

GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

As Emma Robertson so effectively points out in this book, chocolate remains a mythic product, a symbol both of luxury and of a fantasy world of exoticism, yet also (for many) a workaday requirement providing energy and nutrition. Most people in wealthier societies have some kind of relationship with chocolate, such that it conjures up all sorts of romantic and other resonances. It remains a prime medium of gifts in smoothing many forms of relationships and social interactions. As the concept of hand-made chocolates has re-appeared in modern times with the spread of private chocolatiers, many of these characteristics have been re-emphasised. The product has, in some ways, become even more prominent on our high streets, all the more opulent as an aestheticised item (enhanced by such politically correct tags as 'fairtrade' or 'organic') with prices to match. Yet all this masks an essentially imperial relationship with cocoa producers whose living standards are very different from the consumers at the other end of the chain.

Since Robertson stresses the importance of anecdote and personal nostalgia in the collection of oral evidence, perhaps I can indulge myself in a couple of chocolate reminiscences. When I lived and worked in Africa, I (ironically) found chocolate there unsatisfactory, covered with a heat-induced white film which spoilt the taste. When I returned to Britain, my first move at Heathrow Airport was to go to a kiosk and buy myself a bar of chocolate. It became a symbol of return, a product that paradoxically acted as a marker of home. When I felt a touch of depression, I used to dash out to acquire chocolate – only later did I discover that some do indeed consider that cocoa contains an anti-depressant within its chemistry. Chocolate inspires cravings and can even seem life-enhancing. No doubt others in the privileged west will have many similar memories.

Beyond the experience of individuals, chocolate was essentially a discovery of empire, setting up one of the many economic chains of the imperial relationship. As such, it has attracted a great deal of attention. The historiography of empire has indeed been well served in three fields: the significance of just such colonial, generally tropical, products in the economic culture of the metropolis; the gendering of advertisements and consumption relating to such products; and the striking contrasts between the agricultural and manufacturing ends of the production chain. Yet Robertson's book carries all three of these into new and highly productive directions. Her analysis of the origins of cocoa in the deep past of western imperial expansion, of the multiple sources of the product in Africa, the Caribbean, South America and the East Indies, and of the manner in which an exotic product can create such major cultural waves goes further than any previous work. She examines advertising with a greater attention to gender and class, to cultural characteristics such as patriotism and national identity, and to concepts of health and nutrition. And she

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carries forward these analyses into the post-Second World War period, revealing the manner in which the symbols and selling points of empire survived into the 1950s. Only with decolonisation was there a shift in emphases from the nexus of empire towards the alluring prospects of distant foreign travel. Finally, perhaps her most important contribution lies in her remarkable unveiling of the role of women in both the production of cocoa and in the manufacture and consumption of chocolate. What has so often been seen as essentially a male preserve (except in respect of the consumers) has now been revealed as a world where women were more significant than previously recognised throughout the processes of cultivation as well as in the transformation of the bean into a drink and a sweet and tasty delicacy.

Robertson's other notable contributions include the manner in which she locates cocoa and chocolate in a comparative frame, both in relation to other products and with regard to a multiplicity of places of production. She compares the manufacturing approaches and advertising strategies of both Cadbury and Rowntree in the British chocolate cosmos, and she reveals the considerable significance of the latter company (together with its competitor, Terry's) to the economy and culture of the city of York. In doing so, she again demonstrates the ways in which imperial connections can emerge in the cultures of so many British cities and towns. Above all, using intriguing oral evidence, she examines – with great insight and sympathetic understanding – the lives of women cocoa producers in Nigeria and of women on the production line in York. These are not disconnected environments, but different ends of the production chain where interactions and gender connections are of key significance, some of them developed and promoted by Rowntree's own in-house magazine. The result is a varied and satisfying assortment of analyses that further illuminate the processes whereby a tropical product is turned into a western luxury item.

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