



Southern Gardens Series

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A Simple Nut and the History of Nations

Among the items listed for sale at A. Pond & Co. in the Columbus Enquirer on July 17, 1839, one finds two common spices--nutmeg and mace. It is just as likely that both would have been sold in Westville's Adams Store. Behind that simple entry in a store's ledger in frontier Georgia is a story. As unlikely as it may seem, the story of nutmeg accounts for one of the most curious chapters in European history--a race against death, the quest of nations and investors for wealth, a bloody massacre on an archipelago in the East Indies, the

discovery of North America, and the eventual surrender of control of Manhattan by the Dutch to the English in exchange for a small volcanic island on the other side of the globe.

This story is told in all its layers of hope, ambition, treachery, and irony in Giles Milton's *Nathaniel's Nutmeg: or The True and Incredible Adventures of the Spice Trader Who Changed the Course of History* (NY: Penguin, 1999).

Nutmeg makes a rather insignificant claim in our modern lives. It is one ingredient in curry, and we use it to flavor baked goods, eggnog, pumpkin pie, and cappuccino. But in 17th-century Europe nutmeg was the most coveted spice in the world. It was used medicinally for colds, flatulence, and dysentery, and some thought it to be an aphrodisiac. It could disguise the smell of rank meat and actually slow the oxidation process.

Yet, as desirable as those uses might be, they alone would not explain why an Elizabethan would be willing to pay a mark-up of 60,000 percent for nutmeg. The key was much more essential. Apothecaries and physicians had convinced Europeans that nutmeg could cure the plague. Access to nutmeg, therefore, was a matter of life and death. As a result, hundreds would lose their lives to secure this prize. Great fortunes would be made and lost. Nations would stake their reputations on this simple nut. And in the course of the quest for a better route to the Spice Islands, America would be discovered.

Europeans had known of nutmeg, cloves, pepper, and cinnamon since the Middle Ages. Their origins were unknown, but they made their way from the Far East to Constantinople, where Venetian merchants picked them up to ship westward and control the spice market. When Europe got interested in going directly to the source of nutmeg in the 16th and 17th centuries, only one place on the globe had the right soil and climate to produce it--a small volcanic archipelago called the Bandas, in the Spice Island group, about 1,000 miles east of Java and 300 miles west of New Guinea, on the other side of the earth from Europe. The only known route was to sail down the coast of Africa, around Cape Horn, across the Indian Ocean, and past Sumatra and Java. The round-trip voyage could take up to two years and exact a heavy toll from typhoid, dysentery, and scurvy--not to mention starvation, shipwreck, piracy, or death at the hands of headhunters who inhabited the Bandas.

But facing the prospect of death from the plague in Europe, no price was too much to pay for nutmeg, the drug that could allegedly cure it.

To find shorter and less confrontational routes to the Spice Islands became the quest of competing nations. As all school children know, Columbus thought he had reached the East Indies in 1492 when he landed on an island in the Caribbean (what came to be known as the West Indies). Five years later, Cabot attempted a western route to the East Indies and landed on Cape Breton Island. The Portuguese were actually the first Europeans to arrive in the Bandas in 1511, though they didn't return the second time until 1529. In 1518 Magellan sailed west to South America, around the tip and through the straits that would later bear his name, and on to the Philippines, where he was killed. But two of his ships eventually made it to the Spice Islands in 1521 and back to Spain, loaded with cinnamon, mace, cloves, and nutmeg.

The initial rivals in the spice wars were Portugal and Spain. At issue was the Treaty of Tordesillas, signed about 1500, and based on a bull by Pope Alexander VI, which divided the entire globe into two halves. He drew a line from pole to pole about 100 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands and declared all new lands discovered west of the line to be Spanish, all east to be Portuguese. The problem was, he did not define any boundary on the other side of the world, so rights to the Spice Islands remained vague.

Vagueness suited the English and the Dutch just fine. In 1577, following Magellan's western route, Francis Drake succeeded in bringing home spices from the East Indies as well as booty pirated, with the blessings of Queen Elizabeth, from Spanish ships. For this triumph, Drake was knighted and his ship renamed the Golden Hind. Sir Drake proved his worth again when he defeated the Spanish Armada in the English Channel in 1588. By 1599 Queen Elizabeth sanctioned a group of investors who would eventually be known as the East India Company to sail to Sumatra in 1601 under James Lancaster. By the time the ships returned in 1603, the plague in London had killed 38,000 and Elizabeth was dead (not of the plague). A second expedition under Henry Middleton set out, arrived in Java at the end of 1604, and sent back a shipload of pepper. He then proceeded to the Spice Islands and managed to get two ships back to England in 1606.

By now, the spice race had been underway for ten years. Of three fleets which had sailed out of London, one-third were lost; of 1200 men, 800 died of scurvy, typhoid, or dysentery. Only one English ship of the twelve sent reached the Banda Islands. Their fiercest competitor, the Dutch, had sent 65 ships. Through arrangements with local chiefs and through a fierce use of arms, the Dutch began to get control of the Spice Islands. By 1616, they controlled all the Bandas except the smallest one, two miles long and one mile wide, called Run.

In the midst of the rivalry, Henry Hudson got the Dutch East Indian Company to finance his attempt to sail to the East Indies via the Arctic over Russia in 1609. Thwarted by storms, he turned west and reached the Chesapeake Bay before he sailed back north to the mouth of what would be called the Hudson River. In 1610, with permission of King James, Hudson returned to seek a Northwest Passage to the East Indies. His crew mutinied at the mouth of the Hudson River and set Hudson adrift, never to be heard of again. The Dutch arrived in Manhattan in 1611 and established a fur trading post. By 1623 the Dutch West India Company had built a fort on the tip of the island and sent over Peter Miniut as governor, who bought

Manhattan from the Indians. As the curious end of the tale of the nutmeg story will reveal, the fate of the island of Manhattan and the island of Run on the other side of the globe were to become fatally intertwined.

