

Robins, Jonathan E.: *Cotton and Race across the Atlantic. Britain, Africa, and America, 1900-1920*. Martlesham: Boydell & Brewer 2016. ISBN: 978 1 58046 567 0; 312 pp.

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The history of cotton is a crowded field. However, whereas successful recent contributions such as Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* and Giorgio Riello's *Cotton: The Fabric that Made the Modern World* focused on the enduring capacity of cotton capitalism to bend global patterns of production and trade to its needs, Robins' study highlights an episode that ended in failure. He does so in a well-researched and thought-provoking book that is centered on the attempts undertaken in the 1900s and 1910s by the Lancashire-based British Cotton Growing Association (BCGA) to end British dependence on cotton-imports from North-America by stimulating cotton production in Britain's African colonies. Robins does so not from a narrow imperial, but from a wider Atlantic perspective. Chapters move from the New York Cotton Exchange where Daniel J. Sully's price manipulations put British textile manufacturers on the spot, to cotton fields in Nigeria, Uganda and Sudan where the founders of the BCGA envisioned a bright future for cotton farmers. Robins gives ample attention to conflicts and convergences of interest in England between competing groups of cotton manufacturers and representatives of organized labour. But without losing the focus on the BCGA, he also manages to give full attention to the tensions between industrialists and local colonial administrators, to the important role of members of the African elite such as the Alake of Abeokuta, Gbadebo I who played a key role in the short-lived success of BCGA-supported cotton production in Southern Nigeria, and to the complex interactions between British philanthropists' paternalist colonialism and the small number of students from Booker T. Washinton's Tuskegee Institute that went to Sudan as agrarian specialists in the hope of aiding in the uplift of Africa. In doing so, Robins ably illustrates the potential of global history for integrating seemingly

disconnected stories across continents.

Race is a key component of this transcontinental narrative. For Robins, the BCGA's insistence on the special suitedness of the African colonies for cotton cultivation cannot be explained without reference to the firmly-held belief that cotton was „the black man's crop“. This led the founders of the BCGA to ignore many indications of the greater viability of other crops and the reluctance to engage in cotton production of local farmers in many parts of Africa, as well as reports on the greater possibilities provided by cotton production in Asia. The level of racial prejudice undergirding discussions on the future of cotton is also brought out by the stubbornness with which British observers clung to an imagery of cotton production derived from the „Old South“, at a time in the early twentieth century when cotton production in the US was increasingly dominated by white farmers. Racially infused colonial ideologies also were behind the stark discrepancies between the BCGA's stated commitment to philanthropy, economic development for the independent African farmer, and free labour, and its willingness to return to forced labour practices and a plantation model of production in practice. Some of the most interesting parts of the book can be found in chapter 3, that details in what ways despite the „semi-philanthropic“ agenda of the BCGA and the mounting claims of colonialism's civilizing mission, the agents of the BCGA reverted to „outright coercion to force Africans to grow cotton“. In doing so, their practices were informed by French and German experiments with African cotton production that likewise made substantial use of coerced labour practices. As Robins argues, 'a state-backed, technocratic agricultural regime would not mature until the 1920s and 1930s in Britain's African empire, but its origins lay in the cotton campaign of 1902-14.' (p. 130) This was partially a response to the Agency of the African farmers themselves, an element that Robins stresses throughout the book. While in the minds of European industrialists and colonial planners, coercion was a necessity because of the perceived inability of the colonial subjects to act in economically rational ways, in fact the opposite was the case. With some

exceptions, like Uganda and the area around Lagos, in many places where the BCGA tried to encourage the growth of cotton for export, African farmers for economic reasons preferred to produce different types of cotton suited for regional markets or other types of crops that brought better returns. As Robin concludes, „if Africans chose not to grow cotton, it was because it was not economically attractive.“

Unfortunately, the description of the agency of local producers in this study mostly remains confined to this negative: the refusal to bow to the schemes thought out for them in the metropole. Robins is aware of this problem, which of course is partly due to an imbalance in the sources. However, more explicit attention to the labour history side of the projects that the book describes might have been one way to compensate for this. Having said that, this compact but dense book manages to bring in a great amount of detail to show how cotton's empire worked, or failed to work, in the early decades of the twentieth century.

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