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After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807

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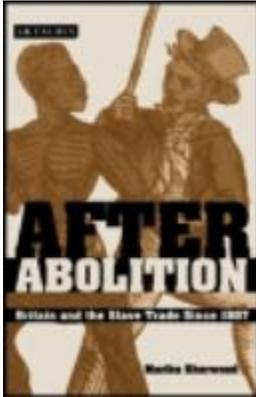
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Book Review



H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Marika Sherwood. *After Abolition: Britain and the Slave Trade since 1807*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007. x + 246 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, index. £20 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84511-365-0.

Reviewed for H-Atlantic by Christian Hogsbjerg, Department of History, University of York.

Marika Sherwood's *After Abolition* is a timely and important work that should serve as a reminder of the dark side of British commercial and industrial development during the long nineteenth century. Instead of engaging in the ongoing controversy over the profitability of colonial slavery during the eighteenth century that has gone on ever since Eric Williams published his classic *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944, Sherwood examines the "omnivorous attitude" of the "rising merchant class" in Britain after the official abolition of the slave trade within the British Empire in 1807. By drawing attention to the "huge profits" that British merchants and bankers still managed to make from slavery and the slave trade until at least the 1880s (p. 26), Sherwood breathes new life into Williams's general point that British civilization was built on the backs of the labor of enslaved Africans.

With a nod to Charles Dickens, Sherwood tells the "tale of two cities," Liverpool and Manchester, and how their growth during the Victorian "age of great cities" was dependent on trade with slave-owning states in the American South, and the wider Americas. It was not just merchants and bankers who profited from trade with countries like Cuba and Brazil. In the "cottonopolis" of Manchester, the whole city and indeed the economy of Lancashire, in general, was built on slave-produced cotton, and while many, but not all, cotton textile workers in Lancashire identified with the struggle to abolish slavery, the British government was not prepared to kill "King Cotton." As Horatio Bridges, an officer in the U.S. Navy, noted in 1845, "It is quite an interesting moral question . . . how far either Old or New England can be pronounced free of guilt and the odium of the Slave Trade, while, with so little indirectness, they both share the profits and contribute essential aid to its prosecutors" (p. 137).

Britain's continuing complicity in this barbaric and horrific trade was in part because of the influence in Parliament of many merchants who had effectively bought themselves parliamentary seats and tenaciously fought for their economic interests through politics. As one such member of Parliament, Matthew Forster, whose company Forster and Smith traded extensively with West Africa, admitted to a House of Lords committee in 1843, "it was painful to hear the twaddle that is talked on the subject of the sale of goods to slave dealers on the coast of Africa. People forget that there is scarcely a British merchant of any

eminence who is not proud and eager to deal as largely as possible with slave importers in Cuba and Brazil, and slave buyers and sellers in the United States" (p. 72). One of the strengths of Sherwood's book is her investigative reporting of the activity of some of these British merchants of eminence, using the papers of antislavery organizations that campaigned against the likes of Forster to try and reconstruct the manner in which these merchants made their fortunes.

Sherwood is also particularly incisive on the devastating effects that such commercial trading with slave dealers in Africa had on the continent of Africa during the nineteenth century, as the drive to capture and enslave led to continuous wars. Instead of modern commerce somehow bringing "civilization" and slow liberation from slavery to Africa, the reverse seems to have taken place, as the power of local slavers was legitimated and strengthened. The continued existence of slavery in Africa in the 1880s was then, of course, invoked as a justification for European colonization in the later nineteenth century. When it was no longer possible for British business to profit from slavery in the Americas and the American South by the 1880s, the British government used its official abolitionist stance to declare itself on a "civilizing mission" in Africa.

After Abolition then stands as an indictment of what Sherwood calls "the realities behind the well-promoted image of an altruistic and anti-slavery Britain" (p. 59), though she does not pass over the few measures that the British government did take to enable it to build up such an image after 1807. For example, while the British West African Anti-Slave Trade Squadron was set up in 1808 to try and stop slaving vessels crossing the Atlantic, and did undoubtedly do some good work, it was never funded adequately or legally empowered to be effective as a deterrent. As Lord Palmerston noted in 1862, "if there was a particularly old, slow going tub in the navy, she was sure to be sent to the coast of Africa to try to catch the fast sailing American clippers" (pp. 116-117).

There are of course limitations to Sherwood's study, as she would undoubtedly be the first to admit. To fully investigate the extent to which the British government and people were complicit in slavery and the slave trade would take far more research than was possible for this work. In addition, some of the arguments in *After Abolition* are speculative, inadequately referenced, and of a slightly repetitive nature. Sherwood's polemical and relentlessly accusatory tone, while perhaps understandable and even justifiable, seems at times unfair to the work of historians who have investigated the extent to which Britain's economic growth rested on enslaved labor after 1807.

Yet, the number of historians engaged in such research remains miniscule, and Sherwood asks challenging new questions about the British past. While *After Abolition* is clearly written for a popular audience as much as for her fellow academics, it would be criminal if historians, particularly British historians, refused to attempt to build on Sherwood's often pioneering research to try and come up with some convincing answers. At a time when British politicians are increasingly championing the apparent virtues of "Britishness," advancing public understanding about the full significance of the barbarism of slavery and the slave trade in making Britain "Great" could not be more urgent.

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