

MAPES, KATHLEEN. *Sweet Tyranny. Migrant Labor, Industrial Agriculture, and Imperial Politics.* [The Working Class in American History.] University of Illinois Press, Urbana [etc.] 2009. xi, 307 pp. Ill. \$80.00. (Paper: \$30.00.); doi:10.1017/S0020859010000593

Sugar is a prominent factor in modern history. Its ascendancy to the status of a bulk commodity providing the necessary calories for the working classes shaped the social contours of the Caribbean and facilitated the Industrial Revolution. Being the single most important commodity after oil, produced in tropical as well as temperate zones, sugar has always been subject and cause of geopolitical tribulations. The literature on the production of cane sugar in tropical and subtropical regions is rich and though the historiographies of sugar production in Asia and the New World do not always speak to each other, there is a clear sense that writing about sugar is key to understanding colonialism and therefore global history.

As a rule, however, these narratives concern only cane sugar. Beet sugar is apparently considered to be agrarian history of mere domestic importance. This obfuscates the fact that by the late nineteenth century beet sugar was produced in greater quantities than cane sugar and exported all over the world. Obviously, this had its imperial repercussions too, as Mapes's thoroughly researched book demonstrates. Precisely in the middle of the ascendancy of the United States' beet sugar industry, around 1900, the Spanish sugar colonies Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines were acquired. This turned the beet sugar industrialists into ardent advocates of Philippine independence, which they expected would automatically end the favourable tariff treatment for its sugar exports to the US.

From its very beginning the story of Michigan's sugar industry and its workers, who play a central role in this book, has been linked to America's formal and informal empire. In the very year that Michigan welcomed its first beet-sugar factory, the United States gained control over the Spanish sugar empire. But it is also a story of informal empire, namely a story about Mexican migrant labourers, including many women and children, who were brought in to harvest the beet. *Sweet Tyranny* inserts the Michigan sugar beet into the global history of sugar and the flows of labour migration it engendered. By relating beet to cane and local to global this book offers a series of eye openers. A lot has been written, for example, on the perennial struggles between the cane cultivators and the factories, in which the factories were the stronger party, a situation usually attributed to colonial power relations. It was not, however, very different in Michigan where the resourceful factory owners usually won their struggles with the farmers despite the fact that they relied completely on the willingness of the latter to grow beet.

If cane-sugar production was labour-intensive, beet-sugar production also involved many hands in the fields. So many indeed that it affected American immigration policies. During World War I the stream of fresh Polish and Russian immigrants to the fields dried up. From 1917 onwards labour shortages became general. The solution was found by lifting immigration restrictions (the need to pass a literacy test) for Mexican workers to allow them in as seasonal labour to rescue the strategically important beet-sugar production. The general opinion in the US was that these "temporarily allowed aliens" should by no means be permitted to become permanent residents or to find their way to urban industrial sites. The guest worker was introduced to Michigan, while Labor Secretary Wilson believed, naively we might say with the benefit of hindsight, that those Mexican workers could be exported as easily as they were imported. This happened within a state, remarks Mapes, that was deeply committed to free labour. Here the comparison with the case of Chinese coolies who were imported to the cane fields of Louisiana during

Reconstruction¹ half a century earlier would have been apposite, because the same discussion took place then. Both these discourses entailed the same procedure of defining the United States as a land of free citizens and free labour, thereby making the immigrant worker without citizen rights an anomaly, a coolie whose otherness was framed in a racial vocabulary.

Like the Chinese fifty years before, the Mexicans had come to stay despite appalling forms of exploitation. The contracts the workers had to sign charged them for transport, supplies, and accommodation, which often left families in debt after months of arduous work. It was not easy for these workers to get their rightful wages, exposing, according to Mapes, “the limits of ‘free labour’ in the labour contracts they signed” (p. 155). Not surprisingly, the Mexican immigrants could not be confined to the countryside but found their way to the cities, circulating between agricultural and industrial work and belying the idea of their being seasonal immigrants. And thus the sugar-beet industry became the most important employer of Mexican workers in the 1930s.

It was an employer always at odds with the larger political interest of the United States during its period as formal empire and in the course of its devolution to a modern hegemonic power, which was global free trade. The beet-sugar industry has been fighting against free trade ever since the Roosevelt administration began lowering tariff walls in the 1930s. Sugar thus remains a highly political topic, both in terms of the relationship between the US and tropical sugar producers within its political spheres of influence as well as in terms of the immigration of guest workers. Sugar has been in the crucible of American imperial and immigration policies, a unique position for a commodity, as Mapes convincingly shows.

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SPURLIN, WILLIAM J. *Lost Intimacies. Rethinking Homosexuality under National Socialism.* [Gender, Sexuality, Culture, Vol. 4.] Peter Lang, New York [etc.] 2009. xii, 152 pp. € 21.34; doi:10.1017/S002085901000060X

“Some people draw conclusions like curtains”, sang the late Scottish folk singer John Martyn in the 1980s. In that same period, some scholars did the same where homosexuality and World War II were concerned. From the 1970s onwards, a myth about a “homocaust” was cultivated. A compelling narrative about an ever-growing number of homosexual victims of the Third Reich – from 220,000 victims in 1974 to 300,000 in 1978 and even three million victims in the 1990s – followed Heinz Heger’s publication in 1972 of his experiences as an inmate in the Nazi concentration camp Dachau in *Die Männer mit dem rosa Winkel* [*The Men with the Pink Triangle*, translated into English in 1980]. Heger’s account has been of pivotal importance for the public commemoration of homosexuality and National Socialism because his book was reworked into a play and a film. Martin Sherman wrote the play *Bent* in 1979 and Sean Mathias reworked the play into a film in 1997, casting movie stars such as Jude Law, Clive Owen, and Mick Jagger. The fictional accounts of Heger’s story travelled the world and caused quite a stir, the implicit message being that one was better off as a Jew than as a homosexual under Nazi rule. One of the main characters in these accounts tried to survive the camps by swapping his pink triangle for a yellow star.

1. Moon-Ho Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD, 2006); see my review in *IRSH* 54 (2009), pp. 520–521.