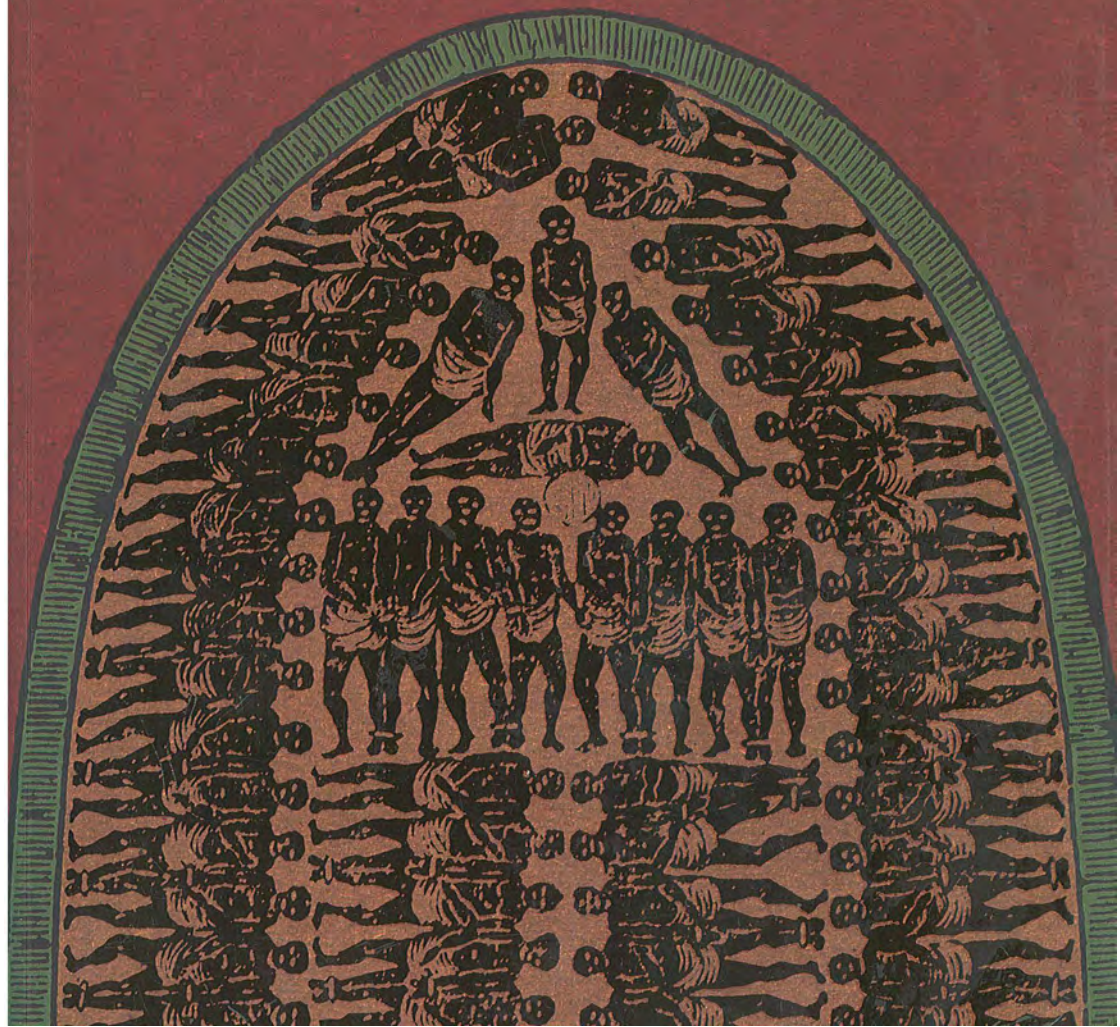


THE SLAVE TRADE

THE HISTORY OF THE ATLANTIC SLAVE TRADE 1440-1870

HUGH THOMAS





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*The History of the
Atlantic Slave Trade:*

1440-1870

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INTRODUCTION

I REMEMBER AS IF IT WERE YESTERDAY the day when I began to be interested in the slave trade: it was thirty years ago. I was dining in London. At the table, among others, there was the Prime Minister of Trinidad, the historian Dr Eric Williams. Hearing that I was making a study of the causes of the Cuban Revolution, he expressed astonishment that I should contemplate writing such a book without reading his own works, such as *A History of Trinidad and Tobago* (completed, he spiritedly explained, in ten days while his people were celebrating carnival) and, above all, *Capitalism and Slavery*, a copy of which came to my house next day, by messenger, from the Trinidad High Commission.

A swift perusal of the latter showed me the fascination of the eighteenth-century Caribbean, and I devoted much attention, in what became a history of Cuba, to slavery and the slave trade on that island.

I became particularly interested in a Basque, Julián Zulueta, the last great slave trader of Cuba (if you will permit the adjective) and, therefore, of the Americas, a man who started quite humbly, as a trader in all sorts of goods, in Havana in the 1830s but who by the late 1840s was a byword for evil-doing in the minds (and logs) of the British naval patrol trying to prevent the slave trade; for Zulueta had his own large sugar plantations in Cuba to which he would bring, in fast clippers often built in Baltimore, 500 or 600 slaves direct from Cabinda, just to the north of the River Congo.

Being a modern man, Zulueta would usually have his slaves vaccinated before they set off across the Atlantic, and by the 1850s he began to use for the passage steamboats capable of carrying over 1,000 captives; being a Catholic, he had his slaves baptized before they left Africa. What sort of man could he have been, I asked myself, who was carrying on the slave trade in a Christian colony four centuries after a pope, Pius II, had condemned the practice of enslaving baptized Africans? And how did Zulueta justify his insatiable demands for slaves almost a century after Adam Smith had dryly insisted that they were less efficient than free men? Why was he subsequently made a marquis by the Spanish government; and when he styled himself Marquis of Alava was he thinking as much of the name of his sugar plantation as of his home province? And what happened to his great fortune? And to his papers?

At the time I did not follow up these questions very far, but I did write an article on the subject in 1967 for the *Observer*, on the invitation of