SEYMOUR DRESCHER. — *Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977. Pp. *xiv*, 299.

The relationship between the development of western capitalism and the introduction and gradual phasing out of African slavery is one that has held continuing fascination for Western intellectuals. Were George Fitzhugh and his contemporaries right in their assertion that slavery was a necessary and desirable ingredient in the attainment of civilized society? Was Lowell Ragatz correct in his twentieth-century argument that an economic decline in the profitability of slavery opened the way for a "fall" of planters' status and subsequently the abolition of slavery that signalled the end of the opulence of West Indian civilization?

Until recently, these historical questions were "answered": the slave trade was seen to have been the keystone of an impressively lucrative empire in the New World which was abolished only after it began to lose its vigour. Investigators such as Eric Williams and David Brion Davis differed as to the elements and sequence of the decline of the slave trade, but there has been little challenge to the idea that a decline *did* precede and influence the 1807 British decision to abolish the slave trade.

Seymour Drescher has now added a provocative new dimension to the old debate about the place of slavery in eighteenth-century British economy and philosophy. The title he has chosen succinctly summarizes his thesis: that the abolitionist forces were not simply providing moral justification for the death of an already moribund institution; that, on the contrary, the abolitionists chose to tackle an economy that was thriving on the slave trade, and successfully wrested the life line from that economy. Moreover, argues Drescher, this abolitionists' victory was not the result of duplicity or misperception on the part of either abolitionists or pro-slave-trade forces. Drescher combines mathematical models with contemporary commentary to make the case that not only was the slave trade growing ever more profitable in the years following the American Revolution, but also the British parliament — both its pro- and anti-slave trade forces — knew it. Hence, he concludes, the abolition of the British slave trade cannot be simply dismissed as a humanitarian veneer on a crumbling economic structure.

An undertaking as ambitious as the one Drescher assumes here naturally involves some shortcomings. For example, Drescher takes on what he allows to be Williams' contradictory argument with some contradictions of his own. He asserts

> The dynamic of the colonial system was no more measured by the statistics of the seventeenth-century pioneers than were metropolitan trends by the statistics of Old Sarum. British slavery was still riding the wave of the future in 1805 (p. 166).

Yet Drescher's own tables (pp. 77, 90, 150) suggest that sugar production hit some very bad years between 1796 and 1805 and that coffee values also were levelling off after 1800. Nor does Drescher give sufficient weight to the possible delayed impact of the unfolding of other political realities in the Caribbean.

He dismisses, for example, the 1795-1796 British/Maroon wars in Jamaica as being of only minor significance, since these issues did not surface in Parliamentary abolition debate in that year. However, the slow growth of a class of "coloured" planters between 1750-1800 — people such as Francis Williams of Jamaica — may well have led planters to be apathetic about defending the importation of new slaves, considering the insidious effect the presence of more blacks would have on white civilization. Lady Nugent, for example, was not alone in her complaints that the social roles she played before the "blackies" and the "coloureds" of Jamaica were oppressive. Drescher also fails to explore the possible relationship between humanitarian impulse and the optimism of prosperity — even if that prosperity is based on the absence of such humanitarian impulses. (An analogous situation is the 1960s design for a "Great Society" which, in seeking to guarantee a minimum

standard of living for the poorest segments of society, contributed to 1970s inflation and recession in the United States.)

There are other elements of Drescher's case with which one might argue, but *Econocide* has persuasively and provocatively re-opened a "closed" question. In addition, Mr. Drescher has an unostentatious flair with word and phrase that makes reading his prose a pleasure.

Emma LAPSANSKY,
Temple University.

* * *

RICHARD COBB. — *Death in Paris, 1795-1801*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. Pp. 134.

The historical study of death has achieved a certain popularity recently: in France alone one thinks of the work of Ariès, Lebrun and Vovelle. It is perhaps to be expected that Richard Cobb's contribution to this historiography should concentrate not on the common social aspects of this universal human experience, but on the atypical, on the statistically aberrant. Turning from his earlier work on *la vie en marge*, Cobb here presents *la mort en marge*, a study of suicides and sudden and violent deaths in Paris in the last years of the eighteenth century.

The source for this work is some 404 *procès-verbaux* of violent deaths from the Basse-Geôle de la Seine. Two-thirds of the corpses represented by these dossiers were recovered from the Seine, and 274 of the 404 were judged to be suicides. Thus the source does not (it does not claim to) represent a comprehensive survey of violent death or even suicides for Paris; the figures cited by Tulard (p. 6, n. 2) suggest that the six years covered by this study would have seen about 900 suicides in the capital. Moreover, the bodies which Cobb has vicariously examined are those of the very poor, their families claiming to be unable to afford burial expenses.

From the information collected by the *concierges* of the Basse-Geôle — statements of witnesses to acts of suicides, testimony of family and friends, descriptions of clothing and the contents of pockets — Cobb has established a context of suicides (for they are his main interest). There is a calendar, first of all: a preference for spring and summer. There is a daily breakdown: Fridays, Sundays and Mondays were most popular. And there is a clock: a preference for the morning, between nine o'clock and noon (as distinct from violent deaths such as murders, which were more common in the late evening). These conclusions are sometimes presented in a frustrating, imprecise way, but the general outlines are clear enough.

Where Cobb comes into his own is in the re-creation of the social context of the suicides. He peers over the shoulders of the *concierges* and examines with them the clothing on the bodies, the bits of string, snuff-boxes, keys, and other odds and ends found in their pockets. He listens to the evidence of their friends and relatives. From the mass of evidence he draws a convincing impressionistic picture of the family circumstances and personal relationships which might have contributed to the decision to end it all: loneliness, physical pain, feelings of failure, lost love. This reconstitution of personal life is the strength of the study, and only a historian with Richard Cobb's intimate knowledge of, and sensitivity for, eighteenth-century France, could have done it. He is able to elicit signifi-