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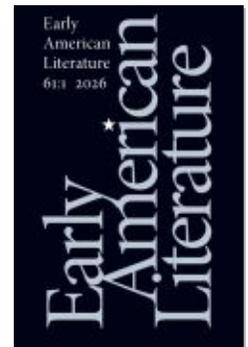
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*Mutiny on the Black Prince: Slavery, Piracy, and the Limits of Liberty in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* by James H. Sweet (review)

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## Book Reviews

### *Mutiny on the Black Prince: Slavery, Piracy, and the Limits of Liberty in the Revolutionary Atlantic World*

JAMES H. SWEET

Oxford University Press, 2024

248 pp.

James Sweet's *Mutiny on the Black Prince: Slavery, Piracy, and the Limits of Liberty in the Revolutionary Atlantic World* solves a 350-year-old mystery of what took place aboard the eighteenth-century enslaving vessel *Black Prince*, which included a mutiny, the murder of the vessel's company, and yet another uprising against the newly elected crew of the renamed pirate ship, *Liberty*, before the remaining crew scattered to various cities in Africa, Europe, Latin America, the United States, and the Caribbean. Until now, no one has endeavored to reconstruct the events that transpired aboard the ship transporting enslaved people that departed Bristol on December 10, 1768, and whose remains were found abandoned on the southern coast of Hispaniola in April of the following year. Using an impressive array of sources—which include the *Transatlantic Slave Trade Database*; close to fifty periodicals ranging from the *Times of London* and the *Boston Gazette* to *Gaceta de la Nueva Granada* (Bogotá); family papers; and archival sources in Australia, England, Portugal, and the United States—Sweet, a scholar of world history, compellingly and fascinatingly reconstructs the stories of the prominent actors in Bristol's mercantile life, as well as the events and politics in the days leading up to and following the mutiny.

In a page-turning monograph that reads like a historical thriller, Sweet meditates on the importance of the legal spectacle that ensued upon discovery of the mutiny, its impact on the development of policing and legal procedure in Britain, its place in the consolidation of corporate interests in the nation-state, and its role in the development of banking and

infrastructure in England. Sweet identifies that the tools employed to capture the mutinous crew—encouraging “the public to report crimes and aid in investigations” and publishing “newspaper advertisements to solicit information that would lead to the capture of fugitives” alongside warrants that appeared in South Carolina, New York, and Boston—overlapped with existing methods of apprehending fugitives from slavery (101–2). Ultimately and ironically, the capture, prosecution, and punishment of the *Black Prince*’s largely European crew, Sweet writes, reveals the ways “criminal’ surveillance [is] tied directly to ideas about property in people” (102).

Sweet also reconstructs a complex social and economic history by linking Bristol to important ports of enslavement in West Africa. Thus, Sweet’s focus on Bristol’s history does not come at the expense of spending a significant portion of the book paying careful attention to the histories of Old and New Calabar, two prominent ports of the Efik ethnic city-state located in the southeastern coast of present-day Nigeria, as well as to the prominent enslaving African families in the region. His attention to these social, economic, and political networks illustrates the webs of exploitation and partnership that quite literally underwrote the purchase and sale of enslaved people. Likewise, Sweet emphasizes how companies profiting on enslavement were able to exert their influence on the Crown, as well as on the statecraft of other sovereign nations, thereby consolidating the place of corporate monopolies as meaningful and prominent nonstate actors who enacted and defended their own interests while also expanding their political power on a domestic and global scale.

Sweet’s monograph most notably follows in the tradition of Marcus Rediker’s work on sailors in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge UP, 1987) and *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (Viking, 2007), with whom *Mutiny on the Black Prince* even shares a cover image: J. M. W. Turner’s 1840 painting *The Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On)*. Sweet’s *Mutiny* also shares an interest in and commitment to unearthing and restoring the lives of ordinary Black and white wage laborers at sea, who were vulnerable both physically and financially, and locating their lives within the broader Atlantic revolutionary period while still being particularly attentive to their participation in the exploitative and genocidal transatlantic slave trade. In stressing both the freedoms and restrictions experienced by Black sailors

(and pirates), Sweet's book also joins works such as Jeffrey Bolster's *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Harvard UP, 1997), Rediker's *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age* (Beacon P, 2004) and *Outlaws of the Atlantic: Sailors, Pirates, and Motley Crews in the Age of Sail* (Beacon P, 2014), as well as Nicholas Radburn's *Traders in Men: Merchants and the Transformation of the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Yale UP, 2023). Like Bolster and Rediker, Sweet takes an unflinching look at the promises of egalitarianism at land and sea by juxtaposing Britain's liberal discourse with the lived experiences of Black sailors who were subject to bodily violence, enslavement, and death at the hands of both fellow sailors and the state. Moreover, by foregrounding both the enormity of the toll on Black life both during and after capture in West Africa, and by unearthing the long afterlife of the capital gained from the trade in the amplification of racialized wealth disparity in Britain, Sweet underscores the meager gains made by most white European and free Black wage laborers in this period.

