

The Chocolate Makers and the “Abyss of Hell”.

An Anglo-Portuguese Controversy

By David Evans

Miguel Sousa Tavares’ best-selling novel *Equador* and the television series which followed, recently rekindled interest in the bitter controversy which raged at the turn of the twentieth century over the use of “slave labour” in the cocoa plantations of São Tomé and Príncipe. The scandal, which had been smouldering since the eighteen-eighties, brought together an unlikely alliance of British and Portuguese humanitarians, protestant missionaries, Angolan freemasons and Quaker chocolate manufacturers against a powerful lobby of wealthy São Tomé planters who enjoyed the support of the Portuguese authorities during both the Monarchy and the early years of the Republic.

For decades hundreds of men, women and children, many of whom had been captured in tribal wars, were purchased from their captors by intermediaries and marched hundreds of miles from the far interior of Angola to Novo Redondo and Benguela, on the Atlantic coast. The survivors of the march, often less than half of those who set out, were brought before a government representative on their arrival, declared that they had come of their own free will and undertook to render any service the planters might require in exchange for food and clothing and unspecified monthly wages. They were then dressed in striped uniforms, baptised and resold for transport to the islands as steerage on regular passenger vessels. Virtually none of them understood a single word of what was being said either by the magistrate, or by the priest who baptized them. And none expected to return from the place they knew of as Okalunga or “the Abyss of Hell”.

The contract labour system which had become the target of so much international opprobrium, had developed in response to legislation approved since the Marquês Sá da Bandeira’s enlightened decree of 1858, which had established April 29th 1878 as the last day of slavery in Portugal’s African colonies. New legislation, passed in 1903, provided for a contract, which, in theory, established guarantees for plantation labourers. Ostensibly the labourers’ contracts were valid for five complete years and they committed, usually silently, to working a nine-hour day with a two-hour rest period, on all days except “those sanctified by religion.” They were also entitled, in theory, to complain about working conditions or cruel punishment to the government-appointed *Curador* who was charged with protecting their interests. As well-meaning as the legislator’s intentions appear to have been, in practice only a semblance of legality was maintained and before 1908 no contracted labourer had ever returned to Angola.

The “slave-grown cocoa” controversy, which for long periods received almost weekly coverage in both the Portuguese and British press, finally led in 1909 to a boycott of

Portuguese cocoa by the British firms Cadbury's, Rowntree's and Fry's and their German associates, Stollwerck, which was never to be withdrawn.

Although reports of slave trading had been reaching the Foreign Office since the eighteen-eighties, when the first Protestant missions were set up in Portuguese West Africa, the survival of practices akin to slavery, decades after prohibition, was not, at first, widely known in turn-of-the-century Britain. The full gravity of the situation in Angola was only brought to the attention of the general public by a series of eyewitness accounts of the slave route in *Harper's Magazine* and *The Evening Standard* in 1905/6, under the heading "*The New Slave-Trade*". The author was the British journalist Henry Wood Nevinson, who had made his reputation by his vivid reporting from the battlefield in the Crimean and Boer Wars. The use of forced labour in the Portuguese Colonies, however, did not immediately become a "cause célèbre", in part because of the overwhelming humanitarian attention which was being devoted to the E. D. Morel's tireless crusade against the cruel system of exploitation endorsed by King Leopold of the Belgians in the ironically-named Congo Free State.

Nevinson claimed in the introduction to his articles that "little information had reached England since the reports of Livingstone's journeys and Capt. Verney Cameron's coast to coast crossing", but his better-informed compatriots would have been familiar with Joachim John Monteiro's *Angola and the River Congo* published in 1875, Serpa Pinto's *How I crossed Africa*, published in English six years later and Lord Mayo's *De Rebus Africanis*, written in 1883, one year after a journey around West Africa with the remarkable polymath and colonial administrator Harry H. Johnston, which was already critical of the São Tomé system and Portugal's claims to the Congo. All three had been published a generation before Nevinson's articles first appeared and all referred to the fact that slave raiding was common in the interior of Angola.

