The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America by Jason M. Colby (review)

Marcelo Bucheli

Enterprise & Society, Volume 16, Number 4, December 2015, pp. 976-978 (Review)

Published by Cambridge University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/ens.2015.0079*

It is rich in research, with one or two quotations from primary documents for each page, but because only the lengthy passages are accorded citations, it will be hard to use it for further study. This body of detail would be even more engaging if Basile had used it to make a potent argument, but he seems content to conclude that "love it or despise it, air conditioning has insinuated itself into the world's day-today existence" and "it's not going away" (p. 254). Considering that most readers know that before they begin the book, the point here is to be amused by the journey.

Gail Cooper
Lehigh University
Email: gc05@lehigh.edu

doi:10.1017/eso.2015.41

Published online September 15, 2015

Jason M. Colby. *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011. xi + 274 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-4915-4 (cloth) $45.00; 978-0-8014-7899-4 (paper); $24.95.

Jason Colby's *The Business of Empire* is a welcome addition to the literature on the interactions between multinational corporations and domestic societies in poor countries. Based on deep archival research, this well-written monograph focuses on the U.S.-based multinational banana and producing corporation, United Fruit Company (now Chiquita), in Central America. Specifically, Colby studies United Fruit's labor policies, consisting of importing black English-speaking workers from the West Indies to work in the Central American plantations, and the impact this practice had in domestic societies and in the way the elites and working classes related to the multinational corporation. The Central American elites were caught between two policies they considered consistent with their ambition for achieving economic development: attracting foreign capital and encouraging white European immigration. United Fruit was certainly providing the former, but not the latter. In the long term, this situation led to racial tensions among workers and animosity against United Fruit. One of Colby's interesting findings is that by the 1920s and 1930s, criticisms against United Fruit as a tool of American imperialism were strongly tainted with racist views against the black West Indian workers (especially those from Jamaica) —critics of the firm considered the practice of

bringing "inferior races" into their countries as a manifestation of imperialist oppression. Colby shows that by the 1930s, pressured by labor strikes and nationalist politicians, United Fruit adapted to the Central American racist nationalism by decreasing the hiring of West Indian workers, particularly in managerial positions.

Colby does a very good job at contextualizing the conflicts he analyzes. Chapter 1 outlines the racist discourse justifying American expansionism, particularly after the Mexican-American and Spanish-American wars. Here he shows how both the military, merchants, and corporations expanding into Central America and the Caribbean brought racist practices and concepts from the United States into societies they considered racially inferior. United Fruit's officials were not an exception, showing strong disdain toward local societies (Chapter 3). This view clashed with ideas of "whiteness" in Costa Rica and the view the Central American elites had of themselves as "white" in contrast to the rest of the citizens of their countries (Chapter 2). By bringing in West Indian workers, United Fruit took advantage of these tensions. The domestic xenophobia, in addition to the influence of the race-centered Marcus Garvey's movement among black workers, made workers' unity harder (although not always impossible) to achieve (Chapter 4). Ironically, this strategy eventually failed because of three threats. First, during the 1920s and 1930s, some governments developed more nationalist policies, which included discrimination against foreign (and particularly black) workers. Second, United Fruit sought to show itself as a good corporate citizen, which translated into discrimination policies against West Indian workers (Chapters 5 and 6). Third, the rise of the "Good Neighbor" policy in Washington led the U.S. government to encourage United Fruit to adapt better to domestic demands. In short, policies that were considered more pro-labor and progressive reinforced racist discrimination against black workers.

Colby is not shy about quoting material from primary sources, which he does particularly in the opening paragraphs of each chapter. He also skillfully combines his historical research with related works of fiction written by both American travelers and Central American writers. These two aspects make this book attractive for different types of audiences, including undergraduate students and the general public. One missing element in this book, though, is the lack of a concluding section in which the author discusses the theoretical and historiographical implications of his work and engages in current debates on economic imperialism with historians including Niall Ferguson and Noel Maurer, among others. Instead, the book merely ends with an "Epilogue."

The Business of Empire received an honorable mention for the Ralph Gomory Book Prize (2012) awarded by the Business History

Conference, but it can also appeal to an audience beyond business historians, including scholars interested in diplomatic history, race relations, and Latin American history.

Marcelo Bucheli
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

doi:10.1017/eso.2015.42

Published online June 15, 2015

Claire L. Jones. *The Medical Trade Catalogue in Britain, 1870–1914*. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013. xii + 264 pp. ISBN 978-1-84893-443-6, $99.00 (cloth).

Although increasing attention has been paid in recent years to the retailing and consumption of medicines and medical instruments across time, the nature of the relationship between medical professionals and medical companies has remained obscure. In particular, the effects on medical advertising of factors such as demand-led innovation and the bureaucratization and regulation of medicine have, until now, remained unclear. Likewise, little attention has focused on medical advertising to the medical profession, rather than to the public, and on the often-delicate ethical issues this could engender. Claire Jones's excellent new study of medical trade catalogues is therefore both important and timely in exploring the important role of nineteenth-century medical practitioners as both consumers of medical products and agents in the development of instruments of their trade. As Jones argues, medical trade companies and practitioners developed a mutually beneficial relationship, one that balanced the ethical considerations of the profession in not engaging in overt commercial marketing or endorsement in the public domain. As this occurred, medical catalogues became proxy reference texts—a means through which medical knowledge could be disseminated, but also statements of the "professional" nature of medicine.

The book is split into six thematic chapters, each exploring a different aspect of catalogue construction and consumption. Chapter 1 charts the origins and rise of the medical trade catalogue in context of the changing nature of supply, but also discusses the huge rise in practitioner numbers and importance of the institution, creating new opportunities for medical companies. Jones makes a compelling case for the trade catalogue to be understood not only as an information technology in itself, but also as a "discernible tool of business" (p. 31).