

Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port. By MADGE DRESSER.
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This book is both a reminder of the need to integrate slavery into the warp and weft of British history and a good start in that direction. Slavery has, for far too long, been viewed by British historians as a distant, exotic topic: something best left to Africanists or Americanists. It has also been clear that such a view has served to deflect slavery away from British intellectual focus, and to throw the center of academic attention away from Britain itself. What is needed is a more determined effort to integrate Atlantic slavery into mainstream British history: to see slavery as a major force in the shaping of modern Britain from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century.

The remarkable efforts of the historians behind the treasure trove that is the Cambridge University Press slave trade CD-ROM, the effect their work has had on others, and the confidence historians can now muster when marshaling data on the slave trade, all bear witness to a changed historical climate. David Eltis has been at the forefront of that change, through his own work and as a catalyst for others' scholarship. Eltis's long-time collaborator, David Richardson, staked out his own claims to recognition in earlier important work on the slave trade records in Bristol. These two exemplary historians of the slave trade have, quite properly, been concerned with the detailed information of that trade, and it is useful to remember the enormous difficulties they and others faced in locating, retrieving, and analyzing much of that data.

Even before the emergence of their findings, it had long been apparent that Bristol was a critical pioneer in the English slave trade. What remained relatively unknown was the influence of that burgeoning seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century trade on the historical sociology of Bristol itself. For some time Madge Dresser, working in that city, has labored to give historical flesh and social substance to that account. The result, *Slavery Obscured*, is an important book, both in itself and as a guide to how others might proceed with such projects in the future.

Bristol has long needed a rounded social history of this kind—not simply an account of the maritime data of that city, but an attempt to fuse the hard detail of Bristol's maritime growth and development with the social geography of the city itself. Like so many other British cities ensnared by the Atlantic and African trades, it is easy to miss the degree to which Bristol was fashioned by the effort of African slaves on the far side of the Atlantic. Equally, it is easy to concentrate on the splendors of that city, notably its architectural landmarks, and overlook the distant origins of the city's physical and human transformation. *Slavery Obscured* is, in effect, a case study that could be cast onto a broader canvas to suggest the significance of the Atlantic trade on Britain from the late seventeenth century onward. Scholars could trace a similar pattern in Liverpool and Glasgow (though with slightly different chronologies) and in a number of smaller ports and their economic hinterlands.

Dresser's book begins with some of the better-known features of Bristol's slaving past: the facts and figures of its rise to eminence on the back of the Atlantic trade. Dresser hits her stride when she tells the untold stories of Bristol, and of the multifaceted effect of slavery on the city. Even its most obvious consequence—the presence of black people in the city—has been largely assumed, and has never been described, as it is here, with such precision and care. Indeed those qualities characterize the book throughout, for here is a work that derives not only from careful and detailed study of a broad range of materials and archives but also from an alert residence in, and affection for, the place itself. It is hard to imagine anyone who does not know the city as intimately as Dresser does writing a book that combines her local appreciation with a broader scholarly

awareness.

Dresser's account of Bristol's black residents, enslaved and free, supplies an important dimension to British black historiography. Yet here it is located in the specific historical trajectory of Bristol, and is all the more revealing for that. Local newspapers, church records, burial grounds, family portraits, and diaries have all long yielded clues to the black presence there (and indeed in other British cities). Dresser's study is a reminder that scholars of British black history could fruitfully turn to local studies for rewarding leads. Indeed, the example of Bristol is also a reminder that all the major studies of the British black community in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are now thirty years old, and there is clearly a need to revisit the topic equipped with the remarkable historiography of slavery spawned over the past three decades (on both sides of the Atlantic).

The story of blacks in Bristol or elsewhere in Britain can never be fully told, or understood, simply by examining a single locale. Dresser locates the city in its broader geographical setting. But such studies demand of the historian a mastery of an unusually diverse scholarship in time and space. Bristol and its hinterland were shaped by the expansion of maritime history and trade, by the complex development of the African markets, by the evolution of the newly settled American slave colonies, and by the remarkable story of imported tropical staples from the Americas. Yet all these forces were so far away from Bristol (indeed from Britain) that it is tempting to focus on the local and the specific, and to concentrate solely on Bristol itself. Dresser does not fall into this trap.

Dresser is equally good—revealing and revisionary—in her account of the city's urban transformation (her comments will surely be of interest to urban historians of the period). Similarly, she provides an important discussion about the nature and development of the abolition debate in the heart of slave trading territory. Finally, she makes some suggestive comments about the influence of slavery in the local public mind.

Slavery Obscured is relevant and important to a range of scholars: students of urban England, maritime historians, students of abolition, and that growing band interested in British black history. Methodologically bold, the study is rooted in and shaped by a wide span of historical evidence, from the more conventional archives to graphic and material sources. It is an appealing book by a scholar in command of Bristol's complex history and always alert to the (often unnoticed) contemporary position of a forgotten past.