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The Dutch Slave Trade 1500-1850

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This is a short book on what turns out to be a rather bigger subject than might have been expected from the title; not because the Dutch slave trade was so important, but because Emmer uses it as an entry to a wide range of issues concerning the Atlantic slave trade in general and its historiography. In just over 152 pages of text the author not only covers the main features of the Dutch slave trade, but also provides a succinct discussion of the impact of the trade as a whole, and even finds space to enter into the contentious arena of moral judgements and imputed guilt. Indeed, besides being a triumph of concision, the book is also characterized by its pervasive moral tone. In an interesting variation on the usual form of such discussions, Emmer moves beyond straightforward condemnation and tries to place the undoubted harshness of the slave trade in the perspective of man's general inhumanity towards man in the early modern period, and so to suggest that there was nothing especially cruel about the treatment meted out to slaves. It is remarkable how much interesting material and controversial argument he has managed to pack into such a limited space. The translation by Chris Emery from the original Dutch text is clear and reads well.

Emmer estimates that despite their general economic strength, in the seventeenth century at least, the Dutch had only a relatively insignificant share in the Atlantic slave trade—never averaging much more than 5–6 per cent of the total. However, he argues that they did have a significant role in the development of the trade in the first half of the seventeenth century, not only through supplying their short-lived Brazilian colony with slaves, but, perhaps more importantly by stimulating the cultivation of sugar—with the consequent urgent need for slaves—in the French and English Caribbean. Then they turned to Spanish America, transporting around 100,000 slaves to this region by 1730. Nevertheless, the Dutch share of the trade as a whole remained relatively small. In a way the problem is not so much why the Dutch role in the Atlantic slave trade was so limited, but rather why they bothered with it at all, as the surviving evidence suggests that, as far as the Dutch were concerned, the economic returns of the slave trade were notably poor. Certainly, the second West India Company (after 1674) failed to make the trade pay, despite enjoying a monopoly until 1730.

Admittedly there were a range of other problems dragging the WIC down, but opening the trade up does not seem to have led to a significant improvement in profitability. Indeed, this may be the reason why the economically ailing province of Zeeland played such a prominent part in this trade—merchants there had fewer alternative options, and there was always the hope of profit.

In his introductory chapter, Emmer sketches the background to the Dutch entry into the slave trade, showing how initial hostility faded with the economic opportunities opening up to the (first) West India Company after its foundation in 1621. Opposition to the slave trade seems to have been little more than a minor part of the more general condemnation of Spanish cruelty embodied in the Black Legend rather than having strong moral or religious roots in contemporary Dutch culture. When the conquest of part of Brazil opened up new economic opportunities such moral scruples rapidly faded. (In a similar way, sympathy for the sufferings of Native Americans at the hands of the Spanish did not long survive Dutch contact with real, rather than idealized, Indians in New Netherland.) Emmer suggests that there was a species of racism involved here; subjecting Europeans to slavery was unthinkable but Africans were a different matter. There is, however, another way of understanding the situation. Slavery and the slave trade existed in Africa, and the Dutch were prepared to take part in it, just as they involved themselves in existing trade and trade systems throughout the world in the seventeenth century, without giving too much thought to the moral implications of what they were doing. To this extent racism did not create the slave trade, but it did give Europeans a ready excuse for taking part in it.

The main sections of the book cover the way in which the Dutch collected their slaves in Africa, the crossing to America, and the destination of the slaves. The Dutch bought their slaves in West Africa and the Congo/Angola region, and they bought them on the open market. This could be a slow business. In the eighteenth century it took about five to seven months cruising off the coast of Africa before a full cargo could be obtained, and although traders had their preferences they usually had to take what they could get. With regard to the conditions on the ships during the crossing of the Atlantic, Emmer stresses that high rates of mortality were not a consequence of deliberate inhumanity, but rather of disease, ignorance, and overcrowding. There was no profit in dead slaves, but disease came aboard with the slaves and flourished in the cramped conditions in which the slaves were forced to live. A major problem seems to have been the lack of sufficient drinking water—in the hot conditions of the slave-holds the slaves suffered severe dehydration as far less water was available than they needed. It was not cruelty that kept rates of mortality aboard the slave ships high but a combination of ignorance of its causes together with an inability to treat tropical—indeed any—diseases effectively. However, the Dutch did lag behind when the English, in the late-eighteenth century, began to improve conditions on their slave ships by better ventilation of the slave holds. If there was inhumanity involved, it was of a much more general nature and not especially directed at slaves. The rates of mortality among the crews of slave ships were also high, as they were for the crews of the Dutch East India Company ships on the long voyage to Java. Emmer notes that a particular problem for Dutch slave ships was the difficulty of finding ships' surgeons with experience of the slave trade and its problems, as more than half of them died on their first voyage.

The slaves were mostly taken to the West Indies or Surinam and Emmer gives a brief account of their treatment on arrival and the conditions of life on the plantations where most of them were sent. One problem he considers is the relative reproductive failure of slaves in the Dutch West Indies and Surinam, which meant that a constant supply of slaves was required to satisfy the needs of the plantation economy. The chief reason for this seems to have been a constant high mortality rate caused by the continual importation of West African diseases along with the slaves. (Emmer points out that mortality among Europeans in the West Indies was even higher than that of the slaves.) The effects of this unhealthy environment were compounded by the low ratio of female to male slaves, so the birth rate was never able to exceed the death rate. In contrast, in the southern United States mortality was lower and the slave population was able to reproduce itself, which in itself produced a demographically healthier male-female ratio.

