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Bernard Capp, *British Slaves and Barbary Corsairs, 1580–1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 210 pp., bibliography, index. ISBN 978-0-1928-5737-8, £81 (hbk).

The blurb for *British Slaves and Barbary Corsairs* promises the ‘first comprehensive study of the thousands of Britons captured and enslaved in North Africa in the early modern period, charting their lives from capture to eventual liberation, death ... or, for a lucky few, escape’. In the preface, Bernard Capp notes that although ‘these issues were of huge concern to contemporaries, especially in the early Stuart period ... they have gone unmentioned in most surveys of early modern British history’ (v). It is on this basis that he decides to assume no prior knowledge on the part of the reader. This is probably a wise decision, and this slim volume would be a good starting place for a student or curious non-specialist looking to grasp the phenomenon of Mediterranean slavery and its important and still underappreciated role in the politics and culture of early modern Britain. It is a shame, however, that there is not more extended critique of the extensive primary source base that Capp makes use of, which is far from uncontroversial. There is also a lack of explicit historiographical discussion. This seems like a missed opportunity, as Capp clearly does have things to say vis-à-vis his interlocutors in this field. Yet engagement with the work of other scholars is most often fleeting or completely hidden.

The book is nicely structured around the journey of Britons through the process of enslavement: capture at sea by North African corsairs, sale in the market, trials of faith and identity – which could often lead to apostasy and religious and cultural conversion – and then, for some, escape, ransom or redemption. A final chapter considers the role of the state in (eventually) reducing the threat to British travellers and mariners. Capp’s overarching concern is to stress the diversity of individual experiences of slavery, which depended not only on a range of elements particular to the individual (age, sex, social class, nationality), but also on contingent factors or just plain luck. In this he engages with a problematic but persistent controversy besetting studies of Mediterranean slavery, which might be crudely summarized as whether Mediterranean slavery was ‘as bad’ as the transatlantic slave trade and whether, in this light, it merits the term ‘slavery’. Capp’s convincing answer is to stress that, for the majority, this was a very bad fate indeed and in many cases terminal, although the sheer variety of experience should effectively undermine any definitive pronouncement on this score. (It could arguably be pointed out that this very heterogeneity represents an important point of difference with the transatlantic trade.)

The sources are almost exclusively British in origin and supporting literature almost exclusively anglophone, although Capp does a good job of contextualizing and comparing the British experience with that of other nations, including the slavery practised by European Christians against North Africans. Capp brings to bear an impressively wide array of original primary evidence on his subject, including state papers, consular correspondence, and especially captivity narratives and letters written by British slaves and ex-slaves. The episodes he narrates are often fascinating in and of themselves, although it must be said that the internal structure of the chapters – point followed by numerous examples – can begin to feel a little bit wearing after a while, even with such promising narrative material at hand. What is more, this source material is treated fairly unproblematically, even though the authors of letters home or those writing captivity narratives for the British public presumably had considerable incentives to portray events in a certain light. The question of source reliability is dealt with briefly and in general terms, and the positioning of particular authors not at all. The issue of Orientalism is hinted at but dismissed in very short order. I think there was space, even in a short book, to engage a little more with these important issues.

This is part of a more general tendency – perhaps a conscious authorial decision – to limit engagement with other points of view on the topic. The idea that this study is the first of its kind, while true in the strictest sense, does something of a disservice to the increasing attention that Mediterranean slavery has received in recent times, including from historians looking at the experience of enslaved Britons. In particular, there exists not only a lifetime of work on the subject written by Nabil Matar – whose contribution to the field Capp recognizes in the preface – but also Linda Colley's *Captives*, which has received a great deal of attention since its publication 20 years ago.¹ Both these scholars are cited in the footnotes, but their work is not engaged with in the main body of the text. These writers have not only taken a different view with regard to the reliability of the source material, but have also advanced quite negative views about the efficacy and determination of the British state in engaging with the problem of captivity. The decision to leave scholarly disagreement at the door detracts from the book, especially because Capp actually advances some convincing arguments to the contrary, demonstrating in the final chapter how difficult and intractable the problem of British captives was in practical terms, while also showing how increased British naval power (as well as French hostility) was key in successfully resolving the problem of the regencies. Morocco, where naval power could not be easily leveraged, is an exception that proves the rule.

This is a field where language and labels have come under considerable scrutiny and, as the author recognizes, some readers may have quibbles about his choices in this regard. The decision to use 'slave' in place of 'captive', which Capp justifies in his introduction, is convincing and seems to be emerging as a consensus among current writers on the topic. Less so is the choice to employ 'Barbary' for the North African regencies. This term may indeed have been 'widely used', but only by Europeans and with decidedly pejorative overtones. There is also, less controversially but somewhat oddly, repeated

1. See, for example, N. I. Matar, *Britain and Barbary, 1589–1689* (Gainesville, FL, 2005); Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (London, 2010).

reference to 'Florentines' and 'Florentine galleys' even though the Grand Duchy of Tuscany had already come into existence before the start of this period.

It was perhaps Capp's intention to avoid overshadowing the fascinating experience of his subjects with 'academic' argument. Yet even if the book was intended only as a brief and readable introduction, I feel it could have been rendered more useful and interesting for all readers by choosing to engage openly with disagreement rather than conceal it beneath cool scholarly prose.

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