In response to the increasing demand for drinking chocolate in Europe and America, cocoa production in S. Tomé and Príncipe had increased four times in volume in the last ten years of the nineteenth century, but the most extraordinary growth was in its value, which soared from £67,000 in 1888 to £1,000,000 in 1905. The number of plantation labourers or "non-natives", as they were officially known, had no more than doubled from 16,000 in 1895 to 35,533 in 1909. Fifteen times the value of cocoa was being produced by only twice as many labourers! Virtually nothing had changed over the period as far as the organisation of labour was concerned. Some mechanisation had been introduced on the larger and wealthier plantations, including narrow-gauge *decauville* railways, but it was quite clear that many of the planters were amassing considerable fortunes whilst still protesting that they were unable to pay proper wages or substantially improve working conditions. At the same time they argued that the conditions under which recruitment of labour was carried out in Angola was entirely beyond their control.

But criticism of the contract labour system was not limited to British philanthropists. Voices had already been raised against the system during the final years of the Monarchy. The colonial administrator Judice Biker, writing in the *Revista Portuguesa Colonial* e

Marítima, had summed up the vicissitudes of the system in 1898, seven years before Nevinson's visits to São Tomé and Angola:

O serviçal não [é livre]; é um preto selvagem desconhecendo a nossa língua, e, se emigra para S. Thomé, não é por sua livre vontade, mas sim porque é obrigado [...] Os commerciantes de Benguella e Novo Redondo resgatam aos sobas do interior os escravos de que elles se querem desfazer (em geral prisioneiros das guerras que entre si fazem) e quando recebem alguma encomenda de braços para S. Thomé, são estes os pretos resgatados que comparecem perante o curador para se contractarem como serviçaes. Que valor podem ter estes contractos, se os pretos, desconhecendo as nossas leis e a nossa língua, não sabem que garantias lhes dá aquele contracto?

Biker went on to affirm that despite the five-year contract period, to that date not a single “serviçal” had achieved repatriation. He added that the labourers actually worked an average of eleven and a half hours a day and that their daily rations were totally inadequate, whilst expressing the opinion that such conditions contributed to the abnormally high death rate on the islands. An even more serious accusation was that the “serviçal” could not complain to the “curador” of ill treatment because of his ignorance of the language, and should he do so he would never carry the marks of the lash because offenders were thrown into the cell that existed on each (plantation), until the marks of corporal punishment had disappeared. Shortly after Judice Biker's article appeared, António José de Almeida, the future President of the Republic, who was then working as a plantation doctor in São Tomé, added his own protest in an article in *O Paiz*, stating that the “servicais” were bought and sold like cattle.

It was in that same year, 1898, that British Consul Arthur Nightingale arrived in Luanda, with a watching brief on the movement of contract labour between Angola and São Tomé. Nightingale soon realised that the labour drain would ruin Angola and called it “Slavery in its worst phase [...] under the farsical title of contract labour.” Nightingale's report was soon to be confirmed by the 1902 Ovimbundu uprising at Bailundu in the South of Angola after a group of native chiefs had been seized by the commander of the local fort. Over 400 tribesmen were massacred in the aftermath. Later that year a great political rally, inspired by local freemasons, was held in Luanda to protest against the drain on the provinces' labour supply which it was stated had been at the heart of the Bailundu revolt. Even the Angolan settlers had begun to realise that the contract-labour system was not in their interests.

Nightingale also pointed out that official statistics showed that the death rate was in the order of ten percent per annum, with even more disastrous figures for the island of Príncipe, where sleeping sickness was rife. The mortality of children born on the plantations was even more horrendous, in several years reaching 25%! Other significant causes of death were identified as being directly linked to the lack of sanitary provision and the promiscuous living conditions on the “roças”.

The first sign of concern regarding the use of forced labour on the part of the Quaker chocolate manufacturers who purchased over a third of S.Tomé's cocoa, can be traced to 1901 when William Cadbury admitted he had been warned of reprehensible practises in Angola and São Tomé when on a visit to the firm's plantations in Trinidad. It is interesting to note, however, that George Cadbury, the doyen of the firm and the founder of Bournville, the model village for Cadbury's workers, had been a member of the Anti-Slavery Society since 1893 and of the Aborigine's Protection Society since 1900, and that both Societies regularly referred to the situation in Portuguese West Africa over this period. What appears to have forced the hand of the Quakers was a visit to their offices by M.Z. Stober, a Scottish missionary in the North of Angola, closely followed by an offer in the same year of a São Tomé plantation, Trás-os Montes, which listed amongst its assets two hundred labourers at £18 a head.

