assou or Father Manuel do Rosario Pinto. He also moderates the "French" character of the voyage—to universalize the story—by using much material from English slave trade accounts, especially those by William Smith, William Snelgrave, and Jean Barbot.

Even the best historical writing must have at least one problem. In this book, a notable failing is one most popular readers will not miss, namely a weak thesis and theoretical structure. The author lays out a guiding argument that the voyage was shaped largely by local events, so "there was no overarching 'global' context to the voyage" (p. xix). But that is repeatedly belied by the obviously global, colonial capitalist project in which the Bilby brothers are consciously working to make a

profit. Perhaps because he hopes to avoid muddying a text that includes so many different subjects, Harms opts to avoid putting any of them into its historiographic framework.

The laconic approach to analysis is also evident, however, in his 737 endnotes, whose rich content is dominated by citations of primary documents, which Harms mined in nineteen archives in Europe and the United States. Although twenty leading historians' books on the slave trade are cited in the notes, it is a comparatively light dressing. One finds no hint of what Harms thinks about some of the big questions, such as the overall effect of the slave trade on Africa. As for France, at one point (p. 82) he notes that the trade goods the ship carried to Africa did little to serve French industry, but he is not interested in the larger significance of that fact. He describes the specific local reasons why Captain Pierre Mary is forced to take such low prices for his slaves in Martinique, but he refuses to explore what that may reveal about the colonial economy as a whole. If it is true that the individual voyage was shaped primarily by local conditions, it is implausible to deny the titanic battle between European ruling classes for world domination, which made the slave trade possible and shaped its basic conditions at any given time.

Because of its comparative detachment from historians' leading debates, this book might be embraced with a special enthusiasm by the general reading public. Confidence in the craft of history has been shaken by a rash of recent scandals in the profession, and a good old-fashioned narrative strongly flavored with interesting and easily verified details may be just the right restorative tonic.

This book simply presents the unmistakable brutality, human waste, and everyday capitalist contradictions of the slave trade in its simplest terms. At the same time, for those with an appetite for the minutia of this particular enterprise—weights and measures, methods of branding slaves, sailing lore, contemporary epidemio-

logical wisdom, and the like—this book is a treasure trove.

The reader who wants more on the African setting of the trade should begin with the author's *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500-1891* (1981).

Lamentably, the book includes no bibliography, but it does include fifty-eight well-placed illustrations, many of them Durand's own sketches of trading stations. An appendix reconstructs the balance sheet for the voyage.

Imaginatively constructed, deftly and engagingly written, a model of research, the book takes the reader deep into the tragic heart of the eighteenth-century Atlantic.

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