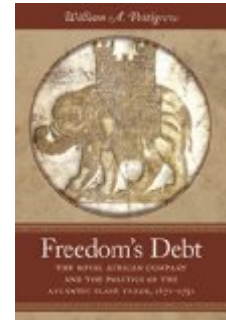


William A. Pettigrew. *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672-1752.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. 272 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-1181-5.



Reviewed by Nancy L. Rhoden

Published on H-Albion (February, 2015)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth (Red Deer College)

William Pettigrew's study of the Royal African Company (RAC) from its charter to its final demise looks at "the slave-trade protagonists, analyzing the ideas, the disputes, the compromises—in short, the politics—that established England's involvement in and later dominance of the transatlantic slave trade" (p. 4). This is a deeply researched, persuasive study on the political disputes between the RAC and what the author calls the independent slave traders who opposed the RAC's monopoly and were victorious by 1712 in deregulating Britain's slave trade. Pettigrew argues that independent traders were more politically astute than supporters of the RAC, more effective in their lobbying and pamphleteering, and more savvy about the ways British politics had changed following the Glorious Revolution. More uniquely, Pettigrew attributes their victory to their successful championing of liberty, or their right as Englishmen to be free to trade in African slaves.

Whereas the politics of abolitionism are well known and a better fit with a British narrative of

freedom, *Freedom's Debt* explores an earlier story of Britain's slave trade, its architects and advocates, and the "process of politicization and its influence on the regulation, deregulation, and re-regulation of the slave trade" (p. 7). The first part of the book, "Deregulation, 1672-1712," offers a profile of independent traders, an exploration of their arguments and those of the RAC, and an examination of their strategies. It draws its findings chiefly from evidence of lobbying in Parliament and the Board of Trade, petitions, and pamphlets. Pettigrew explains the separate traders' victory in deregulating the English slave trade in terms of a coalition of diverse interests, expansive and popular ideas of liberty, and "an ingenious political strategy" (p. 7).

Responding to the *Nightingale* decision, the RAC launched in 1690 a campaign to secure parliamentary and statutory recognition for its royal charter. The RAC had little reason to worry, given its strong connection to the monarch and influential merchants and friends, but this appeal "exposed it to an opposition interest group" that

would prove highly effective (p. 48). The RAC petition began almost a quarter century of parliamentary deliberations, referred to as the Africa trade debates, and produced more than two hundred parliamentary petitions and almost another two hundred pamphlets. Lobbying groups opposed to the RAC, including independent slave traders, expressed various antimonopoly arguments that resonated with the public, Parliament, and the Board of Trade. They tapped into a growing popular opposition to the RAC and developed a huge constituency of Atlantic supporters for deregulation. Meanwhile, the RAC argued that a monopoly was the better way to secure the British state's interests in America and in Africa. In 1698 Parliament acknowledged the charter, but also endorsed partial deregulation by letting independent merchants engage in the slave trade if they paid a 10 percent duty to help support the RAC's trading forts in Africa. By 1712 the independent traders had achieved their victory: a complete deregulation of the British slave trade.

Although Pettigrew acknowledges briefly that separate traders enjoyed "undoubted economic advantages over the African Company" (p. 17) and had made the slave trade more efficient and profitable through cost-cutting measures and by lowering slave mortality rates, he writes, "the expansion of the slave trade resulted, not from the separate traders' economic success, but from the separate traders' innovative political strategy" (p. 19). Whereas the RAC needed a statute to confirm its monopoly, the separate traders needed only a "legislative vacuum" to trade freely (p. 117). The chapter entitled "The Strategies" answers clearly why separate traders were effective. They did not need a law, but rather they needed to prevent one. Consequently, petitions, pamphlets, and lobbying offered strategies to filibuster parliamentary deliberations while simultaneously building popular enthusiasm for deregulation that discredited the RAC. The RAC, by contrast, relied on "traditional lobbying ... [that] ... envisioned the Africa trade as best managed with the help of the coer-

cive power of the state," which only confirmed, for its opponents, that it was patrician and corrupt (p. 138). By neglecting to court popular and parliamentary interest, the RAC failed to recognize the new political and institutional context, while the independent traders had an "astute appreciation of the post-1688 legislative and regulatory processes" (p. 149). As much as one may legitimately wonder more about what role the economic advantages of the separate traders played in their ultimate success, Pettigrew's examination of their effective political strategies is convincing.

