

April Merleaux, *Sugar and Civilization: American Empire and the Cultural Politics of Sweetness*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015. 336pp.

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April Merleaux opens her fascinating book with accounts of people who, in the aftermath of the Spanish American War, created candy replicas of the U.S.S. Maine. She thus highlights an important, if generally overlooked, dimension of this war. Namely, people considered sugar one of the spoils of victory. *Sugar and Civilization* traces the story of sugar from the 1890s through the 1930s and looks at a variety of people, workers as well as consumers, in order to understand why people came to eat so much sugar. Merleaux places a great deal of emphasis on tariffs and tariff policies. To be sure, tariffs are not a very popular topic with modern audiences. However, they mattered very much in the period covered by this book. People, from Presidents down to ordinary citizens, debated tariffs passionately. Furthermore, tariffs were “a critical component of the imperial repertoire through which U.S. policymakers and investors formed the U.S. sugar empire” (6). Because historians have different definitions of empire, it is helpful to note that for Merleaux it means “an arrangement in which political sovereignty is exercised unevenly across space and in which some people and geographies are differentiated as being outside of the law or subject to an alternate set of legal arrangements” (20).

Merleaux merits praise for focusing tariffs, as they are sometimes neglected by historians. She also deserves credit for the important distinction she draws between “policymakers” (politicians or people in the executive branch who made policy decisions or did research that influenced policy) and “administrators” (people charged with carrying out policies). Although administrators did not make policy, “their job was to make it work on the ground. Their actions were sometimes more important than the intentions of those who designed the policies” (xv). Rather than restricting her analysis

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to Washington and national elites, Merleaux roams beyond the Beltway and considers other countries as well as rural areas of the U.S. In addition, one of the goals of the book is to “broaden our understanding of which nation-state actions we interpret as imperial in the U.S. context. Formal annexation and military occupation are not the only ways that nation-states have engaged in imperial action. Trade policies are also crucial elements of empire” (14). In other words, empire is not just about annexation.

There are too many important points in this book to discuss in a short review. Policymakers did not begin with an overarching imperial vision, Merleaux contends, but the sugar tariff became “a site of an imperial racial formulation” (31) and the cultural politics of sugar were intimately linked with race, nation, and a civilizing mission. The formation of a sugar empire meant easily available sugar and changing patterns of consumption. For middle-class people, “to eat refined white sugar was also to internalize a colonial and racial division of labor” (55) which linked sugar and whiteness and associated African Americans and residents of the island territories with less-refined forms of sweetness. The U.S. quickly developed an insatiable sweet tooth. Although the U.S. Food Administration called for people to restrict their consumption of sugar during World War I, in reality, U.S. consumers actually ate more rather than less sugar. Interestingly, the wartime sugar program “was one of the first examples of coherent economic planning through which federal officials aimed to balance demands from industrialists, farmers, merchants, urban eaters, and workers, in the United States and abroad” (83). After the war ended, businessmen and federal officials created a mass market for inexpensive sweets. The good times could not last forever and sugar soon entered a crisis of overproduction. It quickly became obvious that the tariff could not solve the problem. New Deal policies, despite anti-imperial trappings, “reconsolidated the U.S. sugar empire by reconciling issues that had first emerged after the Spanish American War” (200). Merleaux’s epilogue reinforces the idea that the tariff “was a site for an emerging imperial racial formation as policymakers, workers, and consumers negotiated how U.S. sovereignty would be exercised in movement of commodities and people across borders” (236).

All in all, this is a fascinating book. Merleaux guides the reader through a fascinating forty-year history of sugar and draws on an impressively wide base of sources. *Sugar and Civilization* will appeal to anyone interested in economic history, imperialism, consumption, and the development of the state. It will certainly prove useful in upper-level undergraduate classes as well as graduate seminars.