In assessing the effects of the slave trade on Africa, Emmer sides with those who tend to minimize its impact, at least economically. Europeans did not create the African slave trade, though they did stimulate its growth, and the Atlantic trade was only a part of the total African trade in slaves, and was never controlled

by the Europeans who had to take what African traders offered at the prevailing market prices. Similarly, the volume of European goods imported to pay for the slaves was far too small to have any significant deleterious effect on the African economy overall. (Yet, as he points out, this only serves to emphasize how little Africa gained from the sale of so many of its people.) Demographically too, he argues, the impact on Africa was minimal: 11 million over nearly four centuries comes to only 1.3 per cent per annum (p. 52; a figure of 12 million is given on p. 56). In brief, the economic problems of modern Africa have nothing to do with the slave trade, however morally repugnant it may have been.

The Dutch played even less of a part in the ending of the slave trade, and what little they did was largely the result of British pressure. At first glance it seems odd that the Dutch, with so little to lose, dragged their feet while England, with a much heavier investment in the trade, took the lead. On this issue the Dutch failed to take the moral high ground which was to become so familiar to them by the later-nineteenth century. Emmer attributes this failure to the deeply conservative nature of early-nineteenth-century Dutch society and politics together with concern for the plantation economy of Surinam. More weight might, perhaps, have been given to the general fragility of the Dutch economy in contrast to the dynamism of industrializing Britain. The Dutch believed they were in no position to take risks, and only later in the century, with increasing profits from the exploitation of their East Indian possessions, did they feel able to afford to end slavery in their American colonies. Emmer sees this notable lack of humanitarian concern as morally reprehensible but notes that other countries with relatively weak economies and an investment in the slave trade and slavery were equally unwilling to act.

Throughout the book the author tries to place the unpleasant realities of the slave trade in a comparative perspective. In some cases these comparisons are more than somewhat dubious, and at times they are inaccurate. Unless it is a misprint, he appears to believe that two thirds of the population of central Europe died as a result of the Thirty Years War, while his comments on the general harshness of life in early modern Europe are true but of uncertain relevance. More obviously relevant is his comparison of the cruelty of some of the punishments meted out to slaves with the equally inhumane treatment of condemned criminals in early modern Europe. Appalling cruelty there was, but it was endemic in European society and not specific to the slave trade. Similarly, as noted above, mortality among slaves during the Atlantic passage is compared with that among the slave ships' crews and, indeed, with mortality during long-distance voyages in general before the advent of effective modern treatment for disease and physical debilitation.

Less helpful perhaps is the comparison with other great crimes of history, though, to be fair, Emmer is more concerned with the problem of selective historical memory rather than with futile arguments as to whether the slave trade was worse than the Holocaust. It is more to the point to ask why the one has been given far more attention than the other. He claims that the relative neglect of the slave trade is part of a wider tendency for the Dutch to ignore, or play down, the less virtuous aspects of their own history. Here Emmer joins what seems to be a fashion in Dutch historiography; in recent years historian after historian has attacked what is seen as a pervasive sense of moral superiority stemming from a highly selective view of their country's history. The spectacular achievements of the VOC are celebrated, but not the ruthless exploitation that was essential to this success. The extent of religious toleration in the seventeenth century is praised, but its sometimes severe limits receive far less attention. The German occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War is seen in terms of the heroism of the few and the sufferings of the many, while the extent of collaboration of one sort or another is swept under the carpet. Indeed, such condemnations of complacency have become so common that one is left to wonder who is left to be complacent—just who still clings to such simplistic views about the past? The Occupation is a case in point. During the last forty or so years a flood of material has been published that has very effectively shattered the myths that were so dear to the immediate post-war generation. This particular battle against complacency has surely been won. It may be that the Dutch need to be made aware of the part that their country played in the slave trade, but sometimes it seems that the prevailing Dutch vice is not complacency but moral masochism. At one point Emmer lists some of the darker aspects of the Dutch past: 'persistent and widespread poverty, high infant mortality, the relentless persecution of homosexuals, the degrading treatment of women … and the inequitable system of class justice'. He then goes on: 'One might expect the present-day Dutch to feel some

sense of shame, but there is no indication that they do' (p. 147). Apart from the fact that there is nothing specifically Dutch about such conditions, it is hard to see why anyone should be expected to feel guilt about high infant mortality in early modern Europe when no one could have done anything about it at the time. Also, while a better understanding of attitudes to women and homosexuals in the past can make a vital contribution to contemporary social debate, it is far from clear why shame should come into it, and what purpose it would serve if it did. It seems that it is the claims of the black community in the Netherlands—largely from Surinam and the Antilles—for some sort of recognition of their part in Dutch history, and perhaps for some form of reparations for past mistreatment, that has made the imputation of guilt an issue in this case.

It might be asked whether it should not be possible to study the history of the Atlantic slave trade and the associated slave systems in the Americas without questions of shame and guilt blurring the picture. It is in any case difficult to see who should feel guilty for these undoubted crimes of the past. Should the descendants of the almost equally exploited labourers and unskilled workers of early modern Europe be excluded—together with women and homosexuals because they too were mistreated? On the other hand, Emmer argues that without racism the Atlantic slave trade could never have flourished as it did. Europeans did not enslave fellow Europeans but had no such scruples about Africans. It is in the context of persisting endemic racism in the modern world that the history of the slave trade has an enduring relevance.

This book is volume five of the series *European Expansion and Global Interaction* , of which the author is one of the general editors, and it certainly constitutes a valuable contribution to the history of the European impact on the wider world in the early modern period and after.

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