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BOOKSHELF | By David S. Reynolds

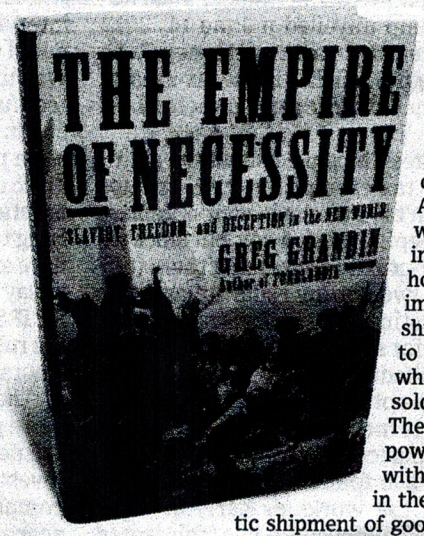
The Captain Held Captive

The Empire of Necessity

By Greg Grandin
(Metropolitan, 360 pages, $30)

Herman Melville's 1855 novella "Benito Cereno," based on the true story of an early-19th-century slave revolt on a Spanish ship off the coast of Chile, reveals the bleak side of race relations with unmatched subtlety: The reader doesn't realize until the very end that the ship's captain is in fact now the captive. In his engaging, richly informed "The Empire of Necessity," Greg Grandin probes the historical background of Melville's classic work and shows that the complexities of slavery, dramatized so masterfully by Melville, reflected economic and social forces that channeled humanity's highest ideals toward oppression and cruelty.

The age of liberty, which brought the American, French and Haitian revolutions, was also the age of slavery. Mr. Grandin explores many dimensions of this tragic paradox. The era's devotion to liberty unleashed freer trade, including the commerce in Africans who were captured in their homeland, imprisoned in ships and carried to the Americas, where they were sold into slavery. The European powers competed with one another in the trans-Atlantic shipment of goods, including enslaved blacks. The American South profited immensely from slavery, and, Mr. Grandin reminds us, so did New England, which thrived on the triangle trade of rum, slaves and tropical products, as did Spanish-American countries like Argentina and Chile. Slavery, as Mr. Grandin writes, was the flywheel on which the region's market revolution turned.



The author fills in the background of Melville's tale with an illuminating description of Spanish America's involvement in slavery. Imported Africans were put to work on inland plantations or in coastal towns, or sold to other nations. Mr. Grandin provides a vivid portrait of Alejandro de Aranda, a Spanish-descended merchant in the Argentine province of Mendoza, who in April 1804 purchased 64 blacks in Buenos Aires and took them, along with other slaves, hundreds of miles westward, across the pampas and the Andes, with the aim of shipping them north from Valparaiso to Lima, where he planned to sell them. Mr. Grandin re-creates the torment of these overland marches, on which the blacks were transported over the vast plains in "hide-covered, cane-ribbed, constantly rocking wagons" and then over the mountains "on foot, linked together with neck chokers."

Benito Cerreño was seized by the slaves he was transporting, who demanded he sail them to Africa. But he only pretended to comply.

Such callous treatment impelled Aranda's chattels to rise up in rebellion when they were on board the Tryal, the ship on which Aranda was transporting them northward. On Dec. 22, 1804, at a moment when the Africans were unchained on the deck of the Tryal, they overwhelmed their captors in a bloody revolt. Aranda was executed. The ship's captain, Benito Cerreño, was threatened with the same fate but agreed to meet the blacks' demand that he sail them back to Africa. His compliance, however, was feigned. For weeks, he recrossed by night his daytime route along the Chilean coast in the hope of being rescued.

Rescue indeed arrived, with a serendipitous drama that Melville borrowed for his novella. The Tryal, dilapidated and drifting, was spotted near an island by the Massachusetts sea captain Amasa Delano, who was hunting seals in the area. Delano boarded the Tryal to help its beleaguered crew but confronted an enigma. Cerreño, supposedly the master of the ship, was listless and seemingly dependent on the blacks around him. Delano—by turns compassionate, suspicious and scared—spent nine hours on the ship, only to learn the truth of the situation when he began to return to his own ship and Cerreño suddenly leapt from the Tryal into Delano's departing rowboat.

After saving the Spanish captain, Delano took action and recaptured the Tryal in a battle in which six Africans were killed. Nine other blacks were taken into custody and were later tried and executed in Lima. Their heads were impaled on pikes around a public plaza where their bodies were burned in a pyre.

Melville used these facts to create a haunting palimpsest of tangled motives, which Mr. Grandin explores more fully. The rebellious slaves acted on a basic desire for liberty. Aranda was following the dictates of a slave-based economy. The author reveals that Delano embodied the optimistic Unitarianism and antislavery attitudes of his New England background. His benign nature, ironically tinged with racism, represented, as Mr. Grandin writes, "a nation trapped inside its own prejudices, unable to see and thus avert the coming conflict." The Spanish characters espoused the traditional beliefs bred by Roman Catholicism, while several of the enslaved Africans were educated Muslims whose resistance to enslavement was laced with righteous militancy.

Frequently switching between topics and perspectives in successive chapters, Mr. Grandin ranges so freely through history that his book has a zigzagging course, like a schooner tacking constantly with the wind. But the voyage he takes us on is hardly directionless. "The Empire of Necessity" opens up fresh vistas on an institution deeply at odds with the age's ostensible commitment to freedom and explores many forms of cruelty besides slavery. These include the abduction of indigent whites and Natives Americans, who were forced into naval service, and the depredations of pirates, who preyed on ships and sold slaves even though they claimed to share the era's egalitarian spirit. The author describes his unsettling panorama in a restrained manner, avoiding exaggeration and allowing facts—many of them horrific—to tell the story. In doing so, he has produced a quietly powerful account that Melville himself would have admired.

Mr. Reynolds, a professor at the CUNY Graduate Center, is the author of "Walt Whitman's America" and "John Brown, Abolitionist."