

Chocolate, Women and Empire: a Social and Cultural History

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Author: Emma Robertson

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Chocolate, writes Emma Robertson in the introduction to her monograph, 'has been invested with specific cultural meanings which are in part connected to ... conditions of production' (p. 3). At the heart of this study is a challenge to existing histories:

In the mythology of chocolate, the power relations of production and consumption are subsumed by a more attractive narrative of exotic peoples and their surroundings... chocolate seems to generate a particular type of history writing ... one which delves into the realms of fantasy and romance (pp. 85–6).

This interesting and wide-ranging study of one of the major commodities of empire analyses both the production of cocoa in West Africa and chocolate making, marketing and consumption in Britain. It weaves together the local and the global and provides further evidence for the indivisibility of British culture and society and its imperial hinterland. Given the association of women with production, manufacture and consumption, a strong gender perspective is integrated into the study that makes imaginative use of oral sources. *Chocolate, women and empire* thus goes much further in time scale and scope than existing studies such as William Gervase Clarence-Smith's *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765–1914* (1), adopting a comparative framework and providing fresh insight into aspects of the relationship between colony and metropole.

The book begins with an analysis of the romantic construction of chocolate as 'luxurious, hedonistic and sensual' (p. 3) followed by a chapter on the history of cocoa production including the way in which, after the Spanish conquest, cocoa, indigenous to Central America, travelled to the Caribbean and then West Africa. In Europe a taste for chocolate quickly developed as the import of slave-produced sugar from Caribbean plantations made it more palatable. Reputedly, writes Robertson, Maria Theresa (1638–83), the Spanish Infanta, and wife of Louis XIV of France, was one of the first 'chocoholics' and legend has it that in consequence she gave birth to a black child (p. 68). This demonstrates the link that was quickly made in the European imagination between chocolate and sex and between chocolate and people of colour, as reflected in later advertising. To counter the romanticised history of chocolate Robertson then goes on then to explore the hidden history of the exploitative labour practices that constitute the reality of cocoa and chocolate production. As an imperial commodity, cocoa shares commonalities with tea and sugar but was less suited to large-scale plantation production. Nevertheless, Rowntree did own some estates in the West Indies up to

1934 (pp. 70–1) and Cadbury's were accused of hypocrisy for knowingly buying sugar produced by slaves in West Africa in the so-called 'Cocoa Scandal' of 1908–9 (p. 72).

Cadbury's and Rowntree's overseas connections highlight one of the ironies of chocolate production – the dominance of enlightened and paternalistic Quaker owned companies (which also include another York based company, Terry's and the Birmingham company, Fry's) that concealed the darker side of chocolate production. As Catherine Hall observed, Cadbury World, the purpose-built 'chocolate experience' museum built next to Bourneville, the model village built for Cadbury workers in Birmingham, and opened by John Major in 1991, vividly evoked how British society 'turned a blind eye' to the more uncomfortable aspects of the imperial past. In such heritage spectacles the presence of empire was acknowledged but at the same times its meanings, 'especially its unsavoury ones', were not confronted.⁽²⁾ Thanks to historians like Hall and other exponents of the new imperial history, much has been done to challenge such amnesia concerning the origins of the tropical commodities Britons took for granted, although exploitation of workers, particularly at the point of production, continues despite the Fair Trade initiative.

The inspiration for *Chocolate and Empire* was the author's own experiences of growing up in 'chocolate city', York. Robertson began her research in 2000 'inspired by the working lives of generations of family and friends, particularly women, in the chocolate factories of York' (p. 5). As part of an MA dissertation she conducted 13 oral histories of retired women worker's from Rowntree and then, in 2002, followed these up with 15 interviews with Nigerian women involved in cocoa production and these interviews formed the basis of a wider study for a PhD. Her analysis of one 'local' firm thus resulted in a wider ranging analysis of the powerful networks interconnecting the globalised chocolate empire (p. 9). In so doing, Robertson challenged the way in which York is marketed as a 'medieval city' divorced from modernity and the colonial links of other major British cities (p.11). In chapter four she explores York's links with empire, its history of imperial exploitation and the sexism and racism in which, she claims, Rowntree and the people of York were deeply implicated (p. 7). Chapter five, "I think I was the only Chinese girl working there": race and gender in the chocolate factory' continues this theme examining the ways in which Rowntree workers were influenced by ideas of empire and race.

