Here is a book that would tell us “the story of Big Sugar” in colonial Java, and it is written by a real expert who has worked on Java sugar for a good deal longer than the “25 years” modestly claimed in the book’s blurb. The book’s title claims two themes, Colonialism and Commodities, but on the very first page of the Preface we are told which will prevail: “It is precisely this latter perspective, however, which is espoused by the present volume” (p. ix).

Chapters 1, 2, 4 and 7 carry most of the weight of description and carry it well. They tell how Java sugar, starting as a buffalo and thatched shed operation, moved into the modern world with fully mechanised refining mills to compete with and beat the world’s best. Chapters 4 (“No business like sugar business”) and 7 (“Making the Best of It”) give a revealing account of the financial estimates for undistributed profits. The latter chapter also notes the “Closed Shop” policy of State and plantations that kept non-Dutch business away from the lucrative sugar industry. Statistical Appendices 1 and 2 are also very informative.

Chapter 3 is ominously named “Bureaucracy versus Plantocracy” (my emphasis). I shall return to this issue but must observe now that, try as he might, Knight fails to convince here that the State was opposed to sugar plantations, far from it. Chapter 6 is a sort of replay of the earlier chapter that deals with the uneasy relations of the State and one of the largest sugar plantation conglomerates, the Handelsvereenigen Amsterdam (HVA), in particular over the latter’s barely legal manoeuvring over its great Djatiroto mill. Colonial state intervention here rarely moved beyond tut-tutting by a Governor-General or claims that the plantations should pay their taxation dues.

The final chapter is particularly well worth reading. In this chapter, the author does not reiterate a fairly common view that it was the 1930s recession that marked the end or turning-point for Java’s sugar plantations. Knight qualifies that view by placing some emphasis on the recovery after 1938. By 1941, “big sugar had resumed operations in colonial Indonesia in no uncertain fashion” (p. 238). His explanation of the fall of Java’s colonial sugar industry is that it “took a battering during the Second World War and the national revolution against the Dutch” (p. 239). Alas, the events behind that “explanation” remain unexplained. Other gaps glare. During World War II, the Japanese kept plantation sugar production at remarkably high levels, although their relative success (unmentioned here) had the same results that he claims (p. 239) for the immediate pre-war and post-Independence recovery periods for sugar. Furthermore, this important passage fails to note the significance of the Indonesian
Revolution of 1945–1949 that brought the industry to a halt by removing the colonial state machinery that had supported the enforcement of artificially cheap land values that upheld the sugar plantations.

For those short-lived recovery periods, Knight has to rely in part on the impact of “opportunity costs” of cane (p. 239) without much in the way of clarification. (Are we already supposed to know what they are?) “Opportunity costs” are surely the last resort of “explanation”. When academics reach for them to explain a difficult topic they are really scrabbling around the bottom drawer. We suspect something similar may be happening here. The real reasons may be getting a cold shoulder.

At this point Knight and the reviewer begin to part company. There are interesting pages (Pp. 118–119) based on his earlier research dealing with the Sugar Commission of 1921, which ignored the Javanese protests and reached a conclusion that was in almost every respect strongly in favour of the plantations. But has Knight never read the complaints recorded throughout the Commission’s Report that run against those conclusions? These lay bare the forced and indeed illegal operations of the planters against the Javanese. They reveal the system underpinning the whole sugar venture, explaining how under the colonial system the plantations got their cheap land and labour. That is the great piece we feel is missing from this book.

The nature of the miserable rent paid to Javanese farmers who were forced to rent out to the sugar mills is not mentioned. The mills’ technical, financial and marketing apparatus is discussed, but not what made them tick. Long ago, the respected author Legge (1964:82) made the significant observation that Indonesia’s plantations had basically depended on cheap land and cheap labour. But not a word on how this structure came about appears in this book. Yet, it was colonialism that installed the non-economic forces behind this system—colonial law and law enforcement, and the illegal use of village customs that compelled Javanese farmers into the sugar plantations. This was the colonial “normality”, not applicable in the Netherlands, from which the farmer could not escape.

One of the things Knight is getting at is as follows. Let me quote him in detail:

Most recent studies (including the author’s own) have been regional ones, and have largely ignored how the industry’s developments were shaped by the ‘big picture’ of sugar as a major world commodity. Indeed their focus has been less on the industry per se than on its impact on the social and economic evolution of rural Java. Essentially, they belong to the field of ‘peasant studies’ rather than to the histories of commodities.

p. ix