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Review of *Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807* by Emma Christopher

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Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807. EMMA CHRISTOPHER. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xviii + 241 pp. (Paper US\$ 21.99)

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Slave Ship Sailors and Their Captive Cargoes, 1730-1807 is Emma Christopher's ambitious attempt to fill a significant gap in the historical literature on the eighteenth-century transatlantic slave trade. While historians have rightfully focused on either the statistical significance of the trade or African slaves' suffering within it, no study has thoroughly examined the role of the thousands of sailing men (and some women) who made the transatlantic slave trade possible. Christopher makes careful use of sailors' journals, Admiralty Court records, newspaper reports, and other printed material to build on the scholarship of W. Jeffrey Bolster, Marcus Rediker, and others (see, for example, Bolster 1997, Rediker 1987, and Linebaugh & Rediker 2000). In doing so, she tells a compelling story about sailors who demanded their own liberty while they kept others in chains.

The book is divided into two sections of three chapters each. Christopher first traces why slave ship sailors took up the task, acknowledging that it entailed poor pay, hazardous working conditions, and little chance of economic improvement (even as the well-connected slaving captains could make fortunes off the trade). These sailors were often "crimped" into service, through methods that could involve trickery, bribery, and even outright force. The second chapter examines the multiracial makeup of slave ship voyages. Though there might have been more on the women or Asian *lascars* involved in the slave trade, this chapter effectively contradicts the assumption that only white sailors carried black slaves. The section ends with a gruesomely disturbing chapter on the brutality and violence that characterized a slaving voyage. Herein lies the central paradox of sailors' experiences: while they were often targets of the captain's cat-o-nine-tails, slave ship sailors could just as easily turn that vicious whip onto their captive cargo.

Section 2 begins by following slave ship sailors' prolonged visitations to West Africa, either as convicts in British prisons, runaways seeking refuge, or womanizers looking for a good time. In fact, Christopher is at her best when discussing the sexual interactions between slavers and African women. Invoking Orlando Patterson's idea that slavery is best understood as a pro-

cess, she also suggests that slave ship sailors were the crucial mechanism whereby African *captives* were commoditized during the Middle Passage into African *slaves* (through the use of violence, subjugation, and then cleaning). The book ends with a detailed examination of the conditions that these sailors faced once in the West Indies. While they were necessary for the slave trade, ships that took less risky cargo from the Caribbean had no need for slave ship sailors, making the skills they learned during the Middle Passage virtually obsolete once slaves were sold on land. Stuck on the islands, they often maintained close friendships with slaves and free Blacks, making the local elite increasingly uneasy about alliances that cut through both race and class.

As fascinating as this text is, *Slave Ship Sailors* also leaves many questions unanswered. First, Christopher claims that the unique situation of slave ship sailors put them at the forefront of the fight for freedom in the eighteenth-century Atlantic. Their close proximity to African slaves obviously gave them a point of comparison from which to draw rhetorical energy. Sailors thus used their unique position of being close to slavery, but not actually in it, to resist unfair wages and nasty working conditions. This argument is not as clearly developed as it might have been, as Christopher could have used more examples to examine how sailors' individual fights for freedom had wider implications throughout the Atlantic world. Another problem is the issue of chronology. The title claims that the period from 1730 to 1807 will be covered, but the book never explains why these dates were chosen. Readers are left to assume that Christopher chooses 1730 because that was when British slave trading intensified. The official conclusion of British involvement in that trade, 1807, is an obvious ending point. Between these two dates, however, there is no sense of historical development or change. Did slave ship sailors' lives get better or worse over time? How was the nature of slave ship sailing transformed as a result of Atlantic revolutions? Perhaps most importantly, how did the end of the slave trade affect these poor seamen's lives? Did this momentous event represent for them a golden opportunity or a financial disaster? While Christopher does an admirable job of tracing sailors' journeys throughout the space of the Atlantic world, she seems less concerned with charting their historical changes through time.

This book nevertheless makes an important contribution by investigating an aspect of the slave trade that historians have too often neglected. Though it will probably not catalyze a paradigm shift in our understanding of slavery, maritime culture, or the Atlantic world (in fact, when Christopher cites historians, she often does so to support her own interpretation rather than to disagree with them), this was not the intention of the work in the first place. Instead, the text fills an important gap, examining the sailors who served as cogs in the massive wheel of the transatlantic slave trade. As Christopher reminds us, to ignore these Sons of Neptune is to misunderstand the central

role that slaving seamen played in the construction of racial slavery, transatlantic commerce, and ideologies of freedom.

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This is by any standards an excellent first book. Like that genre it carries some of the marks of the Ph.D. dissertation from which it derives, but Douglas Hamilton brings a coherent argument to the forefront and usefully points to sources and questions that warrant further research. Like previous authors who have identified Scottish involvement with the West Indies as an important subject of study, Hamilton estimates the number of Scots who might have migrated to the West Indies over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but he parts company with his predecessors (notably Alan Karras, Trevor Burnard, and Bernard Bailyn) both in suggesting a higher total than any of them allow for (almost 21,000 in place of the previous highest estimate of 17,000), and in arguing that it was the quality and capability of the Scots, rather than their number, which rendered their presence in the Caribbean important, especially during the eighteenth century.