

# REVIEW ESSAY

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## THE SLAVE TRADE AND ABOLITION REVISITED

**Herbert S. Klein.** *The Atlantic Slave Trade.* New Edition. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. xx + 242 pp. Maps. Figures. Tables. Appendix. Bibliographic Essay. Index. \$90.00. Cloth. \$24.99. Paper.

**David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz, and Anthony Tibbles, eds.** *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. xii + 315 pp. Preface. Notes on Contributors. Introduction by the Editors. Tables. Graphs. Index. \$34.95. Paper.

**Derek R. Peterson, ed.** *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa and the Atlantic.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010. x + 235 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Series Editor's Preface. Acknowledgments. Bibliography. Contributors. Index. \$64.95. Cloth. \$28.95. Paper. \$25.00.

In the past five years, the world has witnessed an efflorescence of symposia, museum exhibitions, and public commemorations focused on slavery and the slave trade. There have been many events in West Africa, North America, and Europe marking the bicentennial of the 1807 British abolition of the slave trade, the two hundredth anniversary of the 1808 U.S. ban on the importation of enslaved labor, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the American Civil War, and the tenth anniversary of France's declaration that slavery and the slave trade constitute crimes against humanity. And last year, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon designated December 2 as the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery.

Simultaneously (and perhaps not coincidentally), these same years have also witnessed a tremendous growth in the already large body of schol-

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*African Studies Review*, Volume 54, Number 2 (September 2011), pp. 195–99

arly literature on the slave trade, slavery, and abolition. The three books reviewed here, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* by Herbert Klein, *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa and the Atlantic*, edited by Derek R. Peterson, and *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery*, edited by David Richardson, Suzanne Schwarz, and Anthony Tibbles, are significant contributions to this literature. The first two do not focus on a single country, region, or continent but engage, rather, in the kind of transnational history that charts the trajectories of often separate, yet interconnected, decisions and events that came to connect and effect so many different peoples from around the world over long stretches of time. The third, *Liverpool*, focuses on the history of this port's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade, but it does so by also positioning Liverpool within the larger British context. Each book addresses a specific set of questions central to the histories of the slave trade, slavery, and imperial studies. But each also brings new information to bear on these questions as well as new perspectives.

*The Atlantic Slave Trade* (2010), for example, is a new edition of Klein's earlier book of the same title, first published in 1999. But his incorporation in this latest edition of David Eltis's updated and greatly expanded quantitative data set on the involvement of Portuguese and Spanish ships in the Atlantic trade strengthens his already compelling arguments about the importance of the South Atlantic to this enterprise. *Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery* expands upon an already good body of literature on the ports that were so central to the trade in Africa and the Americas, but the authors in this edited volume bring to this area of inquiry the kinds of quantitative data that historians of the ports in Africa would love to access in regard to African ports. It is this quantitative approach that allows the contributors to explain in convincing detail how and why Liverpool outstripped the other major ports in Britain (i.e., London and Bristol) in terms of its involvement in the slave trade while also becoming a center for abolitionist activity.

The scholarly literature has long noted the connection between the abolition movement in Britain and Britain's imperialist ambitions. The establishment of Sierra Leone, the calls by nineteenth-century missionary societies and humanitarians for greater European intervention in the affairs of African communities to stop the internal and external slave trade, and the response of local government officials to missionary and humanitarian calls to expand imperial activity despite their governments' reluctance to do so have all been well documented. But *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa and the Atlantic* provides a welcome addition to this literature, focusing not just on the events in Africa, but also on the intellectual roots of the abolitionist movement and the influence of its ideas as they moved across Africa, the Caribbean, and Britain well into the twentieth century.

Herbert S. Klein's *The Atlantic Slave Trade* has gone through ten printings so far and has been translated into several languages. Its greatest strength is an especially strong focus on the early years when the slave trade was dom-

inated by the Spanish and Portuguese. These years have often garnered little attention in North America, where the British connection tends to be predominant in classroom discussions. His book also addresses questions that are of particular concern to the general public or undergraduate students, with each chapter tackling a common question or misconception about the trade: Were Africans the only enslaved peoples, and if so, why? Were most Africans kidnapped by European traders? Did the experience of the Middle Passage involve massive deaths? Klein tackles these questions and many others by marshalling the quantitative data that he and others (most notably David Eltis) have painstakingly unearthed. His approach is geographically capacious, with attention to Africa and the Caribbean as well as South America and Europe, although the book focuses largely on labor and economic history despite the stated inclusion of social and cultural history. It is this latter aspect of the book that I find to be the weakest. In his discussion of the history of the Atlantic slave trade, for example, Klein has clearly taken what Richardson, Schwartz, and Tibbles describe as a “clinical approach to the human past”; the enslavement of Africans—which is described as a “truly impressive” operation in terms of the traders’ ability to move “cargo”—is discussed almost dispassionately, with the same objectivity that one might bring to bear, for example, on a study of the trade in palm oil. This is not a new criticism of the book. A number of reviewers responded similarly to the first edition. What is surprising is that this language has not been revised in the new edition. Additional revisions could also have been made to the discussion of the cultural impact of the trade on Africa. Whereas it is an accepted fact that the slave trade had a negative impact on the mining of iron in Africa, we now know that the effects were not uniform but varied by region and distance from the coast. More recent scholarship has also undermined Klein’s assertions that the Aro did not incorporate the slave trade into their religious activities and that the use of religious shrines for this purpose was uncommon in general. Still, despite its limitations, the book is quite valuable as an economic history of the Atlantic slave trade and it addresses questions of concern to those who are unfamiliar with the scholarship. It also introduces students to the power of quantitative methods while encouraging them to think about why Britain abolished the trade even while it was still so profitable.

