



The Bitter Truth About Sugar

Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom and Science
By Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos

By *Desiree Rucker, Oct 2014

Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos have sugar in their blood. The co-authors of the book, *Sugar Changed The World, A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom and Science*, are a husband and wife team of educators and writers who set out to tell this story when they realized that they each had an ancestor who was impacted by the sugar trade.

Aronson's connection is through his Cousin Avram's wife, Nina. Nina's grandfather was a serf in Russia, which was akin to being a slave during that time. Her grandfather invented the process by which beet sugar was refined and bleached to whiteness. This invention allowed competition to the British domination of the sugar market. Nina's grandfather bought his freedom with his wealth and changed the trajectory of his family's destiny.

Budhos's story begins with her great-grandfather in India deciding to sign a five year contract to become an indentured servant on a sugar plantation in British Guiana. His decision to cross the "black water" as the ocean was called by the fearful villagers was a fateful decision as he would never see India again. Once a person sailed away he or she was "said to have gone to tapu," and no longer had a place in the village or any claim to ancestral land.

Ironically, *Sugar Changed The World*, is a bittersweet recounting of the discovery of sugar cane, the invention of sugar and the desire of men to dominate the market. The desire for the taste of sweetness is a need that humans possess instinctively from birth. Just as a drug craze changes society, sugar's impact on the world's palate is detailed in the book using economic, social, and political events. The wide-ranging history (the book contains a timeline from 8000 BC to the 21st Century) of the sugar trade is presented cogently in 166 pages with 80 stunning illustrations from archival sources, photographs, songs and oral history that capture the humanity of the people caught up in the trade.

For example, Budhos's great grandfather's decision to sail to British Guiana was initiated by the promises of recruiters working for plantation owners who needed to replace formerly enslaved

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Africans in the cane fields. Having spent their lives working from sun up to sun down without pay, and cruelly punished for the slightest infraction, newly emancipated Africans wisely chose to pursue work elsewhere. Southeast Asians, suffering from drought and famine at home, were willing to invest five years of their lives to earn money with which to return home. The resentment between Africans and Southeast Asians was fanned by the low wages accepted by the newcomers, and the instigation of the plantation owners. When the Southeast Asians began demanding more money and better treatment, the next ethnic group was brought in to displace them. This scenario was replayed in every country where the plantation owner's objective of keeping the cost of labor as low as possible and profits high.

Aronson and Budhos found that between the 1600s and the 1800s sugar drove the entire economy linking Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas. (35) This Age of Sugar the authors contend is just as important as The Bronze Age or The Iron Age of history.

How it all began is also extremely fascinating. Before then the authors suggest the world was in the Age of Honey, which began about 7000 B.C, evidenced by a rock drawing from that time found in Spain of a man reaching into a crevice to remove honey from a hive. According to the authors, the end of The Age of Honey was initiated by the none other than the megalomaniac Alexander the Great. On a scouting expedition for Alexander, the captain of his fleet, Nearchus, discovered the "sweet reed" in India. It is believed that the cane plants are native to New Guinea and were brought to Asia by Polynesians sailors who settled in Hawaii in A.D. 1100. The Greeks knew of the reed, because Herodotus, who had lived a century before Alexander had documented that the Persian Emperor Darius I had encountered it in India in 510 B.C. In India, sugar had three purposes. Sugar was a food, an object that was offered to the God and burned in rituals and ceremonies and last, used as medicine. When Muslim invaders conquered India they set about becoming the masters of growing, milling and refining sugar.

Egypt became the nexus of sugar production. It was the Egyptians who figured out how to make sugar as pure and white as possible.

Marco Polo noted in his writings that sugar had been cultivated in China for centuries but it was an Egyptian at the court of Kublai Khan that had taught them to how make the sugar as white as the snow on the peaks of the mountains.

Cane reed needed to be processed quickly or it stiffens and becomes woody. It was the Muslims who formulated a system to handle the requirements of producing a vast amount of sugar. Hence, the plantation system was born. "The plantation had only one purpose to create a single product that could be grown, ground, boiled, dried and sold to distinct markets. Since one cannot live on sugar, the crop grown on plantations could not even feed the people who harvested it."

It was Muslim and Christians in the 1600s that began using the plantation method of farming, incorporating slavery. Many of the slaves working in sugar production in the Mediterranean were Russians or people considered the spoils of war.

The Crusades led Europeans out of their villages and across the known world introducing them to what they called honey cane. Now that the common man had tasted it, he clamored for more. Sugar had before this time been a precious commodity that was affordable only by the merchant class, the nobles and, royalty. With the plantation system instituted and enslaved Africans as the tireless machines of the factory production could finally meet demand.

The chapter in the book simply entitled “Hell” tells of the aftermath of Christopher Columbus’s “successful” voyage to Hispaniola. The cane plants he transported from the Canary Islands to Hispaniola flourished, instituting a “white gold” rush that issued in a hellish life of toil and torment for thousands of Arawak Indians and millions of Africans.

“Europeans saw growing sugar in the new world with slaves as the way to vast wealth.”

After the Caribbean, Europeans set their sights on growing cane in Brazil.

According to the authors “the true Age of Sugar had begun—and it was doing more to reshape the world than any ruler, empire or war had ever done.”

Sugar flooded into the markets of Europe fueling the low paid workers of the Industrial Revolution’s tea and biscuits.

In order to create sugar, Europeans and Colonists destroyed African society, turned the people into objects and took away their rights and freedom, only to be confronted by their own societies by working men who demanded representation for taxation, the right to equality under the law, and the pursuit of happiness.

The true horror of the cost of this quest for white gold rests in the fact that only 4% of the people taken from Africa were sent to the United States, and 96% were shipped to the Caribbean and Brazil and the rest of South America. At the time of Emancipation the number of Africans in the United States had grown to four million. But in the Islands where sugar had been produced, where two million Africans had been shipped, only 670,000 Africans were alive to see Emancipation. One can never pour sugar into their beverage again without reflecting on the true cost of sugar.

Avram and Budhos conclude the book with chapters covering the Abolitionist Movement of England and the United States and Mahatma Gandhi’s fight for the rights of citizenship for Southeast Asians in South Africa. Though many families had resided in the country for decades and had come to the country as indentured workers to work the cane fields, they were treated as outsiders.

Sugar Changed The World represents history as it should be taught. History should be presented like a tapestry that is also turned over to show the stitching. This needs to be done to reveal the facts and the relevance of events; to display the crisscrossing motives of all the nations of the world and the unfathomable methods used by many of their greedy and inhumane citizens

working under the banner of industry and progress. Perhaps, then we, the people of the world can meet on the level playing field of truth.

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