

Crossings: Africa, the Americas and the Atlantic Slave Trade

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For every large historical topic – and the transatlantic slave trade is certainly a large one – there is a need for good small books to introduce the academic understanding of the topic to students and the general public. The writing of a good small book on a large topic, however, can be no small challenge. Complex debates must be distilled into a few paragraphs and tough decisions must be made about what aspects of the larger topic to emphasize, what aspects to cover more briefly, and what aspects to leave out altogether. Yet this formidable editorial task must result in a book that provides a holistic overview of the topic at hand in a limited number of pages and at low cost. The emotion-laden ethical dimension of the slave trade further compounds the difficulty of the author's task. With *Crossings: Africa, the Americas, and the Atlantic Slave Trade*, James Walvin has admirably answered the challenge of writing a small book on one of history's largest tragedies.

Walvin, a slave-trade scholar of four decades' standing, not only wrote this book with a broad public in mind, he also wrote it in the light of his experience of a major public commemoration: the bicentennial of the 1807 Act of Parliament outlawing Britain's slave trade. Walvin's narrative fittingly offers 1807 as a pivotal date, paying hearty tribute to the mass political movement that made the abolition of Britain's slave trade possible and to 'indefatigable' anti-slavery lecturer Thomas Clarkson as its main architect: 'if we need to find heroes in this story, Clarkson surely has the pre-eminent claim' (p. 190). Clarkson, Granville Sharp, the ex-slaver John Newton, ex-slaves such as Ottobah Cuguanu and Olaudah Equiano, and the politician William Wilberforce (criticized by Walvin for his 'often indecisive leadership' (p. 174)) accomplished a revolution in British public opinion about slavery: 'Just when the slave trade seemed more attractive and

lucrative than ever, the nation which had perfected the system decided that the slave trade was wrong' (p. 169). In Walvin's telling, not only did 'public opinion' triumph over the continuing profitability of slave-trading and slave-driving, but even Britain's top diplomats found 'that public opinion at home obliged British governments to press ahead with abolition diplomacy' (p. 178). The nation that in the 18th century had been Europe's most prolific transporter of enslaved Africans not only ended its own slave trade in the 19th, but pressured other nations to enter into abolition treaties and used its navy to enforce these commitments.

In *Crossings*, however, 1807 functions not as an *endpoint*, but instead as a *midpoint*. As Walvin notes in his introduction:

... the Atlantic slave trade did *not* end in 1807. The last Africans stepped ashore from a slave ship (in Cuba) in 1866 Moreover, slavery itself thrived long *after* 1807. The British ended colonial slavery in 1838, American slavery survived until the Civil War, and slavery in Cuba lasted until 1886, in Brazil until 1888. Why, then, the great fuss about 1807? What was so virtuous about the abolition of 1807 when it left millions of people mired in slavery across the Americas? (p. 11)

He accordingly devotes one of the book's most interesting chapters to what he calls 'The durable institution: slavery after abolition', examining how slavery during the 1800s not only survived, but expanded in vast regions of the Americas. Spanish Cuba became the Caribbean's new sugar frontier, while in Brazil the older northeastern sugar economy gave way to the rapid expansion of coffee cultivation and various other extractive activities from the immediate area of Rio de Janeiro to parts inland. Both Cuba and Brazil required the importation of enslaved Africans in numbers rivalling those of the slave trade's 18th-century peak: 'of the 779,000 Africans landed in Cuba, the very great majority – some 711,000 – had arrived after the British and Americans had abolished their slave trade' (p. 207). As for Brazil, nearly 5 million enslaved Africans arrived there, far more than any other American region, and 2.3 million of those arrived in the period from 1791 to 1856 (p. 129). In the United States, by contrast, the demographic peculiarity of a naturally-reproducing enslaved population compensated for the end of the legal slave trade in 1808 and supported the forced internal movement of American-born slaves towards the new cotton growing states to the southwest. Walvin's juxtaposition of 19th-century slavery in Cuba, Brazil, and the United States will challenge and expand the perspective of English-speaking readers who may be more familiar with the so-called 'peculiar institution' as it existed in the United States until 1865. He also demonstrates the continuing importance of slavery to the British Empire even after the final emancipation of its slaves in 1838; slave-grown cotton continued to feed the mills of Lancashire even as the British commitment to ending slavery served as moral justification for the imperial expansion of the 19th century.

