

Slave Ships

[What follows is a revised extract from the lecture given by Professor James Walvin of the University of York at the Annual Cowper and Newton Day, 24 April 2004. The day's theme was 'Olney - a Cradle of Emancipation?']

Cowper, Newton, and their Olney associates are famous for their effective and sustained attack on the slave trade. But what exactly was the slave trade? Why did these men, and a growing band of others in the late eighteenth century, become so passionate about it? After all, the Atlantic slave trade had existed for centuries without too much opposition. Yet, in the late years of the eighteenth century, it attracted some of the most withering attacks from a broadly-based group of people. To understand the passion that informed the abolition campaigns, and to set the Olney project in context, we need to understand the nature of the slave trade itself. What follows is an attempt to provide an account of some aspects of the trade which aroused the revulsion of so many people of sensibility.

At its simplest the Atlantic slave trade was the enforced flow of humanity between Africa and the Americas. Something like 12 million Africans were loaded onto slave ships (though nothing like that number arrived at the ships' destinations). It is a staggering historical phenomenon, hardly diminished in scale by the even greater human tragedies of the twentieth century. Yet even today, it remains difficult to recall that beneath these bald statistics lay the sufferings of millions of individuals. What follows is not intended to diminish that suffering, but rather to describe in broad outline the process by which it was ordered, and brought into being by apparently impersonal forces in distant parts of the globe.

The Africans caught in this trade were the human pawns in a massive commercial system which was driven forward by the widely-accepted belief that the slaves were things, not people: chattel not humanity. Grotesque to the modern mind, such a view (though it encompassed a variety of contradictions and confusions) was the necessary philosophy which underpinned the whole Atlantic business. Concede the African's humanity, and the system unravelled. And that is exactly what began to happen, in the late eighteenth century, when voices of moral, religious (and economic) dissent began to challenge the idea of the slave as commodity.

The Atlantic slave trade was orchestrated by commercial and political interests in Europe, and later, in the Americas. What appears at first to be a relatively simple trading structure (Europe, to Africa, to the Americas, then back to Europe) gave way to a remarkably complex system. The British trade grew out of London, but the centre of slave trading gravity shifted first to Bristol, later to Liverpool, while Glasgow came to dominate the tobacco trade. Although large numbers of ports joined in, sending local vessels out to profit from the slave trading cornucopia, the British slave trade was dominated by those major ports. Throughout, the finance, insurance and the complicated flow of money, letters of credit, insurance and trading instructions, passed through trading houses and banking facilities in London.

The bold statistics of the Atlantic slave trade are now familiar - if no less remarkable. About 12 million Africans were loaded onto the ships, ten and a half million surviving to landfall in the Americas: something like 27,000 known slave voyages, of which about 12,000 were British or British colonial (mainly North American). About 5,000 slave voyages originated in Liverpool. Such statistical snapshots can easily mask the human misery they are intended to represent. The majority of those African captives were male, although the sex ratio on the slave ships changed over time. By the last years of the slave trade, in the mid-nineteenth century, when the last slave ships heading for Brazil and Cuba were trying to out-run the British and American anti-slavery patrols, their cargoes consisted largely of very young (largely male) Africans.

There are of course any numbers of ways in which we can arrange these figures. But one particular formulation demonstrates the dominance of Africans in the population movement westwards to the Americas. Although it is tempting to think of the migrations to the Americas as European, until 1820 the African was the typical migrant across the Atlantic. Before the 1820s some two and a half million Europeans migrated to the Americas. But in the same period, almost eight and a half million Africans had been transported in the slave ships. Of the total number of Africans landed in the Americas fewer than 10% were taken to North America. The great majority were shipped to Brazil and the Caribbean. They were shipped overwhelmingly to work in the sugar fields. Despite the dispersal of slaves to all corners of the American economies (from domestic work to cowboys), it was sugar which lured the very great majority across the Atlantic.

The preferred aim of the slave traders was to fill their holds with Africans and to leave the African

coast as quickly as possible. But they were rarely able to do so. Despite high death rates among the crews, which rose the longer they lingered on the coast, where some experienced losses of 45% per month, the slave ships had to wait until they had acquired sufficient human cargo to make the crossing economically worthwhile. Of course slaves were not the sole African export, and until about 1700 the total value of other exported African goods (led by gold) was higher than slave exports. Yet whatever the form of trade, Europeans were, throughout, subject to, and in the hands of, African coastal traders and African governing elites. In their turn these were dependent on the flow of slaves and other goods from the African interior. Slave captains and European traders developed highly complex and ritualized negotiations with African merchants, traders and elites in search of slaves: handing over in exchange their imported cargoes from Europe or transhipped from Asia. The early casual offerings of baubles and trinkets were soon forgotten as Africans developed specific trading demands, and learned the commercial value of their human commodities. What seems like a set of simple negotiations on the coast was in fact just the most visible (to the Europeans) of hugely complex and geographically diverse trade systems which stretched from the African coast into the interior. The consequences of that trade were enormous, helping at their most extreme to bring down indigenous African states, and encouraging violence and warfare in search of prisoners/slaves for onward sale to traders on the coast.

