



**Jonathan Robins.** *Oil Palm: A Global History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 418 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-6289-3.

**Reviewed by** Julie Weiskopf (Gonzaga University)

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**Commissioned by** David D. Hurlbut (Independent Scholar)

Jonathan E. Robins's *Oil Palm: A Global History* offers readers an engaging introduction into one plant's global odyssey from a useful African resource to the world's most widely consumed fat. In doing so, the book is attentive to environmental realities, technological innovation, consumption patterns, rural and gendered labor, and development policies. It spans nearly every continent and touches on world regions dominated at times by the plantation complex, industrial economies, European imperialism, Cold War politics, and neo-liberal policymaking. As Robins notes, it is palm oil's physical adaptability that has enabled it to adjust to changing markets and trade policies, a classic "flex" crop.

This informative and wide-ranging book is based on published work on the oil palm in Africa, Asia, and Latin America as well as archival materials from over eleven institutions across four continents. As Robins himself admits, his reliance on largely written sources makes it challenging to center the experiences of Southeast Asians and Africans whose lands and labor were the basis for the bulk of this history. Still, it is commendable that he raises their perspectives as often as his sources permit.

The introduction divides the book's eleven chapters into three parts: "Africa and the Atlantic World" (four chapters); "Oil Palms and Empire"

(four chapters); and "Expanding the Oil Palm Frontier" (three chapters). It is a pity that Robins does not create introductions for each section or otherwise remind the reader of this division, as it is a useful way to understand distinctions between these sections.

The first four chapters mainly focus on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century trade and manufacturing, but begins with a useful, if brief, chapter on the tree's basic biology and early African history. Readers learn in the first chapter that the oil palm cannot be easily categorized as either wild or cultivated, and instead is an "emergent" plant that exists naturally but tends to spread through human care. Its many uses and important place in forest fallow agricultural systems throughout coastal West Africa make clear why it was so valued locally and in regional trade to the savannah zone. The next three chapters offer a richly detailed portrait of palm oil, palm kernels, and palm kernel oil in wider Atlantic trade, contributing to the plantation complex as well as Industrial Revolution industries. At the same time, Robins remains attentive to factors within Africa that resulted in a new form of oil—the "hard" oil of the mid-nineteenth century—and the market forces like generally low international prices and high local demand that limited greater expansion of palm oil products as export goods.

These chapters are packed with fascinating detail about the ways that the palm's products "lubricated" transatlantic trade and western Europe's industrialization. We learn how European merchants active in Africa needed palm oil and palm wine to pay their workers, build relations with African counterparts, purchase enslaved people, feed them during their journey to the Americas, and even to prepare enslaved Africans' shoulders before branding them as property. In Europe, palm oil products were valued mainly as substitutes for other fats needed to make soap, candles, animal feed, and lubricants—and only used when they were cheaper than local fats. This changed when palm oil contributed to the industrial food system, as its inherent physical qualities first started to matter to industry. Starting in the 1830s, it was the best oil to use in the tinning process for metal cans, the key step that allowed for tinned food not to spoil. It also easily mixed with skim milk to produce margarine, and so Europeans began direct consumption of palm oil in this form in the 1870s.

The next section's four chapters focus on the ways that imperialism expanded oil palm production in West Africa as well as Indonesia and Malaysia. Here we verge into familiar African colonial histories, as colonial officials sought to "modernize" African oil palm farmers' methods and concessionary companies attempted to create profitable plantations. While overall production and palm oil quality both increased in this period, colonial goals were rarely met, again for familiar reasons. Corporations and marketing boards never paid African workers or farmers enough to make participation attractive, and there were two additional internal dynamics that decreased Africans' compliance: colonial policies tended to threaten women's stake in the palm oil economy, plus a vibrant local market always gave producers viable options.

As Robins frequently notes, most of palm oil's appeal came because it was a cheap substitute for

other fats, and its price largely depended on the cost of labor. This is one of the keys to explain its great expansion in Southeast Asia, which already had land and labor regimes in place from past rubber and tobacco plantations when oil palms arrived in the early decades of the twentieth century. Indentured workers and attractive colonial land policies enabled Western planters and corporations to exploit land unsuited to other cash crops and take advantage of how the region's rainfall patterns led to greater oil palm productivity than in its African homeland. Read together, these chapters on Africa and Southeast Asia enable a fascinating comparison between colonial regimes in two world regions.

It is in these chapters, too, that Robins pays the greatest attention to the role of scientific and technological innovation in expanding palm oil's uses. This begins with hydrogenation at the turn of the twentieth century with its ability to solidify and adjust the texture of palm oil, but also includes bicycle transportation, botanical understanding of the oil palm itself, its selective breeding, oil presses, and finally the process to refine, bleach, and deodorize the oil that allowed it to substitute even more easily for other fats.

The last four chapters bring the history up to the recent present, focusing on the postwar world's needs for fats to match population growth and greater demand for fat in relation to greater wealth. Late colonial and early independence-era governments tried to meet this need, which also attracted planters and farmers in Central America, Latin America, and Thailand. Robins explains how Cold War politics, related international funding agencies, national land policies, and then neoliberal economics shifted the basis for the oil palm's success in these decades.

There are two interesting themes running across these disparate chapters. One is the primacy of local conditions in determining the success or failure of oil palm industries. These include indigenous consumer demand, workers'

priorities, land tenure regimes, and how Cold War politics played out on the ground. Another is the way in which many industries and groups have either celebrated or denigrated palm oil products to further their interests. Candlemakers in nineteenth-century Britain sought to lower import fees on palm oil by promoting its use to snuff out slavery. The logic went that by offering an alternative trade system, African and European merchants would cease their trade in enslaved people. In one of many more recent examples, the American Soybean Association lobby in the 1980s painted palm oil as a suspect tropical oil dangerous to heart health, as they pushed policies to favor their industry against their palm oil rival.

As the foregoing makes clear, *Oil Palm* defies easy summary or categorization, touching as it

does on so many different locales and topics. Its wide-ranging nature is certainly an asset when considering the book for use in the undergraduate classroom. It could easily be adopted for classes focused on African environmental history, African colonial history, commodity history, consumption history, the global Industrial Revolution, imperialism, or development. Just as important, the chapters are a digestible length (the average is twenty-three pages) and—especially in the first two parts—written in a lively manner.

The book delivers what it promises: a world history of how humans have lived and used oil palms. It is a story not only dependent on political, economic, and scientific power but also on the whims of consumers and priorities of laborers. In the end, it is a global story well worth telling.

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