Another particular strength of the book is its elaboration of the context of post-1688 English politics, and its relationship to the slave trade. The Glorious Revolution provides the watershed moment. Whereas the political and constitutional context supported monopoly and chartered companies in the 1670s and 1680s, the 1690s witnessed the expansion of parliamentary powers and growing interest in popular participation, a situation that opponents of the RAC were able to use to attack the company's monopolistic royal charter and to argue that statute law was a superior authority to royal prerogative. Separate traders successfully appealed to Parliament, the Board of Trade (after 1696), as well as a British political climate that favored the public's consent for slave trade deregulation. As Pettigrew writes, "Each side claimed to advance liberty, each believed its position was the most British" (p. 82). Pettigrew's point about contested strains of Britishness, while not a major theme of the book, is intriguing. What also might have been examined in some more detail is the meaning of different strains of liberty in this era. Pettigrew argues that the RAC "later co-opted the separate traders' rhetoric by citing the company's freedom to enjoy property and the ways in which monopoly could best uphold national liberty" (p. 84). Claims of freedom on the part of the RAC were strategic, given its use by independent slave traders. Yet freedom or liberty in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world, as David Hackett Fischer in

Liberty and Freedom (2005) contends, had divergent roots and meanings, some that promoted individual rights, others that focused on corporate or community-oriented goals. Since liberty could refer to a set of rights enjoyed by a privileged few and systematically denied to others, on the basis of class, race, or other criteria, the RAC could argue, as Pettigrew notes, that the separate traders, presumed to be social-climbing provincials, were a “self-interested” and “socially corruptive force” acting against the “national liberty” (p. 85). For separate traders “freedom primarily involved the political right to defend individual economic self-interest” (p. 111). Independent slave traders and the RAC were advancing different ideas on what was most British, but also divergent views of liberty.

Part 2, “Re-regulation,” follows the RAC from 1712 to 1752, revealing its efforts to develop new trading opportunities with the South Sea Company and to promote commercial trading with the African interior. Overall, Pettigrew argues “the maintenance of the Royal African Company between 1712 and 1752 had sought mostly to generate income for the company’s directors from stock market manipulation” (p. 177). More controversially, the last chapter (“The Legacies”) argues there is a connection between later RAC policy and abolitionism. Blaming separate traders and deregulation for the evils of the slave trade, the RAC argued that a monopoly could “rein in the slave trade’s unique brutality” (p. 180). Pettigrew suggests that “the political disputes between the African Company and the separate traders helped produce from the 1680s to the 1760s the ideological and policy underpinnings for the antislavery movement” (p. 180). Yet if, as Pettigrew notes, the RAC was “one of many institutions that celebrated this ethic [of benevolence] and reconceptualised the public image of the African,” then its contribution seems less unique, less critical to later abolitionist thought (p. 208).

This book is deliberately a political history, and not an economic history of the RAC, its opponents, or the British slave trade. As such, it contains little or almost no discussion of the New World demand for slaves, the impact of wars and slave prices (or the prices of sugar, tobacco) on the slave trade, or how demographic changes (improving mortality rates, balancing sex ratios for slaves in the Upper American South) affected demand. More curiously perhaps, there is nothing on the African experience of the slave trade, except for the political leverage the RAC attempted to gain by arguing about the inhumane practices of rival independent slave traders. The author’s nearly exclusive focus on the politicization of the slave trade reveals a good deal, but can leave a somewhat unbalanced impression. For instance, the primacy Pettigrew gives politics in his analysis seems to imply, if not outright argue, that politics is responsible for the expansion of the slave trade. Pettigrew writes that “the politics of slave-trade escalation also influenced which colonies received an increased supply of enslaved Africans.... [T]he Chesapeake colonies ... received more slaves after the African Company’s demise because their merchants had been persistent and energetic political opponents of the company” (pp. 13-14). Later, there is evidence presented of “a Virginia interest combining London tobacco merchants with a handful of influential Virginian expatriates and resident planters” that opposed the RAC (p. 55). Yet how critical was this lobby’s success to the importation of slaves to Virginia? What role did the expansion of the plantation system in America play in providing the strong economic impetus for the growth in the slave trade and consequently for these political discussions? In short, how did politics and political ideology of the RAC and independent traders complement and coincide with economic reasons for the slave trade’s expansion?

As a study of the politics of the RAC and its independent slave trading opponents, this is a successful book. What it does particularly well is offer a “lens of politics” (p. 16) through which to un-

derstand the British slave trade, and the victory of separate traders concerning deregulation. It is equally strong on the British political context and its detailed understanding of how post-1688 political institutions and culture shaped responses on the slave trade. These are valuable contributions, particularly the argument that understandings of liberty and popular consent after the Glorious Revolution provided an effective ideology for both the deregulation of and the growth of the slave trade. Less convincing is the argument about the impact of the RAC on later British abolitionism, however much one might admire the attempt.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Nancy L. Rhoden. Review of Pettigrew, William A. *Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672-1752*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40841>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.