As a result of this, William Cadbury was appointed to represent the concerns of the Quaker firms Cadbury's, Rowntrees and Fry's to the planters and the Portuguese authorities, and to liaise with the Foreign Office on the matter. In his book *Labour in Portuguese West Africa*, published in 1910, which summarises the whole affair until then, Cadbury writes that when he met the Planters' Association in Lisbon in 1903, they denied all charges of cruelty and malpractice and recommended that, as a business friend, he should visit São Tomé and see for himself. The Minister of the Colonies, Manuel Gorjão, was equally dismissive. Cadbury was advised by Sir Martin Gosselin, the British Minister in Lisbon, who had been a delegate at the Brussels Conference, to wait for a year to see how the new legislation, enacted that year, would affect the situation, but agreed that Cadbury should accept the planters' suggestion and undertake a private enquiry.

A year went by before Joseph Burt, who was also a Quaker, was ready to investigate on behalf of the chocolate manufacturers. This was partly due to the fact that before his departure for Africa, Burt spent six months in Oporto learning Portuguese with the help of Alfredo Henrique da Silva, a Methodist educationalist who later played an important role in the humanitarian campaign. Nevinson's path was to cross with Burt on landing at São Tomé after returning from his arduous fact-finding expedition to the source of the slave trade in the interior of Angola.

According to Nevinson, Burt was "honest above suspicion" and imbued with the Quaker virtue, which Nevinson found maddening, of being able to "obey the precept, resist not evil, but overcome evil with good." Burt and Nevinson visited many of the plantations in São Tomé together, and the journalist was also to visit some of the plantations on Príncipe, this time alone, where plantation doctors confided to him that "if they could keep a slave alive through the melancholy and home-sickness of the first year or two, he or she sometimes lived for some years longer."

Cadbury's envoy spent almost six months in São Tomé and several months more on the mainland in 1906, visiting all the coastal towns and making a four-month trip into the interior of Angola with Dr W. Claude Horton of Brighton Children's Hospital. He then sailed on round the Cape to Delagoa Bay, ostensibly to study contract labour in Mozambique; visited

South Africa, and was away from Britain for almost two years in all. His report, which was published on his return, confirmed Nevinson's findings in almost every detail. It concludes:

I am satisfied that under the serviçal system, as it exists at present, thousands of black men and women are, against their will, and often in circumstances of great cruelty, taken away every year from their homes and transported across the sea to work on unhealthy islands, from which they never return, If this is not slavery I know of no word in the English language which correctly characterises it.

There were also speedy reactions from the Portuguese authorities to Nevinson's articles, and in June 1906, a "Justifying Memorial" on native labour in the Portuguese colonies appeared, the first of several to be published over the next few years. Referring to the "*modelar regime de mão de obra*" in São Tomé, the "memorial" refers to "*propaganda, ultimamente retomada com insistencia*" and records successive legislation which had been introduced from 1875 onwards, to conclude, with either outrageous ignorance or breathtaking cynicism that:

O indígena de Angola, dispondo em geral de um notável aptidão de trabalho, tem-se adaptado facilmente ás condições do meio, criando interesse pelo trabalho, affeiçoando-se á terra, sentindo-se tão feliz que nem pensa no repatriamento.

The memorandum, which was also published in French, further argued that labourers who were contracted to work in São Tomé e Príncipe were guaranteed by the laws and regulations a regular salary, comfortable and hygienic lodgings, abundant and healthy nourishment, caring and helpful attention, hospital internment, nursery schools for children, and industrial and agricultural schools.

The gulf of perception on the question of slavery between the Portuguese authorities and philanthropists from both countries had never yawned wider.

