The Advantages of the African Trade  
Malachy Postlethwayt (1772)

[The British transatlantic slave trade flourished from the mid-seventeenth century until the early
teneteenth century. It was a major conduit for the forced migration of Africans to the Americas.
Between 1660 and 1807 over three million Africans were dispatched to the Americas in British
vessels. The British took the position that any interference with the slave trade touched the
economic well-being of the empire. British merchants were persistent in this view because they
were deeply engaged in the trade, particularly from 1713 onward. This was when, by the Treaty
of Utrecht, the British received the *Assiento*, the exclusive right to supply the Spanish colonies in
America with slaves. British political economists gave their blessing to the slave trade,
regarding it as a cornerstone of British commercial prosperity. No respectable writer on
commerce took a contrary position, and Malachy Postlethwayt, was no exception.]

http://www.pickeringchatto.com/transatlantic.htm and Ver Steeg & Hofstadter, *Great Issues in
American History* (1969)

The most approved Judges of the commercial Interests of these Kingdoms have ever been of
Opinion, that our West-India and Africa Trades are the most nationally beneficial of any we
carry on. It is also allowed on all Hands, that the Trade to Africa is the Branch which renders our
American Colonies and Plantations so advantageous to Great-Britain; that Traffic only affording
our Planters a constant Supply of Negroe-Servants for the Culture of their Lands in the Produce
of Sugars, Tobacco, Rice, Rum ... Fustick, Pimento, and all other our Plantation-Produce: So that
the extensive Employment of our Shipping in, to, and from America, the great Brood of Seamen
consequent thereupon, and the daily Bread of the most considerable Part of our British
Manufacturers, are owing primarily to the Labour of Negroes; who, as they were the first happy
Instruments of raising our Plantations; so their Labour only can support and preserve them, and
render them still more and more profitable to their Mother-Kingdom.

The Negro-Trade therefore, and the natural Consequences resulting from it, may be justly
esteemed an inexhaustible Fund of Wealth and Naval Power to this Nation. And by the Overplus
of Negroes above what we have served our own Plantations, we have drawn likewise no
inconsiderable quantities of Treasure from the Spaniards, who are settled on the Continent of
America; not only for Negroes furnished them from Jamaica, but by the late Assiento Contract
with the Crown of Spain; which may probably again be revived, upon a Peace being concluded
with that Kingdom.

What renders the Negro-Trade still more estimable and important is, that near Nine-tenths of
those Negroes are paid for in Africa with British Produce and Manufactures only; and the
Remainder with East-India Commodities. We send no Specie or Bullion to pay for the Products
of Africa, but, 'tis certain, we bring from thence very large Quantities of Gold; and not only that
but Wax and Ivory; the one serves for a foreign Export without the least Detriment to our own
Product; the other is manufactured at Home, and afterwards carried to foreign Markets, to no little Advantage both to the Nation and the Traders. From which Facts, the Trade to Africa may very truly be said to be, as it were, all Profit to the Nation; the direct Trade thither affords a considerable national Ballance in our Favour, and is apparently attended with such a Series of advantagious Consequences, that no other Branch whatever of our foreign Traffic admits of. And it may be worth Consideration, that while our Plantations depend only on Planting by Negroe-Servants, they will neither depopulate our own Country, become independent of her Dominion, or any way interfere with the Interests of the British Manufacturer; Merchant, or Landed Gentleman: Whereas were we under the Necessity of supplying our Colonies with White-Men instead of Blacks, they would not fail being in a Capacity to interfere with the Manufacturers of this Nation, in Time to shake off their Dependency thereon, and prove as injurious to the Landed, and Trading-Interests as ever they have hitherto been beneficial.

Many are prepossessed against this Trade, thinking it a barbarous, inhuman, and unlawful Traffic for a Christian Country to Trade in Blacks; to which I would beg leave to observe; that though the odious Appellation of Slaves in annexed to this Trade, it being called by some the slave-Trade, yet it does not appear from the best Enquiry I have been able to make, that the State of those People is changed for the worse, by being Servants to our British Planters in America; they are certainly treated with great Lenity and Humanity: And as the Improvement of the Planter's Estates depends upon due Care being take of their Healths and Lives, I cannot but think their Condition is much bettered to what it was in their own Country.

Besides, the Negroe-Princes in Africa, 'tis well known, are in perpetual War with each other; and since before they had this Method of disposing of their Prisoners of War to Christian Merchants, they were wont not only to be applied to inhuman Sacrifices, but to extream Torture and Barbarity, their Transplantation must certainly be a Melioration of their Condition; provided living in a civilized Christian Country, is better than living among Savages: Nay, if Life be preferable to Torment and cruel Death, their State cannot, with any Colour of Reason, be presumed to be worsted.

But I never heard it said that the Lives of Negroes in the Servitude of our Planters were less tolerable then those of Colliers and Miners in all Christian Countries. However, while our Rivals in Trade receive great national Emolument by the Labour of these People, this Objection will be of little Weight with those who have the Interest of their Country at Heart; or indeed the Welfare of the Negroes.

But to resume the Subject. As the present Prosperity and Splendor of the British Colonies have been owing to Negroe-Labour; so not only their future Advancement, but even their very Being depends upon our pursuing the same Measures in this Respect as our Competitors do. That our Colonies are capable of very great Improvements, by the proper Application of the Labour of Blacks, has been urged by the most experienced Judges of Commerce. And if it be good Policy to purchase as little from, and sell as much to foreign Nations of our own Produce and Manufactures, 'tis certainly very unwise and impolitic in us not to encourage our Plantations to the extent they are capable of; in order to supply ourselves at least from thence with what we can't do without; and take from other Nations such Essentials only, as neither our own Country, or our Plantations will afford us.
From these Considerations it has been wisely proposed to extend the Planting of Coffee, Cocoa, Indigo, Cochneal, Logwood, Hemp, Flax, Naval Stores, and making of Potash, and variety of other Products, which those Lands admit of. Whereby, instead of being under the disadvantageous Necessity of purchasing such valuable and useful Merchandize of other Nations, we might easily become capable, not only of supplying ourselves, but exporting to others considerable Quantities of our Plantation-Produce. This would turn the balance of Trade in our Favour, with Countries where 'tis now against us; and enable our Colonies to encrease their demand for British Manufactures, in Proportion to our Demand for their Produce. But all Improvements proposed to be made in our Plantations, have always presupposed the Well-Being and Prosperity of our African-Trade; to the End that they might not be destitute of a constant supply of Negroes for those Purposes: Without which, instead of Improvement, nothing but Distress and Poverty could ensue in all the British Colonies, while France, by wiser Measures, would render their Colonies still more opulent, and consequently a more formidabale Nursery of Naval Power.

And however mean an Idea some may entertain of the Advantages arising from the direct Trade to Africa, it can proceed from nothing but want of being duly aquatinted therewith. Was all the Gold that has, or easily might have been brought from thence, coined at the Tower, with some Impression to distinguish it from all other Gold, as was formerly done, we should soon be sensible, that we need be little beholding to any other Nation for that valuable Metal; for were we to extend our Commerce into Africa, to the Pitch it will admit of, we must certainly export thither, of the British Produce and Manufacture, considerably more than we do to any one Country in the whole World.

The Continent of Africa is of great Magnitude, the Country extremely populous, and the Trade and Navigation now well known, easy, and not hazardous. As the Natives in general stand in great Need of European Commodities, so they have valuable Returns to make us; and such too, that to do in no respect interfere either with the Produce and Manufactures of these Kingdoms, or her American Plantations; which ought never to be forgot, it being the State of no other Branch of Trade carried on by the whole British Empire . . .