
Between 1800 and 1942, the colonial economy of Indonesia depended heavily on the export of a few agrarian commodities. In 1870 coffee was the major export commodity with around 40% of total export earnings. The following decade sugar exports surpassed coffee and became the colony’s largest export earner, reaching over 45% by 1885. It would take until the middle of the 1920s before sugar had to relinquish its position to rubber. In 1925 rubber and sugar together accounted for 52% of total export earnings, or about 950 million guilders (worth roughly 15 billion euros nowadays).

This early form of agribusiness was of immense importance to the economy of the Netherlands Indies. In Java, the centre of the sugar industry, huge sums were invested involving ever bigger and usually interconnected vested interests. Many people scrambled for a piece of this pie, aspiring to riches, influence and fame. The lure of sugar in particular was remarkable. Oei Tiong Ham, an immensely wealthy and successful Chinese businessman from Semarang, was known to the public as *Radja Goela*, the Sugar King. A clear example of sugar fortunes’ appeal to the people’s imagination.

Roger Knight has researched the social, economic, and cultural dimensions of the now nearly forgotten world of Javanese sugar for well over twenty years. His dedicated efforts on this subject have resulted in dozens of papers and many articles, all of them well-informed and extremely detailed, scouring original sources to uncover information. His latest publication, *Commodities and Colonialism: The Story of Big Sugar in Indonesia, 1880-1942*, has been eagerly awaited.

In this masterful account, based upon an exhaustive body of secondary sources and an impressive array of primary sources, he presents a synthesis based upon his long-term research and intimate knowledge of the topic. His storyline is factual, rich in ideas, wide-ranging in thematic scope, and comparative by continuous references to sugar developments in other parts of the world (such as Cuba, Hawaii, and the Philippines). Amazingly, the author succeeds in presenting a synthesis and synopsis at the same time. The wealth of detail, the complexity of agricultural, technical, and business considerations as well as the intricacies of family and business relations could easily have left the reader gasping for air. But Knight manages to
cover every aspect of the colonial world of sugar, from labour conditions, agricultural innovation, technical accomplishment, financial and managerial practice, to the complex dynamics of sociocultural networks that link all these aspects. Each of these themes could have been treated at book length.

Events take place in eight chronological chapters. Each chapter is dedicated to a theme, such as the specific Asian and Javanese economic contexts (Ch. 1, 5, 8); agrarian preconditions and related scientific developments (Ch. 2, 7); the relationship between state bureaucracy and the business community (Ch. 3); and the unique features of sugar entrepreneurship in Java with regard to financial and investment strategies (Ch. 4, 6).

General descriptive and/or conceptual passages introduce specific and detailed case studies. By zooming in and out, Knight provides a dynamic sense of how details and personal lives fit into the big picture. His discussion of the grandiose *Djatiroto* project demonstrates this well; initiated by the *Handelsvereeniging ‘Amsterdam’* (pp. 165-87), the *Djatiroto* project was an expensive and fruitless attempt to break the Javanese agro-industrial confines. Other examples of Knight’s range of scholarship include the Research and Development initiatives of sugar institutes such as *Proefstation Oost-Java* in Pasuruan (pp. 88-93); the connection between sugar business and state bureaucracy, personified in the personal relationship between Governor-General Van Wijck and the entrepreneur Van Musschenbroek (pp. 98-111); and the agrarian labour question, as dealt with by the *Modjo-Agoeng* sugar factory (pp. 194-202, 206).

From the beginning of his analysis, Knight stresses the exceptional circumstances that allowed the Javanese sugar industry to become one the biggest in the world. Time and again he makes it clear that all attempts to maintain this (unwarranted) position were bound to be short-lived, due to the basically unfavourable agrarian, bureaucratic, and/or commercial conditions inside and outside of the colony. In exploring the curious balance of exceptional circumstances and political-economic dynamics, Roger Knight has written a ‘whydunnit’ instead of a ‘whodunit’. This allows him to focus his analysis on the context, circumstances, motives and arguments of the relevant actors in order to reach a deeper understanding of the outcome.

Critics might argue that the adoption of such a technique amounts to determinism and/or wisdom by hindsight. This could easily lead to biased argumentation, allowing sources to be selected in accordance with the
perceived or final outcome, whereas contradicting sources are conveniently ignored. To be sure, the author does not fall into this trap. His analysis is exhaustive as well as nuanced and by no means implies that the actors in the sugar industry could foresee the future. They acted upon information that made a different final outcome conceivable. In the book's final pages, Knight convincingly argues that before the Japanese invasion in 1942, the Javanese sugar industry had a clear future (pp. 238-9). Big Sugar had resumed operations on an impressive scale after the disastrous worldwide economic crisis of the 1930s. Around 50% of the industry’s productive capacity had been restored, output in 1941 stood at approximately 60% of what it had been in 1930, and it appears that sugar companies operated at a modest level of profitability.

The story of Big Sugar in Indonesia until 1942 has now been recorded. In so doing Roger Knight has set a high standard. His book contains a wealth of information and will serve as an important reference work. This monograph may therefore be considered his magnum opus, although one hopes he will continue his efforts, and follow up the story of Indonesian sugar in the post independence era.

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