Nevinson decided there had been enough time-wasting and in September, 1907, against the wishes of Cadbury and Co. who were following the Foreign Office's advice to restrain from any direct action which might jeopardise the supply of Mozambican contract labour for the Transvaal gold mines, he published a powerful article entitled "The Angola Slave Trade" in the Fortnightly Review. Nevinson's article ended ominously, expressing the view that the only measure that would arouse world public opinion was a boycott on Portuguese cocoa:

The Foreign Office is necessarily cautious. Our own position in the matter of contract labour has been none too strong in recent years, and then we have to take into account Delagoa Bay, German ambitions, trade rivalries and Royal Friendships. [...] A boycott proclaimed by well-known British and American makers would have an incalculable effect upon the public opinion of the world.

There is little doubt that what Nevinson called "royal friendships" had indeed played an important part in staying the hand of Sir Edward Grey at the Foreign Office, as did the discreet diplomacy of the Portuguese Ambassador Marquês de Soveral. The official visit of

Crown Prince Luís Filipe to São Tomé in July of 1907 was further proof of the King of Portugal's involvement in the matter.

The planters later refuted the Burt report in a paper which Cadbury called a "lengthy document containing the wildest charges against the integrity of Mr. Burt and the motives of the British cocoa makers", but the planters' protest was only printed in 1910, long after the boycott was in force, under the title *O Cacau de S. Thomé*, presumably because they still hoped that the chocolate makers would quickly review their decision. The cover of the pamphlet bears a verse from Camões' *Lusiad*, which is far from complimentary to the British Quakers:

*O recado que trazem é de amigos;
Mas debaixo o veneno vem coberto,
Que os pensamentos eram de inimigos,
Segundo foi o engano descoberto.*

In 1907, however, the atmosphere, though tense, was still not embittered. The planters argued that they were possessed of the same humane sentiment as Cadbury and that they would place no obstacle before labourers who might wish to return to their homes. Furthermore, they suggested that the repatriation fund should be transferred from their safekeeping to the Colonial Bank in São Tomé, whilst they also undertook to ensure that each labourer would receive about £18 on his return to Angola, adding that the first contracts to expire under the 1903 legislation would be in 1908.

For those in Portugal who were convinced that some kind of accommodation could be achieved with the chocolate makers, 1908 brought bitter disappointment. Positions on both sides were becoming more extreme, undermining the strategy of the Foreign Office. The Aborigine's Protection Society, the more effective of the two British anti-slavery organisations, published evidence, gathered over a number of years, under the heading *Slave Traffic in Portuguese Africa*, whilst Lisbon's *Sociedade de Geografia* responded to the humanitarian campaign with a pamphlet in English entitled *São Thomé. The Native Work. Legitimate Defence*.

Cadbury warned the planters, in a letter dated June 6th, that public opinion in Britain was running high and that they might be obliged to cease buying Portuguese cocoa unless drastic measures were taken. Two days later, the planters replied that they were unable to yield to all of the chocolate makers demands and, in view of their response, Cadbury decided he had no alternative than to go to Africa and see the conditions for himself. There is no doubt that, at this point, it would have been far easier for the chocolate makers to proceed with a boycott without further delay, had they not wished to be seen as acting in the best of faith. Instead Cadbury and Burt set off in September for a fact-finding tour of São Tomé and Angola, whilst on October 7th, at Cadbury's request, Charles A. Swan, who had spent twenty-three years as a missionary in Angola, departed for the interior to gather more information on the slave-trade at its source.

Swan, who was a useful amateur photographer, took his camera with him, and as much as the testimony of other missionaries and the natives themselves, it was the photographs he shot along the route from Benguela into the interior that provided the most damning and persuasive evidence on his return. Cadbury and Burt spent two weeks in São Tomé and another month and a half in Angola. During this time the first token repatriation of a handful of *serviçais* took place and the Portuguese Government hastily reviewed the legislation which had been introduced earlier in the year.

If from the legislative viewpoint the government could not be accused of immobility, the quandary remained, however, as to how to implement the law. The first sign of effective change in recruitment practice was to occur at the end of year, with the publication of legislation which would allow Mozambican labourers to be imported into São Tomé on shorter contracts.