With his eye for telling statistics such as those just cited, Walvin acknowledges the debt that he and his field owe to the editors of the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. First introduced in 1999 and updated periodically as new documentation emerges, the *Database* is a searchable online compendium of statistical information on roughly 35,000 slave-trading voyages. Thanks to this great effort of compilation, Walvin can pronounce on the overall volume of the forced transatlantic migration over the centuries with a degree of confidence impossible only two decades ago: 'The numbers involved are astonishing: 12 million plus loaded onto the slave ships; 11 million plus surviving to landfall' (p. 9). At slightly finer levels of detail Walvin observes that 'a staggering 4.7 million departed from a mere four slave ports' in Angola (p. 54); that ships based in a core group of twenty ports were responsible for embarking 8.5 million human beings; that ships from Rio and Liverpool alone accounted for 2.8 million of the total; and even that the single Liverpool vessel *Brookes* (made infamous in abolitionist propaganda) embarked 5,163 Africans and disembarked 4,559 over ten voyages and 25 years (pp. 63–5).

Yet Walvin, wanting to avoid the impression that the slave trade's 'victims, the living and the dead, have somehow vanished under a pile of statistics', seeks to put these 'oddly sterile' data at the service of a

narrative that presents the trade's consequences for individual human beings (p. 93). The *Brookes*, for example, 'carried five times as many Africans per ton as slave ships of three centuries before', meaning that 'conditions of overcrowding for the African captives had got worse – not better – in the course of the trade' (p. 65). Notwithstanding the extreme discomfort it caused, 'this crowding – "packing" – of Africans on board a slave ship was *not* the key determinant of the levels of slave mortality on board the ships; the main factor was the length of time spent on board' (pp. 68–9), especially as ships trawled from port to port on the African coast for weeks on end seeking enough slaves to make a full cargo. On this subject we learn that in the mid-1600s British and Dutch slavers alike remained on the African coast for an average of 100 days, while a century later British ships stayed about 173 days and Dutch ships about 200. Slaves plying the relatively short route from Angola to Brazil had the quickest crossings and the least ruinous mortality – until the mid-1800s, when British attempts to enforce slave trade abolition paradoxically led to 'a revival of startling levels of mortality' on the many Brazilian slavers still active as they 'sought hurriedly to pack up and outrun the abolitionist navies' (92–3).

Walvin discusses what all this meant for the experience of enslaved African individuals in raw, physical language that elicits sympathy for those enslaved. About the experience of Africans enslaved by various means in the African interior and marched to further imprisonment on the coast he writes:

Who is to say which was the most traumatic form of incarceration and departure from the coast: being shuffled into the dark, dank misery of a dungeon in Elmina or sharing the filth with the pigs and the corpses in the barracoons of Luanda? (p. 56)

Likewise 'the stinking claustrophobia of the slaves' conditions' once brought aboard European slaving vessels included 'rough wooden shelves only inches above other captives lying on the deck'; the 'filth of the slave decks' and the 'epidemics of the bloody flux (amoebic dysentery) which both fouled and haunted the slave ships' (p. 91); the 'rats scurrying around the decks ... boldly nibbling at the flesh of sleeping Africans' (p. 96). Though sea travel had its hazards and discomforts for convicts, troops, and poor emigrants, to use Walvin's examples, these others 'did not have to endure anything like the seaborne miseries of millions of African slaves' (p. 68).

This appalling misery of the Middle Passage is, in Walvin's view, the peculiar 'feature of slavery in the Americas that distinguishes it from other forms of slavery' (p. 13). However, he applies similarly evocative language to the slaves' continuing predicament after landfall, describing the experience of the 'scramble', which saw 'planters and their agents rushing to grab their targeted Africans laying claim to them by roping or tagging the terrified victims', and declaring it 'hard to decide with system of sale was most distressing for the Africans: the scramble or, for example, the auction system of South Carolina' (p. 126). Nor was this the end of miseries, since many slaves arriving in Buenos Aires were then marched hundreds of miles into the mountains of Peru while purchasers of slaves in the British Caribbean often re-embarked them immediately for the British or Spanish American mainland in 'a system designed to bewilder its victims' (pp. 133–4).

Walvin's lament that all this 'fails to capture what the seaborne crossing meant to each *individual* survivor, not to mention those who died' speaks to a desire, although ultimately a frustrated one, to go even deeper beneath the surface of the statistics:

We can only speculate about what went through the captives' minds as their ships made their way across the Atlantic But it is surely not idle speculation to feel that thoughts about the Atlantic crossing embedded themselves deep in the personal and communal folk memories of the African survivors, to emerge as the stuff of nightmarish accounts across the slave communities of the Americas (p. 93).

Perhaps this is more than 'idle speculation', but the fact that it is given without any footnote, reference, or

further commentary leaves the reader to wonder: in what forms *has* the Middle Passage survived in ‘personal and communal folk memories’ (as it surely must have done), and what scholarship exists on this very interesting question? Be that as it may, what Walvin *can* show us is that ‘wherever we look, slavery was contested and resisted by the slaves’ (p. 141), whether in the course of the Middle Passage or within the plantation system of the Americas. Enslaved Africans at sea revolted in 500 documented instances (p. 104), usually when the African coast was still in sight, and ‘there were at least 120 slave upheavals which resulted in freedom for some of the Africans on board’. Walvin pays tribute to these uprisings as ‘the persistent assertion by all involved of their rights: they denied the authority of their oppressors to treat them as slaves’ and declared their ‘unquenchable desire for freedom’ (p. 121).

