

Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics, and the Ethics of Business. *By Lowell J. Satre.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005. ix + 308 pp. Illustrations, photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$55.00; paper, \$24.95. ISBN: cloth, 0-821-41625-1; paper, 0-821-41626-X.

Reviewed by Gail Cooper

This book chronicles the ethical dilemma faced by Quaker chocolate manufacturer Cadbury Brothers at the turn of the century, following the revelation of an abusive forced-labor system in Portuguese colonial Africa, particularly in the cocoa-growing islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, which supplied the firm with raw materials. While slavery became illegal in the Portuguese colonies in 1878, the continued need for labor on European plantations led to the institution of a state-sanctioned system of indentured labor, whose abuses were so numerous and fundamental that its critics charged it reconstituted slavery in a modern form. The growing public indignation over abusive labor practices and the company's dilatory response led to a sharp criticism of Cadbury's purchasing policies in the press and culminated in 1909 in a suit for libel by the firm against the conservative newspaper the *Standard*, which produced a surprisingly mixed result. Rather than a simple tale of business ethics, Satre reveals that the colonial labor question became irrevocably tangled both in Cadbury's personal ethics, on the one hand, and in British party politics and imperial policy, on the other. It is the complexity of the tale that makes this book worth engaging.

Charges that Cadbury Brothers had profited from the sufferings of slaves were especially damaging for a firm with a public reputation for progressive labor policies and a model manufacturing village in Britain. For none was the problem more compelling than board member William Cadbury, who was delegated the responsibility for investigating the Portuguese labor issue in 1901 but who did not recommend a company boycott of slave-grown cocoa until 1909. The company's private investigation confirmed the findings of the investigative reporter Henry Nevinson, who revealed in a series of articles for *Harpers Weekly* in 1905–06 that African slave traders in the interior of Angola captured or bought African men, women, and children, who were then shackled

and forcibly marched up to a thousand miles to the coast, where their labor was involuntarily contracted en masse under the supervision of Portuguese colonial officials. Those unable to keep pace on the march to the coast were often killed by the side of the road and their shackles hung in the trees for use by other caravans. Workers' five-year labor contracts were profitably sold to cocoa growers in São Tomé and Príncipe, where the relatively high price of labor meant that the workers' basic needs were well supplied and conditions of labor were judged to be reasonable. Nevertheless, inquiries revealed that the disease climate of the islands claimed a 20 percent mortality rate in the first year and a 50 percent figure after five years. More important, critics pointed out that surviving workers were never released at the end of their contract but labored until they became physically unable, and that all children born on the islands became the property of the landowners. Both the Portuguese government and the cocoa growers denied the existence of these abuses and cited legislation that explicitly forbade such practices.

The slowness of the firm either to share publicly or to act on its information (the heart of the accusations against it) was largely a consequence of the decision by William Cadbury to effect a reform of Portugal's indentured labor system rather than follow the simpler course of purging the firm of suppliers who engaged in dubious labor practices. Cadbury sought to use economic pressure to force cocoa growers to repatriate indentured workers at the end of their contract, and he lobbied the British government to apply political pressure on Portuguese authorities to end the cruelties of labor recruitment in Angola. In neither case was he successful. The threat of an economic boycott was undermined by the fact that while Cadbury Brothers' purchases represented 20 percent of the islands' production, island cocoa constituted over 45 percent of the firm's cocoa purchases. In addition, political action by the Liberal government under the direction of the foreign secretary, Edward Grey, was half-hearted due to the government's ongoing efforts to secure labor for British mines in southern Africa from Portuguese Mozambique. Ensnared for nearly a decade in fruitless consultations with reformers, business associates, and government officials, the company was judged harshly by the public, owing in part to the criticism of Conservative colonial labor policies published by the Liberal newspaper, the *Daily News*, which was owned by George Cadbury. Media, politics, racial theories, imperial policies, and personal ethics all complicate this business

history, and Satre embraces that complexity. Built upon a solid foundation of newspaper accounts, manuscript sources, and government documents, the book conveys a wealth of detail.

By balancing such diverse themes, Satre does not have the space to expand upon some of the provocative issues in his study. He gives careful attention to the question of why Cadbury Brothers was slow to boycott Portuguese cocoa, but just as interesting is the question of why William Cadbury thought that reform of colonial indentured labor was possible or even desirable. Why did Cadbury believe it was within his power to mobilize the British government behind his objectives? Why did he fail to realize the limits of his influence with the Foreign Office? Why did he target reform rather than elimination of forced labor in the colonies? Why did he resist the conclusion that his Portuguese business associates knowingly tolerated exploitative labor practices? Satre provides partial answers to these questions, but they could be applied more directly to his study. Perhaps because he sympathizes with Cadbury's reformist urge, Satre accepts his extraordinary decisions rather than scrutinizing them. That we want to know more about Cadbury's dilemma is a testament to Satre's skills and the power of his story.

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