



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### [Review of: G.R. Knight (2013) Commodities and colonialism: the story of Big Sugar in Indonesia, 1880-1942]

Boomgaard, P.

**DOI**

[10.1080/00074918.2014.896257](https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2014.896257)

**Publication date**

2014

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Boomgaard, P. (2014). [Review of: G.R. Knight (2013) Commodities and colonialism: the story of Big Sugar in Indonesia, 1880-1942]. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 50(1), 138-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2014.896257>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*

*Commodities and Colonialism: The Story of Big Sugar in Indonesia, 1880–1942.* By G. Roger Knight. Leiden: Brill, 2013. Pp. xi + 291. Hardback: €112/\$146.

---

G. Roger Knight and Java sugar belong together. Since the early 1980s, Knight has published article upon article on Java's sugar industry, mainly between 1830 and 1942. Indeed, any article on Java sugar published during the last 30 years is bound to be from his hand (with a few exceptions). His readers have been waiting for him to synthesise this work, and now, finally, their patience has been rewarded.

*Commodities and Colonialism* unfolds over eight chapters (plus an introduction and a conclusion). The book deals with the high or late colonial period, 1880 to 1942, during which the production of (cane) sugar in Java – the 'Indonesia' in the title is misleading – was almost constantly increasing, except for in the early 1930s (owing to the severe economic depression of those years). Sugar exports in Java

grew more or less at the same rate during the same period (again, exclusive of the 1930s); almost all factory-produced cane sugar was exported, while the local population usually consumed 'brown' sugars, including palm sugar. From around 1895, cane yields per hectare in Java also increased constantly. In other words, the story of big sugar is one of success, at least from the industry's point of view.

Knight discusses the many elements that, taken together, shaped the industry's development, from the role of the state to the roles of capital, mechanisation, land, labour, agronomics, and of foreign demand. The (colonial) state, for example, was usually supportive of 'big sugar', but there were relatively brief episodes of a more critical attitude, such as the period of the so-called Ethical Policy, during the early decades of the 20th century. Usually, however, the colonial bureaucracy helped the industry acquire land and labour.

It must be remembered that in Java during the high colonial period the sugar plantations, as a rule, were employing (renting) peasant-owned rice fields on which to grow cane, and that land was almost always in demand—in contrast to the abundance of suitable land in Cuba, for example, which was Java's main competitor for many years. However, there was an advantage in employing peasant land for cane: it did not have to be cleared of its original vegetation. Conversely, labour in Java was usually relatively cheap and plentiful, which was to be expected on such a densely populated island. Yet it could still be scarce, locally and temporarily.

Knight discusses at length the role of capital in the early years of the period, when the sugar industry went through a difficult patch (with which the author deals rather briefly) and had to be rescued by capital from the Netherlands. Knight emphasises that the people behind this 'Dutch' capital had many 'Indies' connections, and that some authors have made too much of the contrast (Dutch versus Indies). He also states that the 'rescue' operation was essentially a short-term exercise anyway, not a long-term inflow of investment capital from the Netherlands. Most of the time, however, the sugar industry did not need much outside money, because it reinvested its earnings.

Knight acknowledges that mechanisation was restricted to the factories, where innovative technology had been applied at an early stage. Labour being relatively plentiful, work in the fields, where most labour was deployed, underwent little mechanisation, apart from the transport of cane from the fields to the factory. Knight's discussion of agronomic elements includes the industry's voracious use of artificial fertiliser and the development of high-yielding cane varieties, such as the celebrated POJ 2878, POJ being short for Proefstation Oost-Java, the experimental station where it was developed. Knight also devotes much space to examining the fluctuating demand from foreign markets. He rightly stresses that Java sugar's main markets were in Asia, and that when these markets (India, Taiwan, China, Japan) became autarchic after 1929, the demand for Java sugar fell, although there was a short revival on the eve of the Japanese invasion of 1942.

The book is a good read, and will be the text of reference for many years to come. It is impossible to think of a better guide through the intricacies of Java sugar than Knight. My main quibble is that the author has collected so much information, mainly on the big players in Java's sugar industry, including the senior civil servants, that the balance between interesting facts and structural developments is sometimes at risk. It is understandable, but disappointing, that the book does not cover 1820–80, the formative years of mechanised sugar in Java.

Finally, a small detail: Knight translates the Dutch word *welvaart* (as in *onderzoek naar de mindere welvaart* [investigation into the reduced prosperity]) with the English term 'welfare', something often done by Dutch people, but he, a native speaker of English, should have known better. 'Welfare' is a much too modern term ('the welfare state'); in my view, 'prosperity' would be a perfectly adequate translation.

Peter Boomgaard

*KITLV, Leiden; University of Amsterdam; European University Institute, Florence*

© 2014 Peter Boomgaard

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2014.896257>