

Cotton's Renaissance: A Study in Market Innovation. By *Timothy Curtis Jacobson and George David Smith*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. xvi + 346 pp. Index, notes, figures, illustrations. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-521-80827-8.

Reviewed by Sven Beckert

In 1973, cotton accounted for only 33 percent of all textile fibers used in the United States, as polyester suits and “durable press” shirts filled the shelves of department stores. The global market share of American cotton had dwindled as well, amounting to only 12 percent in 1983, a year in which the People’s Republic of China produced nearly three times as much raw cotton as the United States. Partly as a consequence of this dwindling of national and international markets, the number of cotton farmers in the United States fell by 90 percent between 1970 and 2000—from 300,000 to 30,000. By 1980, it seemed that cotton farming, cotton manufacturing, and cotton consumption were threatened by extinction. King Cotton had abdicated.

Something had gone terribly wrong. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, cotton had been at the center of the nation’s economy and its cultural and political fabric. But by the late 1970s, the rise of synthetic fibers produced by multinational corporations, the strengthening of global competitors, and the attendant falling prices for cotton suggested that cotton’s distinguished history within the United States might come to an end.

Timothy Curtis Jacobson and George David Smith, in their well-written, tightly argued, and generally persuasive book, explain to us why history turned out differently. As of the year 2000, cotton’s domestic market share in textile fibers had risen to 60 percent, its global market share to 19.5 percent (though still less than China’s), and the substantially reduced number of farmers had at least a chance of making a living growing cotton. The reason for this turnaround, the authors argue, is largely to be found in the activities of one organization: Cotton Incorporated. Cotton Incorporated (which also funded the study), created in 1970 as an organization of cotton growers to represent their interests, reestablished American cotton on national and international markets. With a small staff and a tight budget, its imaginative managers understood what seems to have evaded others before them: if you want to sell cotton, you need to persuade consumers of the desirability of owning goods manufactured with the fiber. “Cotton: The Fiber of Life” was probably the most memorable slogan coming out of the offices of Cotton Incorporated. Beyond marketing cotton’s desirable properties to final consumer, the managers of Cotton Incorporated also helped manufacturers devise ways to use cotton fibers efficiently in their factories and

engaged in research to improve the growing and handling of raw cotton. In all three areas, so goes the argument of the book, they succeeded spectacularly. Cotton rebounded, Jacobson and Smith argue, because of Cotton Incorporated.

The book is filled with fascinating information about the inner workings of Cotton Incorporated, including portraits of the most important people involved with the organization. Beyond telling the history of the organization, it also provides what is perhaps the best survey of the history of cotton in the United States, chronicling its nineteenth-century meteoric rise and its painful, slow decline in the hundred years after the American Civil War.

The study has many other virtues as well: It makes a laudable effort to place the story of American cotton in a global context. It explains the way in which demand can be created—a salutary, if not explicit, critique of a booming historical literature that sees consumption mostly as an effort at self-invention. And it transgresses historiographic boundaries between urban and rural, manufacturing and agriculture, Madison Avenue and Memphis.

While I found the arguments of the book generally persuasive, the plot appeared a bit too obvious—Cotton Incorporated’s heroic managers rescue the downtrodden cotton farmer. The strength of this particular account is partly undermined by the book’s ambivalence about its mode of analysis. The authors combine structural and largely “faceless” accounts of the history of cotton during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with a highly personal, even biographic and sometimes anecdotal approach to the thirty years of Cotton Incorporated’s history. While they establish successfully that Cotton Incorporated mattered, they run the risk of deemphasizing large structural changes, especially the impact of the countercultural revolt of the 1960s, the rise of the environmental movement, and the embrace of “authenticity” by consumers living in an ever more regimented society. Moreover, by attending so closely to the organization, they forget at times about the history of cotton farmers themselves. These hardy souls appear largely as a “bloc” with a few charismatic leaders, but the texture of their community, their struggles, and their internal differentiation remain largely outside the authors’ purview. Last, but not least, I would like to have seen a more sustained discussion of the role of the federal government, especially on the issue of securing global markets for U.S. cotton. At least to present-day foreign cotton growers, it appears that the improved position of U.S. cotton on world markets is the result of the support of cotton growers by the federal government—and not primarily the result of Cotton Incorporated’s marketing campaigns.

This said, the book does a wonderful job in disentangling the important, fascinating history of cotton in the twentieth century. There is a lot of new material here for students of business history, collective action, marketing, and agricultural history. Not least, *Cotton’s*

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Renaissance helps solve the puzzle of how Cotton Incorporated managed to sell cotton's "naturalness" at the very moment when machines, chemicals, and biotechnology were reengineering cotton to suit the demands of the global marketplace.

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