

KNIGHT, G. ROGER. *Commodities and Colonialism. The Story of Big Sugar in Indonesia, 1880–1942.* [Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land en Volkenkunde, vol. 286.] Brill, Leiden [etc.] 2013. xi, 291 pp. Ill. € 112.00. \$146.00. doi:10.1017/S0020859014000066

Roger Knight is renowned as one of the world's foremost specialists on the history of the Java sugar industry, having spent much of the past several decades exploring the primary sources, especially as kept in the National Archives of the Netherlands. His perceptions of the Java sugar industry have over the years been laid down in a number of seminal articles.¹ The time is ripe for the all-encompassing synthesis. This elegantly produced volume is part of that *magnum opus*. It forms the middle segment of a planned trilogy, which, as it happens, has been published prior to the first and third volumes of the total work. This book covers the period from the famous crisis in the Java sugar industry in the early 1880s up to the Japanese occupation and conclusion of effective Dutch colonial rule over the entire Indonesian archipelago. For the benefit of readers, references are discreetly made to the conception of the Java sugar industry as a government-led “industrial project” under the aegis of the Cultivation System, to be presented in the forthcoming first volume of the trilogy.

During the late colonial period, embracing the six decades between the 1880s and 1942, Java emerged as one of the three chief producers of cane sugar in the world, rivalled only by Cuba and Taiwan. This accomplishment was all the more astonishing considering that Indonesia nowadays has to import sugar in order to satisfy the huge domestic demand. The foundations of the industry lay in the Cultivation System (1830–1870), but the industry was revitalized by private Dutch enterprise after the so-called sugar crisis in 1884. Success was guaranteed by a unique combination of fertile soils, ready access to water, a huge supply of low-cost labour on the one hand and large-scale investment of Dutch private capital and inputs of modern technology and management on the other. This combination of factors of production was once, indeed by Roger Knight, defined as a “First World factory” in a “Third World field”.²

Roger Knight tells us how the Java sugar industry gradually rose to prominence, reaching a peak in the 1920s with productivity and profits at unprecedented levels, then was badly struck by the worldwide depression of the 1930s, never again to recover fully. It is an account from within, solidly based on primary sources, in particular company archives, and it is very rich in detail, which makes for comfortable and pleasant reading. However, the story – the author's own wording – also fits into the wider context of both globalization and colonialism. Exports brought the over 100 sugar factories in Java and their large workforce into a direct dependence on expanding foreign markets, particularly in Asia. Although the author may be carried away to a degree when likening sugar then to oil now, Java sugar was an absolutely essential ingredient in the late colonial economic

1. See, in particular: G. Roger Knight, “Gully Coolies, Weed-Women and *snijvolk*: The Sugar Industry Workers of North Java in the Early Twentieth Century”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 28 (1994), pp. 51–76; *idem*, “The Visible Hand in *Tempo Doeloe*: The Culture of Management and the Organisation of Business in Java's Colonial Sugar Industry”, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 30 (1999), pp. 74–98; *idem*, “Descrying the Bourgeoisie: Sugar, Capital and State in the Netherlands Indies, circa 1840–1884”, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 163 (2007), pp. 34–66; *idem*, “Exogeneous Colonialism: Java Sugar between Nippon and Taikoo before and during the Inter-war Depression, c.1920–1940”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 44 (2010), pp. 477–515.

2. G. Roger Knight, “Did ‘Dependency’ Really Get it Wrong? The Indonesian Sugar Industry, 1880–1942”, in J. Thomas Lindblad (ed.), *Historical Foundations of a National Economy in Indonesia, 1890s–1990s* (Amsterdam, 1996), pp. 155–173.

expansion of Indonesia. But would this process have turned out to be so successful in the absence of colonialism? That is the underlying counterfactual question in this book, and it is therefore important that much attention is devoted to the nexus between private Dutch capital and the colonial government. The massive mobilization of cheap labour also fits neatly into the twin contexts of globalization and colonialism. For that reason alone, this book is likely to be of interest to readers of the *International Review of Social History*.

The argument of this book is structured in a highly innovative way. The eight substantive chapters – preceded by an elaborate introduction and followed by a brief conclusion – are loosely chronologically arranged yet above all highlight key aspects of the topic. These include: the shift in market orientation from Europe to Asia; the physical conditions of production; the Dutch colonial lobby; the use of retained earnings for fresh investment in Java; constraints to growth at the time of World War I; excessive optimism in the 1920s as represented by a carefully chosen case study: HVA, *Handels Vereeniging Amsterdam* [Amsterdam Trading Association]; the illusive success of the so-called wonder cane variety (POJ 2878) that triumphed all over Java in the late 1920s; and, finally, stiffening competition in the huge markets in British India and Japan during the 1930s.

