



# **THE SLAVE TRADE: The Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade 1440-1870**

*Hugh Thomas*

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A masterful survey of the origins, development, nature, and decline of the trade in African men, women, and children, drawing heavily on original sources. Thomas (Conquest: Montezuma, CortÇs and the Fall of Old Mexico, 1994, etc.) argues that, while the practice of slavery was widespread in Europe even during the Middle Ages, it was the Portuguese, as their explorers began to establish trade in Africa in the 1440s, who turned an intermittent habit into a large and sophisticated business. Most other seafaring European nations--including the Spanish, English, and Dutch--soon followed. Drawing heavily on journals, state documents, business ledgers, and memoirs, Thomas is able to trace in astonishing detail how the business was run, who financed it, and what their profits were, and to explain the complex and profitable interactions of merchants and governments in the trade. Because Thomas is so thorough, there are numbers of surprises here, including the details of the longstanding collaboration of some African rulers with the slave trade. It's also startling to discover that, according to Thomas, approximately one in every ten slave ships experienced a slave rebellion--and that a few were even successful. The sailors in the trade, Thomas notes, were treated horribly themselves: The mortality rate of Dutch crews, for instance, hovered at about 18 percent, while on average about 12 percent of the Africans being transported died at sea. While this is primarily an economic and political history, Thomas does not slight the suffering of the slaves, nor the widespread corrupting effect of the trade on the nations involved in it. He concludes with a vivid history of the long struggle of the abolitionists, beginning in the 18th century, to make the trade illegal. Grim but consistently gripping history, told with clarity and a meticulous attention to detail, this is likely to become the standard reference on the economics of the slave trade.

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