The Great Indian Slave Caper

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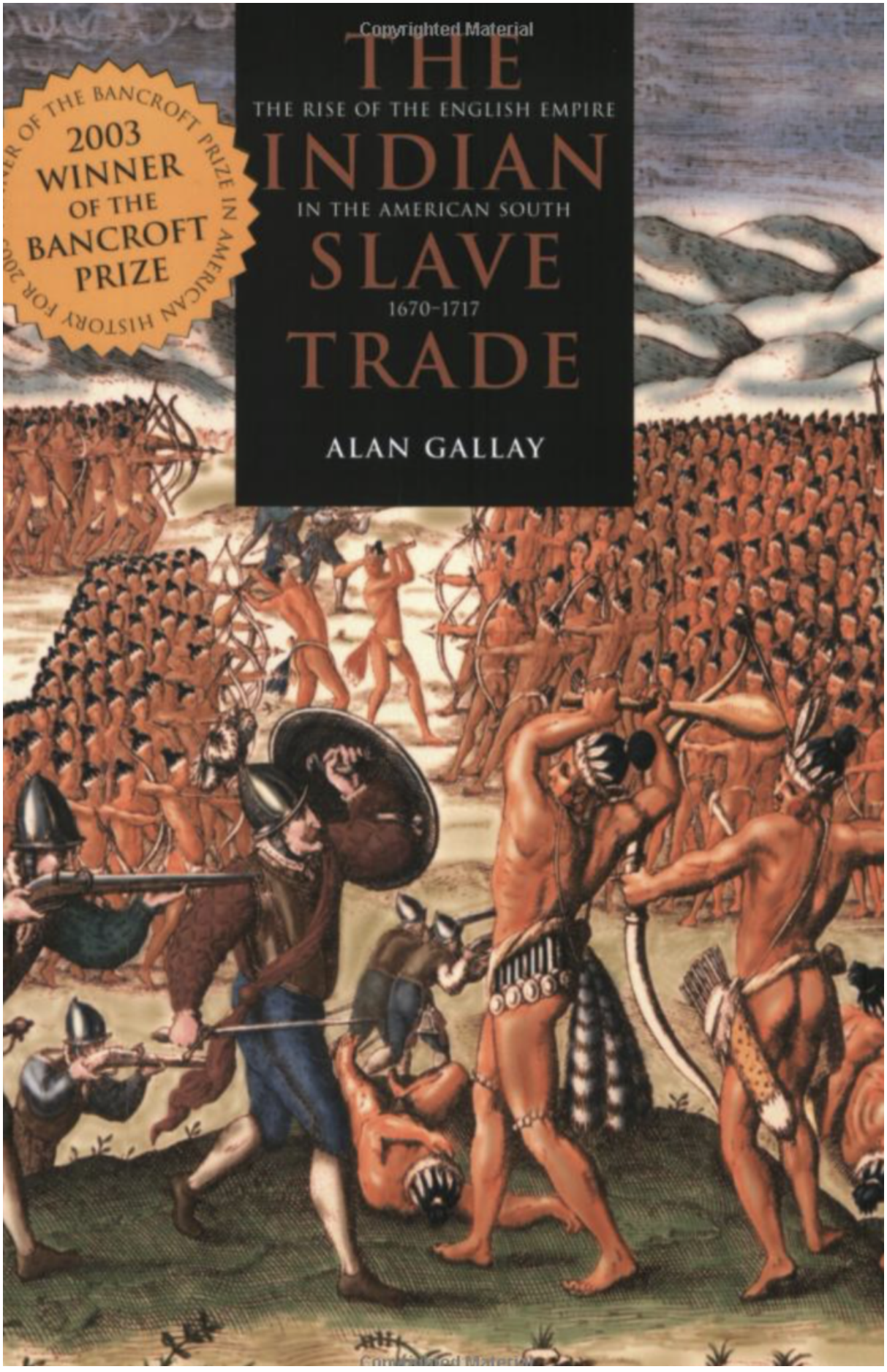
THE INDIAN SLAVE TRADE

THE RISE OF THE ENGLISH EMPIRE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH 1670–1717

ALAN GALLAY

2003 WINNER OF THE BANCROFT PRIZE

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Alan Gallay, The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002. 427 pp., $45.00 cloth.

For historians of the colonial south, particularly the lands south of the Tennessee River and east of the Mississippi, the trade in Indian slaves has long been one of the region's greatest unsolved mysteries. In the half century before 1715, intertribal warfare, kidnapping, and enslavement displaced thousands and reshaped the lives of all of the region's inhabitants. Slave raids depopulated the missions of Spanish Florida and complicated French efforts to colonize Louisiana. Disparate Indian communities formed powerful confederacies in an effort to take advantage of the lucrative trade and avoid enslavement. By exporting their human cargoes everywhere from Boston to Barbados, the British slave traders of South Carolina spurred the colony's economy while extending its influence among slave-hunting Indians as far west as the Mississippi River. No corner of the region escaped the hunt for slaves or its consequences.

