

# White Cargo

The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America

Don Jordan and  
Michael Walsh



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



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**MAINSTREAM  
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**To Dian  
and  
To Eithne**

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# 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 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.

*White Cargo* 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.<sup>1</sup> England's richest man was behind this mass expulsion. It was presented as an act of charity: the 'starving children' were to 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 kidnapers 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 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, kidnapers 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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 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.'<sup>6</sup> 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. 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.<sup>7</sup>

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'.<sup>8</sup> 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 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: 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.

# CHAPTER ONE

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## A PLACE FOR THE UNWANTED

Slavery's introduction to the New World took place much as serfdom left the Old: stealthily and hesitantly; its sly arrival over a few decades hardly noticed except by a few vigilant pamphleteers and its mainly silent victims.

The seeds of the new colonial serfdom were planted in the 1570s, when English pride in social freedoms was strong enough for Shakespeare's favourite historian, Raphael Holinshed, to boast:

As for slaves and bondsmen, we have none. Nay, such is the privilege of our country by the especial grace of God and the bounty of our princes that if anyone come hither from other realms so soon as they set foot on land they become so free . . . all note of servile bondage is utterly removed from them.<sup>1</sup>

Even as Holinshed was celebrating his notion of England, forces were at work that would soon produce a very different prospect for tens of thousands of freeborn English men, women and children who sailed to America either willingly or involuntarily. Within a generation, a system of slave labour would evolve in America that would deprive them of those very freedoms in which Holinshed gloried.

One of the catalysts for the white slave trade was the fear that England was in danger of being overwhelmed by the poor and the lawless, a perception of insecurity still all too recognisable today. In the course of a few generations, the

population had risen by a third. In 1509, Henry VIII came to the throne to inherit a kingdom of around three million souls. By the time his daughter Elizabeth faced the Spanish Armada eighty years later, she ruled over a population nearer to four million.<sup>2</sup>

For landowners fattened by church lands acquired during the Reformation and common lands grabbed through the first Enclosure Acts, it was a time of gallivanting Renaissance luxury. But at the other end of the scale, life in the mid-sixteenth century was pitted and disfigured by poverty. Recurring harvest disasters, the enclosures and economic depressions had left hordes of peasants and labourers dispossessed and on the margins of survival. Once, the monasteries would have offered some succour but Henry had closed them down and now the poor roamed the countryside and cluttered the towns. In 1570, 2,000 beggars were reported in Coventry alone. A crowd of 20,000 poor people gathered at the funeral of one rich magnate, begging for alms. In London, between 1560 and 1601, there was an eightfold increase in the number of vagrants ending up in the old Bridewell Palace, which had become a house of correction.<sup>3</sup>

Inevitably, lawlessness increased. A statute of 1572 begins with the lament:

All the parts of this realm of England and Wales be presently with rogues, vagabonds, and sturdy beggars exceedingly pestered, by means whereof daily happeneth in the same realm horrible murders, thefts, and other great outrage, to the high displeasure of Almighty God, and to the great annoyance of the common weal.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most bloodstained figures of the age, Humphrey Gilbert, half-brother of Walter Raleigh, promoted the idea of finding a solution in America. Gilbert has been left in the historical shade by his brilliant sibling but he was as much a Renaissance Man as Raleigh. He was born into minor gentry in the West Country and began his career as a page to the

future Queen Elizabeth, before taking to soldiering, whereupon he gained a reputation for cold-blooded ruthlessness. However, he was also a poet, classical scholar and visionary who inspired a generation of fellow Englishmen with thoughts of empire in America.

Humphrey Gilbert made his mark during the religious wars that gripped France in the early 1560s. This was a saga of massacre, torture and atrocity exemplified by the Huguenot captain who wore a necklace of priests' ears around his neck. Nearly a century later, Pascal wrote of this conflict: 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.' While still in his early twenties, Gilbert headed a contingent of 1,000 English Protestants fighting on the Huguenot side. He exhibited dash and bravery but cruelty, too, making a practice of taking no prisoners. Those who were captured were invariably hanged. Impressed as always by young daredevils, in 1569 the Queen put him in command of English troops in Munster, where the English responded to a revolt by launching an ethnic-cleansing campaign to replace the native Irish with plantations of English Protestants.

In this gory arena, the ambitious young firebrand demonstrated an implacability unsurpassed by either Oliver Cromwell or William of Orange a century later. In every stronghold that offered resistance, Gilbert slaughtered wholesale, scouring the countryside for anyone who got away. 'I slew all those . . . that did belong to, feed, accompany or maintain any outlaws or traitors . . . how many lives whatsoever it cost putting man, woman and child to the sword.' The severed heads of his victims were stuck on rows of pikes on either side of the path leading to his tent. Gilbert explained that it brought 'great terror to the people when they saw the heads of their fathers, brothers, children, kinfolk and friends'. Tens of thousands died; Humphrey Gilbert was knighted.<sup>5</sup>

It is one of the paradoxes of human nature that the most ruthless often have a well-developed sense of the romantic. And so it was with Sir Humphrey. In France, he is thought to have met seafarers who had crossed the Atlantic and to have developed a fascination with America. Marriage to a Kentish heiress called Anne Aucher in 1570 enabled him to retire from the Queen's service, buy a seat in Parliament and devote himself to what soon became his obsession.