Roger Knight's story moves easily between the broader context of international economic relations and the minute detail of the narrow perspective of individual Dutch investors and their factories. On more than one occasion he cannot quite resist the temptation to tell readers about the genealogical ties among the Indies sugar dynasties, families that were unequivocally entrenched in colonial society in Java, yet stubbornly Dutch in culture and outlook. It must be admitted that individual labourers at the sugar factories remain largely anonymous throughout the entire account, which obviously reflects a virtually complete lack of written sources. The colonial lobby was clearly of great importance, but this does not imply that the spectacular success of the Java sugar industry was above all attributable to Dutch colonial rule. The author convincingly demonstrates that management practices at the sugar companies were of overriding importance in raising output, reducing costs, and enlarging profits. The industry was exceptionally effective in attracting large numbers of labourers at low wages. Roger Knight is not inclined to speak immediately about "exploitation" of workers, but his cautious reference to a "new degree of impoverishment" in rural Java (p. 237) does point in that direction. The low costs of labour coincided with rising productivity of both land and labour, a development contrary to the wisdom of economic theory but commensurate with the specific conditions of production under the protective umbrella of colonial rule.

Globalization and colonialism become intertwined at various points in the history of Java sugar as presented in this book. It is particularly interesting to note that commercial emancipation by the colony with respect to the metropolitan mother country coincided with the almost exclusive predominance of Dutch capital in investment in the Java sugar industry. This shift of emphasis in the stakes of Dutch private capital in the Netherlands, from mutual commodity trade to finance, epitomizes a more general development in the relationship between the Netherlands and the Dutch East Indies during the late colonial period. In a longer time perspective, we seem to have come full circle in the history of Java sugar, from state-run production in the mid-nineteenth century, to the hegemony of private Dutch enterprise with a supportive colonial state in the background during the early twentieth century, and from there to production handled by Dutch-owned, later nationalized, firms operating in the environment of independent Indonesia after 1945. This circle will only become fully visible when all three parts of the Roger Knight trilogy have been published.

This is an excellent piece of scholarly work, likely to become the standard text for anybody who wishes to know more about the Java sugar industry. Only a few minor omissions need to be mentioned. Surprisingly little attention is given to the active support of the sugar companies in erecting a rival institution for the training of colonial civil servants at the University of Utrecht in 1925, born out of dissatisfaction with the alleged

ethical traditions at the existing institution at Leiden University. The sugar companies, just like the oil companies, had a vested interest in not taking too soft a stand with respect to demands for higher wages. Another point concerns the survey of the industry as a whole. It would have been most helpful if an appendix had been added with a complete list of all the sugar companies operating in Java during the period under study. After all, the total number of companies is not prohibitively large and a published serial source with detailed data on individual firms and estate, cited in the bibliography, could have been used more extensively.³ Such information would have enhanced the book's value as a standard work on the Java sugar industry. The strength of this book does not lie in rigorous quantitative analysis, including many tables and figures, but rather in the qualitative argument and the eloquently presented synthesis.

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BANTMAN, CONSTANCE. *The French Anarchists in London, 1880–1914. Exile and Transnationalism in the First Globalisation*. [Studies in Labour History, Vol. 1.] Liverpool University Press, Liverpool [etc.] 2013. xii, 219 pp. £70.00.
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Studies of classical anarchism and syndicalism (1860–1939) have been rejuvenated by the adoption of transnational approaches. This is particularly the case for exile communities and their interaction with the dynamics of diaspora and globalization during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Constance Bantman's study of the exile community of French anarchists in Britain, centred in London, is an excellent example of a thriving genre. Bantman's approach is enlivened by her enquiry into the intermeshing and cross-pollination of modes of organization and ideas, which constituted the basis for syndicalism in France from the 1890s and the British "syndicalist revolt" of the years leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914. Although Bantman's book is relatively short, it packs in a great deal of lucid analysis that will be beneficial for readers interested in the history of cities, labour, and social movements, the circulation of ideas, the surveillance of "subversive" movements, and the limits of nineteenth-century British liberalism.

Bantman examines the several hundred French anarchists resident in London from the 1880s to 1914. But she also notes that current transnational studies have been stimulated by more recent developments. It is now a commonplace to compare the "Londonistan" of the 1990s and 2000s with London, the "anarchist Mecca" of the 1890s. The movement of peoples and ideas through the two iterations of this capital of globalized worlds, and the copy one could garner through sensational reporting of globalized terrorism during the infancy of tabloid culture on both sides of Channel in the 1890s or in our own time, are two striking parallels. But as Bantman shows, although some of the exiles were engaged in terrorism or attempted plots, for the most part their criminality was of a more pedestrian and less violent sort (swindling or the moonlight flit) and in any case many

3. *Handboek voor Cultuur- en Handelondernemingen in Nederlandsch-Indië* (Amsterdam, 1888–1940) [published annually].