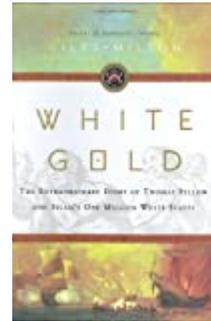




Giles Milton. *White Gold: The Extraordinary Story of Thomas Pellow and Islam's One Million White Slaves.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2005. 305 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-374-28935-5.



Reviewed by Brian W. Refford (Indiana University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-Albion (February, 2007)

More than a Cabin Boy's Ripping Good Yarn

In the aftermath of September 11, Islam has often been tarred with the brush of fanaticism. This is nothing new. A combination of fear and loathing, European attitudes towards Islam have deep roots in the western historical consciousness. Medieval and early modern Europeans dreaded Islam as the infidel faith of a brutal enemy intent upon destroying the mother church. The "Islamic threat" nourished the European fear of the dangerous other, and distant Islam became an overbearing symbol of menace. In *White Gold*, Giles Milton suggests that such fear was not without cause, as nearly one million white Europeans were captured by Muslim pirates between 1530 and 1780, and sold in the slave markets of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli.

Author of several well-received works, Milton recounts the harrowing tale of Thomas Pellow, an eleven-year-old Cornish cabin boy captured at sea by "Barbary corsairs" in 1716.[1] Employing the letters, journals, and manuscripts of Pellow and other escaped and redeemed English captives, Milton describes the white slave trade as "one of individuals caught up in a nightmare far beyond their control" (p. 9). Milton's story of Pellow's en-

slavement by Muslim pirates, his service with the notoriously cruel Sultan Moulay Ismail of Morocco, and his subsequent return to England after two decades in captivity, is both compelling and eloquent. A major strength of his narrative is that he relies upon contemporary sources to describe the pall of fear that descended upon the villages of Cornwall during the periodic raids of the "Salā Rovers." Milton describes one such raid in frightening detail. In the summer of 1625, Barbary corsairs raided the Cornish coast and seized more than one thousand men, women, and children to sell as slaves in North Africa. To freeborn English Christians, few fates were more feared than enslavement in foreign land by Muslim pirates.

More than simply a ripping good yarn, the story of Thomas Pellow is an important exploration of the mutual intolerance that characterized relations between Christian and Muslim as Britons took to the sea after 1600. In *White Gold*, Milton recreates the bitter reality of the trade in white slaves and its negative effect in shaping European attitudes towards Islam. "Fanatical devotion to Islam was greatly admired in Morocco," Milton observes, "but it was [also] the source of growing consternation

in the Christian west ... provoking a growing backlash against Islam in almost every nation in Europe" (p. 157). As elsewhere in Europe, English hostility towards Islam arose not only from ignorance and bigotry, but also from personal experience. Tales of Muslim barbarism played to the prejudices of Englishmen, and bolstered the assumption that Muslims were uncivilized brutes. In part, the barbarism of Muslim pirates was attributed to the simple fact that they were not Christian. However, the pirates also made cultural assumptions of their own. For Muslim believers, the obligation to convert the infidel to the true faith made the enslavement of Europeans a profoundly religious act. Muslim pirates, however, were not motivated by religious zeal alone. European slaves were also valued as property by Muslim slave traders intent upon waging holy war against Christendom. To men such as Sultan Moulay Ismail, white slavery was a profitable form of commercial *jihad*.

Although Milton offers a useful description of European attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, he breaks little ground in his depiction of the role of the white slave trade in Muslim society, nor does he make any fruitful comparisons with the contemporary European trade in black slaves. Milton acknowledges that while the early eighteenth-century trade in white slaves was a booming business throughout much of North Africa, it was far smaller than the European trade in black Africans. Although he vividly recounts the horrors of the Sultan's matamores in Meknes, he briefly notes that the "suffering endured by captives during the middle passage ... was truly appalling" (pp. 28-29). Milton, however, makes no effort to minimize the enormity of the European slave trade, suggesting that mortality rates outstripped those of the Muslim trade, nor does he argue that European outrage over the taking of white slaves was matched by a similar solicitude for the welfare of black slaves. Muslim and Christian slave traders were equally brutal and equally indifferent to the well-being of their captives. "No one in England paused to consider," Milton observes, "that their concern for the white slaves was not matched by a similar compassion for the black slaves being bru-

tally shipped out of Guinea" (pp. 28-29).

Although a skillful writer, Milton has been most criticized for insensitivity in his use of language rather than his superficial treatment of the Atlantic slave trade. In his description of the travails of Pellow, Milton describes the trade in white European slaves as an "Islamic" rather than a North African trade. Critics have questioned the accuracy—even the appropriateness—of characterizing this trade as intrinsically Islamic. While linguistic precision is essential in a field as potentially explosive as Islamic studies, Milton's depiction of the trade in white slaves as Islamic is not wholly inaccurate, nor is it particularly insensitive. Unlike the European slave trade, a major declared purpose of those who dealt in white slaves was religious conversion, and many European slaves, Thomas Pellow included, were forced to convert to Islam.

There are more fertile grounds for criticism than insensitivity or imprecision. Most glaringly, Milton fails to properly cite his sources or provide a functional bibliography. In addition, he fails to address the extant literature or critically analyze his sources. To be fair, however, he makes no claims that his narrative is any sort of carefully researched academic treatise. Milton's masterful use of primary sources tells one man's story, and demonstrates the power of narrative history to illuminate the human condition.

Note

[1]. These include *Nathniel's Nutmeg: Or, The True and Incredible Adventures of the Spice Trader Who Changed the Course of History* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999); *Big Chief Elizabeth: The Adventures and Fate of the First English Colonists in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000); and *Samurai William: The Englishman Who Opened the East* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002). Although, see Carla Gardina Pestana, "Review of Giles Milton, *Big Chief Elizabeth: The Adventures and Fate of the First English Colonists in America*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, January, 2001: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=3798982342530>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Brian W. Refford. Review of Milton, Giles, *White Gold: The Extraordinary Story of Thomas Pellow and Islam's One Million White Slaves*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12838>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.