Gilbert believed the North American continent was an island and - like a number of contemporaries - burned to prove the existence of a North-West Passage to China through the Arctic Circle. After studying every manuscript and classical text that he could find, he produced a scholarly-looking discourse to support his own theory and with it - almost as an aside - the first detailed blueprint for English colonisation of North America.<sup>6</sup> It was said that, 'His geography, if learned and often ingenious, was mostly preposterous.'<sup>7</sup> However, it was convincing enough for the Queen and her council, and in 1578 Gilbert was granted leave to go ahead. He was given six years to found a colony.

His motives weren't, of course, purely altruistic. For Gilbert - as for so many empire builders - personal aggrandisement and the national interest happily went hand in hand. He ordered up written versions of the stories of a sailor called David Ingram who'd been shipwrecked in Florida and spent two years trekking through North America. Ingram had just returned with fantastical tales of native women wearing 'plates of gold like armour', men decorated with 'pearls as big as one's thumb' and houses 'upheld by pillars of gold, silver, and crystal'. If gold there was, Gilbert aimed to grab the lion's share. In his scheme, the envisaged territory would be a fiefdom of the Crown that he would rule, taking an eighty per cent share of any gold or silver. The humble servant would retain twenty per cent for his Queen.

Gilbert's blueprint covered everything, from the size of the first colony (a mere nine million acres), right down to street

layouts and the number of churches. In retrospect, the most significant part of his plan was the suggestion of where to find the colony's manpower. He proposed transporting 'such needy people of our country which now trouble the commonwealth and through want here at home are forced to commit outrageous offences whereby they are daily consumed with the gallows'.<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to reconcile the humanity infusing this passage with the butcher of Munster. One historian has suggested that Gilbert was mellowed by his experiences in Ireland. A more reliable explanation may be that self-interest hid behind altruism's lofty mask.

There were precedents for Gilbert's scheme. Convict labour had featured from the earliest European forays into the Americas. In Spain, the difficulties of persuading free men to try their luck in the unknown had prompted King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1497 to promise a pardon to convicts facing death if they would agree to go on Christopher Columbus's third expedition. Half a century later, the Marquis de la Roche, an old adversary of Gilbert's, took his pick from the Breton jails to man successive expeditions to parts of the New World that Gilbert had an eye on. It was said that de la Roche's ships were 'deep freighted with vice'.<sup>9</sup>

At first, the Queen was reluctant to let Gilbert go. She was anxious to keep her former page close at hand to stamp down further eruptions in Ireland. But Gilbert was backed by his persuasive half-brother Walter Raleigh, Elizabeth's emerging favourite, and she finally agreed. The letters patent allowed him to claim vast tracts of America in the Queen's name. Only those areas to the south already ruled by 'Christian princes' were officially precluded, i.e. those already invaded by the Spanish and Portuguese. However, with her habitual eye on the main chance, Elizabeth secretly gave Gilbert the go-ahead to plunder the Spanish and Portuguese wherever he found them. In an equally typical move, the Queen would not fund the venture. Gilbert had to

raise the money from friends and relations and any adventurous spirits who agreed to accompany him. He recorded how he only managed to fit out his fleet of ten ships after 'selling the clothes off my wife's back'.<sup>10</sup>

In 1578, he set sail with a large fleet and 500 men, including at least one convict who had been reprieved from execution and handed over to him. His 27-year-old half-brother Walter furnished his own ship and came too. For Gilbert, it must have been a mouthwatering prospect. The royal licence entitled him to total control over a land expected to be awash with gold and silver just like the Spanish American colonies. But a combination of bad luck, infighting, bad weather and bad leadership turned the expedition into a disaster when it was barely out of English waters. A decimated fleet returned home without even crossing the Atlantic.

Undeterred, Gilbert tried again in 1583. Without Raleigh this time, he followed in the track of the fishing fleets to the Grand Banks and made landfall at the bleak fishing outpost of St John's in Newfoundland. The Basque, Portuguese and French fishermen already at anchor there were no doubt bewildered as Gilbert flourished his royal commission and claimed Newfoundland as English. He then issued licences for them all to continue fishing and just as suddenly departed. His fleet headed west and south, casting along the dangerous eastern seaboard for a site to settle. It was not to be, however. 'Foul weather increased with fogs and mists' and Gilbert's largest ship foundered and was lost.<sup>11</sup> Morale collapsed and demands grew for a return home. Most of the great Elizabethan seafarers at one time or another were threatened by mutiny in similar situations and most faced down the threat. Gilbert, however, could not. He reluctantly conceded an immediate return but lest anyone think him a coward he announced that he would brave the storms on the journey home by sailing on the smallest, most

vulnerable ship, a ten-ton brig called the *Squirrel*. It was a typical act of Elizabethan braggadocio – and fatal.