On September 26th 1908, taking advantage of Cadbury's departure for Africa, the Tory newspaper *The Standard* published a leading article by Sidney Low on Cadbury's hypocrisy regarding slave-grown cocoa, which Nevinson later called "a fine specimen of satiric invective". Cadbury's saw no option but to sue for libel. The part that was most offensive to the chocolate makers was an ironic contrast between the idyllic conditions at their Bournville factory and those on the cocoa islands. Cadbury's won their suit but were awarded only token damages of one farthing. *The Standard* however, was obliged to pay all the costs of the case.

Cadbury saw no sign in Africa that the legislation brought in by the Portuguese Government had had any effect on the situation and on March 17th 1909 a statement to the press was issued by Cadbury's, Fry's and Rowntree's, to the effect that they would no longer buy S. Tomé cocoa. The following day the German firm Stollwerck followed suit. After a lecture tour of the United States by Joseph Burt and his wife later in the year at least six American manufacturing firms agreed to boycott cocoa from São Tomé.

Without doubt, the tide had changed regarding repatriation of contract labourers, but all too late. The chocolate makers were buying elsewhere.

Postscript

The boycott was not a sign, however, that the controversy had come to an end; in fact, it was only the end of the beginning. The fall of the monarchy and the advent of the Republic was to bring new pressure from the Foreign Office, making the reform of the contract labour system a prior condition for recognition of the new regime. But if this was Sir Edward Grey's intention, he failed to pursue it and Britain was to recognize the Republic shortly after France did. The dispute was still simmering acrimoniously eight years later, when Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour sent a memorandum to Sir Lancelot Carnegie, the British Minister in Lisbon, dated February 27th, 1917:

"Sir, His Majesty's Government have been glad to learn that the recent report of His Majesty's Consul-General at Loanda on the conditions of Labour in Angola and the

Portuguese Islands has been a source of gratification to the Government to which you are accredited.

Mr. Hall's despatch will be published with as little delay as possible, and you should inform the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs that His Majesty's Government hopes that the effect will be to remove the boycott which has been maintained by British firms against the produce of the regions in question, as they themselves have formed the opinion that the general conditions there, the terms of the labourers contracts and those on which they are renewed, and the conditions of repatriation are entirely satisfactory.

But despite this demonstration of the British Government's goodwill towards Portugal, a month after Portuguese troops had joined British forces in Flanders, the boycott, perhaps surprisingly, was not withdrawn. Writing in 1931 in his history of Cadbury Bros., 'The Firm of Cadbury', Iolo Williams offers the official explanation but also, unwittingly, discloses a second, far less admirable, motive:

Ltd. Have been directly and increasingly interested in the cocoa-growing areas of the Gold Coast and Nigeria. It was evident that much genuine repatriation was taking place; the death rate remained appallingly high in San Thomé and Príncipe. The English cocoa firms, including Cadbury Brothers, therefore did not choose to begin once more the purchase of San Thomé cocoa, and have never, to this day, done so. [...] the firm's connection with West Africa has not lapsed, as for the past twenty-one years Cadbury Brothers; and they are proud to be associated, through their buying agencies, with the development, under British rule, of cocoa cultivation by free native farmers in these Colonies.

Cadbury's had wasted no time in transferring their interests to the British West African Colonies and there can be little doubt, in hindsight, that the reason given for maintaining the boycott, the high mortality rate in the cocoa islands, was little more than a smoke-screen. Despite the real progress in improving conditions on the plantations and increasing repatriation of contract labourers, the Quaker chocolate makers had no intention of resuming purchases. Their philanthropic and business objectives had both been achieved.

— ooOOoo —

David Evans spent the greater part of his professional career with the British Council in Portugal where he was involved in a wide range of teaching and management duties. He is also an artist and translator. At present he is writing a Ph.D thesis on Portuguese perceptions of the humanitarian campaign against slavery in S. Tomé and Príncipe at the beginning of the twentieth century. He is a researcher with CETAPS at Universidade Nova in Lisbon, and has a particular interest in the field of Anglo-Portuguese relations and the origins of Socialism and Anti-Imperialism in Britain.