

INTRODUCTION

IN THE SHADOW OF THE MYTH

Slavery they can have everywhere. It is a weed that grows in every soil.

– Edmund Burke

That man who is the property of another, is his mere chattel, though he continue a man.

– Aristotle, *A Treatise on Government*

In the summer of 2003, archaeologists excavated a seventeenth-century site outside Annapolis, Maryland, and discovered the skeleton of a teenage boy. Examination showed the boy to have died sometime in the 1660s. He was about sixteen years old and had tuberculosis. His skull showed evidence of a fearful mouth infection, and herniated discs and other injuries to his back were synonymous with years of hard toil.

The youth was neither African nor Native American. He was northern European, probably English. His remains were found in what had been the cellar of a seventeenth-century house, in a hole under a pile of household waste. It was as if the boy was of so little account that after he died he was thrown out with the rubbish.

Forensic anthropologists believe the youth was probably an indentured servant – the deceptively mild label commonly used

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to describe hundreds of thousands of men, women and children shipped from Britain to America and the Caribbean in the 150 years before the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Most of these servants paid their passage to the Americas by selling the rights to their labour for a number of years. Others were forcibly exiled and sold in the colonies as servants for up to fourteen years. Many were effectively enslaved.

While the Spanish slaughtered in America for gold, the English in America had to plant for their wealth. Failing to find the expected mineral riches along the eastern seaboard, they turned to farming, hoping to make gold from tobacco. They needed a compliant, subservient, preferably free labour force and since the indigenous peoples of America were difficult to enslave they turned to their own homeland to provide. They imported Britons deemed to be 'surplus' people – the rootless, the unemployed, the criminal and the dissident – and held them in the Americas in various forms of bondage for anything from three years to life.

This book tells the story of these victims of empire. They were all supposed to gain their freedom eventually. For many, it didn't work out that way. In the early decades, half of them died in bondage. This book tracks the evolution of the system in which tens of thousands of whites were held as chattels, marketed like cattle, punished brutally and in some cases literally worked to death. For decades, this underclass was treated just as savagely as black slaves and, indeed, toiled, suffered and rebelled alongside them. Eventually, a racial wedge was thrust between white and black, leaving blacks officially enslaved and whites apparently upgraded but in reality just as enslaved as they were before. According to contemporaries, some whites were treated with less humanity than the blacks working alongside them.

Among the first to be sent were children. Some were dispatched by impoverished parents seeking a better life for them. But others were forcibly deported. In 1618, the authorities in London began to sweep up hundreds of troublesome urchins from the slums and, ignoring protests from the children and their families, shipped them to Virginia.¹ England's richest man was behind this mass expulsion. It was presented as an act of charity: the 'starving children' were to

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be given a new start as apprentices in America. In fact, they were sold to planters to work in the fields and half of them were dead within a year. Shipments of children continued from England and then from Ireland for decades. Many of these migrants were little more than toddlers. In 1661, the wife of a man who imported four 'Irish boys' into Maryland as servants wondered why her husband had not brought 'some cradles to have rocked them in' as they were 'so little'.

A second group of forced migrants from the mother country were those, such as vagrants and petty criminals, whom England's rulers wished to be rid of. The legal ground was prepared for their relocation by a highwayman turned Lord Chief Justice who argued for England's gaols to be emptied in America. Thanks to men like him, 50,000 to 70,000 convicts (or maybe more) were transported to Virginia, Maryland, Barbados and England's other American possessions before 1776. All manner of others considered undesirable by the British Crown were also dispatched across the Atlantic to be sold into servitude. They ranged from beggars to prostitutes, Quakers to Cavaliers.²

A third group were the Irish. For centuries, Ireland had been something of a special case in English colonial history. From the Anglo-Normans onwards, the Irish were dehumanised, described as savages, so making their murder and displacement appear all the more justified. The colonisation of Ireland provided experience and drive for experiments further afield, not to mention large numbers of workers, coerced, transported or persuaded. Under Oliver Cromwell's ethnic-cleansing policy in Ireland, unknown numbers of Catholic men, women and children were forcibly transported to the colonies. And it did not end with Cromwell; for at least another hundred years, forced transportation continued as a fact of life in Ireland.

