Traders in Men
Merchants and the Transformation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Nicholas Radburn
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In the eighteenth century, more than 2.85 million Africans were shipped overseas in British vessels to meet the demands of expanding tobacco and sugar plantations in America. Nicholas Radburn's latest book offers significant new contributions and interpretations to the vast historiography of the British transatlantic slave trade. Through an easily accessible prose, Radburn emphasises that the eighteenth-century British slave trade underwent a transformation that facilitated a substantial increase in enslavement in Africa, the Atlantic, and America. This shift was driven by the actions of three types of merchants involved in the trade of human lives: British, African, and American. While many works have concentrated on these three groups individually, this book weaves them together into a compelling historical narrative.

The book presents five main arguments, which are highlighted in the introduction. First, British, African, and American merchants collectively expanded and transformed Britain's slave trade through their individual economic self-interest. They did this by formulating new methods for enslaving people across the different coasts in the British Atlantic and Africa. Second, the process of transformation was driven by individuals with similar backgrounds, motivations, and strategies. These individuals are depicted as 'fortune hunters', typically non-elite people willing to ascend socially in a high-risk, high-reward business.

The third main argument is that the slave trade was organized through Atlantic-wide commercial networks. These were decentralised networks formed through small-scale partnerships, creating a self-regarding and resilient business as new actors entered the trade. Fourth, an enslaved person's characteristics, especially their health, were the main factors determining their path through the slave business. Enslaved individuals experienced a multistage 'Long Middle Passage', crossing from Africa, across the ocean, and through the internal markets in America. Finally, the experience of enslavement for Africans varied considerably according to their physical

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characteristics. Besides health, an enslaved person's age and gender largely shaped their path through the 'Long Middle Passage'.

To sustain his previous arguments across the chapters, Radburn uses a remarkably significant and varied set of sources. These range from letters between slave traders, logs of ships, account books recording purchases of enslaved people, instructions given by merchants to captains of slave ships, papers of the Royal African Company, archives of American factors, diaries, petitions in the British Parliament, newspaper advertisements, and more. This strategy is particularly effective, allowing for a mixed method that combines personal histories of slave traders, merchants, and enslaved individuals with quantitative data—two approaches that have often been adopted separately in the historiography. In Radburn's words, 'this book seeks to bridge a methodological divide that has emerged within slave trade studies' (14).

The piece is structured in five chapters, accompanied by an introduction and an epilogue. Throughout the text, detailed explanations are consistently supported by accurate case studies. The quality of the images and the maps, which are well chosen and situated in the text, should be highlighted. Furthermore, the book features comprehensive appendices with data extracted from ships, presented in table formats, which effectively bolsters the arguments laid out in the main text. This organisation allows the reader to fully appreciate the impressive effort behind these pages.

The first chapter explores the role of British and African merchants in developing the infrastructure that supported the growth of the eighteenth-century Atlantic slave trade. Both groups were initially peripheral participants in this trade before the turn of the century. Radburn highlights the emergence of new British and African slave trading ports, showcasing the involvement of private British actors in a market that the Royal African Company had traditionally dominated. The chapter clearly explains how new British slave traders from Bristol, Liverpool, and Lancaster began to move away from the traditional London traders of the seventeenth century. They developed essential goods that African consumers desired in exchange for enslaved people. Additionally, the chapter discusses the rise of new African trading ports established by emerging political groups, such as the Fante and the Ibani. Notably, the Gold Coast and the Bight of Biafra became important new locations for slave extractions in the eighteenth century. The African polities established effective systems to support the growing slave trade. However, 'even as the traffic's scope and scale widened, it remained concentrated in a handful of locations' (20) both in Britain and Africa.

Chapter Two discusses the practices of British and African slave traders in sourcing enslaved individuals in Africa for the transatlantic voyage. African traders played a crucial role in determining who was taken to the coast, while British traders were selective, often rejecting many of the enslaved being offered. Radburn notes through good use of sources that 'Britons turned away very large numbers of people offered to them on the African coast' (70), a new idea in the historiography which

assumed 'that Britons purchased anyone presented to them' (61). British captains prioritized inspecting enslaved bodies to select the fittest, often loading ships first with women and children and placing healthy men—known as 'prime slaves'—last. At the same time, African traders developed stable abstract currencies to acquire goods in exchange for enslaved people, keeping inflation low for most of the century.

The third chapter historicises the transportation methods of enslaved people, which were transformed to increase the British slave trade. A new shipboard regime was developed to minimise mortality rates during the Middle Passage, incorporating strict exercise routines above deck during the day, gender separation, and forced meals. In the seventeenth century, the death rate was nearly one-quarter, but 'during the eighteenth century—when Britons began bringing captives above deck throughout the day and providing greater quantities of food and water—one in six people (16%) perished on the crossing' (103). Radburn also elaborates on the macabre philosophy of slave merchants, who acknowledged the mortality of people on their voyages and sought to pack as many individuals as possible into the ships to overturn losses. Slave ships were modified and prepared for these voyages by carpenters, who created cramped spaces for each person beforehand, aiming to maximise profits even before purchasing the enslaved. In just the eighteenth century, over 400,000 enslaved people died aboard British slave ships due to diseases and ill-treatment.

Chapter Four contributes to the historiography by highlighting that a structured American slave trade existed prior to the disembarkation of enslaved Africans. The chapter focuses on American slave traders, known as Guinea factors, who were instrumental in creating a distribution system across the various British territories in America. These traders often came from non-elite backgrounds and 'served an important dual role: they communicated with the company to ascertain when ships might arrive and then organized sales of enslaved people' (132). Additionally, they provided vital information to the slave ships, enabling them to determine their destinations among the British possessions. Generally, ships would first arrive at the eastern islands of the Atlantic, where they sold the sickly enslaved individuals, while they aimed to sell the healthier ones in Jamaica or mainland America, where prices were considerably higher. Radburn portrays the internal voyage through American waters as a continuation of the Middle Passage, as it began to acclimatise the enslaved people to their new territories, while they received much-needed fresh water and different foods to combat the likely threat of diseases among them.

Chapter Five delves into the process of selling enslaved people and the internal American slave trade, emphasising that the physical condition of the enslaved was a primary determinant of their fate in America. It outlines a sales system where affluent colonists had the first opportunity to access sales venues—typically above the same slave ships—allowing them to select the healthiest enslaved individuals. Following this initial selection, additional rounds of sales took place, in which middle-class and poorer white colonists participated. Notably, those enslaved individuals who were ill—representing about one in five—were subjected to an internal American slave trade, a

hitherto overlooked process that Radburn highlights by noting it was 'designed to extract value from their damaged bodies' (186). In contrast, the epilogue underscores that during the Age of Revolutions, following an initial sharp decline in the slave trade after the American Revolution, British ships gained dominance after the disruption of the French market due to the Haitian Revolution until the final ban in 1807. Radburn, moving away from an abolitionist hagiography, emphasises the paradox that 'abolitionist efforts to improve shipboard conditions for captive Africans therefore inadvertently improved the efficiency of slave traders' business' (204).

In conclusion, *Traders in Men* is a book that both academics of the transatlantic slave trade and those interested in the history of the Atlantic will find compelling. It offers a fresh perspective that illustrates how the British slave trade evolved over the eighteenth century into a brutal system of commodification of human beings. Merchants, whether British, African, or American, have often been overlooked in the historiography. Their decentralised networks, like spiderwebs stretching across oceans and continents, shaped the lives of millions and contributed to countless experiences of violence and marginalization that still resonate in today's world.