William A. Pettigrew

Freedom's Debt: The Royal African Company and the Politics of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1672–1752. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. 262 pp.
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In *Freedom's Debt*, William Pettigrew analyzes “the ideas, the disputes, the compromises—in short, the politics—that established England’s involvement in and later dominance of the transatlantic slave trade” (p. 4). He does so through a focus on the Royal African Company, and a detailed examination of the long-running debates over monopoly versus free trade, debates that flared up frequently from the late seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. Charles II chartered the Company in 1672 and gave it a monopoly over all trade with Africa that was intended to last for a thousand years. By some measures, it was a stunning success; it transported nearly 150,000 enslaved Africans to the Americas, more than any other engine driving the African slave trade. Despite those numbers, it came nowhere near meeting the growing demand for slaves in the English American colonies.

The Company prospered under the Stuarts, but the Glorious Revolution made it possible for independent traders to launch a campaign against its monopoly. The Company seized ships and cargos of merchants who violated their charter, but English courts began to rule against the Company. Without the power to enforce its monopoly, the Company could not restrict the activities of the interlopers, themselves wealthy and powerful merchants, whose share of the trade began to climb at the Company’s expense. The Company appealed to Parliament in 1690 which set off debates over its role that went on for decades and played into the hands of its opponents. Hundreds of petitions poured in from across Britain and the British Atlantic world and the debate also played out in a fierce pamphlet war as the Company’s opponents built an effective lobby and articulated a free-trade ideology with wide appeal.

The result was a spiral that lowered the Company’s stock value and its share of the trade and weakened its political position. In the 1690s British American colonies feared a black majority and did not press for an expanded trade, but those fears subsided by the end of the century. Colonies enacted harsher slave codes lessening Whites’ fears, colonial courts upheld the chattel principle, and the supply of white indentured servants shrank which combined to raise demand for enslaved laborers. Colonists joined the call for free trade in opposition to the Company creating a broad Atlantic coalition. As a result, in 1698 Parliament opened the African trade to all comers who would pay a 10 percent duty (the “ten percent men”). Pettigrew sees this as “a remarkable statutory victory” (p. 37) for the Company, but it meant the end to the

Company's monopoly and further weakened its position. The Company's share of the English slave trade plummeted from 88 percent in 1690 to 8 percent in 1701, and it owed far more in bonds and stocks than it was worth. The success of the ten percent men in expanding the trade further undermined support for the Company, and they also out-maneuvered the Company politically.

As a result, Parliament totally deregulated the slave trade in 1712 and gave the Company an annual stipend to keep up its forts on the African coast. In larger terms, the volume of the trade soared as did the African population in the British colonies, and the lion's share of the trade shifted away from London to Bristol and Liverpool. The Company attempted to respond by opening up plantations in Africa and by expanding its inland trade. Both initiatives failed, in large part because of opposition from Africans, which Pettigrew does not sufficiently emphasize, and the Company was dissolved in 1752. He convincingly demonstrates that the successful struggle to dissolve the Company went hand-in-hand with an expanding slave trade and a deepening commitment to that trade, making it inseparable from British "people, ideals, institutions, and identity" (p. 218). The links he identifies between the rise of slavery and the rise of capitalism are important, but one wonders how much of the growth and expansion of the slave trade is attributable to economic rather than political forces.

Pettigrew interprets these battles as a clash of ideologies. The pro-Company party saw a monopoly as a companion to the state, and the best way to defend the national interests in Africa and against rival states, while its opponents celebrated free trade and the idea that economic growth was best achieved by entrepreneurial merchants. Everyone agreed, however, that the slave trade was "legitimate, moral, and of national strategic importance" (p. 179). Pettigrew concludes that the debates over the Company's monopoly provided the "ideological and policy underpinnings for the antislavery movement" (p. 180), an odd and counterintuitive argument that is not fully convincing. His suggestion that the Company's politicization of the trade contributed to the early abolitionist campaign is asserted but not demonstrated; the origins of the abolitionist movement have been well chronicled by a cadre of scholars who have found that its roots lie elsewhere. Pettigrew's focus on British politics means that he pays almost no attention to the Company's workings in Africa, not even when the conduct of the officials there—who ran the forts virtually as their own private trading company and whose corrupt practices did much to discredit the Company at home—is directly related to his story. Since he ignores Africa and Africans, the plight of the enslaved and the suffering of the Middle Passage are absent from his study. It is troubling that a book focused on a slave-trading com-

pany has so little to say about that brutal business and the millions who suffered and died as a result of it.

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