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In 1773, a Swedish botanist named Henry Smethman arrived at Banca Island, fifteen miles upstream from the mouth of the Sierra Leone River. On this rock, the site of a West African slave factory owned and operated by six London merchants, and the safest anchorage of the region, Smethman found an orderly refuge from the confusion of the jungle. Much given to regular ways himself, the “unfortunate flycatcher” was immediately struck by the harmonious arrangement of the place. The unruly growth of the tropics was carefully and frequently cleared away, and there remained “little else but iron, rock & gravel.” Favorably comparing these facilities to others along the coast, he wrote that the headquarters of the factory was “a plain neat building” with “a very cool & convenient gallery in the front” where the traders “walk & see everything... that is passing about them.” Its main spaces boasted large and lofty rooms. But what most fascinated the Swede was not the order and neatness, for the depot certainly had its share of “little, dark & inconvenient” apartments, not the barbarous trade in slaves, but rather the entertainment available there, the myriad ways the factory made up for tropical discomfort with European amusements and necessities.

On his first full day on the island, the botanist and his companions, traders from all parts of America and Europe, played a game of golf. In Britain, golf courses could be found in only two places and, on the continent, they existed only in Holland. In Africa, therefore, a golf course was something of a rare species and, in his diary, Smethman described what was surely the first course on the African continent, as if it were a new creature omitted by his friend Linnaeus. Two holes, each the size of a man’s head, were made in the ground, he recorded, about a quarter of a mile from each other. The balls were the size of tennis balls, and the clubs were made from rare Central American woods. The players formed two parties; each group took its place at one of the holes and then proceeded to strike its ball toward the opposite hole; and so it went, back and forth. These sportsmen were dressed in white cotton shirts and trousers brought from India in the factory proprietors’ ships. They were attended by African caddies, draped in loincloths
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A tartan design made from wool that had been woven in one of the partners' industrial ventures, a wool factory near Glasgow. Golf was "a very pretty exercise" for the middle of the jungle, since the exertion was minimal and the American and British company congenial. When the game was over, entertainment shifted indoors. The white inhabitants amused themselves before supper with whist and backgammon. They dined on ape, antelope, boar, and fish. After dinner, they drank Madeira wine and smoked Virginia tobacco.¹

As I read Smeathman's account for the first time, over 200 years later, I was stunned by the bizarre, un-self-conscious parody of African territorial conquest. But I was more surprised by and intrigued with the implications of the image for the larger colonial and imperial world. Golf courses hedged by mangroves, British and American traders in Indian cotton, slaves in tartan, Irish beef and butter, Caribbean rum, Virginian tobacco, German guns, London ships? How did this odd collection come to be, and what did it represent?

This congeries of goods and peoples was the tangible result of the work of a small group of London partners. The six owners of the factory, drawing on their own peripatetic experiences, were working to extend the frontier of Britain's empire, in Africa and in America. They were doing this by marshaling their employees, agents, and clients on four continents to build the outpost, to staff and provision it, to conduct an extensive trade with the African hinterland from it, and to sell its produce, slaves, from Tobago to Jamaica to Rhode Island. This slave entrepot was one of the principal nodes in their far-flung business operations, which embraced victualing stations in India, Jamaica, Nova Scotia, and Germany, plantations in the Caribbean, the American mainland, and India, and an interconnected chain of shipping and trading routes between London and Calcutta, Madeira, the British West Indies, and the North American mainland colonies in the period 1735-85. Building these networks made them wealthy and provided the commercial infrastructure for the development of the British Atlantic world in the eighteenth century.

This study is part of a larger, ongoing research inquiry into how America grew from a small band of settlers scattered along the eastern coastline of the mainland and the Caribbean early in the seventeenth century to a diverse group whose prosperity and confidence nearly 175 years later allowed thirteen colonies "to dissolve the political bands" that had connected them to Britain. The present historical study aims

¹ "Extracts from Mr. Smeathman's Letters to Mr. Drury," May 10, 1773, Smeathman Papers, Ms. D26, envelope 2, no. 4, University of Uppsala, Uppsala, Sweden; GD 248/601/331, 54, and 248/511/4; and Chapter 6 in the present book.
to understand one critical aspect of that growth: how the British metropo-
olis influenced the American periphery. It focuses on commerce and
particularly on the men in the metropolis who traded with America. It
shows how one group of London merchants working between 1735 and
1785 seized imperial, largely American opportunities, helped integrate
the empire as they integrated their own business operations and worked to
improve their surroundings as, by the standards of their day, they
improved their positions in British society. In doing so, these merchants
actively abetted what Adam Smith called America’s rise to “wealth and
greatness,” even as they enriched themselves.

