

Current Books

plans as if we were not under a death sentence. It is by these fictions—shall we say, these lies—that we stride confidently into the future.

—JACOB STEIN

BIG COTTON:
How a Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations, and Put America on the Map.

By Stephen Yafa. Viking. 398 pp.
\$25.95

In his 14th-century bestseller *Voyage and Travels*, the English knight Sir John Mandeville described a half-animal, half-plant he called the “Vegetable Lamb.” Each pod on this amazing Scythian shrub, he wrote, contained a tiny lamb, and lint from the animals could be harvested and spun into a light fabric. For many Europeans, this fanciful account represented the first encounter with cotton, a crop that would transform their clothing, their working lives, and their place in the political world.

In *Big Cotton*, journalist Stephen Yafa traces the history of the plant and its products, beginning with the near-simultaneous domestication of wild cotton in Africa, South America, India, and Mexico around 3500 B.C. Cotton fabric woven in India was a luxury in ancient Greece and Rome, and in the 1660s a craze for Indian cotton chintz infected central and northern Europe. The popularity of the fabric helped drive the English invasion of India; the colonial government promptly outlawed the Indian manufacture of cotton fabric, requiring instead that raw domestic cotton be shipped to English mills. “By depriving India of the fruits of its own labor,” Yafa writes, “England all but guaranteed that the crop would one day come to symbol-

ize colonial subjugation and provide a rallying point against it.”

The overwhelming demand for cotton goods in Europe also spurred the development of the first factory system and, in the words of one contemporary admirer, forced “human beings to renounce their desultory work habits.” In the late 1700s, fear of industrial piracy was so intense that the British refused to let cotton mill workers leave the country. But American entrepreneurs eventually smuggled some secrets out and, with the help of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin (patented in 1794), launched a homegrown industry. The nation’s textile center of Lowell, Massachusetts, hired thousands of New England farm girls to work 14-hour days with little respite, and thereby planted the seeds of the labor movement.

Northern industrialists, dependent on Southern slave labor for raw materials, were latecomers to the cause of abolition, but by the end of the 1850s, Yafa writes, many were “no longer willing to pay for their conscience with their cotton.” For their part, many Southerners believed cotton exports would underwrite their ultimate independence. In the decades after the Civil War, farmers attempted to rebuild the devastated Southern cotton economy, but they were stymied by low



Workers open cotton bales at North Carolina’s White Oak Mill in the early 1900s—one of the few mill jobs available to blacks.

prices and the invasion of the boll weevil.

American cotton continued to dominate for a time. Some growers moved west, and in the late 1800s a Bavarian immigrant named Levi Strauss bolstered the consumer demand for sturdy cotton fabric. Today, however, domestic production of cotton (like that of some other crops) survives mainly on federal subsidies, and the U.S. textile industry is swiftly disappearing; more than 210,000 of its workers have

lost their jobs since 2000. China has produced more cotton than the United States in recent decades; indeed, its mills are by far the most productive in the world.

Yafa has a weakness for trite metaphors and puns, and his eagerness to entertain occasionally gets in the way of the story. Still, his tale is ably constructed, dense with well-described heroes and villains, and largely worthy of its substantial subject.

—MICHELLE NIJHUIS

HISTORY

BORN LOSERS:

A History of Failure in America.

By Scott A. Sandage. Harvard Univ.

Press. 362 pp. \$35

Stock options, year-end bonuses, vacation houses, designer clothes—these are the measures of American achievement. The winners in this relentlessly aggressive game get lionized. Donald Trump, for instance, is the author or subject of some 15 books, not to mention his starring role in the reality-TV show *The Apprentice*. But what of those who fall short? In this important and entertaining work, Scott Sandage sets out to chronicle some of “America’s unsung losers: men who failed in a nation that worships success.”

A history professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Sandage focuses on the 19th century, an era of much economic upheaval in America. While industrialists and robber barons built their fortunes, financial panics occurred regularly. Bank closings, crop failures, and other disasters could impoverish families overnight. Diaries and letters reveal that many people were haunted by a fear of failure. “I have struggled very hard to get along and sacrificed all my comforts,” a Philadelphia merchant wrote during the panic of 1819, but “what is to become of us . . . I know not.” When he went bankrupt soon after, the merchant declared that his “days of sentiment have gone”; from now on, “the sine qua non is money.”

Money became the sine qua non of self-worth, too. Even though the volatile

worlds of business and finance took almost no account of personal merit, failure was commonly deemed to be *your fault*. Along the way, the 19th-century economy transformed the nation’s criteria for evaluating individuals: “Character,” a set of traits rooted in traditional morality, gradually gave way to “personality,” a more amorphous set of traits thought likely to bring prosperity. The expression “I feel like a failure,” Sandage notes, “comes so naturally that we forget it is a figure of speech: the language of business applied to the soul.”

In the archives of New York’s Mercantile Agency, a predecessor to Dun & Bradstreet, Sandage unearthed red-leather volumes that recount the financial affairs of thousands of businesses and individuals. Beginning in 1841, the Mercantile packaged and sold the era’s most sophisticated commercial intelligence. It gathered data on almost every triumph and reversal of fortune from a network of informers, including a young lawyer named Abraham Lincoln. The Mercantile’s reports exemplify the emerging cult of success, with their combination of empirical rigor, bourgeois moralism, and unsparing criticism of those who fell short (“has no energy & will never make a dollar”). Sandage’s recovery of these riches alone is worth the price of the book.

From college admissions to unemployment, success remains the American barometer of individual worth. How does it feel to be Willy Loman in a nation that