

A Troublesome Commerce: The Transformation of the Interstate Slave Trade. By Robert H. Gudmestad. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003. xvi + 246 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$59.95; paper, \$21.95. ISBN: cloth 0-807-12884-8; paper 0-807-12922-4.

Reviewed by David Hickman

Nearly one million enslaved men, women, and children crossed state lines between 1790 and 1860 as the center of American slavery shifted from the tobacco fields of the Chesapeake to the cotton plantations of the Deep South. Driving much of this forced migration was a rough but extensive network of slave buyers, transporters, and sellers, who collectively brought order and regularity to the distasteful business of trading in human beings. In *A Troublesome Commerce*, Robert Gudmestad examines the interstate slave trade to question how its culture of commerce interacted with and influenced the larger southern culture of honor and the slaveholders' professed belief in the mutually beneficial order of a paternalistic society. Slave traders always preferred to work in the shadows, and thus, unsurprisingly, the record of their activities available to the historian is fragmented and elusive at best. However, by drawing upon the records of political debates within Congress and the southern states, by carefully scrutinizing newspaper advertisements for the half-hidden messages that identified speculators, and by using the largest and best documented slave-trading firms as illustrative examples, Gudmestad successfully reveals the many anxieties that swirled around the antebellum South's uncomfortable acceptance of the slave trade.

The development and elaboration of the interstate slave trade, Gudmestad argues, occurred as part of the broad national trend toward increasing economic sophistication in the early nineteenth century. Prior to 1820, most of the interstate movement of slaves had resulted from white owners migrating to new lands with their workforce in tow. But as the white migration slowed after 1820, the demand for labor in the Deep South did not decrease correspondingly, and the opportunity opened for speculation in human flesh. The most successful slave traders rapidly assimilated themselves to a capitalist ethos and organized their businesses along lines that would have been familiar to northern

entrepreneurs. They formed partnerships to separate the tasks of purchase, transport, and sale; they purchased their own ships to allow for a regular and predictable schedule of deliveries; they established permanent headquarters with private jailing facilities; and they emphasized their ability to conduct transactions in cash. The largest slave traders also made use of local agents to handle the most disgraceful task of separating recently purchased children from their mothers, husbands from their wives. This peculiar interstate labor market functioned entirely with profit, not honor, in mind, and it represented, Gudmestad writes, the most blatant form of capitalistic exploitation in the South (p. 184).

The naked greed and cruelty that was all too visible in the free-market exchange of enslaved labor threatened to undermine the southern claim to an organic and paternalistic social order. Influential southerners hoped to regulate the movement of slaves to separate the corrupting lust for profit through speculation from the legitimate needs of owners to periodically adjust their labor forces. Much of the meat in Gudmestad's work consists of examining the various efforts of southern politicians, editors, and church leaders to reform the trade and to curb its excesses. All such efforts, Gudmestad demonstrates, ultimately crumbled under the practical necessity of maintaining the trade and the inability to distinguish speculation from ordinary sales. Southern attempts at reform vanished entirely as abolitionist rhetoric heated up and its flagship paper the *Liberator* took to including an image of a slave trader in its masthead. Even the mildest critique of slavery's most dishonorable features came to be associated with outright treason. The slave trade continued to increase in importance in the decades prior to the Civil War, but it simultaneously made itself less visible by concealing slave pens from public view and by moving slave coffles after dark. In defending their social order, southerners deliberately minimized the importance and volume of the slave trade, and they created the half-fictional character of the wayward, sadistic slave trader on whose shoulders they could dump all the blame for the cruelties that were in reality inseparable from the ordinary business of buying and selling human beings.

Gudmestad's work is a valuable addition to the growing body of literature that assesses the impact of the market revolution on the antebellum South. His depiction of the interstate slave trade demonstrates the extent to which the labor market impinged

upon the conscience of southern slaveholders and forced them to confront or consciously obscure the contradictions in their world view. He adeptly sketches the anxieties that this market intrusion generated and finely differentiates between the concerns of the Upper and Lower South. The focus on political debates allows Gudmestad to color his presentation with a number of dramatic episodes. Less well covered is the interaction of average slaveholders with the larger market. The manner in which individual slaveholders personally negotiated a compromise between commerce in human beings and a commitment to a paternalistic ideal warrants further study. Gudmestad, however, has highlighted the essential features of the cultural conflict sparked by the interstate slave trade, and he has presented this complex subject with clarity and style.

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