Another key them of the book is the way in which chocolate was consumed and marketed. In her first chapter, Robertson seeks to 'de-romanticise' chocolate providing an illuminating discussion of chocolate consumption in popular culture, demonstrating with well-chosen illustrations how advertising and marketing reinforced contemporary ideas of race, nation and gender. She argues for the 'feminisation' of chocolate consumption and the way in which the type of chocolate signaled class distinctions. In the 1930s Black Magic was associated in advertising with upper class women whereas milk chocolate Dairy Box was marketed to working class women (pp. 28–9). In post-war adverts for Rowntree's Cocoa the housewife is a dominant figure, nurturing her family with chocolate goodness (p. 21) but chocolate also had long- standing associations with female sexuality and notions of female addiction and 'pleasurable surrender to temptation' (p. 35). Of particular significance, then, was the link between sex, romance and chocolate but, more profoundly, the way in which chocolate became a euphemism for people of colour who were also used in stereotyped representations in advertising (p. 42).

There are flaws in this book; the ambitious aim to cross borders between countries and disciplines does not always work and, in parts, results in a somewhat superficial handling of the complex economics of commodity production. Robertson's arguments centred on the significance of 'chains' versus 'networks' in linking cocoa growers in Nigeria with consumers of chocolate in Britain and its colonies could have been more effectively and consistently developed. The defense of the methodology – oral interviews – is rather weak, particularly in the Nigerian context, and the number of interviews in both locations is somewhat limited for a major study. Derived from a PhD, the analysis is sometimes too uncritical of the contemporary historiography in which it is embedded, innovative at the time in 'disturbing and overturning' conventional histories of empire, but now appearing a little dated. In some sections, for example where the relationship between chocolate and the civilizing mission is discussed (pp. 45–7), arguments needed strengthening and more sustained discussion was warranted. Additionally, cocoa production in Nigeria is addressed in detail,

but Ghana, a major cocoa producer and where cocoa first arrived from the Americas, is given little space. Robertson, however, provides a plausible defense here – far more has been written on cocoa production in Ghana and one of the key aims of her research was to challenge assumptions that in Nigeria cocoa production was primarily carried out by men (p. 101).

On a more positive note, *Chocolate, women and empire* also has much to commend it. The topic is approached with sensitivity and empathy for the lives of women in both York and Nigeria, whose poorly-paid labour produced, and continues to produce, a desirable and ubiquitous commodity. Robertson writes fluently, vividly and accessibly and with passion for her topic yet she retains academic rigor. By and large, given the wide scope of the topic she succeeds in weaving together the complex and diverse elements of her study. She is stronger on the familiar territory of British cultural history but manages to produce a plausible interdisciplinary analysis embracing global perspectives. Chapter four, 'Minstrels, missionaries and the minster', that challenges the tourist perceptions of York and explores its imperial heritage, is particularly good. Here, Robertson makes a fresh contribution in support of the arguments pioneered by John Mackenzie relating to the impact empire had on British popular culture and identities that has stimulated an ongoing and contentious debate.

In conclusion *Chocolate, women and empire* is a clearly organized, highly readable, engaging and informative, study that blends economic and cultural histories. The strengths outweigh the weaknesses. It will most certainly be of interest to, and stimulate debate among, students, teachers and researchers in history, English and cultural studies with an interest in links between imperialism and globalization, imperial networks, connections between empire, race and gender, and the impact of empire on British popular culture and patterns of consumption. Its blend of academic rigour with accessible, illustrated narrative could attract a wider readership.

Publications that span area studies and disciplines lend themselves to criticism from those with more specialist knowledge in their narrower fields but they are essential in making imaginative interconnections and opening up new ways of looking at previously researched topics. Robertson has thus taken a bold step in taking on this ambitious project but *Chocolate, women and empire* will hopefully encourage the reader to reconsider their own relationship to the chocolate products our forebears consumed and we continue to enjoy. Many of us are chocolate lovers but few question the ethics behind production. Recent developments in the chocolate industry have vindicated Robertson's arguments about the need to pay attention to the globalised nature of the industry and the exploitation of a predominantly female labour force that supports it. The old British Quaker firms whose fortunes were so clearly bound up with Britain's imperial past are no more or no longer British-owned. In York, Terry's closed in 2005 (p. 222) and in 2006, after Nestlé absorbed Rowntree, it was announced that Smarties would no longer be produced in the UK and the factory in York was closed with the loss of 646 jobs.⁽³⁾ In January 2010 Cadbury's was taken over by the predatory American multinational, Kraft, resulting in threats to British jobs and the quality of favourite chocolate brands.⁽⁴⁾ Will these developments even further divorce the British consuming public from the mode of production?

Notes

1. William Gervase Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765–1914* (Cambridge, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Catherine Hall, 'The ruinous ghost of empire past', *THES*, 8 March 1996, 8.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. '645 jobs lost as Nestlé ships Smarties abroad', <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2006/sep/21/food.foodanddrink> [2]> [accessed 12 May 2012].
[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. 'Cadbury says job cuts inevitable after Kraft takeover', <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8468540.stm>> [3] [accessed 12 May 2011].[Back to \(4\)](#)

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[4] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=412780§ioncode=26>