The topic of abolition, mentioned briefly in the last chapter of *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, is given fuller attention in Derek Peterson’s *Abolition and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*. While two of contributors to this edited volume (Philip Morgan and Seymour Drescher) speak to the question that has dominated much of the discussion of the 1807 abolition of the slave trade (why did Britain become the source of such a strong abolitionist movement?), both—as well as the other authors—go well beyond this focus to emphasize the many international threads that contributed to the abolitionist movement. Christopher Brown examines the earliest efforts by Britain to encourage a trade with the Senegambia

region of West Africa in goods other than slaves and how these efforts contributed to the inclusion of a commercial element in what was otherwise a humanitarian effort to establish Sierra Leone as a colony for the formerly enslaved. Phil Morgan demonstrates that while a West Indian lobby in favor of the slave trade existed, the Caribbean planters did not speak with one voice and some actually supported abolition. Other factors that fed into the abolitionist movement (and that extended beyond the British involvement) were Danish efforts to establish alternatives to the trade on the Gold Coast at the end of the eighteenth century, the influence of Africans' own notions about legal and illegal enslavement (as emphasized in John Thornton's contribution), and the activities of Africans in Britain and the Caribbean in pursuit of their own freedom and that of their fellow blacks. The topic of the linkage between abolition and imperialism is developed most clearly by Seymour Drescher and Robin Law. Drescher argues convincingly that while the abolitionist movement rationalized British imperialism, it certainly did not cause it, and much debate existed in Britain over the advisability of imperial expansion. Robin Law considers these debates in greater detail in his examination of the connections among the abolition movement, British imperialism, and Britain's embrace of international law. The final chapter, by Jonathan Glassman, develops a point noted in Peterson's excellent introduction: that once abolitionist ideas about the inhumanity of slavery circulated around the world, the message was adopted by others (in this case, in Kenya and Tanzania) and deployed for their own purposes. Both the introduction and the final essay by Glassman are fitting bookends to a volume that will serve as an excellent classroom text. They both summarize the existing literature while offering new insights into the legacy of abolitionist rhetoric more than a century after it was successfully deployed to help end the slave trade.

*Liverpool and Transatlantic Slavery*, edited by David Richardson (who worked on the slave trade data base with both David Eltis and Herbert Klein), Suzanne Schwarz, and Anthony Tibbles is a very impressive set of essays, especially in its focus on quantitative methodology. Each contribution represents original research and addresses issues of concern in economic and business history. The first three essays, by Kenneth Morgan, Paul Lovejoy and David Richardson, and Stephen D. Behrendt, stand as a set that seeks to explain Liverpool's dominance in the slave trade. They variously emphasize the importance of Liverpool's geographical location and its competitive spirit, particularly the innovative ideas that its business leaders developed about credit and networking with business partners in West Africa and Caribbean, which helped them make a place for themselves in a trade that until the mid-eighteenth century had been dominated by London and Bristol. The two chapters by Lorena Walsh and Melinda Elder focus on Liverpool's peripheral trade with the colonial Chesapeake and the Lancaster region in England, respectively. While both are very good studies, they tend to exhibit a problem that is the reverse of the one I identified

in Herbert Klein's *Atlantic Slave Trade*: while Klein focuses largely on the numbers, ignoring the human element, Walsh and Elder tend to give too much attention to specific individuals. The chapters by David Pope and Jane Longmore stand out for providing an overview of the kinds of records historians can use to reconstruct the history of Liverpool's involvement in the slave trade. Pope, for example, who focuses on the social aspirations of Liverpool's slave merchants, includes four appendixes listing information found in the archives about specific merchants: whether or not they left wills or owned property outside of Liverpool, and what the values of their properties were. In including this material she makes it possible for students to understand how a number of disparate documents might be cross-referenced in order to detect how the wealth accumulated by Liverpool slave traders affected the region. Three of the essays—Trevor Burnard's discussion of African ethnicities in seventeenth-century Jamaica; Suzanne Schwarz's article on the development of the Sierra Leone Company; and Brian Howman's piece on abolitionism in Liverpool—are less directly connected to Liverpool and the slave trader per se. Yet these essays, too, contribute to on-going debates about cultural identities in the Americas, the role of commerce in the development of Sierra Leone, and the reason abolitionism took hold in Liverpool despite its centrality to Britain's slave trade, respectively. In that regard they are welcome additions, even if their inclusion in a book that focuses specifically on Liverpool and the slave trade seems rather curious.

Together these three books highlight the continued vibrancy of studies on the slave trade and its abolition as scholars expand their research to focus on both the specific (in the case of Liverpool as a major slave trading port) and the international connections that both supported the trade and brought it to an end.