

Robert Murray's new *Atlantic Passages: Race, Mobility, and Liberian Colonization*.

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Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition. *By Bronwen Everill*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. 328 pp. Illustrations, map, notes, index. Hardcover, \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-674-24098-8.

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Reviewed by Samantha Payne

Reflecting on his time as a history graduate student at Oxford University, the famous Trinidadian scholar Eric Williams once remarked that “British historians [then] wrote almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it.” Williams’s dissertation demolished that idea. Published as *Capitalism and Slavery* in 1944, the Williams thesis argued that profits from Caribbean slavery gave rise to industrial capitalism in Great Britain. British capitalists only embraced abolitionism after slavery became an obstacle to further industrial development. According to Williams, abolitionism had material—not moral—roots.

Capitalism and Slavery likely provoked more debate than any other work of British history published in the twentieth century. Two of its most famous critics are worth mentioning here. David Brion Davis developed the first major revision to the Williams thesis in *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (1975). He argued that while antislavery ideology did not have material origins, it still gained traction in the late eighteenth century because it served the “needs and interests” of the capitalist class. In a direct challenge to Davis, Thomas Haskell argued ten years later that capitalism gave rise to abolitionism by working a transformation in mankind’s “cognitive style.” In his conception, international markets enabled individuals to perceive causal links between their actions and distant suffering, resulting in unprecedented anxiety about human slavery. (For an overview of this debate, see Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* [1995]).

Bronwen Everill’s intriguing new book, *Not Made by Slaves: Ethical Capitalism in the Age of Abolition*, reopens this old debate. Armed with fresh insights from the new history of slavery and capitalism, Everill argues that scholars must launch a renewed investigation into the

origins of abolitionism in the Atlantic World. If—as the new history contends—slavery was itself capitalist, then we can no longer assume that the triumph of capitalism made abolitionism inevitable. Everill begins this re-investigation by diving into the transnational history of the free produce and legitimate commerce movements. Abolitionists involved in these movements worked to purge slave-made products from global supply chains and replace them with “ethical” goods made by free labor. Together, Everill contends, these individuals crafted an argument for a “new, ethical capitalism” that was unprecedented in world history (p. 4). Simultaneously, Everill’s study aims to “re-center West Africa” in the study of transnational abolitionism (p. 8). Fascinatingly, free produce supporters in North America sought to establish free labor cotton and sugar plantations in West Africa beginning in the 1790s. Throughout the work, Everill draws on rich archives from Senegal, Sierra Leone, the United States, and the United Kingdom in order to explore both the evolution of American abolitionists’ ideas about Africa and how Africans themselves shaped the movement for “ethical capitalism.”

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first two chapters focus on the origins of anxieties about slavery during the late eighteenth century. Everill stresses that these anxieties were not limited to the United States or Europe; Islamic states in West Africa were also profoundly “concerned about the rise of secular military states whose power and wealth were based on slave trading” (p. 45). This concern prompted West African leaders to prohibit the consumption of several goods connected with slavery (most notably rum). Their efforts, according to Everill, paralleled those of antislavery activists involved in organizing consumer boycotts in England and North America. The middle chapters focus on different challenges abolitionists encountered as they struggled to create “ethical capitalism.” Supporters of the free produce movement found it difficult to prevent counterfeiting, to command credit, to source free labor goods, and to shape government policy. As they attempted to overcome these challenges, Everill concludes, they engaged increasingly in “suspicious business practices” that compromised their ethical principles (p. 242). Occasionally, free produce supporters even turned a blind eye to the use of slave labor on African plantations. The final two chapters trace how free produce advocates rationalized these decisions in ways that ultimately lent “moral justification to the continuation of racial disparities in labor exploitation,” which have endured to this day (p. 198).

Not Made by Slaves successfully knits together U.S. and West African history in novel ways that will make it especially useful and exciting for early Americanists looking to expand their transnational reach. Whether it makes an original contribution to the “antislavery debate”

is less clear. The introduction makes it difficult to tell where Everill stands in relation to Williams, Davis, or Haskell. Only Haskell receives any sustained engagement from Everill, who essentially agrees with the “principle that spreading marketplace interactions . . . were important for shaping the abolition movement” (p. 12). The closest she comes to making a clear intervention in this debate is when she suggests that “the flow of commodities around the Atlantic World illuminates a shared consumer revolution in Africa and other parts of the Atlantic World that generated a shared moral backlash at the end of the eighteenth century” (p. 27). At other points, however, her argument seems merely to be that “the rise of industrial capitalism” led people throughout the Atlantic World to explore “new ways of thinking about the relationships between producers and consumers, between colonies and metropolises, between laborers and capitalists, and between personal and national economies” (p. 244). As she herself acknowledges, this claim “should not be too surprising” for the reader (p. 44).

As I finished the book, I got the sense that the author was really interested in a different question. How can individuals behave ethically under global capitalism? Everill ponders this question in the conclusion, and it is an important one to ask but not one that is easily answered historically or that has clear historiographical stakes. In some ways, this helps explain the shortcomings of *Not Made by Slaves*. The book repeatedly and effectively demonstrates that creating “ethical capitalism” was “nearly impossible” in the nineteenth century, a point which most scholars would already consider indisputable (p. 24). It does less, as a result, to illuminate the origins of abolitionism in the Atlantic World.

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Reviewed by Matthew E. Stanley

Brian P. Luskey’s *Men Is Cheap: Exposing the Frauds of Free Labor in Civil War America* is an original and expertly crafted work that seeks to