Today’s world textile and garment trade is valued at a staggering 425 billion dollars. We are told that under the pressure of increasing globalisation, it is India and China that are the new world-manufacturing powerhouses. However, this is not a new phenomenon: until the industrial revolution, Asia manufactured great quantities of colourful printed cottons that were sold to places as far afield as Japan, West Africa and Europe. Cotton explores this earlier globalised economy and its transformation after 1750 as cotton led the way in the industrialisation of Europe. By the early nineteenth century, India, China and the Ottoman Empire switched from world producers to buyers of European cotton textiles, a position that they retained for over two hundred years. This is a fascinating and insightful story which ranges from Asian and European technologies and African slavery to cotton plantations in the Americas and consumer desires across the globe.

Giorgio Riello is Professor of Global History at the University of Warwick and a member of Warwick’s Global History and Culture Centre. He is the author of A Foot in the Past (2006) and has co-edited several books, including The Spinning World (2009), How India Clothed the World (2009) and Global Design History (2011). In 2010 he was awarded the Philip Leverhulme Prize.
COTTON
The Fabric that Made the Modern World

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Today the world textile and garment trade amounts to a staggering 425 billion US dollars in value. We are told that under the pressure of increasing globalisation, it is Asia – India and China in particular – that is the new world-manufacturing powerhouse. However the recent growth of Asia into the world’s leading textile manufacturer is not a new phenomenon. Until the industrial revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, both India and China were leading economic areas and their skills in cotton textile manufacturing were superior to those of Europe. Asia manufactured great quantities of colourful printed and painted cottons that were sold across the Indian Ocean and reached faraway places such as Japan and Europe where they were craved as exotic fashionable goods.

Historians have argued that this ensured for Asia – and in particular India – widespread prosperity, as well as high rates of economic growth and technological development, but that sometime after 1750 Europe experienced a sudden and radical economic transformation: the continent industrialised. Mechanisation was first experienced in the textile sector. The spinning machine allowed one late eighteenth-century European woman to produce as much yarn as three hundred women in India. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, India, China and the Ottoman Empire switched from being world producers to being buyers of European cotton textiles, a position that they retained for the following two centuries.

This book is the first global analysis of cotton textiles. It argues that Europe’s engagement with cotton textiles changed the shape of the world we still live in. It brings together the history of European industrialisation and the global significance of cotton textiles. Key to this book is the explanation of when, how and why Europe replaced Asia as the main area of production and trade of cotton textiles and the profound effects that this generated. Cotton was central to the creation of a ‘new global system’ increasingly presided over by Europe,
not Asia. But technological development was just one among the many factors explaining this transition. The importance of raw materials, markets for products and consumers’ preferences, and the increasing power of European nations over vast areas of the globe are in this book seen as critical in explaining the divergent paths of Europe and Asia.

This book was researched and written over a period of several years. Its original idea and formulation emerged from the activities of the Leverhulme-funded Global Economic History Network (GEHN) based at the London School of Economics and coordinated by Patrick O’Brian between 2003 and 2007. The network constituted the first truly collaborative platform for research and discussion in the field of global economic history. Over the years, I learned a great deal about global history and about the challenges posed by this relatively new field of historical enquiry. I also learned from Patrick what historians should aim for, a lesson that is more important than any other. Several members of GEHN provided much needed support. I would like to thank in particular Kent Deng, Kenneth Pomeranz, Om Prakash, Kaoru Sugihara and Peer Vries. I have also a considerable debt to the late Larry Epstein.

My move to the University of Warwick in 2007 and the foundation of the Global History and Culture Centre was a second and no less important stage in the shaping of this book. It allowed me to engage with a new agenda in cultural and social history that has greatly enriched my analysis. I also found the best colleagues that one can hope for, in particular Maxine Berg, Anne Gerritsen and Luca Molà. The four of us developed courses and organised sometimes logistically complicated events and trips that entailed cooking dyes in a famous London museum, broken arms, and getting lost in Beijing. The Warwick Global History and Culture Centre has provided the perfect setting for completing the research included in this book.

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Maxine Berg, Pat Hudson, Beverly Lemire, Patrick O’Brien, Prasannan Parthasarathi and John Styles read closely the entire manuscript, commenting, questioning and correcting it. Needless to say that any remaining errors
are entirely their fault! Shengfang Chou, Amy Evans and Sara van Dijk provided much needed research and practical assistance. Glenn Adamson, Alain and Michèle Bresson, Barbara Canepa, Giovanni Luigi Fontana, Kayoko Fujita, Sakis Gekas, Regina Grafe, Hannah Greig, Philippe Minard, Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Liliane Pérez, Jeannie Siegman and the late Tony Siegman, Claudia Stein, Sarah Teasley, Elisa Tosi Brandi and Amanda Vickery have been great friends and have supported this project in different and extraordinary ways. Richard Butler read every single word with enormous patience and care. Finally, my mother, brother, sister-in-law and nieces Eleonora and Anastasia hope that the book will be soon translated into Italian so that they can find out what it is about.

Any heartless economic historian like me should point out that love and friendship do not pay bills. The research and writing of this book has been possible thanks to the financial support and hospitality of the following institutions: Australian National University, Canberra; British Academy; Ecole des Hautes Études in Sciences Sociales, Paris; European University Institute; Leverhulme-funded Global Economic History Network, LSE; Fondation Les Treilles, France; Leverhulme Trust; Stanford Humanities Center, Stanford University; University of Technology Sydney; and Warwick Global History and Culture Centre.


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xxvii / Preface

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The majority of this book was written in Palo Alto while a fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center. I was surrounded by a group of absorbing scholars who made me often forget the throbbing toothache that accompanied the slow writing of this work.

To Anastasia and Eleonora
Christmas 2012
ABBREVIATIONS

AHR  American Historical Review
ANF  Archives Nationales de France, Paris
BNF  Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris
BPP  British Parliamentary Papers
EEIC French East India Company
EHR  Economic History Review
FEIC French East India Company
IESHR Indian Economic and Social History Review
JAS  Journal of Asian Studies
JEEH Journal of European Economic History
JEH  Journal of Economic History
JESHO Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient
JGH  Journal of Global History
JWH  Journal of World History
NA  National Archives, Kew, London
P&P  Past & Present
TH  Textile History
VOC Dutch East India Company