
**Reviewed by** James Parker (Texas Woman's University)

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**Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

Jonathan Robins’s *Oil Palm: A Global History* tracks the global expansion of *Elaeis Guineensis* into diverse ecologies and industries. The book traces the emergence of the commodity from one rooted in west African (broadly construed) environments to a worldwide product emanating largely from Southeast Asia that has infiltrated industries ranging from fuel to food to detergent. Although prized for its malleable oils, the growth of the palm oil industry is far from natural and is instead tied to an array of political-economic, environmental, social, and cultural factors that tie together communities and corporations from across the globe. Robins offers a story “of how humans used and lived with oil palms,” where smallholders and primary producers across the globe challenged market integration and Western consumers willingly or unwillingly consumed the cheap and invisible bounty of far-off groves (p. 1).

The plurality of oil palm’s uses, and the global spread of the plant itself, at first glance may appear to lend itself to an unwieldy and overwhelming story. Robins, however, mitigates these fears despite an astounding breadth of analysis. The book is largely limited to west African and Southeast Asian production sites as well as Euro-American economic trajectories, using these locations as proxies for the commodity’s wider spread and development. This breadth is mirrored by a variety of archival material present throughout the text, largely taking in British, American, Ghanaian, and Malaysian archives alongside historical or ethnographic analyses from nearby regions, coming together to form a truly exhaustive study of the commodity. These ethnographic materials provide much-needed balance to the text, offering a tangible and tantalizing insight into alternative and indigenous non-capitalist relationships with land and resources. Given the inequities of the state and corporate archives that Robins consults, the addition of these supplements provides a much-needed counter-history to the naturalized commodification of palm oil.

In tracing the expansive modern history of *E. Guineensis*, Robins loosely organizes the book into three parts, consisting of eleven chapters in total. The first chapter provides a valuable background to the plant itself and its original ecological context. Robins explores west African material and cultural uses of the tree and its fruits, including its varied products and the difficulty of harvesting the oils. From the vantage point of environmental history, this introduction is both useful and tantalizing; the materiality of the plant itself stands front and center, but its place within west African ecologies is overly generalized, while its spread, germination, and diversity receive too little attention and indeed largely fall away in the rest of the
book. Precisely why this tree thrives in “the palm zone” is left ambiguous aside from muted mentions of soil fertility and moisture, while the anthropogenic nature of its spread (as part of land clearance and wider agricultural change) is oft-mentioned but perhaps undervalued. A recurring theme of the text is that foreign individuals and bodies sought but misunderstood the nature of the crop, and a more thorough grounding of the tree within environments may have made the divergence between indigenous and external knowledge more explicit.

Part 1 encompasses chapters 2, 3, and 4. Broadly, these trace the pre-1885 history of palm oil in the Atlantic world, beginning with Europeans’ early perceptions of the tree. Slavers used palm oil to mark their captives, while enslaved and maroon communities in the Americas propagated the tree as a symbol of resistance and cultural communion. The globalization of the product, however, owed much to the importation of oils to Britain as a medicinal product, setting off a consumptive trajectory that launched the oil palm into commodity status. Chapter 3 integrates this shift within the wider historiography of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. While historians generally present the oil economy as a successor to the trade in enslaved peoples, Robins successfully demonstrates the coterminous rise of the African oil trade alongside the apexes of transatlantic enslavement. The rise of wealthy city-states gave indigenous west African producers a great deal of control over pricing and distribution, aided by the reorientation of inland labor that saw enslaved persons employed on proto-plantations that tenuously if successfully overcame the ecological limits placed on palm oil production in “natural” groves. Chapter 4 then explores the role of this expanded trade within Britain’s domestic industrial expansion, as new chemical processes reconfigured palm oil into innumerable industrial commodities. Within Robins’s wider project, this chapter stands out as the genesis of palm oil’s transition into a “substitute commodity,” a fungible product used to displace or replace existing fats and oils (including whale fats) when those became too expensive or too scarce (pp. 74-75). That malleability is fundamental to palm oil’s rise within this text, and Robins dates this to the mid-nineteenth-century railway, detergent, soap, and candle industries. As industrial competition in Europe and the United States increased, however, control over palm production became a key foreign policy goal of British companies.

Part 2 examines the period between 1885 and 1945, when control and expansion of palm oil production grew into a central raison d’être of colonial states in west Africa. Chapter 5 focuses on the early stages of colonial mechanization programs that sought to more efficiently squeeze oil from the pulp of palm fruits on new plantations. These technologies successfully produced a more standardized form of oil that eschewed the variations of taste and color that disconcerted Victorian consumers, but they could not overcome labor shortages. West African smallholders and producers much preferred small-scale or village production so as to maximize the use of oils, fronds, and wines produced by the tree, and mechanization potentially undermined the social order of village life by eliminating women’s work. Chapter 6 examines colonial state responses to smallholders’ actions in the early twentieth century, as colonial land regimes heavily taxed village life in an attempt to force communities into externally oriented production relationships. Even within this prism, west African communities rejected the full manifestation of the colonial enterprise by flexibly shifting their production toward cocoa or palm wine as prices fluctuated. In response colonial enterprises, such as Lever Brothers, attempted to “rationalize” the palm oil industry via forestry and agronomy, yet the particularities of the palm tree ensured that growth rates on purpose-planted plantations regularly failed to yield. Ultimately, land and labor placed a firm cap on colonial exploitation in all areas except those that practiced
the most violent forms of labor coercion, yet exports took off nonetheless and greatly expanded the global consumption of palm products.