When Africans were sold to the slave ships, this was only the latest of a string of transactions which had seen them enslaved and moved onwards, mainly on foot, from their distant homelands to the coast. Most had almost certainly never seen white men before, nor had they ever seen the ocean or European sailing ships: and all this before they were thrust into the stinking hell of the slave decks.

The slave trade was a harsh commercial business, and all the people involved expected a profitable return on their risky investments. The slave traders' aim was to get their human cargoes across the Atlantic and to the American slave markets, without loss or injury. Dead or sick slaves meant a financial loss. The simple, if crude, point remains indisputable: slave traders (for all the brutality of the system) were anxious to deliver Africans in as good a condition as possible. Whatever brutalities took place, and there were plenty of them, the aim was not to damage or harm - and certainly not to kill - the slaves, but to transport them as swiftly as possible in order to sell them at a profit. In fact, the very great majority of all Africans loaded onto the ships did indeed land in the Americas. But large numbers arrived sick (a fact reflected in the death rates among newly-landed slaves) and a sizeable proportion did not survive the crossing.

Slave ships were generally smaller than other cargo ships, their human cargoes packed below decks, normally divided by sex, with the young sharing the women's quarters. They were more crowded ('packed') than any other comparable maritime travellers (included troops), but the degree of packing did not seem to affect the levels of shipboard mortality. Indeed there was a huge variation in the levels of deaths among Africans on board the slave ships, though the overall level decreased over time: the death rates on slave ships in the late eighteenth century were half those of the early days of the slave trade. And this was true on all European ships. The key factor seems to have been the point of departure from Africa and the length of time of the voyage, both factors related to local African conditions. What tended to decrease the death rates was the growing experience of slave trading itself. Traders developed an expertise in how best to ship, load and transport large numbers of people on the African coast, and then to ship them, as swiftly as possible, across the Atlantic. Like other businesses, slave traders simply got better at their trade with experience. Again, this was true of all the nationalities involved. Overall the slave ships were markedly smaller than other vessels plying the West Indian or American routes. It seems clear enough that the size of ship was important: the smaller, swifter vessels emerged, through trial and error over a very long period, as the vessels best-suited to carrying Africans across the Atlantic. They were not however best for carrying American produce back to Europe and there thus emerged a distinct and separate leg of this trading system for that purpose. The so-called 'triangular trade' was in fact a complexity of criss-crossing sailing routes: direct to and from Africa, from Europe to the Americas direct, and back; from North America to the West Indies and back. There was a similar series of criss-crossing routes across the South Atlantic, to and from Brazil.

All ships were, of course, at the mercy of the natural elements: of currents and wind systems, of storms and being becalmed. Slave traders learned the maritime tricks of the Atlantic system: how best to catch the winds and currents to get to their chosen destination, when (and when not) to leave (and when to leave the hurricane-prone Caribbean). Even so, the timing of the transatlantic crossings varied hugely, though the average time to Brazil was one month, to the Caribbean and North America two months. Crossing times got shorter, and the ships got bigger over the broad span of the slave trade. With the exception of slave ships destined for North America (in the mid-eighteenth century carrying 200 slaves), European slave ships carried more Africans by the end of the eighteenth century

than they had previously: 390 for the British, 340 for the French and Portuguese - even higher, in the 400s, in the last phase of the 'illegal' nineteenth-century slave trade to Brazil.

For all its miseries at sea, the Africans' captivity did not consist solely of time spent on the ships, even though that was the unquestioned trough of misery for them. Africans had been enslaved for months before they were thrust into the slave holds. They had been held for months on the African coast, and most had trekked for months to the coast from the point of their initial enslavement. We do not know how many Africans died before reaching the slave ships, but we have a reasonably clear idea of the levels of deaths on the ships. In total some one and a half million Africans died on board the ships, to be cast overboard, their number (never their name) simply struck from the ship's logs, like so much lost cargo. By the early seventeenth century the average mortality rate ran at about 20%, but a century later it had fallen to half that. There were, of course, catastrophic examples of contagious disease sweeping away huge numbers of Africans. All this was quite apart from the death and destruction brought about by slave resistance. We know of almost 400 instances of ship-board insurrection. Death rates rarely fell below 5% (and that among a relatively young group of people). Most slave deaths on board were from gastro-intestinal disorders, mainly the 'bloody flux'. Inevitably, untold numbers of survivors stumbled ashore suffering from the same condition; weakened, aged, often 'bunged up' by slave traders anxious to pass them off as fit, and destined for an early grave in the Americas. At this point we return, again, to the issue of historical interpretation. How are we to capture, present, discuss suffering on such a scale, of such a personal humiliating nature, where private functions were public, when privacy had no meaning, and where living quarters quickly descended into the squalor of a seaborne stable?

