

Big Cotton: How A Humble Fiber Created Fortunes, Wrecked Civilizations, and Put America on The Map, 2005, 398 pages, Stephen H. Yafa, 0670033677, 9780670033676, Viking, 2005

Cotton has touched off wars and revolutions, inspired astonishing inventions, laid waste to entire ecosystems, and enslaved untold millions of people. Alexander the Great carried cotton cloth on his back from India to Europe. Starting from the late eighteenth century, the fiber transformed creaky rural England into the greatest industrial power on earth. Today, cotton is, if anything, more preeminent than ever and at the center of raging global controversies. Now Stephen Yafa delves deep into the past to tell the amazing story of this humble, infinitely adaptable fiber that has ;again and again ;reinvented our world. Domesticated simultaneously in Peru and Pakistan some 5,500 years ago, later a prime motive for the colonization of the New World, as Yafa shows, cotton's most profound impact came after the Industrial Revolution. By the mid-nineteenth century, the vast plantations of the antebellum South, the grim mill towns of New England, and the soot-spewing factories of the English Midlands were knit together in a global system of exploitation and enslavement ;all of it based on cotton. When Marx and Engels composed The Communist Manifesto, they chose cotton manufacturing as the prime symbol of capitalism run amok. Beautifully researched and written, Big Cotton traces the cultural, economic, and social history of the ;world's friendliest ; fiber from the kingdoms of Mesopotamia to the Gap.

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