Chapter 7 brings in a wider global frame, narrating the genesis and growth of Southeast Asian palm oil production in Dutch territories. Here, large-scale plantation agriculture was much more viable due to the presence of imported and alienated “coolie” labor and the Dutch states’ willingness to annex indigenous lands. By the end of the 1930s, Asian production had outstripped west African production despite a lack of domestic consumption. Finally, chapter 8 examines the post-World War II development paradigm and its relationship to palm oil hybridization, where colonial development organizations invested heavy time and funding into agricultural research. The post-war epoch saw the adoption of Nucleus Estate Small Holder (NES) plantations that united smallholder tenancies with governmentally or privately owned plantations and factories, compelling producers to sell into the global market via subsidized seeds, fertilizers, and technology. These programs would shape the second half of the twentieth century despite the wide-ranging social and environmental implications that Robins explores, including further cleavages in the gendered labor divide and corporations’ expansion of production into marginal peatlands.

Part 3 brings the text into the present and past the existing geographical frontiers of the book. Chapter 9 narrates palm oil’s place in our current industrial food system and the political economy of consumption. Postwar population growth led to a huge demand for fats within the wider nutrition revolution, yet palm oil’s place within this revolution was heavily contested by both environmental groups and the soybean industry lobby in the United States. Robins ties these conflicts to wider public discourses surrounding trans and saturated fats that wielded spurious nutritional studies regarding this invisible “golden gift.” The global transition away from trans fats ultimately paved the way for palm oil’s dominance in the industrial food system as part of Western societies’ outsourcing of commodity production to the Global South. Yet this victory was always tenuous, rooted in palm oil’s ultimate characteristic as a cheap and fungible product. Chapter 10 challenges criticisms of palm oil production as necessarily destructive or violent through an emphasis on local and national conditions dictating production on NES schemes, plantations, and smallholder projects. Robins emphasizes the ways that diverse actors influence the tenor of dispossession and extraction while simultaneously exploring the very real problems present within global governance structures. To make this point, he compares Indonesia and Malaysia with a wide range of nations, including Cote d’Ivoire, Colombia, and Honduras, showing how past and present influence the current trajectory of extraction. Finally, chapter 11 draws conclusions about the possible futures of the palm oil industry, moving past a good/bad binary to theorize on how structural changes may mitigate social and environmental concerns while retaining the very tangible benefits the commodity has for some rural communities. Further, Robins fruitfully parses the environmental damages wrought by major plantations and industrial extraction in comparison to the biodiversity and practicality exhibited by smallholders across the palm belt. The Faustian bargain lived by these communities drives at the heart of Robins’s contention in this book, that palm oil is both a valuable and viable global commodity, the production of which is variously destructive due to the political economy of capitalism and its relationship to poorly understood landscapes and palm oil crops.

Evidently, the breadth of scales and vantage points covered by Robins here is astounding. The text weaves coherently between local contestation and global structures, demonstrating clearly the interplay between external consumption and internal dynamics. Indeed, *Oil Palm* is at its strongest when explicating commodity chains, changes in consumption, and the political eco-
omy of palm production. In this sense, the text is an excellent work of world history focused on the multiple lives of oil and the myriad connections among global landscapes. Furthermore, Robins’s commitment to elevating the lives and agency of indigenous actors emphasizes the unsettledness of global supply chains and the tenuous nature of colonial and postcolonial rural control. In this way, the palm industry serves as an allegory for global capital at large, rooted in the rampant extraction of individual commodities and with little care for alternatives of use or production, or even the full value of a plant. Robins’s ability to demonstrate the fungibility of individual palm oil attributes by overseas buyers stands alongside his consistent elevation of the plant’s malleability for local consumers in the form of wine, oil, seed, or cake. Both deep and readable, *Oil Palm* is a wonderful commodity history, one that is fundamentally concerned with the present of extraction and inequity.

For all of its many success and attributes, however, the sheer breadth of topics covered in *Oil Palm* may also be its weakness, especially for environmental historians. As a work of commodity, colonial, or world history, the book excels. However, there remains a pervasive sense that the text treats the oil palm as a vessel for exploring flows of capital and power through time and space, and the landscapes within which it grows as a canvas rather than an actor. Far from a criticism, this may indeed open new avenues for the study of natural commodities that treat plants and landscapes as agents in their own right, following trends growing in water and energy history, to name but two. The environment-as-actor peeks out in places, most notably chapter 11, yet the palm belt described here appears remarkably uniform even as the narrative shifts from west Africa to Southeast Asia, and finally to Central and South America. The ecologies of these lands may retain a great many similarities, particularly in terms of rainfall, but the textual flatness of these diverse spaces stands at odds with the variety of analytical frames put forward throughout the text. Land and palms are by default a commodity here even as Robins is explicitly writing about the process of commodification via histories of capital and colonialism; the oil palm itself thus appears preordained or naturalized as a commodity rather than a substance with diverse roles and meanings within village groves. Even the vital presence of previously hidden smallholders reinforces this naturalized commodification, as their voices are tied to their acceptance (or rejection or contingent approval) of the palm oil industry along various gendered and social lines. An interrogation of palm oil’s fluctuating place within local communities and landscapes may have yielded a thicker and more localized analysis of industry’s place in differing ecologies. In many ways, then, the “localness” of this text is rooted in political-economic interactions rather than ecology.

These points should not distract from the quality or value of Robins’s work, as *Oil Palm* raises important new questions and avenues for environmental historians. Robins’s ability to link the species to numerous industries, corporations, and political conflicts reveals the centrality of natural commodities to modern life, countering public understandings that frequently elide the very spaces from which those commodities come. In doing so much, the book by necessity lessens the reader’s engagement with the slow history of ecological change in commodified landscapes. Ultimately, though, that is not the aim of the text, and as a result, *Oil Palm* offers a firm foundation for the future intertwining of commodity and ecology in environmental history.
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