

# H-Net Reviews

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James A. Rawley. *London, Metropolis of the Slave Trade*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003. xix + 192 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1483-6.

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## Some Early Ventures into the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic Slave Trade

Asking questions about the roles that London, its merchants, and its seamen played in the Atlantic slave trade during its eighteenth-century heyday can open interesting doors. Over the last twenty years several essays by James A. Rawley addressed “who,” “what,” and “how” aspects of this question. Now they are collected into a book. Its opening chapters argue for the importance of London merchants and London-based ships in the trade with West Africa, while his central essays unravel the careers of several participants. These biographical vignettes illuminate a shadowy trade from unfamiliar angles.

A generous introduction by David Eltis gets the book off to a promising start. The biographical core is then framed by more general essays. One sets the *Henrietta-Maria*, a slave ship wrecked off Key West in 1700, into wider contexts, though regrettably there are no maps or illustrations here from the underwater excavation of this important wreck of a former French prize lost on its return voyage after landing slaves at Jamaica. Another piece reprints a participant’s survey of the historiographical debates during the 1970s, when, after Philip Curtin’s *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (1969), a generation of historians first attempted to measure the scale of the slave trade. A third describes the hard-fought Parliamentary campaign to defer the passage of the acts abolishing British participation in the slave trade in 1807.

Following these preliminaries, the biographies of six white men involved with the West African trade provide

the book’s core. We start with Humphry Morice, one of London’s largest investors in the African trade during the 1720s. Rawley located Morice’s papers at the Bank of England, where their owner had risen to be Governor before tangled personal finances pushed him to suicide in 1731. With the aid of these papers, Rawley is able to piece together Morice’s directions to outward-bound captains, snippets from his accounts, along with depositions from captains left unpaid at his death to sketch tactics for successful operations in West Africa. Rawley describes a trading pattern where the aim was to keep moving, with Morice’s captains aiming to re-sell newly enslaved Africans to Portuguese brokers in West Africa who would pay gold for slaves to ship to Brazil. In this version of the African trade the goal was for his ships to return directly to London with gold and African produce. Only if such trading failed were they to sail their cargoes of slaves across to the West Indies or the Chesapeake. In this chapter, and in all his investigations of West Africa, Rawley highlights shifting patterns in a traffic that is often viewed as static.

There are all too few manuscript hoards of the caliber of the Morice papers. Elsewhere Rawley is obliged to trawl mainstream sources for traces of some evasive characters. Three biographical essays describe other Londoners who participated in the slave trade. Richard Harris was an articulate advocate and spokesman for the “separate” slave traders in the 1720s and 30s during their bitter exchanges with the Royal African Company. Alexander Dalzeel wrote a *History of Dahomy* (1792) af-

ter he had served as commander of the fort at Whydah. The London-born John Newton (1725-1807) was a slave trader in the 1740s and 50s who then changed his life to become an Evangelical Anglican, compose hymns including *Amazing Grace*, and finally become minister in the city parish of St. Mary Woolnoth. Rawley's chapters unravelling their careers are effective in demonstrating the wider resonances of their involvements in the slave trade. Harris's campaigns against the Royal African Company's trading monopoly with Africa led him to develop free-trading arguments. The ups and downs of Dalzeel's trading ventures, running ships out of Liverpool and London to West Africa, are traced through Lloyd's insurance lists to show the vicissitudes in captains' careers. Newton was the only ex-slaving captain to testify for the Abolitionists before the House of Commons' select committee on the slave trade in 1788. In each instance biographies provoke useful surveys.

One of these essays was provoked by an invitation to write for the *New Dictionary of National Biography* and this collection may well prove a forerunner of further post-*New DNB* books grappling with intransigent topics via biographical soundings. This book does demonstrate the strengths, along with some of the weaknesses, of adopting such an approach. Most of the essays collected here were occasional pieces that followed Rawley's *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (1981), which has provided a generation of students with a useful introduction to contentious questions. After completing this survey he moved on to focus on the U.S. Civil War, writing several well-respected studies. With a new edition of the *Transatlantic Slave Trade* imminent, he has taken the opportunity to reprint a number of occasional essays on slavers and the slave trade. Hence we also have an essay on Henry Laurens, which looks at a leading South Carolina slave-trader. A further chapter on one Captain Nathaniel Gordon, which rounds out the book, unravels the trial of the only American slave captain to be hanged under the legal ruling that slave-running was a type of piracy, came out of research on Abraham Lincoln. These essays are the products of a productive scholarly career. Reprinting them as a volume should be helpful as some

are unpublished and several others were first published in obscure venues.

Despite such promising ingredients the project's execution proves disappointing. The individual chapters have not been updated, which results in some potentially confusing references. Thus the Minutes of the Committee of West India Merchants, the London-based lobbying group, are cited as being held by the West India Committee in London, even though these papers went to Trinidad in the late 1970s, a lapse that highlights where publishing unrevised essays can be problematic. (The West India Committee's papers are now in the Westindiana Collection at the Library at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad.) The lack of revision also leaves some sizable bibliographical gaps, with no references to David Hancock's *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (1995), nor to any of Jacob Price's many studies of trans-Atlantic trade. These are not even mentioned in the skimpy page of "Suggested Reading" tacked on at the end. Further copy editing, a more ambitious conclusion than simply reprinting the concluding chapter from the 1981 textbook, never mind a fuller bibliographical essay, should all have been feasible enough. This book is still useful, but it could have been good.

There is solid material here. Teaching collections should welcome it as a resource for instructors and students alike. Readers interested in slavers' activities in West Africa will find insights and a helpful emphasis on individual slave traders and on the contingent in their operations. Readers intrigued by the book's title, however, and wishing to get to grips with eighteenth-century London as a "metropolis of the slave trade" will need to look further afield, either to see where the trade with West Africa fitted into London's wider commerce, or to understand how slavery fitted into Londoners' own views of a city where African and Asian populations were becoming more established. They may well find fuller answers in Hancock's and Price's studies, or else in the Survey of London's ongoing work on the East End and Docklands. Even with such caveats, Professor Rawley's collected essays remain useful and often thought provoking.

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