Back in the East Indies, the Dutch-English confrontations continued until 1619, when the English East India Company and the Dutch East India company signed the Treaty of Defence and agreed to cease all fighting, return all captured ships, release all prisoners, and to create a joint fleet (one-third English, two-thirds Dutch) to expel Spain and Portugal from the Spice Islands and to destroy their bases in Indonesia, China, the Philippines, and the Malay Peninsular. Though the Dutch had the upper hand, the English were to be granted one-third of all trade in the Spice Islands. These terms were unacceptable to the Dutch governor-general in the East Indies, so he ignored them and continued to wage war.

Sir Thomas Dale, who had served as governor of the fledgling colony in Virginia and who brought Pocahontas back from America in 1616, got dragged into the spice wars. When his flagship wrecked off the coast of Java in 1618 he returned to the site to recover his goods, only to find eighteen skulls of his seamen on the beach, the remains of a feast by cannibals. Dale rallied his fleet, opened war against the Dutch fort (now Jakarta) in Java, and sent the Dutch into retreat, though he failed to pursue them. He set sailed instead for India and died there in 1619, which left the remaining English on Run at the mercy of the Dutch.

Or one should say the lack of mercy of the Dutch. After killing the English factor stationed on Run, Nathaniel Courthope, the Dutch then captured the English on the island of Amboyna, and hideously tortured them in the fashion of the times with fire and water, before blowing their limbs off with gunpowder then executing them. This barbarity became known as the Amboyna Massacre, later written up by John Dryden. For revenge, the English determined to seize any Dutch ships returning from the Spice Islands as they sailed through the English Channel. The Dutch retaliated by chopping down every nutmeg tree on Run and burning all vegetation.

With most of the Spice Islands in Dutch hands, and India itself suffering a famine, after four decades of existence the English East India Company faced bankruptcy. In fact, by 1657 all the assets of the company were put up for sale. Only a rescue by Oliver Cromwell and Parliament gave the company a new life, and it refocused its attention of the mainland of India, which was to be subjugated under their colonial policy until the mid-twentieth century as British India.

Before the East India Company turned its main attention to India, London merchants still hoped to recover the nutmeg plantations on Run. In fact, they did, as one of the terms of the Treaty of Westminster at the end of the Anglo-Dutch war in 1654. Replanted, the nutmeg plantations had been restored by then and the English took possession from the Dutch. But victory was short-lived. When hostilities once again broke out between England and Holland, the Dutch retook Run and chopped down all the nutmeg trees again. The outrage inflamed the Duke of York, the brother of King Charles II, who sent a fleet across the Atlantic to attack Manhattan and seize New Netherland as compensation for the loss of Run. Peter Stuyvesant surrendered and signed away Dutch rights to Manhattan to the English, who renamed it New York. England and Holland tumbled back into war for two years until the Treaty of Breda in 1667. England demanded the return of Run, Holland demanded the return of New Netherland. Failing to resolve the issue, they finally decided to try to opposite. Each

nation agreed to keep what it had gotten by force of arms from the other. The Dutch kept Run; the English kept New York. As Giles Milton concludes, though the loss of Run "robbed England of her nutmeg, it gave her the biggest of apples" (365).

But that was not the end of the nutmeg story. On the wall of Westville's Stewart County Academy hangs a print of Napoleon, labeled "Emperor of France and King of Italy." As Milton explains in his epilogue, 143 years after the English lost Run, in 1810 they invaded the Dutch Banda Islands again, fearing that Napoleon might use the Spice Islands for a campaign against India. After the Dutch surrendered, the British uprooted nutmeg seedlings and shipped tons of their unique soil with them to Ceylon, Pinang, Bencoolen, and Singapore to start new plantations. Within a few decades these new groves out produced those in the Bandas. In 1778 a volcanic eruption and earthquake, followed by a hurricane and a tidal wave, greatly reduced the nutmeg plantations in the Bandas. Those disasters and the subsequent competition from English nutmeg plantations on mainlands left Dutch East India Company deeply in debt by 1790, and it soon faded into history.

It is difficult to know whether the nutmeg being sold in Columbus in 1839 was from the Bandas or from English plantations. One can only say that as nutmeg passed over the counter of the A. Pond & Co. store in Columbus or Westville's Adams Store into the hands of a waiting customer, it was freighted with over 300 years of European history.

Yet, even as crude frontier towns were being settled in western Georgia, on the other side of the world the Bandas still enjoyed an aura of glamour. Even to the end of the 19th century, vast sums of money were spent on waterfront mansions with antiques, crystal, marble and glass. But the younger generations at the turn of the century returned to Europe. By World War II, when the Japanese occupied the Bandas, locals cut down many of the remaining nutmeg trees and converted the land to vegetable farms for their own survival. An American plane mistakenly bombed a wedding party in the capital, Niera, killing 100 guests.

Once having played their unwitting part in the fierce history of Europe, and even in the discovery and colonization of America, the Bandas slipped into insignificance. Since the small passenger plane to the islands crashed in 1997, the only commercial carrier is an eight-hour ferry from Amboyna. On his recent visit to the Bandas Milton found in the capitol a couple of stores, a fish market, two streets, and two cars. As for the remains of a once opulent European presence, he found only a Dutch church on Great Banda whose clock stopped at the hour of the Japanese invasion in 1944, the ruins of the Dutch fort on Niera, a handful of once magnificent villas, and the ruins of the Dutch governor's residence, "its baroque chandeliers slowly shedding their crystal finery."