

The Dutch Slave Trade, 1500–1850. By P. C. Emmer, translated by Chris Emery. New York: Berghahn, 2006. ix + 166 pp. Bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$75.00. ISBN: 1-845-45031-0.

Reviewed by Karel Davids

This book, a translation of a monograph published in Dutch a few years ago, is a succinct overview of the state of research on the Dutch Atlantic slave trade from its emergence in the early seventeenth century until its disappearance nearly two centuries later, as well as a brief discussion of its moral implications. While P. C. Emmer is not the first scholar to explore the history of the Dutch Atlantic slave trade (W. S. Unger and A. van Danzig published valuable studies on the topic in the 1950s and 1960s), nor is he the one responsible for mapping out the subject in its full length and depth (as J. M. Postma has done in *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* [1990]), he has distinguished himself by tirelessly writing on this theme in scholarly journals, collective volumes, and Dutch newspapers for over thirty years.

Compared with the English, the French, or the Portuguese or Spanish, the Dutch played a minor role in the Atlantic slave trade. Of all the slaves carried from Africa to America some 5 percent to 6 percent were transported in Dutch ships. Starting in the 1630s with the shipment of slaves from Angola and the Guinea Coast to Dutch Brazil (the first date in the title of the book is deceptive), the Dutch slave trade reached the peak of its importance in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, when it made a vital contribution to the expansion of sugar plantations in the West Indies. Thereafter, the Dutch traders concentrated on the transport of slaves to Spanish America via Curaçao and, increasingly, to Dutch colonies in the Guyanas. However, the decline of the Spanish market from the early eighteenth century onward and the crisis of the plantation economy in the Guyanas in the 1770s led to the nearly total collapse of the trade by 1800. After the official abolition of the slave trade in 1814, illegal trading fitfully continued until about 1830.

Emmer's book discusses almost any question one might like to ask about the Dutch Atlantic slave trade, and it does so lucidly, critically, and in a well-structured way. How many slaves were carried in Dutch ships? What were their origins? What was their destination? What was the size of demand for slaves in the Americas? How many slaves survived the voyages across the Atlantic? How profitable was the slave trade? What was its relative importance in the Dutch economy? Why was there in the Netherlands hardly any abolitionist movement to speak of? Each of those questions is approached from a comparative perspective. Evidence on the English, Portuguese, French, or Spanish cases is used to put the Dutch experience firmly in context. One of the striking findings is that while mortality on Dutch slave ships was, on average, twice as high as on English slavers, this disparity can partly be explained by the difference in geographic origins of the slaves, which correlated with a variation in health conditions. However, as Emmer points out, the Dutch lagged behind the English in improving medical facilities on board, too. The high degree of mortality on Dutch slave ships also affected the profitability of the trade as such. Profits in the Dutch slave trade in the eighteenth century were only half those in the English trade. In contrast with French slavers, Dutch traders never received a government subsidy, although they did enjoy tax exemption from about 1790 onward. The ban on the slave trade after the Napoleonic Wars did not evoke any protest from the business community at all.

Although this book was originally written for the general public in the Netherlands, "as a temporary monument" to commemorate the slave trade and slavery (p. viii), it can usefully serve as a scholarly introduction to the subject for a foreign audience, too. The text has barely been changed in the process of translation. One of the intriguing exceptions is a passage on page 108, where Emmer claims (in the English text) that "there is no reason to believe that the slave ships *could* have been sent elsewhere if the slave trade had not existed" (italics mine). The Dutch text reads: "*would* have been sent elsewhere." Research carried out since the publication of the Dutch text in 2000 does not warrant this change of phrasing. There is no fresh evidence that permits us to conclude that alternative uses for slave ships did not exist. The subject of Dutch shipping and trade in the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries awaits further exploration. The role of Dutch merchants and carriers in the Atlantic world has not yet been fully assessed,

but we probably will know a good deal more by the time the next edition of Emmer's book appears.

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