The general outlines of this trade are no secret, but the mystery remains in the significance of the details. Because no colonial power compiled records on the illicit trade, historians have been reluctant to reconstruct this complicated story from disparate and patchy sources. Despite historians' occasional references to a telling fingerprint here or a missing vase there, one of the greatest thefts of people in North American history has been left untold.

Thanks to Alan Gallay, that is no longer the case. Gathering all of the suspects into the proverbial drawing room, Gallay presents fascinating details and striking new conclusions about a commerce that flourished from 1670, when the English founded South Carolina, through 1717, when they concluded peace with the pan-Indian alliance that nearly destroyed them. Tracking down evidence from California to France, Gallay argues that South Carolina's emergent planter class exported Indians to finance the purchase of African slaves. Upon the backs of African laborers who were less likely than Indian chattel to run away or revolt, white Carolinians would construct a more lucrative (and, to their minds, respectable) economy based on rice and indigo. Although South Carolina receives most of his scrutiny, Gallay nimbly ranges across the entire region in his effort to sketch the larger geopolitical context of the trade. In the course of this densely packed narrative, readers will find fresh insights into topics ranging from the political relations among Indian confederacies to the biographies of the English men who sponsored this sinister business.

Gallay unravels his tale in four roughly chronological parts. The first set of chapters describes the native societies and their encounters with Spanish and English colonists before 1701. Despite the Spaniards' century-long head start and Carolinians' internecine feuding, the later arrivals quickly proved more ruthless and effective at colonizing the region. The English and the nascent

Indian confederacies realized that cooperation would best serve their respective interests. At the heart of this cooperation lay the slave trade. Carolina's proprietary sponsors in England tried to limit trade with Native Americans, but ambitious colonists ignored these distant overseers and quickly "infected" the South with this highly profitable traffic (6). The English did not act alone. Indians traded to avoid enslavement themselves and because the sale of slaves enabled them to acquire large amounts of the cloth, beads, and guns that Carolinians offered in return.

The second part focuses on the ways that Native Americans and Europeans adjusted to this new commerce. In the five years following the outbreak of the War of Spanish Succession in 1701, Carolinians advanced their economic and military fortunes by enlisting native allies to conduct massive raids that destroyed Florida's missions and threatened the stability of newly established French Louisiana. French officials responded by encouraging their own allies to capture slaves, and French and Spaniards together tried to use their Indian allies for colonial defense and a fruitless counterattack against Charles Town.

Carolinians' unsuccessful efforts to regulate the trade before 1711 are the focus of part 3. Bitter squabbles among rival traders made a mockery of any regulatory efforts, and as traders continued to beat, rape, cheat, and occasionally enslave their Indian allies, Indian disaffection quietly grew. Carolinians had sown the wind. Part 4 describes the rising whirlwind. The raids that Carolinians sponsored across the region enabled them to export, according to Gallay's calculations, 24,000-51,000 Indians at prices comparable to African slaves. In 1715, Native Americans throughout the region abruptly halted this commerce when they simultaneously killed the English traders among them and began raiding the colony itself. When the Yamasee War of 1715-17 ended, the Carolinians' plantations, trade, and regional influence lay in ruins. The end of hostilities marked not just the demise of the slave trade, but a new watershed. Carolinian involvement in a staple-crop economy dependent on African slaves began in earnest after 1717; this new economic system would define white wealth until the Civil War.

The book's scope, attention to detail, and insightful analysis are the product of impressive sleuthing. Nonetheless, I was disappointed to find so little discussion of two principal actors. Gallay's contention that "Spain's influence did not reach much farther into the South than Florida" (33), contributes to oversights as simple as referring to Governor Juan Márquez Cabrera as Juan Marais Cabrera and as significant as ignoring the subtle impact of Spanish gifts on nonmission Indians' intratown and intertown relations. This shortcoming contributes to the second, and larger, problem. Although Gallay highlights how the Indians were integral to the trade, he says little about how being hunters and hunted shaped native cultures. In any mystery, everyone wants to know both whodunit and why. Indian actors play a central role; unfortunately, their motives lack a similar presence.

But even this criticism is a product of the book's success. Gallay's ability to

integrate the frequently segregated schools of colonial and Native American history means that Indians occupy a leading role in a colonial history. Furthermore, his ability to explore early Southern history without losing sight of the larger picture is as unusual as it is refreshing. If the joy and burden of history is that its mysteries are never completely solved, historians of the colonial South, and indeed of early colonial North America, should all be grateful that Gallay has at least cracked this case wide open.

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