Walvin also turns his attention to the experience of the sailors/jailors entrusted with quelling such uprisings as they conducted enslaved Africans across the Atlantic. The 210,000 ordinary sailors and 140,000 officers and craftsmen that served on slavers from Britain alone faced not only the normal hazards of maritime labour, but also the disease-ridden environment of the slave hold and the constant possibility of revolt (p. 75). Thomas Clarkson found as a result that 2,329 of the 5,000 men who shipped on British slavers in the single year 1785 did not return alive – a finding he used to demolish ‘the traditional arguments that the slave trade was a nursery for the Royal Navy’ (pp. 71-72). The ruinous mortality among slave ship crews in turn aggravated the difficulties of the enslaved; as the sailors found themselves increasingly outnumbered over the course of the voyage, they became ever more prone to use the most vicious methods of intimidation against their charges (pp. 111–13).

While Walvin’s overarching focus throughout the book is on the predicament of enslaved Africans, his examination of ‘the fate of the men who herded them like cattle in their transit to the Americas’ (pp. 71–2) proceeds naturally from his recognition that:

The difficult task for the historian is to strike a balance: to shape from this flinty data a meaningful historical narrative which does justice to the African victims and, equally, makes sense of the actions of the perpetrators of the trade (p. 93).

‘Making sense of the actions of the perpetrators’ has long been touchy scholarly territory. Scholars of the business of slavery have traditionally introduced their studies by declaring a personal belief that the slave trade was morally abhorrent, perhaps to ward off the possibility that ‘to understand all is to forgive all’. Yet the very existence of the slave trade surely cannot be understood without understanding the motivations and strategies of its perpetrators. Walvin’s treatment of this side of the slave trade is exemplary. He notes how the fierce rivalry among the chartered companies that dominated the trade in the 1600s – the Royal African Company of England and the Dutch West India Company foremost among them – led to open commercial violence and the establishment of the Gold Coast forts including Elmina and Cape Coast Castle. He also shows how, despite their current status as UNESCO Heritage Sites and popular symbols of the slave trade, ‘the forts’ role was bypassed by the rising importance of the slave trade’ as the chartered companies gave way after 1700 to independent traders who continually developed ‘better, more efficient and profitable, ways of acquiring prisoners for the slave ships than via the forts’ (53–4).

Both before and after this momentous organizational transition in the European side of the business, they remained ‘clients on the African coast’, present at the sufferance of local rulers (p. 40). Furthermore, since the great majority of ‘Africans who passed into European hands were not enslaved initially by the Europeans but by Africans’ (p. 37), it was this socioeconomically privileged subgroup of Africans who in large part controlled European access to enslaved labourers. The slave trade was, after all, a trade, and would-be European purchasers of enslaved Africans competed with each other to offer trade goods – primarily textiles from Europe or South Asia, but also metal goods, alcohol, firearms, cowrie shells – exchangeable for a cargo of slaves on the best possible terms. Walvin expertly describes the contours of this power relationship:

Rulers and merchants on the African coast were quick to spot goods they liked, items they could enjoy or use to advance their own strength or wealth. In return, they were happy to provide whatever supplies of slaves reached them on the coast via interior wars, raids or trading systems The goods arriving in Africa on the slave ships may have come from all corners of the globe, but the demand they sought to satisfy was *African*. In return, Europeans acquired slaves who were destined to transform the face of the Americas and to toil at activities which enriched their colonial masters and their metropolitan backers. But before that could happen, millions of Africans had to endure the unspeakable terrors of the Atlantic crossing (pp. 80–1).

While students often express disbelief that African merchants could ‘sell their own’ in this way, and some even wonder whether this fact exculpates the European purchasers of slaves, Walvin counteracts these dangers by presenting the issue alongside the brutality of the Middle Passage and the plantation regime, both structured by Europeans for their own economic benefit. His portrayal of this all-encompassing system of human misery for profit spares no party its share of the shame.

Walvin’s unflinching commitment to tracing out the transatlantic slave trade’s most paradoxical implications exemplifies the excellence of *Crossings* as a brief introduction for students and general readers. He has capably distilled a voluminous body of recent research into a highly coherent account that nevertheless manages to convey a satisfyingly complex view of its subject. Indeed, I see a place for *Crossings* in the reading lists for my own classes on the subject – an accolade that many other college and university historians will surely also bestow upon this book.

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