

Background paper of the origins of the endowment of the Barrow Cadbury Trust and the São Tomé and Príncipe slave trade

At the time of the case Cadbury Brothers, which had originally been managed by brothers George and Richard Cadbury, had become a limited company after Richard's death in 1899. George Senior remained the Managing Director and his 2 sons and 2 nephews took on the following roles:

- Barrow (36) – finance/technology/administration
- William (32) – import of raw materials.
- Edward (26) – exports
- George Junior (21) – brand development

In 1901, William Cadbury, Barrow Cadbury's younger brother, visited the two small estates in Trinidad which Cadbury Brothers used for experimenting on cocoa cultivation.

While there, he heard rumours that slave labour was being used on plantations in the Gulf of Guinea, off West Africa, on the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe.

At the time Cadbury Brothers bought 45% of their cocoa beans from these islands. By chance, shortly afterwards, William was told that a plantation in São Tomé was for sale, and it included in its bill of sale two hundred black labourers worth £3555.

William immediately reported this to the Cadbury Brothers board, and the board asked him to investigate. From then on William worked tirelessly, with great care and dedication to resolve the matter.

The islands were under Portuguese control and slavery had been abolished there by 1875. However, when asked the Anti-Slavery Society for advice, they confirmed that they had received several reports of slaves being used and that others had reported that slave gangs in Angola, which was part of the Portuguese empire, were exporting slaves to the islands.

In 1902 William met a Scottish missionary, Matthew Stober, who had also witnessed slavery in central Angola and together they travelled to Lisbon in 1903 to confront the plantation owners and the Portuguese authorities. In Lisbon they were stonewalled by the plantation owners. The Portuguese authorities assured them that a labour law would shortly be enacted which would make them paid labourers and offer repatriation.

It seems William also wanted to get more evidence to convince the other raw cocoa buyers (notably Fry's) to bring the business to an end with a comprehensive multi-lateral agreement. A boycott might well have led to the cocoa simply being exported elsewhere as Britain only accounted for 5% of the exports from São Tomé. In the event, William gained some support for a boycott but not enough to take it forward.

Independently, Henry Nevinson, a journalist hired by Harpers Monthly Magazine, arrived in Angola to investigate these rumours. Nevinson could get no information on the coast but trekked inland and started to find evidence of trafficking – human shackles and human bones. Gradually he uncovered a trade which combined the sale of Angolans by their own community to settle debts or those accused of witchcraft but he also discovered that many people were being seized by Portuguese colonial agents to settle debts. They were then taken to the coast and placed before a Portuguese tribunal who “freed” them as slaves and converted their status to “voluntary” workers on the cocoa plantations on São Tomé for 5 years. Nevinson followed their journey to São Tomé where he estimated there were 30,000 slave labourers and another 3,000 on Príncipe. There was a 20% annual death rate.

Nevinson published his findings in August 1905, pointing out that slavery had gone “underground: disguised, modified, legalised but still a loss of liberty”.

Cadburys and the other Quaker firms had already appointed Joseph Burt as their agent to investigate, and he was eager to go. His trip was delayed by about 9 months while he learned Portuguese to gain the confidence of the Estate Owners.

But in 1906 Burt found much the same as Nevinson. He commented that no one on the islands appeared to return home and children were born into the ownership of the estate owners.

On receipt of this news William returned to Lisbon but made little progress. William and George Cadbury then tried to pressure the Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey to act. However, it appears that the Foreign Office was also concerned about labour problems in South African gold mines and wanted to do a deal with the Portuguese over gold from Portuguese controlled Mozambique.

In June 1907 Seebohm and Arnold Rowntree, Edward and William Cadbury and Francis and Roderick Fry met to discuss whether to continue pressure on the British government or pursue a boycott. They represented the three most significant UK cocoa importers and chocolate manufacturers. After lengthy discussions they decided to give the Foreign Office more time.

But in September 1908 “The Standard” published an article accusing Cadbury Brothers of profiting from slavery, deploring their hypocrisy, and contrasting the conditions of the workers in Bournville to those of the enslaved Africans. Its implied accusation was that the continuance of the trade had been done deliberately. The board decided to sue The Standard for libel as it was regarded as an assault on their integrity that they would have deliberately allowed slavery to continue to maintain their profits. The board was of course aware that they had made decisions to delay a boycott and to trust the British government.

William Cadbury and Joseph Burt then travelled to Angola but could find no direct evidence that the trade continued although they strongly suspected the slaves were now being smuggled out at night.

In March 1909, the British manufacturers did agree to Cadburys’ proposals to institute a boycott although it had little impact on American and German importers and the São Tomé and Príncipe trade continued.

The libel action in November 1909 was very public. The jury took an hour to find that The Standard had libelled Cadbury Brothers and was ordered to pay the costs of the case. But the jury only awarded them damages of one farthing (a quarter an old penny). These contemptuous damages may indicate that the jury was not convinced by the delay over taking action.

The positive outcome in this case was that the libel action did alter the course of the slave trade in Portuguese West Africa as news quickly reached the American manufacturers and by the end of 1909, in the face of international opprobrium, the Portuguese authorities finally publicly outlawed the trade, and 14,000 slaves were repatriated to Angola. However, the Anti-Slavery Society remained concerned about slavery in West Africa for many years afterward and the use of coerced labour continued until independence from Portugal in 1975.

Sources:

Chocolate on Trial – Lowell J. Satre Ohio University Press 2005

Chocolate Wars – Deborah Cadbury HarperPress 2010

The Cadbury Family – John F. Crosfield 1985