The *Squirrel* was overloaded with guns, tackle and provisions. When the fleet encountered heavy seas, Gilbert was urged to transfer to the comparative safety of his flagship the *Golden Hind* but refused. He vowed that he would not desert the shipmates with whom he had faced so many perils. A storm developed and the *Squirrel* began to founder. Gilbert's last recorded words, shouted to the *Golden Hind*, had a fatalism that made him more famous in England than anything he had previously done.

'We are as near to heaven by sea as by land,' he called and resumed reading his book as waves broke over the tiny vessel.<sup>12</sup> The book was said to have been Thomas More's *Utopia*. The manner of his death made Gilbert a national hero. Three centuries later, the image of the visionary adventurer swept away under the waves was still being immortalised in verse by Longfellow:

Alas! the land-wind failed,  
And ice-cold grew the night;  
And nevermore, on sea or shore,  
Should Sir Humphrey see the light.

Walter Raleigh waited just long enough to be sure that Gilbert had indeed drowned, then seized his half-brother's mantle and made the American project his own. The Queen, already showering favours on Raleigh, was prevailed upon to grant him the same free hand given to Gilbert, and Raleigh set to work selling America to would-be backers. Some later romantics would portray Raleigh as one of their own. But essentially, as the historian David Beers Quinn puts it: 'He was an acute and hard-dealing businessman. Colonization was a business which he undertook to promote.'<sup>13</sup> His first step was to commission what was effectively a market report on the New World.

The man he employed to undertake it was Richard Hakluyt, then at the start of a career that would make him the world's leading geographer. A clergyman by profession, Hakluyt had become fascinated as a student with the 'discoveries' that were opening up the furthest oceans. He made himself an expert in the field by translating every work of navigation and exploration he could find and interviewing every explorer and seafarer he could track down. Like a sixteenth-century paparazzo, he pounded from port to port to greet the Drakes and Hawkinses and Gilberts returning from their latest trips of piracy in order to cast an eye over their ships' logs.

Hakluyt had just published his first major work on geography when Raleigh, with his rare eye for young talent, hired him to write about America. The result was a persuasive piece of propaganda, the *Discourse Concerning Western Planting*. Echoing Gilbert's theme of an England being engulfed by the lawless poor and America as her salvation, Hakluyt claimed that the country was so populous that people were 'ready to eat up one another'. In their desperation, so many had turned to crime that 'all the prisons of the land are daily pestered and stuffed full of them, where either they pitifully pine away or . . . are miserably hanged'. How much better, Hakluyt suggested evangelically, to put the wretches to work in a colony overseas. He reeled off a list of America's resources and set out the different industries that should flourish there. There were more than forty of them, ranging from tar making, gold mining and cotton picking to diving for pearls. It is a mark of Hakluyt's judgment that almost all would one day thrive in America.

While Hakluyt was still writing, two of Raleigh's ships were probing the estuaries of what is now South Carolina for a possible settlement site. In 1584, they sent home reports ranging from the heartening to the ecstatic:

The goodliest soil under the cope of heaven . . . we have found here maize . . . whose ear yielded corn for bread four hundred upon one ear, and the cane makes very good and perfect sugar . . . it is the . . . most pleasing territory of the world. The territory and soil of the Chesapeake . . . for pleasantness of seat, for temperature of climate, for fertility of soil and for the commodity of the sea . . . is not to be excelled by any other whatsoever.<sup>14</sup>

The next year, a fleet of settlers was dispatched. The story of Raleigh's 'lost colony' is well known: the fateful selection of the mosquito-ridden island of Roanoke as a site; Raleigh's celebrated naming of the colony Virginia after Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen; the three-year struggle to sustain this precarious foothold; the disastrous failure to re-supply the colonists during the war with Spain; the colonists' unexplained disappearance and the futile expeditions launched by Raleigh in later years to try to find his lost people.

Queen Elizabeth's beneficence had made Raleigh wealthy: he is reported to have appeared at court encrusted with jewels from head to foot. But the American ventures drained his resources. He reputedly spent £40,000 on his voyages – equivalent to approximately £6 million in today's money – and, although he remained obsessed with Virginia, in 1590 he leased out the patent entitling him to colonise it, retaining the right to twenty per cent of all gold or silver discovered – the same cut he had agreed to pay the Queen when his hopes were higher. He also retained the right to veto any other would-be colonists in Virginia.

The new holders of the patent included three of his friends: Richard Hakluyt, John White, the nominal Governor of Raleigh's colony who had returned to Britain before the colonists vanished, and Thomas Smythe, a young man destined to play a big role in bringing white slavery to Virginia. Smythe had his own vision of the New World and would become the driving force in the Virginia project.