

# H-Net Reviews

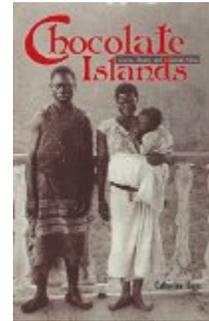
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Catherine Higgs. *Chocolate Islands: Cocoa, Slavery, and Colonial Africa*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012. xv + 230 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-2006-5.

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A major colonial scandal broke out in the years before the First World War, as accusations flew around the world that slaves were cultivating cocoa on the Portuguese African islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, in the Gulf of Guinea. Catherine Higgs has found a new and original niche in this crowded field, by concentrating on the role of Joseph Burt, special envoy for William Cadbury, the Quaker chocolate magnate. Indeed, as Burt also went to Portugal, Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa, on his long and generously funded fact-finding tour from 1904 to 1907, the title of this book is a little misleading.

In effect, Higgs has written a clear narrative account of Burt's travels, aimed at a popular audience as much as an academic one, and with a good eye for illustrative anecdotes and pictures. In the process, she has deftly and ably woven into her text the findings of the existing scholarship on the great African labor scandals of the early twentieth century. The chapters are structured in a narrative mode, with a prologue on Burt's earlier life, chapter 1 on how he was recruited by Cadbury and his time in Portugal, chapter 2 on his long stay in São Tomé, and chapter 3 on a shorter visit to Príncipe. In chapter 4, the story moves to the continent with Burt's visit to Luanda and coastal Angola, chapter 5 is on his arduous trek upcountry from Benguela to the frontiers of the Congo and Northern Rhodesia, and chapter 6 focuses on his brief visits to southern Mozambique and South Africa. Chapter 7 details the production of Burt's final report and the resulting boycott of "Portuguese" cocoa, while a brief epilogue looks at the aftermath of the boycott and Burt's later career. There follows a note on sources.

Unfortunately, the author generally places her footnotes at the end of every paragraph, so that it is at times difficult to know where specific information comes from. That said, Higgs's main archival source consists of letters from Burt to Cadbury. Typed copies of these letters reappeared in the public domain in 2000, when J. H. Duffy's papers were donated to Yale University, as many of the originals had gone missing in the Cadbury Papers, which are deposited in the University of Birmingham Library. In addition, Higgs has trawled industriously and productively through a wide variety of archival and printed primary sources in various countries.

Burt himself emerges as a somewhat naïve and idealistic Quaker, an impression strengthened by the fascinating prologue on his participation in the utopian fringes of turn-of-the-century British social experiments. Moreover, unlike many British critics of Portugal in this period, notably Henry Nevinson, Burt generally liked the Portuguese. Indeed, he spent eight months learning their language in Oporto, before setting out for Africa. Higgs also shows that, for all his utopianism, Burt tended to lapse into the social Darwinism that was so prevalent at the time, and which often served as a spurious defense for labor abuses.

However, Burt was no fool, and he quite soon saw through Portuguese attempts to disguise their "modern slavery" in Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe. Higgs correctly stresses throughout her book that the root problems with Portuguese labor practices in these two colonies lay in obligatory initial contracts (ironically entitled redemption from servitude), and automatic recontracting thereafter, together with "birth into contracts"

for children. It was this clutch of measures that lay behind the famous ditty that in São Tomé there was a door to go in, but none to come out. For all the impressive Portuguese attempts to improve the conditions of plantation workers, which Burttt chronicled in some detail, this remained a form of slavery. At the same time, Burttt noted that labor was more or less free in the Cape Verde Islands, which he did not visit, and in southern Mozambique, which he visited briefly.

For all his racist tendencies, Burttt was also struck by the blurring of racial boundaries in the ranks of the planocracy of São Tomé and Príncipe, which contrasted with hardening social norms elsewhere in Africa. He wrote quite a bit about black or mixed-race plantation owners, who had white Portuguese wives and managers. At the same time, Burttt noted the erosion of this social phenomenon, which had been more pronounced in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Higgs does not tackle the significant question of the partial replacement of slaves by animals and machines, even though Burttt appears to have been interested in this topic. She casually cites some of his reports on mules being ridden, harnessed to carriages, and employed to pull wagons on newly installed tram lines. However, she never brings all this material together into a discussion of the planters' logical strategy to lessen their reliance on increasingly expensive workers. Burttt also implicitly noted that such a strategy was more possible on São Tomé than on Príncipe, where sleeping sickness was decimating both slaves and working animals. Higgs is mute on the origins and cost of mules, which may reflect her sources. Moreover, she does not explore relations between workers and nonhuman animals, despite mounting evidence from other plantation societies that coerced workers took out their frustrations on their animal companions. Finally, although Burttt set off into the interior of Angola with a mule and two donkeys, the reader is not told what happened to these quadrupeds. More gen-

erally, it would seem that the "animal turn" in historical writing since the mid-1980s has yet to have much impact on publications on Africa's past.

Towards the end, the spotlight shifts from Joseph Burttt to William Cadbury, in the well-charted process of the imposition of a boycott by a group of chocolate manufacturers on "Portuguese" cocoa. Higgs generally defends Cadbury against accusations that he moved too slowly, waiting until alternative supplies of smallholder cocoa were pouring out of the British colony of the Gold Coast (modern Ghana). However, she does accept that Quaker idealism was tempered by hard-headed business acumen.

The epilogue pulls rather ineffectively in two contradictory directions. On the one hand, Higgs sketches Burttt's later career, notably his investigations into the 1915 massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. More detail on this episode would have been of considerable interest, especially by exploring how Burttt's Portuguese African experience might have influenced his approach to the equally obfuscating Turkish authorities. On the other hand, the author charts the aftermath of the labor scandal on the cocoa islands. It took the Portuguese Republic of 1910 to enact effective reforms to eradicate slavery, and yet the new regime then imposed forced labor across most of the colonial empire. The crucial distinction between slavery and forced labor does not come out clearly from Higgs's discussion of the famous Ross Report of 1925. Moreover, she attributes the decline of cocoa output on São Tomé and Príncipe in part to swollen shoot disease, whereas thrips, an insect pest, were the main problem. In addition, the exhaustion of the "forest rent," convincingly studied by François Ruf, is not discussed, although it was undoubtedly a major reason for the fall in the islands' cocoa output. But these are minor blemishes in what is a considerable contribution to the literature on modern Portuguese colonialism and its Quaker critics.

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