

God's Capitalist: Asa Candler of Coca-Cola. *By Kathryn W. Kemp.* Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2002. 312 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, appendix, index. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN 0-865-54782-3.

Reviewed by Jocelyn Wills

More than a century after its incorporation (on January 29, 1892), Coca-Cola Company's "Ingredient X" remains one of the world's most securely protected trade secrets. The company's early brand recognition, and the creation of franchise bottlers and distribution networks, also made Coca-Cola one of the United States's most recognizable firms. On its success as the first soft-drink firm to enter the national market, a "swarm" of imitators followed, launching both myriad lawsuits and an international craze for cola. By 1916, when its founder retired from active participation in the firm, Coca-Cola ranked number 212 on the nation's list of top 500 industrial enterprises. Until now, however, Asa Candler (1851–1929)—the country boy from Georgia who turned a cure for one of his legendary headaches into a business empire—has remained as little known to the historiography of business as "Ingredient X" is to Coca-Cola's competitors.

Although his son published a memoir in 1950, and Candler has made cameo appearances in journalistic accounts of Coca-Cola, Kemp's slim biography is the first scholarly attempt to understand this long-neglected business pioneer. Employing surviving business and personal correspondence (contained at the Coca-Cola Company Archives and Emory University's Woodruff Library), as well as newspaper clippings, government documents, and sources related to Candler's philanthropic activities, Kemp follows Candler from his roots in rural Georgia, through his apprenticeship as a prescriptionist, and on to his roles as entrepreneurial creator of Coca-Cola, real-estate and banking mogul, Atlanta booster, philanthropist, and politician (Candler became Atlanta's mayor during 1917), and finally into the rather embarrassing last decade of his life, when two romantic episodes led to public scandal following his elevation to "Atlanta's First Citizen" (an award conferred upon him by the city's elite). While promoting himself as a self-made man, amassing a fortune, and building self-aggrandizing "Candler" skyscrapers in major American cities between the 1880s and 1910s, Coca-Cola's founder generously

supported conservative causes sponsored by the Southern Methodist Church (including Emory University), helped Georgia's cotton farmers stave off ruin during 1914, and gave most of his wealth away. Perceiving himself as one of "God's business agents in the world," Candler, according to Kemp, also imposed his paternalistic, moral elitism on workers, women, African Americans, and the citizens of Atlanta (p. 290). Linking his devotion to building a personal fortune (sometimes at great cost to friends and foes alike) to his concept of Christian stewardship, Candler emerges as an astute businessman, effective political manager, moral crusader, and activist and spokesman for the Southern status quo.

Historians interested in the myth of the self-made man, and the role that religion has played in business decision-making, will find Kemp's biography valuable. Kemp tests Candler's public proclamation that he arrived in Atlanta during 1872 with nothing more than \$1.75 in his pocket, and finds it wanting. By tracing his role as a civic leader, and the ways in which he blended business opportunities with service to Atlanta and the state of Georgia, she also exposes the conservative (rather than Progressive) impulses that guided his business and personal decisions.

Born in 1851, as the eighth of eleven children, Candler grew up in a comfortable rural household, complete with land and slaves. His family suffered financially in the wake of the Civil War; however, Candler had a formal education, social connections, and capital at his disposal. Following a brief stint in college (to prepare him for a medical career), the apprenticeship that convinced him that he liked making money more than practicing medicine, and a sojourn at the family homestead after his father's death, Candler returned to Atlanta in 1876. Within a year, he quit his job, borrowed family money, and launched a partnership in wholesale and retail drugs. A fierce competitor, he soon stole business away from his former employer, bought out his partner, and slowly acquired the production equipment and rights to Coca-Cola syrup (a formula patented by his former employer's soda-fountain operator). He also married his former employer's daughter, despite her father's protests, a union that was to play a large role in Candler's acquisition of Coca-Cola. By 1891, he owned it all, and in 1892, he incorporated the now famous firm. With a net worth of \$50,000, he emerged as a comfortable and respected businessman; however, his transformation into a millionaire took place over the course of

the next twenty years, as Candler used long-standing social networks to market and distribute Coca-Cola globally, to make larger investments in real estate and banking, and to boost Atlanta's economic promise. Throughout this period, his lawyer brother helped him to fend off litigation (including suits centered on accusations that Coca-Cola was a dangerous narcotic and that the company's manufacturing plants violated the Pure Food and Drug Act). One of his other brothers, who became a Methodist bishop during 1907, assisted him as well, by convincing Asa that benevolence was part of one's duty to God, family, and business. Of course, as entrepreneurs from Andrew Carnegie to Bill Gates have learned, philanthropy and public service can also serve as an antidote to public accusations of unfair trade practices and moral hypocrisy. When denounced as a ruthless capitalist, Candler's building projects, donations to Emory and other Methodist causes, and decision to run for public office emerged, to some degree, as part of a larger advertising campaign to sell himself as an innocent man, in the right place at precisely the right time. They also served his need to meet his other worldly obligations.

Although this short biography should stimulate interest in Candler's life, historians searching for specific details about his business strategies will find Kemp's treatment somewhat disappointing. Indeed, we do learn that Candler closely guarded his firm—remaining majority shareholder and micromanager of the family-run business until he entered politics, limiting important roles to his brothers and sons to safeguard trade secrets, and acting as personal taste-tester to protect the Coca-Cola formula. But we still need deeper analyses of Candler's business career, including the ways that Coca-Cola influenced or reflected modern marketing, production, and distribution practices.

*Jocelyn Wills is assistant professor of history at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. She is the author of the forthcoming book, Big Dreams, Slim Means, and City-Building Schemes: St. Paul-Minneapolis and the New Northwest, 1856–1883 (2004). She is currently studying economic strivers in nineteenth-century Brooklyn, New York.*