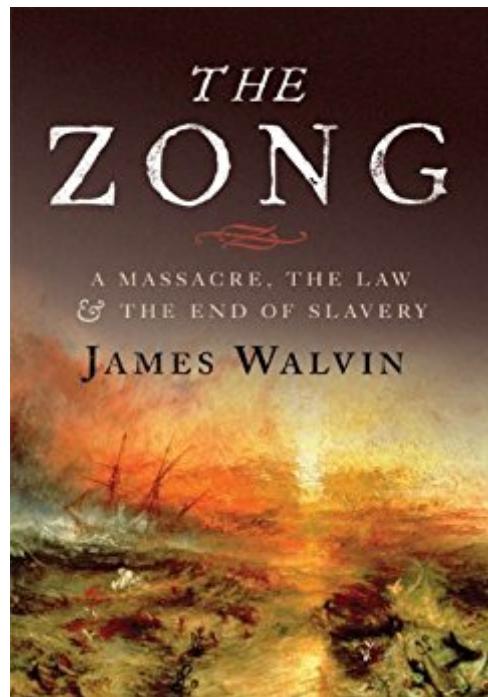


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The Zong: A Massacre, The Law And The End Of Slavery



Synopsis

On November 29, 1781, Captain Collingwood of the British ship Zong commanded his crew to throw overboard one-third of his cargo: a shipment of Africans bound for slavery in America. The captain believed his ship was off course, and he feared there was not enough drinking water to last until landfall. This book is the first to examine in detail the deplorable killings on the Zong, the lawsuit that ensued, how the murder of 132 slaves affected debates about slavery, and the way we remember the infamous Zong today. Historian James Walvin explores all aspects of the Zong's voyage and the subsequent trial—a case brought to court not for the murder of the slaves but as a suit against the insurers who denied the owners' claim that their cargo had been necessarily jettisoned. The scandalous case prompted wide debate and fueled Britain's awakening abolition movement. Without the episode of the Zong, Walvin contends, the process of ending the slave trade would have taken an entirely different moral and political trajectory. He concludes with a fascinating discussion of how the case of the Zong, though unique in the history of slave ships, has come to be understood as typical of life on all such ships.

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Customer Reviews

Professor James Walvin has written a shocking book on one episode of many in the annals of slavery, namely about an event which took place towards the end of the eighteenth century. The Black Holocaust was thought about, planned and executed by the greedy, immoral and corrupt merchants of human bodies and its inception and implementation were to be found in Africa and the slave ships which were bound for the West. More than 12 million blacks were deported and enslaved in the USA, while many more millions were sent to other places in the Western Hemisphere to work in the tobacco and sugar plantations. Water was especially important on a slave ship, because of the hard conditions which were a part of any voyage, particularly when those ships were packed and crammed with hundreds of Africans in a crowded, dehydrating and suffocating environment. The final destination of the Zong was Jamaica. Any slave voyage which started from the Africa entailed horror stories and the story of "The Zong" is just one minor example. The more a slave ship was at sea, the more difficult the human problems on board. In the case described here, Captain Collingwood who was in charge, decided that there would not be enough water on his ship for everyone, so he decided to throw one-third of his human cargo into the sea. In other words, he and others were responsible for the murder of 132 slaves. As Walvin writes, "the killings took place in small, manageable batches. The men were thrown overboard 'handcuffed and in Irons'", while a further thirty-six Africans died before reaching Jamaica. The Gregson syndicate, which owned the ship, did not see this as a disaster, and it decided to turn the loss of life into a profitable trade by claiming on the ship's insurance for the Africans murdered at sea".

This is quite an interesting and informative book about a horrible mass murder aboard a slave ship in 1781. But it goes beyond the tragic event itself to discuss the later legal case and its eventual impact on the end of slavery in Britain. The author is one of the leading experts on the transatlantic slave trade, whose 30 previous books have provided him with a tremendous background for examining this episode. The Zong was a slave ship that during a 1781 voyage threw over the side, to their grisly deaths, several hundred slaves, ostensibly because a shortage of water necessitated such action if the remaining Africans and the crew were to survive. To place this event in context, the author offers a very interesting and concise discussion of the transatlantic slave trade. This is the first bonus of the book. The immense profitability of this trade, largely out of Liverpool, was based on first obtaining slaves in Africa, then heading to the Caribbean or America, delivering and selling "the cargo," and then loading up with a valuable commodity (often sugar) for the return voyage. The numbers of Africans thus transported was enormous, exceeding a million. The conditions under which the trade was conducted were horrible for everyone involved; for example,

by 1807, 20,000 slave ship crew members had died. The truly bizarre dimension of the Zong story is that the owners of the Zong demanded that their insurers make good their losses under their insurance policies. The insurers fought this request in court where there was no consideration of the evil of these murders, but rather the issue was whether "the cargo's" loss had been appropriately "jettisoned" within the provisions of the the insurance contracts.

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