Historical Writing on Trans-Atlantic Traders

Historians’ general assessments of the role of eighteenth-century trans-
Atlantic trade have taken one of two forms – statistical analysis or
biographical narrative. Each form has its strengths and its weaknesses.
The statistical approach constructs arguments about commercial and
economic forces based upon aggregate data; it gathers facts compiled in
the colonial period and focuses on large sweeps of time. Like much
economics, it deals with markets and movements, not principally with
people. Statistics enable the historian to define and measure historical
forces and lend precision to historical questions.2 Yet, at the same time,
the statistical approach often renders a remote and deracinated account,
stripped of reference to the actions and thoughts of the men and women

2. Studies focusing on the statistical dimensions of colonial trade include Gary M. Walton, “Sources of Productivity Change in American Colonial Shipping, 1675-1775,” Econ-
Rum Trade and the Balance of Payments of the Thirteen Colonies, 1730–1775” (Ph.D. disser., University of Pittsburgh, 1970); William L. Davison and Laurence J. Bradley,
Trade to the West Indies, 1750–1815” (Ph.D. disser., Johns Hopkins University, 1975);
Gary M. Walton and James F. Shepherd, The Economic Rise of Early America (Cam-
bridge, 1979); and James H. Levit, For Want of Trade: Shipping and the New Jersey

For similar studies concerning the trade of the mother country, see Ralph M. Davis,
Series for Scotland’s and Britain’s Trade with the Thirteen Colonies and States, 1740
to 1791,” William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd ser., v. 23 (1966), pp. 367–85; and Capital
and Credit in British Overseas Trade: The View from the Chesapeake (Cambridge, Mass., 1980); Jacob M. Price and Paul G. E. Clemens, “A Revolution in Scale in
Overseas Trade: British Firms in the Chesapeake Trade,” Journal of Economic History,
v. 47 (1987), pp. 11–43; Christopher J. French, “The Role of London in the Atlantic
Slave Trade, 1680–1776” (M.A. thesis, University of Exeter, 1970); and “The Trade
and Shipping of the Port of London, 1700–1776” (Ph.D. disser., University of Exeter,
1980); and Kenneth Morgan, Bristol & the Atlantic Trade in the Eighteenth Century
(Cambridge, 1993).
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who made up society. For example, in one analysis, Geoffrey Gilbert ably establishes that the top 2.5 percent of investors acquired 21 percent of the tonnage in late eighteenth-century Baltimore, but he does not (and, in his defense, probably cannot) show how the distribution of investment affected individual merchants. Statistical answers are general, frequently so general that they bear little connection to the people affected. At times, one is left wondering whether the historical forces existed at all, because the process of historical “number-crunching” often reveals patterns in their entirety of which the participants could not directly have been aware.

Biography provides a ready alternative to statistics. The biographical approach focuses on individual lives or families, or specific commercial groups working in certain geographical areas. As a result, reading biography is often more satisfying than reading the economists’ accounts; in focusing the reader’s attention on people, it paints a picture more like life as readers experience it. This method has been adopted by James Hedges, who wrote artfully about the Brown family of Rhode Island, Richard Pares, who studied the Pinney family of Nevis and Bristol, Thomas Doerrflinger, who carefully dissected the community of Philadelphia merchants, and Jacob Price, who wrote about Glasgow merchants. Yet, with the notable exceptions of Doerrflinger’s and Price’s


analyses, these studies, richly detailed and cogently argued as they are, seem incomplete, shackled largely by the state of surviving evidence. Typical is William Roberts’s life of Ralph Carr. Roberts carefully recounts how the merchant Carr fails to market European manufactures in New York and New England in the 1750s, but unrealistically describes the failure as resting solely in Carr’s inability to accept risk; in this account, contemporary economic and geopolitical realities do not impinge upon his decision-making. In principle, by stressing intentionality or agency, biography should allow the historian to see how individuals react to invisible forces. But whatever the community or the size of the group being studied, it has usually been written as if mercantile lives or businesses took place in a vacuum: biographers have trouble dealing with those aspects of social life not under the direct control of their subjects or those areas not fully evidenced. One seldom comes away from reading merchants’ biographies with a sense of the social aggregate into which the individuals fit, or to the extent to which they interacted with larger economic and social forces, processes, and circumstances. In this historical genre, the choices the subject made eclipse attention to the alternatives he weighed; the rationalizations the subject adopted for those choices crowd out attention to different, unknown, or unseen motives.4

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The challenge of understanding the influence of the metropolis on the periphery is heightened by the fact that neither the statistical nor the biographical approach has done much with the metropolis. London’s merchants remain largely unstudied, and the influence of London on trans-Atlantic commerce has seldom been explored, apart from Whitehall’s policy of mercantilism or the legislation of Parliament. There are some exceptions: Ralph Davis’s masterly synthesis of English shipping, a work of immense scope that comprehends London traders even though it is primarily argued from non-London sources; Peter Earle’s recent attempt to dissect London business before 1750; two studies of the port of London by Christopher French, who includes some mention of trading circles but bases his conclusions almost exclusively on the extremely spotty port records; and the dozen or so biographical accounts of Augustan London merchant written by Lewis Namier and his followers. But these contributions are noticeably few, given the overall importance of London to the empire, and they focus exclusively on trade. Ignoring the complex dynamics of eighteenth-century life, none takes into account

5. The view from the periphery has won the day, despite Richard Pare’s compelling case for a view from the center. “The Economic Factors in the History of the Empire,” Economic History Review, v. 7 (1954), pp. 114-44.

