Slavery and the Rise of the Atlantic System. Edited by Barbara L. Solow • New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991. v + 355 pp. Tables, notes, and index. $39.50. ISBN 0-521-40090-2.

Reviewed by Alan L. Karras

With the first sentence of her introduction, Barbara Solow places this useful volume in its proper context. “The inclusion of the New World in the international economy ranks among the most important events in modern history. Slavery was the foundation of that inclusion and slavery accounts for the growth and importance of the transatlantic trade” (p. 1). All of the essays in this collection, which covers the time from about 1492 through the end of the eighteenth century, focus on one or more of the Atlantic world’s regions. The editor and the authors have emphasized economic connections to the exclusion of intersocietal interaction on other levels, including cultural, social, intellectual, and political. The principal value of the chapters lies in their ability to illustrate how economies based on slavery contributed to the development of an Atlantic world system. Because all of the essays address the central theme that Solow establishes at the outset, this book ranks as one of the most coherently organized volumes on the Atlantic world yet to appear.

William D. Phillips, Jr., traces sugar production’s westward migration from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Franklin Knight’s “Slavery and Lagging Capitalism in the Spanish and Portuguese American Empires, 1492–1713” argues that without slavery and the slave trade, “the potential economic value of the Americas could never have been realized, since neither Portugal nor Spain had the reserves of labor needed to explore and develop their new possessions” (p. 72). P. C. Emmer demonstrates the role that Dutch traders played in spreading—and later supporting—slavery and its accompanying plantation system across much of Atlantic America.

Luiz Felipe de Alencastro in “The Apprenticeship of Colonization” examines Portugal’s colonies in Asia alongside those in the Americas. He concludes that slavery, with its rigid control over labor, more effectively benefited the imperial economy than did reliance on indigenous systems of free labor. In their essay on the growth of the British economy from 1688 to 1802, P. K. O’Brien and Stanley Engerman examine the relation-
ship between external demand for British goods and internal demands for the same products. They show that the importance of the Atlantic trade to the rising British economy increased over the course of the eighteenth century.

David Eltis's provocative essay suggests that the perceived negative impacts of the slave trade on West African economies were illusory. He argues that the slave trade created neither African dependency on the Europeans nor an unfavorable balance of trade. Joseph Miller's "A Marginal Institution on the Margin of the Atlantic System: The Portuguese Southern Atlantic Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century" convincingly argues that the wealth that the Portuguese derived from their colony in Brazil did not wind up in the metropole; it went instead to other Atlantic world players, particularly the English, the Jews, and the colonial elites.

Patrick Villiers's chapter assembles a vast quantity of data in one place. Villiers argues that France's Atlantic ports (Nantes, La Rochelle, and Bordeaux) developed as a result of the country's connections to the Caribbean colonies, which were driven by slave labor. Thus, the wealth of these cities was directly related to external trade. Moreover, he asserts, the French Atlantic ports, unlike those in England, never developed local industries of their own, which suggests that France benefited less from slavery than did its competitor. David Richardson shows that much of New England's eighteenth-century wealth developed as a result of trade with Britain's West Indian slave colonies. Slavery thus influenced societies even when its presence was limited.

David Galenson places slavery's rapid growth in the Chesapeake into the context of economic changes and demographic developments across the Atlantic world. He also explores slavery's rise in the 1680s in the light of colonial legal developments. Finally, Jacob Price once again explains the ways in which credit contributed to the rise of the Atlantic system. He shows how systems of borrowing evolved once slavery had matured as a system.

Business historians will find this book particularly useful. It includes studies of the economies of all four continents that bordered the Atlantic. The essays, when taken as a group, show how these economies interacted with each other. Slavery was central to that interaction as well as to any gains and losses that a particular society experienced.

Readers should be cautious, however. Economic relationships form only one part of the influence that slavery had on Atlantic societies. By neglecting to consider social, cultural, and intellectual intercourse, it is possible to paint a picture that differs markedly from reality. Since human beings do not only (or even primarily) act according to economic laws, their history should not be written without attention to their ideas, living conditions, and environment. Although this book makes a fine introduction to the Atlantic world, it should suggest to others just how much work yet remains to be done.
Alan L. Karras is visiting assistant professor of history at Georgetown University and was a Fulbright Scholar at the College of the Bahamas in 1992. He is the author of several books and articles on the Atlantic world, including Sojourners in the Sun: Scots Migrants in Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740–1800 (1992) and Atlantic American Societies, 1492–1888: From Columbus through Abolition (1992). He is beginning work on a social history of smuggling in the eighteenth-century Americas.

Cotton & Capital: Boston Businessmen and Antislavery Reform, 1854–1868. By Richard H. Abbott • Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991. x + 294 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $32.50. ISBN 0-87023-749-7.

Reviewed by Stephen E. Maizlish

In Cotton & Capital, Richard Abbott offers a solid, informative account of the sectional conflict’s radicalizing impact as seen through the eyes of Boston’s business community and as revealed through their actions. Abbott concentrates his attention on the younger generation of Boston’s business elite. These men felt deeply the sense of social responsibility instilled in them by their fathers, but they lacked their elders’ reluctance to engage in controversy. They were determined to transform the nation by extending the values of their New England heritage to the entire country.

Abbott does not claim that these involved Boston business leaders brought about all the dramatic changes of the Civil War era, but he does suggest that they “both reflected and to some degree helped to shape the forces, ideas, and values that were leading the North toward” antislavery reform (p. 7). He shows that, despite their privileged position, these leaders shared the assumptions and ideals of many in the North, and yet their New England–bred commitment to moral stewardship made them more willing than others to act on their beliefs. Confidence in the value of free labor and the centrality of economic development were the hallmarks of their creed. Indeed, these beliefs were the guiding principles behind all their actions on behalf of antislavery reform. Slavery, they insisted, was not so much a crime against black slaves as it was a threat to the right of every individual in society to advance on the strength of his or her own efforts. Joining with a majority of Northerners, these business leaders denounced abolitionists as “sentimental, impractical idealists” who threatened the stability of the Union (p. 5). They determined that “practical, not moral, considerations would guide their actions” against the “Slave Power” (p. 5).

Abbott argues convincingly that it was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 that turned the Boston leaders to antislavery reform. Amos A. Lawrence, John Murray Forbes, and Edward Atkinson, among others, were so out-