The other unwilling participants in the colonial labour force were the kidnapped. Astounding numbers are reported to have been snatched from the streets and countryside by gangs of kidnappers or 'spirits' working to satisfy the colonial hunger for labour. Based at every sizeable port in the British Isles, spirits conned or coerced the unwary onto ships bound for America. London's most active

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kidnap gang discussed their targets at a daily meeting in St Paul's Cathedral. They were reportedly paid £2 by planters' agents for every athletic-looking young man they brought aboard. According to a contemporary who campaigned against the black slave trade, kidnappers were snatching an average of around 10,000 whites a year – doubtless an exaggeration but one that indicates a problem serious enough to create its own grip on the popular mind.³

Along with the vast numbers ejected from Britain and forced to slave in the colonies were the still greater multitudes who went of their own free will: those who became indentured servants in the Americas in return for free passage and perhaps the promise of a plot of land. Between 1620 and 1775, these volunteer servants, some 300,000, accounted for two out of three migrants from the British Isles.⁴ Typically, these 'free-willers', as they came to be called, were the poor and the hopeful who agreed to sacrifice their personal liberty for a period of years in the eventual hope of a better life. On arrival, they found that they had the status of chattels, objects of personal property, with few effective rights. But there was no going back. They were stuck like the tar on the keels of the ships that brought them. Some, of course, were bought by humane, even generous, masters and survived their years of bondage quite happily to emerge from servitude to build a prosperous future. But some of the most abused servants were from among the free-willers.

It invites uproar to describe as slaves any of these hapless whites who were abused, beaten and sometimes killed by their masters or their masters' overseers. To do so is thought to detract from the enormity of black suffering after racial slavery developed. However, black slavery emerged out of white servitude and was based upon it. As the African-American writer Lerone Bennett Jr has observed:

When someone removes the cataracts of whiteness from our eyes, and when we look with unclouded vision on the bloody shadows of the American past, we will recognize for the first time that the Afro-American, who was so often second in freedom, was also second in slavery.⁵

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Of course, black slavery had hideous aspects that whites did not experience, but they suffered horrors in common, many of which were first endured by whites. In crude economic terms, indentured servants sold their labour for a set period of time; in reality they sold *themselves*. They discovered that they were placed under the power of masters who had more or less total control over their destiny.

The indentured-servant system evolved into slavery because of the economic goals of early colonists: it was designed not so much to help would-be migrants get to America and the Caribbean as to provide a cheap and compliant workforce for the cash-crop industry. Once this was established, to keep the workforce in check it became necessary to create legal sanctions that included violence and physical restraint. This is what led to slavery: first for whites, then for blacks.

It has been argued that white servants could not have been truly enslaved because there was generally a time limit to their enforced labour, whereas black slavery was for life. However, slavery is not defined by time but by the experience of its subject. To be the chattel of another, to be required by law to give absolute obedience in everything and to be subject to whippings, brandings and chaining for any show of defiance, to be these things, as were many whites, was to be enslaved. Daniel Defoe, writing in the early 1700s, described indentured servants as ‘more properly called slaves’. Taking his cue, we should call a slave a slave.

How many of those whites who migrated from Britain were subject to the abuses we associate with slavery – 100,000, 200,000, 300,000? It is impossible to know. No one did compile, nor could they have compiled, such statistics. All we can be sure of is that the numbers were considerable. Time and again, the evidence shows this to be the case. Too many white servants ran from their masters, too many instances of ill treatment surfaced, and there were too many damaging admissions throughout the years of British rule for white slavery to be a rarity or a localised aberration that was quickly corrected. In 1663, about the time the wretched sixteen year old buried in that Annapolis cellar breathed his last, the Virginia Assembly warned that ‘the barbarous usage of some

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servants by cruel masters' was giving the colony such a bad name that immigrants would stop coming voluntarily. As the cases in this book confirm, that barbarous usage was widespread and prolonged on the American mainland and in Britain's Caribbean colonies.

Throughout the colonial period, those who were sold into servitude or who sold themselves as servants formed the majority of immigrants, but they have often had short shrift from historians. In the words of the social historian Gary B. Nash, 'Most depictions of early America as a garden of opportunity airbrush indentured servants out of the picture while focusing on the minority who arrived free.'⁶ A creation myth has flourished in which early American settlers are portrayed as free men and women who created a democratic and egalitarian model society more or less from scratch.