Sweet summons an impressive set of sources to reveal a fascinating cast of characters across the socioeconomic spectrum in eighteenth-century Bristol, with a focus on the tight network of traders, merchants, shipmasters, and sailors participating in the enslavement of people. Indeed, the monograph's protagonist, John Fowler, served in all these capacities himself. Having started as a laborer then becoming captain before eventually ending his career as one of the wealthiest men in Bristol, Fowler ultimately amassed a financial empire that extended across the globe and for generations after his death. Yet Sweet's focus on the history and legacy of Fowler in particular—responsible for the enslavement of around “57,000 Africans, [of which] roughly 7,000 perished in the Middle Passage” (150)—emphasizes not just the macroeconomic impact of the transatlantic slave trade on the Britain's growth, but additionally the remarkable, mundane, key, and minor choices made by individual actors that contributed to the expansion of global racial capitalism.

Sweet's cast of “minor” characters include a free African man named Phillip Thompson who prevented the *Black Prince / Liberty* crew's imprisonment and execution by “convincing the Portuguese that the *Black Prince* was a legitimate merchant” rather than a mutinous or piratic vessel (92). Once the mutinous crew arrives in Brazil, Thompson, originally from Ano Bom—an island colonized by the Portuguese located off the west coast of what is now Equatorial Guinea—emerges as a politically powerful

character in part because of his plurilingualism and literacy. Though he disappears from the archival record, by speculating on Thompson's motivations—to earn individual power by garnering the respect of his shipmates; to exchange his labor both for wages and for knowledge of the English language and customs; to utilize “his education and diplomatic skills to save his shipmates in Brazil”—Sweet argues that Thompson “offers us different ways of imagining the histories of the Atlantic world—not as individualist, accumulative, and driven by greed, but rather as collective, distributive, and driven by reciprocal obligations” (92). This may exceed the bounds of what historians can infer about Thompson precisely because the documents pertaining to his life are scant. However, Sweet's conjecture about Thompson and his motivations, read contrapuntally to Fowler, offers an imaginative way of reading historical figures: as brimming with worldmaking potential on the horizon.

One of Sweet's more interesting, albeit undertheorized, arguments is how the case of the *Black Prince* reveals ways in which the transatlantic slave trade and piracy were in many ways indistinguishable in this period. As Sweet notes, “Pirates thus sought the same loopholes in the law to justify their criminal enterprises as their slave trading merchant masters. The ‘law’ was not a strict set of principles so much as a pliable tool to justify individual economic advancement and greed—for merchant and criminal alike” (98). I would have liked to see Sweet unearth something novel about the lawful communion between mutiny and piracy in Britain's legal history to show how this intimacy strengthens corporate interests as well as the legal and economic apparatuses of the state. However, even as certain uncited works—including Janice Thomson's *Mercenaries, Pirates and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton UP, 1994), Jon Latimer's *Buccaneers of the Caribbean: How Piracy Forged an Empire* (Harvard UP, 2009), and Mark G. Hanna's *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570–1740* (U of North Carolina P, 2015)—anticipate Sweet's argument that “corporate pirates, like Fowler, helped make the merchant state [while] in turn, the merchant state created criminal pirates like those on the *Black Prince*,” this book exists at the unique intersection of maritime and piratic histories, and the history of transatlantic Black enslavement (93). Mutiny, for Sweet, like piracy for the aforementioned scholars, “becomes a unique window onto the ways

British merchants harnessed the power of the state to control labor, land, natural resources, and even other European empires” (7).

*Mutiny on the Black Prince* will be of great interest to fans of British maritime history. Sweet produces a robust transatlantic history of the *Black Prince*, while also emphasizing the transhistorical reverberations of the mutiny in British history and political economy. The monograph is narrated in rich, vivid, and evocative prose, which belies the dizzying amount of research undertaken for its production, and it results in a text that will appeal to enthusiasts of historical nonfiction as much as to historians of the eighteenth century. Literary scholars will find rich sources for their own work on this period. While Sweet uses what we now consider to be literary works, such as Charles Johnson’s *General History of the Pyrates from their first Rise and Settlement in the Island of Providence, to the Present Time* (1724) and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (1789), his book in turn serves as an invitation for literary scholars to mine the state papers, records, and periodicals unearthed by him. Moreover, Sweet’s deep commitment to comparative (transhistorical and transnational) methods continues to be a model for literary scholars.

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*Freeman’s Challenge: The Murder That Shook  
America’s Original Prison for Profit*

ROBIN BERNSTEIN  
University of Chicago Press, 2024  
288 pp.

The birth of the prison was coincident with the death of slavery in the northern states during the early nineteenth century. New York, which was home to the largest enslaved population north of Maryland, passed gradual abolition legislation in 1799. The legislation declared children born to enslaved women after July 4 of that year to be legally free, yet it required them to work for their mothers’ enslavers until they reached their