William A. Pettigrew ends his book on the politics of the African slave trade with comments on a speech by British prime minister Tony Blair in November 2006, on the cusp of the two-hundredth anniversary of the island nation’s abolition of the trade. This is part of an epilogue entitled “Confused Commemorations.” The author intends this scholarly work to help clear up confusion about the slave trade and at the same time to have contemporary relevance and value. This is a laudable aim.

The means to this end is a political history of the Royal African Company (RAC), the slave-trading monopoly founded in 1672 by Charles II and given a thousand-year charter—so hopeful was the king’s vision of African riches that the royal grant still has 658 years to run! The book is well researched and coherently organized. Its six chapters combine chronology and theme in clear, effective ways. The roughly two hundred petitions and as many pamphlets generated by the debate between the RAC and their antimonopoly, free-trade opponents form the evidentiary core of the book.

Pettigrew makes two primary arguments. The first is that politics profoundly shaped the genesis and history of the English slave trade. Founded by royal prerogative and close to the court from 1672 to 1688, the RAC developed the English slave trade effectively in those years but came under attack by independent slave traders who resented and resisted its monopoly. A decades-long dispute about the slave trade and national prosperity would ensue, with the RAC occupying a position of superior power during the early years.

The Glorious Revolution of 1688, Pettigrew shows, changed everything. The transfer of sovereign power from the king to Parliament created an opening for the independent traders, in England and around the Atlantic. They attacked the royal charter through pamphlet and petition, arguing that statute law must replace tyranny-tainted royal prerogative. Parliament, now charged with regulating the economy, was suddenly more responsive to new economic interests and popular appeals. The Board of Trade, created in 1696, favored the independent traders. Unable to respond to the changed balance of forces, the RAC lost stature and power. In 1698 Parliament recognized the RAC charter but in a way that
would eventually prove fatal to the company, allowing, through partial deregulation, all English Atlantic merchants to join the slave trade for thirteen years if they paid a duty of 10 percent on exports to Africa to support the RAC’s trading forts. Meanwhile, the independent traders continued their lobbying campaign for the “English liberty” (84) to trade in slaves.

By 1712 they had won the day. The slave trade was completely deregulated, forcing the RAC to change directions and emphasize trade in commodities (other than slaves) produced in the interior of Africa. This project failed completely by 1725, as the market share of the RAC in enslaved Africans dropped from 97 percent in 1687 to 4 percent in 1720. Pettigrew argues that the independent traders prevailed through a highly modern campaign that stressed competition in the free market and benefit to the nation: wealth and prosperity could be based only on the freedom to trade. They lobbied fiercely and mobilized the public to support their efforts. The deregulation of the trade was thus fundamentally a political struggle.

Pettigrew’s second argument is that during the RAC’s decline, its representatives professed concern about the brutality of the slave trade and the rapaciousness of an unregulated market, both results of the victory of the independent traders. This critique offered “much of the inspiration” (214) for the antislavery movement that would emerge later in the eighteenth century. In the 1730s and 1740s, RAC officials expressed a kind of Tory critique of the independent traders and their amoral market activities, emphasizing the importance of Christian paternalism and a commitment to “Humanity and Justice” (204–5) in the slave trade and other areas of British life. These ideas would “underpin” (7), “nurture” (179), and “inform” (180) the antislavery movement.

This second argument I find to be creative but not convincing. Pettigrew discovers parallels between RAC and abolitionist ideas, but he does not actually demonstrate the connection between the two. This would have required a different and much longer book, with more research on how abolitionist thought was actually formed—through what networks and experiences, at which moments in time, etc. It is not persuasive to show a few broad similarities and claim “inspiration.”

The first argument, in contrast, is convincing, compelling, and important. At its best, Freedom’s Debt does for English history something like what Edmund S. Morgan did for American history in American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia—that is, challenge a dominant mythology that has long celebrated national liberty without exploring its dark side. In England as in America, the notion of freedom included the freedom to exploit. But note that Pettigrew reverses Morgan’s causation: in Virginia, slavery was a “flying buttress
to freedom.”¹ In England, “freedom, in multiple ways, caused slavery” (8). The independent traders invoked a specific conception of English liberty to support their “natural right” (6) to trade in slaves. As a result “enslaved labor became embedded in the very fabric of democratic freedom and economic liberalism” (218). Pettigrew concludes that “slavery and the slave trade were not the relics of a traditional, precapitalist society; they were the distillate expressions of modern society’s dynamic founding moments” (8). At fault here were “modern, liberal conceptions of freedom and liberty and their instrumental connections with the kidnapping, enslavement, transportation, torture, and murder of hundreds of thousands of African women, men, and children” (8). Pettigrew drives yet another big nail into the coffin of the once-comforting myth that slavery was not a product of modern, liberal, capitalist society.

Yet even the book’s greatest strength contains within it a weakness. Unfortunately, the kidnapped, the enslaved, the transported, the tortured, and the murdered of Africa have been given no meaningful place in the book. Neither their experience nor their voices, their suffering nor their resistance, register in the prolonged debate or in Pettigrew’s analysis of it. Their plight seems to matter only when elites say mostly false, deceitful, and self-interested things about them, as both the RAC and independent traders routinely did. I had hoped we were beyond the point where books about the slave trade could leave these important human experiences out.

A final disappointment is that the book does not fully live up to its title. In the end the reader is left wondering, what is “Freedom’s Debt”? Telling the truth about the modern, capitalist origins of the slave trade and slavery is an important step, and I applaud the author for having taken it. But many other steps lie ahead in our political, economic, and moral reckoning with slavery. Because Pettigrew links past to present, one must ask, what does this book contribute to the international debate on the legacy of the slave trade, on crimes against humanity, on justice, and on reparations? What does England owe to the people who were victimized by its hypocritical discourse of freedom? The word debt has a specific material and contemporary meaning that deserved deeper investigation.