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the merchants’ other economic activities, such as manufacturing, farming, or stock-trading, let alone their social lives, their houses, art collections, and the like. The omission is serious, since London’s importance in the empire also includes its importance vis-à-vis other urban communities in Britain, its domination of the Home Counties, and its strong influence on the economy and society of rural areas. Furthermore, none of the London studies assesses the contribution made by Londoners to the labor of merchants and entrepreneurs in America. For decades, historians have taken for granted the fact that the mother country was “the central figure, the authoritative and guiding force, the influence of which did more than anything else to shape the course of colonial achievement.” There is little serious analysis of how men at the


metropolitan center actively and creatively managed the economic systems that Americans used to their advantage and then rebelled against. And there is little critical attention paid to what Jacob Price has recently described as "the backward influence of the colonies" on the world of Londoners - a surprising state of affairs, since, in the words of the French historian and philosopher Abbé Raynal, "the whole world" made London "rich and populous."

Inspired by the goals of the founders of the Annals school of history - to analyze as well as to narrate historical phenomena, to comprehend a wide range of human behavior rather than political activity alone, and to draw upon other disciplines - and by recent British and American approaches that view the Atlantic as a bridge rather than a barrier, the present study combines statistical and biographical inquiry to open up the boundaries that have limited historical writing on eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic traders, and fill some of the gaps in our understanding of the mutual influence of the center and the periphery on each other. Hoping to mediate between the mass and the individual, as well as between impersonal forces and human reactions, and statistics and biographies, the present study recreates the complex world of some of


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London’s international merchants at a critical moment in the development of the colonies.11

This is easier promised than delivered. London merchants, the subjects of this study, seldom made the news. Their record is thin, so thin that neither biographer nor statistician should be satisfied. Their business dealings were usually conducted in conversation, not on paper; businessmen seldom wrote about their work unless forced by distance or law. Though they wrote business letters detailing the comings and goings of ships, the fulfillment of contracts, the honoring of requests, the execution of trusts, and the like, little was said about the harmony or tension that prevailed among partners, the division of responsibilities among those in the counting-house, the physical setting for their business transactions, or their reasons for going into new areas of business. They penned personal missives, but these are relatively few and often uninformative. Too, they appeared in governmental records as entries in customs books, securities ledgers, and other official reports. By combining these materials for personal biographical narrative and aggregate statistical analysis, and by adding to them a discussion of the material artifacts the merchants left behind (houses, gardens, roads, factories, and plantations), I propose to illuminate their world. That is to say, by combining the private and public lives of real people, keeping them at the center of the story, and merging the account of their experiences with the broader explanatory context of the economic and social forces impinging upon men and women in the Atlantic community, I believe we can gain a more accurate and interesting understanding of the influence of the metropolis on British-American trade in the fifty years before the end of the American Revolutionary War.

The Sample of Merchants and the Nature of the Evidence

In the present study, I focus on one cadre of London merchants who traded with America. “Merchant” originally meant any trader in goods, but by the middle of the eighteenth century, its original meaning had been considerably narrowed. General dictionaries, like those written by Samuel Johnson or Thomas Sheridan, defined a merchant as one “who trafficks to remote countries.” Trade experts like Timothy Cunningham, the author of a popular treatise on the law of bills of exchange, described

11. Good examples of a “bridge” perspective emphasizing the integrated nature of the empire are Ian K. Steele, The English Atlantic, 1675-1740 (New York, 1986), Bernard Bailyn, Voyagers to the West (New York, 1986), and David Cressy, Coming Over (New York, 1987).
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a merchant as not “every one who buys or sells” but rather one who moves in the “Way of Commerce” by “Importation or Exportation,” who “makes it his Living to buy and sell, and that by a continued Assiduity, or frequent Negotiation in the Mystery of Merchandizing.” Most contemporaries agreed that a merchant was a wholesale trader who had dealings with foreign countries. Many groups of critical importance to the domestic economy, such as “artificers” (manufacturers), skilled tradesmen, retailers, and shopkeepers, were not labeled “merchants.”

The cadre of trans-Atlantic wholesale merchants I am writing about lived in London for the half-century between 1735 and 1784 and worked regularly with one another, trading on a large scale with Britain’s American colonies and around the world. I discovered this group while in my first graduate semester at Harvard. I was searching for material on the cadre’s most famous member, Richard Oswald of Philpot Lane, who served as Britain’s representative at the 1782 Paris negotiations that ended the war between the rebellious colonies and the mother country. As I studied Oswald’s life and examined his role in the prerevolutionary development of America, I quickly moved beyond diplomacy to the activities of Oswald and others like him that contributed to the integration of the Atlantic community. In response to letters I wrote to Oswald’s descendants, I learned that they still had personal and business papers stuffed in hatboxes and sea chests, and they invited me to examine them. I looked at these collections in the ensuing months and quickly realized that Oswald was only one piece of a large puzzle, one character in a complicated story much like the intricate network of Scheherazade’s tales, which never completely come together. As I discovered more about the West African slaving operation Oswald managed, I added his five partners in that venture to my search and, when I learned still more about the six partners, I widened my search to all of their known partners. In the end, I identified a group of twenty-three London merchants, associates clustered in four circles of partnership