The truth could not be more different. The freedoms of modern American society evolved only gradually from enforced labour and penal servitude. Many of those instrumental in planning the earliest colonies were, like the reputedly richest man in Elizabethan England, Sir Thomas Smythe, ruthless and oblivious to the misery they caused. They were nonetheless often men of vision and extraordinary resilience. The tale of the white slave trade unfolds through their exuberant lives no less than through those who were their victims. European slavery in early America is contained within two centuries and between three continents: from the tiny band of Englishmen who established Jamestown in 1607, to the slave ports of Africa and finally to Captain Cook feeling his way along the shores of what was to become New South Wales in 1770.

The 1607 expedition laid the foundations for English settlement in America and when American independence closed the mainland colonies to the dumping of convicts and undesirables, Australia provided a new penal colony. In between, the stream of humanity flowed in a vast current across the Atlantic but has since been diverted from its place in the histories of the British Empire and of the United States.

As soon as the new nation of America was born, it became commonplace to deny the central part played in its establishment by key sections of founding fathers, mothers, sons and daughters.

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Those who chose to ignore the place of both the villain and the ill-used in this new country's history included contemporary apologists whose motivation was to create both social cohesion and status. In Virginia, the Old Dominion, where ideals of freedom flourished and where America's aristocracy was rooted, it was unacceptable for jailbirds to be discovered lurking in the family tree. Just ten years after the Declaration of Independence, this is what Thomas Jefferson wrote about convicts:

The malefactors sent to America were not sufficient in number to merit enumeration as one class out of three which peopled America . . . I do not think the whole number sent would amount to two thousand, and being principally men, eaten up with disease, they married seldom and propagated little. I do not suppose that themselves and their descendants are at present four thousand, which is little more than one-thousandth part of the whole inhabitants.⁷

In fact, at the time of the Declaration nearly 1,000 convicts a year were being dumped in America, mostly in Maryland and Virginia. A convict dealer intimated that in the 1700s more than 30,000 convicts had been sold in Maryland alone.

The numbers of convicts and their descendants in the period when Jefferson was writing were not, as he would have it, 'one-thousandth part of the whole inhabitants' but in reality the much more significant one in a hundred. However, there continued to be those who denied that large-scale dumping of the vicious, the irredeemable, the wicked and the plain unlucky had gone on in anything like either the numbers or over the period that we know occurred. Sydney George Fisher, writing in 1898, claimed that Virginia had avoided 'convicts, paupers and inferior nationalities'.⁸ The very different reality has been exposed by the pioneering work of leading American historians such as Edmund S. Morgan, David W. Galenson and A. Roger Ekirch. Nevertheless, right up to the present day, many Americans have difficulty reconciling themselves to the true nature of their antecedents. The truth is that in Virginia and Maryland a significant proportion of the early settlers was

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composed of convicts. The fact that wealth and nobility could grow from such material is testimony not to the importance of bloodstock but to social evolution.

This book features some of the great names of American history who were the masters of white slaves as well as black. It tracks the ruthless kingpins of the white servant trade who bought and sold their human wares, sometimes disguising convicts as regular servants, sometimes hawking servants from settlement to settlement. And it tells the stories of those they sold and of those who sold themselves. Some refused to be victims and fought the system by running away, by rebellion and even by murder. Many others succumbed to disease or exploitation or to attack from Native Americans. Some thrived and laid down roots.

The book has mainly been designed along simple chronological lines; here and there, however, the reader will discover occasional digressions or side-steps to take a closer look at particular fields of inquiry.

We have chosen to limit what would otherwise be quite a lengthy work to describing what occurred in a small but important group of geographic areas. We concentrate on Virginia and Maryland, for example, where the indentured-servant system was created and where its poisonous bloom flowered most widely. The very many colonies in the Caribbean are largely ignored in favour of dealing in detail with Barbados, so providing a clear account of one important colony, unencumbered by multitudes of regional variations. We hope that this approach also helps to clarify the defining difference between the enterprise carried out on the sugar islands and the colonisation of the American mainland. Broadly, the primary purpose of the settlements on Caribbean islands was to make money. There was little thought of Empire. This role fell to the enterprises in America, where profit and empire building went hand in hand. In the great open spaces of America, indentured servants were theoretically expected to survive bondage and prosper in a growing society; on the island of Barbados, freed workers became an embarrassment.

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines as slaves persons who are the legal property of another or others and bound to absolute obedience:

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in short, 'human chattels'. By this definition white servants were the first slaves in America and it is upon their labour, and later that of African-American slaves, that the nation was initially built. Today, tens of millions of white Americans are descended from such chattels. It is a shame that few in America claim these largely forgotten men and women of the early frontier as their own.