Reviews

The Atlantic Slave Trade. By Herbert S. Klein (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999) 234 pp. $49.95 cloth $15.95 paper

For studies of the Atlantic slave trade, there is a B.C. and an A.D. B.C. means “Before Curtin”—before Philip D. Curtin’s The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census (Madison, 1969), when many works on the subject were based on scant and shoddy evidence. A.D. means “After the Data,” because Curtin’s study initiated a scouring of international archives for existing data on Atlantic slaving. (It is a miracle of the electronic age that the body of raw data about 27,000 Atlantic slaving voyages is now available on CD-ROM.1) Studies based on the newly available data, appearing steadily over recent years, have advanced our knowledge of the demographic, economic, political, social, and cultural aspects of one of the greatest intercontinental movements of people in history. Klein’s The Atlantic Slave Trade is a synthesis of these most recent studies, some his own, capped by an essay about published sources for the subject, both B.C. and A.D.

One cannot read far in Klein’s book without getting a sense of how these new, largely statistical studies expose the myth that abounds in public knowledge of the Atlantic trade. Knowing the small size of transatlantic slaving ships throughout nearly all the years of the trade, for example, enables one to recognize that there was no “triangle trade.” Products from the Americas made it to Europe in larger vessels; slavers returned with small cargoes or in ballast. Details on costs of slaving voyages leaving Europe—the cargo comprising nearly two-thirds of the total—explode the notion that Europeans traded cheap trinkets (to unwitting or uncaring Africans) for the heart of West Africa’s laboring force. “It was African demand for sophisticated imported goods for their slaves,” Klein writes, “that made these cargoes so costly” (86). Moreover, data on the “middle passage” from Africa to the Americas permit startling conclusions: that how tightly or loosely shippers packed Africans on board had no great bearing on middle-passage mortality rates (time at sea was the most important variable); that different African regions of embarkation had dramatically different middle-passage mortality rates (8.6 percent for the Windward Coast; 17.4 percent for Biafra), suggesting greater and more continual ecological or political crises in some regions than in others; and that traders from any one European nation were neither more nor less humane in the treatment of Africans than any others. (Ironically, the Portuguese, saddled with the reputation of being “dirty” slave traders, had the lowest known mortality rates in the middle passage). These are just a few nuggets from a deep mine.

Klein is especially adept at using statistical studies to shed light on social and cultural history. The demographics of Atlantic slaving had a long and deep effect on the Americas. Two-thirds of the Africans

transported across the Atlantic before 1880 were men and three-quarters were adults (sex and age being determined by African suppliers rather than American consumers). The scarcity of women meant that American slave societies had difficulty reproducing themselves (the United States being an exception), which meant that demand for slaves would continue and that family formation and group cultural expression would be delayed. In opposition to recent scholarship, Klein writes that the nature of the trade “did not foster a coherent transfer of either languages or cultural traits to the New World” (173). The cultures that emerged were broad blends of behaviors and beliefs—some African, some borrowed, and some new creations. For Klein, the trade’s major unintended result was the creation of “a viable and vibrant working-class Afro-American population . . . within almost every major society in the Americas” (182).

This is a concise and thoughtful synthesis of interdisciplinary history. Not all will agree with Klein’s conclusions, but all will have to recognize their grounding in evidence and explain why they are incorrect. It will not be easy.

Donald R. Wright  
State University of New York, Cortland

Conquests and Cultures: An International History. By Thomas Sowell (New York, Basic Books, 1998) 493 pp. $35.00

In this volume, Sowell presents the last of a series of three books about culture in history. The approaches taken in the first two (Race and Culture [New York, 1994] and Migrations and Cultures [New York, 1996]) appear to be similar to those of Conquests and Cultures, which contains a concluding chapter for the whole series.

Sowell seems to regard three of his many points as fundamental: that culture is a dynamic, not a static, phenomenon; that cultural change is a primary cause of progress; and that throughout history, conquests have often led to cultural changes that contributed to progress, despite their negative immediate effects on the conquered. Apart from reservations about Sowell’s notion of “progress,” I find it difficult to disagree with any of these statements as general observations. However, I do not necessarily agree with how the author claims to derive them from the historical material that he cites, how he performs his cultural analysis, and how he attempts to apply his analysis to contemporary ideological issues. Most academic scholars are unlikely to be impressed by Sowell’s choice and deployment of evidence or by his interpretive methods. History students will find more coherent discussions of the topics that he covers, perhaps with fewer factual errors, in a standard world history textbook. The readers who will find this book most attractive are those who share the author’s neoconservative politi-