Tales from the Ships

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A Slaving Voyage to Africa and Jamaica: The Log of the "Sandown," 1793–1794. Edited by BRUCE L. MOUSER. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. Pp. xxiv, 156. $27.95.)

The Diligent: A Voyage through the Worlds of the Slave Trade. By ROBERT W. HARMS. (New York: Basic Books, 2001. Pp. 448. $30.00 cloth, $17.50 paper.)

These books showcase two of the many hundreds of extant firsthand accounts of slaving voyages.[1] Assuming each of the 37,000 transatlantic slaving voyages had a logbook and some, in addition, had surgeons' logs, then many thousands of these documents must have been created between 1519 and 1867. In short, these are not rare documents. They range from records kept as part of the business, such as captains' and surgeons' logs, to private diaries and travel accounts kept with publication in mind. A few fragments were written by or at least taken down from Africans themselves. Most accounts derive from officers of slave ships or the European merchants and travelers who accompanied them in an age when almost the only way to reach Africa was on board a slave vessel. Among the latter group was Zachary Macaulay, probably the only white abolitionist luminary to make a transatlantic voyage.[2]

[1] The logbooks of almost all the 143 Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie slaving voyages have survived, as do perhaps 80 logbooks of vessels belonging to companies that operated out of Lorient. At least as many are to be found in various Nantes archives. The Public Record Office in London has many in the T70 and Chancery series. In the U. S., examples of the genre are to be found in most major libraries, to say nothing of the Portuguese language archives around the Atlantic.

[2] See the remarkable surgeon's account of the *Saint Michael's* sojourn off Madagascar in 1726 in the Hispanic Society of America archives; "Journal and Logbook of an Anonymous Scotch Sailor held on his voyage from London to Jamaica, and From London to Madagascar and Buenos Ayres . . . "; and Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill, *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* . . . (London, 1744-1746), vol 6. Not all journals are from officers. See the Mackenzie diary, New York Public Library, kept by a teenaged landsman who sailed on the Thomas from Liverpool to Barbados. The only

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Such documents divide into two broad groups: those written before and those written after the slave trade came to be viewed as evil. The first contain the most interesting material, providing clues to attitudes about slavery very different from our own. Unless faced with the alternative of death, no one has ever wanted to be a slave. But the key change is the point at which large numbers of people became convinced that no one should ever be a slave. Records of slave voyages appearing after this shift exhibit a self-consciousness that their predecessors lack and tend to be suffused with guilt or outrage, or they focus on the horrors of the Middle Passage in the certain knowledge that there was a new audience for such material.[3] At the business end of this second group is a different kind of response. The logbook of the Rhode Island slaver, the *Louisa*, sailing in 1796–1797, faithfully records the voyage but coyly avoids mention of slaves (under Rhode Island law the voyage was illegal). In the nineteenth century, merchants and captains refer to their captives as "*bultos*" (packages) rather than slaves, and in the last known example of the logbook genre, that of the *Wanderer*, a slaver that disembarked in Georgia in 1858, not only is there no mention of slaves, but also, in a nice illustration of attitudes hardening against the trade, there are no further entries whatsoever after the vessel reaches the African coast—in this case the Congo River.

What, then, makes the examples of the genre published by Bruce Mouser and Robert Harms stand out from the rest? Both are from the pre-abolitionist period and help illustrate the way the slave trade used to be viewed. Moreover, despite the title of Mouser's book, neither are true ships' logs; rather, they are diaries. Thus, Captain Samuel Gamble had a rather cavalier approach to recording vital aspects of his vessel's voyage—slave numbers, for example. He also carried his

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surviving fragments of the relevant part of Macaulay's journal, unfortunately, are those printed in Margaret Jean Trevelyan, Viscountess Knutsford, *Life and Letters of Zachary Macaulay* (London, 1900), 45-46.

[3] See the various accounts and illustrations that fill the abolitionist pamphlet literature and the emergent magazines of the 19th century, for illustrations of which see the Virginia Foundation of the Humanities website http://hitchcock.itc. virginia.edu/Slavery/. See also the slave trade accounts in Robert Edgar Conrad, *Children of God's Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil* (Princeton, 1986), 23-53.

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document with him when he left the vessel, temporarily on the African coast and permanently in Jamaica, to return to England on a different ship. The diary format allowed both Robert Durand, of the *Diligent*, and Gamble to provide more descriptive detail than is found in many similar documents, and the persona of the author is pervasive in each. Further, Durand was on the first of his three slaving voyages, and what he saw was new to him. He recorded detail that more experienced observers might have ignored. The density of the detail differentiates Durand's account from Gamble's and most of the rest of the genre, though one cannot say that it is truly exceptional in this respect. By contrast, Gamble had been on the coast at least twice before (once as captain, though Mouser does not mention this). Above all, both contain invaluable illustrations.

How might a scholar use accounts of a single voyage (or indeed, as has been done recently, a single African carried on such a voyage) to illuminate the transatlantic passage of an estimated 37,000 slave voyages carrying millions of Africans and their captors?[4] Three broad approaches come to mind. One is to publish the text in its original form accompanied by copious notes on every term that is unfamiliar to modern readers, together with some background information on all places and events mentioned. Another is to bring the background information into the foreground and then construct the larger stage on which a slave voyage was a normal event, at the same time pointing out the typicality of this particular voyage compared to slave trading voyages in general. A third and perhaps more difficult and subtle approach is, in addition to the first or second, to attempt to examine the voyage by asking how it was possible for one set of human beings to subject another to such awful conditions. One would then need to explain how values could have changed so much and so quickly. This would indeed be a contribution not only to the subject but also to the study of humanity generally. Studies of the slave systems of the Americas and the traffic that supported them have never been more in need of such a strategy.

