

The American Slave Coast: A History Of The Slave-breeding Industry

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Review

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Sublette, Ned and Sublette, Constance. *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry.* Chicago Review Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9781613748206

Beyond the Coast: A Comprehensive Look at the Slave-Breeding Industry

The scholarship and narrative exploration of the American slave trade continues to be one of American History's most compelling areas of inquiry. No doubt this is fueled by the larger issues related to race that continue to plague the national psyche. In academia, long-needed attention has finally focused on the economics, social dynamics, and documented horrors of the American slave trade.

Ned and Constance Sublette have added their voices to this overall dialogue in a recent addition to the slave trade genre entitled *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry*. It is a fairly long text ranging over 700 pages, which sets out to focus more specifically on "A history of the slave breeding industry," and also reads as a general history of American slavery.

Slave breeding has been, and remains, a complicated, delicate, and difficult area of overall slave history to research and write about. The reasons for this are myriad and have often frightened away would-be investigators or story-tellers. The Sublettes acknowledge many of these complications, but also make it clear that they are ready to engage in a full discourse upon the subject. They define the slave breeding industry as those who facilitated and benefitted from enslaving African-American children at birth (p. xiii), a definition that makes a certain amount of common sense, but may differ from those definitions used amongst the most serious scholars of the trade.

In telling this sweeping and horrifying story, they adopt a somewhat mixed approach which is in part linear (time), part topical (different aspects of the business), and in part geographical (Virginia, Barbados, etc.). This choice is

perhaps a good one from a research design standpoint, although from a reader's standpoint it sometimes may appear that there is difficulty in maximizing the coherence of the narrative threads, especially in a book of such length.

It is an extensively researched book, and will probably offer even experts occasional insights or facts that they may not have encountered before. Some shorter primary documents are reproduced in their original format within the text. There are endnotes accompanied by a fairly generous reference bibliography, which includes classic slave trade references (ex. Bancroft) as well as newer articles and authors. It is fair to say that this text represents a significant research and writing effort on the part of the authors.

The Sublettes make plainly known some of their own biases, interpretations and feelings about the events and people they report on, so readers should not be surprised by a mild lack of objectivity. Such reactions are not unknown in the scholarship on slavery, and particularly the slave trade—one can see the equal difficulty scholars of other horrific histories, such as the Holocaust, have had to balance in their quest to be formal and yet still sensitive in their treatments of difficult history. This fact should be a minor note, given the much deeper significance of the text.

One difficulty with the book is the organization, which as mentioned consists of chapters and sections that do relate to one another, but become slightly disjointed over the course of the entire text. While it is possible that the authors might have been able to tell the story in a shorter amount of space, it is also possible that the weight and impact of their effort might have been significantly dissipated by doing so. The individual reader will have to decide for themselves.

The Sublettes also face the challenge of needing to be experts in more than four hundred years of American and European history in order to tell the story they endeavor to share. They admittedly can't do that, so there is no doubt that specialists in different areas may see some parts of the book as less than they could have been, or incomplete. This should again not distract the reader from appreciating the Herculean task of trying to expose the complex threads that comprise the overall American slavery experience.

Finally, it is worth noting that the title might be a little misleading to some, as well. After reading the book, it is apparent that the slave-breeding business

was American slavery in the eyes of the Sublettes (or it quickly became so). For those who have seen the intentional slave-breeding aspects of American slavery as its own phenomenon, the book will still leave many important questions largely unanswered: Why did Natchez, Mississippi become the center of the invisible “sex trade” in American slavery? Did slave owners foreshadow and even facilitate the American Eugenics movement? Were there specific businesses for which the *raison d’être* was solely slave breeding? How can they be documented?

The Sublettes suggest some answers, but much scholarship remains to be done. Overall, their effort is noteworthy and this book should be read by all who work in related fields of inquiry. They will find it valuable to be familiar with as the difficult work of reconciliation and dialogue continues.

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