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Satre's "Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics and the Ethics of Business" - Book Review

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SATRE, L.J., *Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics and the Ethics of Business* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. xii + 229. ISBN 0-8214-1626-X, Paper, \$24.95.

Lowell Satre, emeritus professor of history at Youngstown State University in Ohio, has produced a carefully researched study of 'the controversy surrounding the labour used on Sao Tomé in the production of cocoa, the basis of chocolate goods'. It focuses on the behaviour of the English Quaker Chocolate companies, especially that of Cadbury Brothers, in the years between 1901 and 1914 in trying to improve labour conditions on the Portuguese islands where they sourced their cocoa. This is set in the context of Portuguese colonial history in West Africa and the English social, political and economic pressures of the time. There are forty-two pages of notes and a twenty-one page bibliography covering manuscripts, state papers, newspaper articles and contemporary sources.

The study follows a broad chronology from the beginning of the twentieth century to the outbreak of the First World War. Maps and illustrations are used with great effect: they both help the reader understand the nature and the extent of the slave trade in Portuguese West Africa and also bring vividly to life the horror of a trade that provided four thousand labourers a year to service the cocoa plantation owners' 'unquenchable thirst' for labour on the islands of Príncipe and Sao Tomé.

The story starts in 1901 when the Cadbury Brothers Board first received indirect reports about slavery on the island of Sao Tomé from where they bought about 45 per cent of their cocoa beans. The Board asked William Cadbury, then 34 years old, 'to enquire into labour on Sao Tomé plantations'. Satre follows William Cadbury's actions on the issue for the next eight years until in March 1909 the three Quaker Chocolate companies Cadbury, Fry and Rowntree publicly announced that they were boycotting purchases of cocoa beans from the two islands. We follow the careful gathering of information via personal visits to Lisbon, an enquiry commissioned by the chocolate companies and conducted by Joseph Burt between 1905 and 1907 and a final trip to West Africa and the islands where Cadbury accompanied Burt in 1908/9. We are made party to unsatisfactory discussions with the Foreign Office where repeated efforts to get the Portuguese Government to reform labour practices in its colonies came to nothing. We are helped to appreciate the extent to which business became confused with politics as public pressure on the chocolate companies grew. This was to culminate in the London *Standard*, a conservative London morning newspaper, publishing an editorial in September 1908 'questioning the sincerity of the Cadbury Company's reform effort'. Cadbury sued the *Standard* for libel and the case came to trial in Birmingham in November 1909, more than six months after the

companies' boycott had been announced. While the hearing took seven days, the jury took only fifty-five minutes to deliver their verdict in favour of Cadbury but awarding damages of one farthing. Commentators pointed to the jury's political motivation in arriving at the figure for damages. The judge awarded costs to Cadbury Brothers. Public attention meanwhile was immediately taken by the fall of the government and a new general election campaign. Neither the reputation of the chocolate companies nor their sales or profits seem to have been unduly affected by the case.

In the relationship with Portugal, however, the boycott seems to have resulted in an immediate cessation of slave imports from Angola. The boycott was lifted in April 1917 once the British Consul in Sao Tomé was satisfied that labour was now free and repatriation effective.

I came to this book as a mature student with a business career behind me and researching corporate governance in a small number of twentieth-century Quaker founded enterprises. I knew little about any of the three main strands of this book: early twentieth-century history, the anti-slavery movement in England or the corporate lives of the Victorian Quaker business dynasties. Reading Lowell Satre's study has brought home to me just how much more engaged in public and political life prominent Quakers were a hundred years ago—combining business leading with newspaper proprietorship and Liberal political activism.

Lowell Satre comes over as relatively unsympathetic towards William Cadbury and he becomes markedly more critical as the book progresses. At the beginning he gives William the benefit of the doubt: 'his attitude of fairness combined with a minimising of the serious nature of labour abuse on the islands helps to explain why nearly eight years would pass before the Cadbury company took decisive action in this area'. By the middle of the book he is criticising William Cadbury for 'naivety at best' in believing 'that any meaningful change would come about, given the many years of adamant refusal by the Portuguese planters and much of the Portuguese government to recognise labour problems on the islands'. By the end of the book his criticism has hardened: 'it is hard to understand why he did not call for a boycott earlier especially after receiving Burt's report. His stubbornness apparently clouded his judgement and he did not want his decisions questioned'.

This judgmental attitude got in the way for me. As a reader I want to understand *why* William Cadbury minimised the serious nature of labour abuse on the islands (if indeed he did) and what loyalties and assumptions were limiting his perception. I want to appreciate better the difference in outlook between the Quaker director of a family business and a Foreign Secretary who 'tends not to view foreign policy as a moral issue'. As an organisational researcher I would like to have seen much greater exploration of the chocolate companies' purchasing policies and the ethical dilemmas as they saw them and of discussions that went on behind the scenes about the issue among the Cadbury, Fry and Rowntree family businesses. I would also like to have seen more research into the influence that Britain Yearly Meeting and the relevant Monthly Meetings of the Religious Society of Friends exerted over their prominent business brethren.

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