Slaves were shackled below, normally in small groups; they fed from communal supplies, they shuffled in chains to the 'necessary tubs', but, when sick, relieved themselves where they lay, their faeces soiling and contaminating themselves and their fellow prisoners. In bad weather they were neither cleaned nor exercised, because the crew was too busy battling to man a storm-bound ship. It took a strong stomached surgeon, or a hardened crewman to venture into the stinking, pestilential slave holds in these conditions. The Africans, on the other hand, had no choice in the matter, instead pitching their filthy way across the Atlantic in conditions which often pass belief and description. When Parliament began to scrutinize the slave trade in the late 1780s, the litany of such horror stories, from men who had served on the slave ships, proved a telling factor in turning opinion against the trade itself. Even when weather and security allowed the crew to bring Africans on deck for exercise, they did so in small groups; sailors always feared that Africans might resort to violence or simply end their troubles by leaping overboard.

Through all this the statistics seem oddly misplaced, but they clearly are vital for any historical understanding of what happened. Without them, we have mere guess work. At the same time, they are also curiously deceptive, leading the reader down a gentle statistical path which tends to distract and blur the historical vision, and divert the human attention. When we peer into the slave hold, when we try to capture the physical reality of the slave ship, to catch a whiff of a slave ship's distinctive stink (pursuing Royal Naval vessels could smell them miles downwind), we begin to get a faint sense of what the slaves actually experienced. Here perhaps is one of those historical topics (the Holocaust is surely another) which defies easy historical grasp and reconstruction. Perhaps there is no certain way of imagining life below decks on the slave ships.

Even when land was once again in sight and when the Africans finally quit the holds, their torments did not end. Indeed they merely entered another phase of what must have seemed an unending horror story. Before they went ashore for sale, Africans were prepared for further inspection and sale - and, then, yet more onward travel to another distant, unknown destination.

Africans were prepared for sale by ships' crews, keen to present their cargoes in the best commercial light (that is, as fit and well as they could manage). This generally involved a period of cleaning, resting and feeding on board, in an attempt to make good the human wear and tear of the Atlantic crossing. For many Africans little could be done to restore them to health. There was perhaps nothing more revealing of the whole wretched story than the existence and fate of the 'refuse slaves', those incapacitated and rendered commercially worthless by sickness, and destined to a miserable end soon after landfall in the Americas. Even among those who *were* sold, a substantial proportion carried into their new American homes the ailments and frailties acquired in the protracted period of enslavement and transportation. Large numbers died within the first year of arrival.

Once on shore, the patterns of physical inspection were similar wherever the slave ships made landfall. They also repeated the Africans' initial encounters with slave traders on the African coast. They were scrutinized and probed, handled and inspected in the most intimate, medical-like manner,

to seek out their weaknesses, strengths and imperfections. After the Atlantic crossing, there were plenty to look for. In Rio, large batches of Africans were herded into warehouses close to the merchants' houses. But the physical unpleasantness of these arrangements led to the creation of more distant baracoons. There, and on board ships, or in auction pens and markets, Africans were inspected by potential purchasers, by agents, planters and by merchants, all keen to acquire healthy (that is, profitable) slaves.

Hundreds of thousands of Africans were shipped on yet again, from their point of arrival, to other destinations. For instance 200,000 were transhipped from Jamaica, mainly to Spanish and French possessions. Similarly, Dutch ships headed for the small Dutch island of Curacao, where the Africans were again transhipped to Spanish colonies. Many of them were headed for the Isthmus and to Colombia: others crossed Panama and thence to Lima. In North America, many of the Africans landing in the Chesapeake Bay region had already been transhipped in the Caribbean, and now faced another daunting trek into the American interior.

In general the slave ships headed for those regions of the Americas in the full flood of local slave-based development, depositing their human cargoes where labour was most wanted. Naturally, the patterns changed over time. Before 1600 Spanish America and Brazil attracted most of the Africans. After 1640, and the explosive growth of the sugar islands, the bulk of African slaves headed to the Caribbean. The numbers gathered pace as the plantations proliferated, and as Europe devoured increasing volumes of slave grown commodities. Between 1640 and 1700, 1.6 million Africans were landed in the Americas. In the next century the number increased to 6.4 million. Despite the British and American abolition of the slave trade in 1807 a further three million Africans crossed the Atlantic as slaves in the nineteenth century, destined primarily for Brazil and Cuba.

The end result of these massive enforced movements of African peoples was that Africans - as slaves - were scattered to all corners of the Americas, though they were concentrated initially on the plantations (and mainly on the sugar plantations). They dominated the population of Brazil: they greatly outnumbered whites in all the West Indian slave islands, and they formed a substantial minority in the slave colonies of North America. They worked in towns and cities across the Americas, on boats and ships in all maritime and riverine trades, and as agricultural workers in all forms of labouring and skilled tasks.

Slaves were ubiquitous, appearing in all corners of the Atlantic economy, from the American frontier to the dockside communities of London and Nantes. Black people, free and enslaved, were not only integral to the evolution and prosperity of the Atlantic world, but they were inescapable. Yet all had been scattered by the uniquely distressing experience of months on board the Atlantic slave ships.

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