[4] Robin Law and Paul E. Lovejoy, eds., *The Biography of Mahommah Gardo Baquaqua: His Passage from Slavery to Freedom in Africa and America* (Princeton, 2001).

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Bruce Mouser has taken the first approach in editing the account of the slaving voyage of the *Sandown* in 1793–1794. Gamble, the ship's captain, is already on board on page 1 and is back in England by the final lines. Several pages in between contain just two lines of the original text and more than thirty lines of notes and commentary. Mouser leaves no term undefined or sighting unexplained, except, strangely, most of the other slave vessels mentioned—an odd omission because several published catalogues make such identification easy. Gamble's voice is on every page. Mouser appears to have read everything about the Sierra Leone region where the *Sandown* went to get slaves, and he makes full use of a career's worth of knowledge whenever it is relevant. He has chosen to print the original text exactly as it was written, complete with strikeouts and symbols. Despite this, obscurities in the voyage remain unexplained, and the provenance of this ship could be discussed in more detail. There are also some repetitions in the notes. Nevertheless, this is a careful and scholarly work.

Robert Harms's book represents the second approach and has altogether greater pretensions. It converts 113 hand-written into 450 printed pages largely through the amplification of Durand's manuscript with descriptive and anecdotal material. The *Diligent* is mentioned on the first two pages and again on pages 31–32, but the vessel does not even begin to outfit until page 65, and it is still in port on page 85. (At this stage in Mouser's book, by contrast, massive footnotes notwithstanding, the subject is close to the end of a protracted stay on the African coast.) Harms's first six chapters cover the controversy over the status of a slave in metropolitan France, the conflict between the Jansenists and the Jesuits, French commercial policy, and the John Law scandal, much of it replete with such quotidian detail as the size of the puddles on the road to a convent in Nantes in January 1714 that are unlikely to be in the historical record and, even if they are, are not germane. This sets the tone for the remainder of the book. The voice of Durand disappears for chapters at a time. There are lengthy digressions on the Bulfinche Lambe case, involving an English agent

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detained as a singularly well-treated slave by the king of Whydah in the mid 1720s, the 1727 earthquake in Martinique, and much other material from periods up to a generation before the *Diligent* cleared from Vannes, all presented with the detail and much of the style of the novelist.

Students will likely find Harms's work the more interesting of the two. Scholars will likely find more reason to consult Mouser's volume. Both are strong on Africa and weak on the Americas and overall are more successful than Nigel Tattersfield's account of the *Daniel's* voyage, the closest recent parallel publication, in attempting to combine the two approaches mentioned above.[5] Like Tattersfield's, neither book attempts to engage rather than merely make reference to the current literature on the slave trade, and only Harms's book does much of the latter. What these two carefully researched and well-written volumes do offer is a lot of color and background information and, in Mouser's case, the invaluable opportunity to engage with the daily text of an individual involved in what is today classed as an evil pursuit. Mouser's focus on clarifying the text of the original nicely brings out the matter-of-fact spirit in which the original manuscript was written.

In the end, however, the description of the *Diligent*'s voyage may demonstrate the limitations of microhistory as a genre even as it is enjoying something of a revival. Located somewhere between biography and narrative, microhistory can bring the modern reader into the daily detail of lives very different from our own. The effect is not necessarily to increase historical understanding but, paradoxically, to increase the distance between events and reader. In a sense, such a treatment confirms the historical agent as the "other" and ultimately affirms the reader's own sense of difference. In Harms's book, this tendency is accentuated by frequent reminders that the values of early eighteenth-century France were unlike those of today. A sense of the suffering of slaves or the evil-doing of slave traders will only take us so far in understanding why the transatlantic slave trade

[5] Tattersall, *The Forgotten Trade: Comprising the Log of the "Daniel and Henry" of 1700 and Accounts of the Slave Trade from the Minor Ports of England, 1698-1725* (London, 1991).

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happened. As with tensions between cultures, insight and comprehension begin only when the reader is encouraged to recognize a humanity shared with historical agents across the centuries.

As for analysis of historical change, how much can reasonably be expected from a single voyage? To take just one example from the otherwise strong African side of the book, Durand arrived at Jakin a year before it was taken over by Dahomey, perhaps the most powerful of all African slaving polities. Four years earlier, Dahomey had conquered Whydah, the single most important slave embarkation point in West Africa. In the aftermath of these events, Whydah steadily lost market share to other slaving centers in the Bight of Benin—first, Popo, then Porto Novo, and eventually Lagos. Alone of all major coastal slaving regions in Africa, the Bight of Benin sent its peak number of slaves to the Americas as early as the first quarter of the eighteenth century, when Whydah was still independent and still accounting for more than 80 percent of all slave departures from the region. The *Diligent*'s slaving voyage thus coincided with a huge shift in slave provenance within the Slave Coast, much of it stemming from differences in how independent Whydah and imperial Dahomey organized the collection and sale of slaves. There are just hints of these seismic shifts here, and perhaps no amount of detail on interactions of Africans and Europeans over a single transaction for slaves, however amplified, can do more. But if this is the case for African issues, to which nearly half of Robert Harms's book is devoted, how much truer must it be of the even larger cultural and economic factors that we must address to even begin to understand slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic world.

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