

Derek Peterson (ed.), *Abolitionism and Imperialism in Britain, Africa, and the Atlantic*, Cambridge Centre of African Studies: Ohio University Press, Athens, 2010. x + 235 pp.

The commemoration of abolitionism in Britain, France, and the United Nations over the past decade or so has been historic. After almost 200 years of public history's relative silence, the slave trade and slavery have been foisted on the public consciousness. In Britain, the Heritage Lottery Fund disbursed £20,000,000 in 2007 (the anniversary of the British abolition of the British Atlantic Slave Trade) for events celebrating abolition, while the Labour government, parodying while ironically supporting the Eric Williams' thesis that abolitionism symbolised capitalism in its birth-throes, had it that 1807 "marked an important point in this country's development towards the nation it is today – a critical step into the modern world, and into a new and more just moral universe". Morality in France in 2001 was writ almost as large as in the humanitarian campaigns of the *Amis des Noirs* in the age of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* with the Taubira Law in the French legislature that year declaring the Atlantic Slave Trade a "crime against humanity." The piety of the New Enlightenment is neatly summed up by former Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin; he characterises French abolitionism as "nourished by the ideal of the Enlightenment and carried by the momentum of 1789". In Old Enlightenment and Revolutionary days, though, there was not much momentum. Empty declarations of universal emancipation were coupled with the suppression of slave rebellion in Haiti. It was a reluctant France that gave up the slave trade in 1818, and also a French academy reluctant ever since, until recently, to invoke the history of either the slave trade or abolition. In Britain though, the history of the "peculiar institution" has a rich pedigree.

This important collection of essays "was conceived," the editor tells us "as a contrarian effort to challenge the self-congratulatory frame in which the bicentenary of the Abolition Act was being cast" (p.4). The authors open up the diaspora and international dimensions of the slavery question, and engage with contemporary reflections and appropriations of abolitionist discourse. In so doing they reveal the chasm that separates the quest for objectivism in academic history, and the outright distortions that permeate the contemporary obsession with memory and commemoration. One of the most fascinating

essays is the final chapter by Jonathon Glassman on “Racial Violence, Universal History, and Echoes of Abolition in Twentieth-Century Zanzibar”. The reification of ethnic identities (Arab/African) is tied to intellectual trends dating back to Reginald Coupland (the original humanitarian thesis of abolition) and nationalist politics in the post-World War II era. Glassman also deconstructs the narratives that surround the Zanzibar Slave Market, a great tourist attraction. The antiquity and brutality tropes of the Zanzibar Slave Market narrative are exposed as “absurd” and “misleading.” “Why Western visitors are so willing to believe such fantasies is a question best taken up elsewhere” (pp. 178-79). Sometimes, though, Africanist academic scholarship is complicit in such narratives. As Ella Keren observes in “The Transatlantic Slave Trade in Ghanaian Academic Historiography: History, Memory, and Power”, Ghanaian historians have been quick to jump on the UNESCO-sponsored “Slave Route Project” and “Breaking the Silence” initiatives that came into being in the early 1990s. “Internationally marginalized and economically impoverished, the Ghanaian government wished to capitalize on a global change of attitude toward the slave trade” and her academics, as reluctant heretofore as their French counterparts to invoke a tainted past, have taken up government positions in tourism (Keren, 991-992).

Often, collections such as this are uneven in quality. Not so here. Every essay is engaging and erudite, with many of them still paying homage to Eric William’s *Capitalism and Slavery* thesis almost seventy years on, even if just to reiterate the critiques. Yet the excursions into British entrepreneurship (Christopher Leslie Brown), into “1807 and All That” (Boyd Hilton), and the Caribbean and Atlantic context (Philip Morgan), are testimony that Williams’ ghost lingers close by. Capitalism had something to do with it. While the humanitarian thesis held sway, Seymour Drescher tells us, “The story was dramatic, the motivation clear, the ending happy” (p.130). The contributors here prise open the “transoceanic sphere” to show that abolitionism’s advocates “were neither saints nor self-interested profit seekers” (p.18). The story is still dramatic, but motivations and outcomes are still not resolved. The introduction by Derek Peterson provides an encapsulating frame of abolitionist historiography and the politics of abolitionism in colonial Uganda; John Thornton follows up with a comparative exploration of the ethics of African slavery in early modern Kongo and Dahomey; the era of abolitionism

is covered exceptionally well by Boyd Hilton, Christopher Leslie Brown, Philip Morgan, Seymour Drescher and Robin Law; and the collection closes with Jonathon Glassman's excursion into the abolition/ethnic nexus in colonial and post-colonial Zanzibar.

Practically two-and-a-quarter centuries have elapsed since Thomas Clarkson and William Wilberforce began their campaign against the slave trade. Both were graduates of Cambridge University. Appropriately, *Abolitionism and Imperialism* has a Cambridge connection. The book arose from Cambridge University lectures to "commemorate" the bicentenary of the abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade, not in the celebratory sense but in re-evaluating the history and legacy of abolition, sometimes in places one does not think to look (Uganda and Zanzibar for instance). This book is heralded as "the first installment in a new Cambridge Centre of African Studies Series," arising from the Cambridge/Africa Collaborative Research Programme. Every year, under this programme, Cambridge sponsors visiting "Africa-based" fellows to undertake research and present their findings at conferences. "These books will highlight the work that young, promising African scholars have composed and refined over the course of their time in Cambridge" (p. vii) (from the Series Editors' Preface). Despite these noble words, and notwithstanding the erudition of all of the essays, those "young, promising African scholars" are conspicuous by their absence. Not one African or Africa-based scholar enters the text as an author. This is very odd. However, this should not detract from the original and perceptive studies that make up this volume.

Reference

Keren, Ella. 2009. "The Transatlantic Slave Trade in Ghanaian Academic Historiography: History, Memory, and Power", *William and Mary Quarterly* 3rd series, LXVI (4), October.

Chris Youé
Department of History
Memorial University
