

## **The Campaign against Island Slavery 1901 – 1908. (Adapted from the account by John F. Crosfield)**

While on a visit to Trinidad in 1901 William Cadbury first heard disturbing rumours about the use of forced labour on the cocoa plantations in the Portuguese islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. These rumours were given more substance when the firm received the particulars of a São Tomé plantation listing 200 labourers among the assets for sale, a clear indication that they were regarded as the absolute property of the estate. Asked by the firm to investigate further, William embarked on a correspondence with other interested parties including anti-slavery campaigners, African Missionaries and the other British chocolate manufacturers. By temperament and training William was cautious and meticulously detailed in his approach. It is evident from his letters at the time that he hoped to find a situation which was less bad than some of the evidence suggested, something more akin to the contract labour system he had encountered in the West Indies, a system that was genuinely free of coercion.

It was a Scottish missionary Matthew Stober who provided clear and devastating evidence of slavery in Angola and the Islands and it was Stober, a Portuguese speaker, who accompanied William on his first visit to Lisbon in March 1903. There they met the British Minister to Portugal, the Association of São Tomé Planters and the Portuguese Minister of Colonies who made light of the matter, saying the abuses were trivial and, such as still existed would be removed by a new law known as the Labour Decree of January 1903.

At this juncture it would have been easy for Cadbury Brothers to have stopped purchases from the Islands and washed their hands of the whole business. But William wanted to make sure that if there were injustices done to the labourers, they would be put right. Since only 5% of the São Tomé cocoa was sent to England, the withdrawal of Cadbury's custom would probably have had no effect.

The British Minister in Lisbon advised William to allow a year for the new Labour Decree to take effect and then to send an investigator to the Islands. In order to maximise pressure on the growers, William enlisted the support of Fry's, Rowntree and Stollwerck, and in 1904 they selected Joseph Burt, a member of the Society of Friends to investigate.

Burt travelled first to Portugal to learn the language and then on to the Islands and Angola where he made a study in depth. He concluded: -

*'if this is not slavery, I know of no word in the English language that correctly characterised it'.*

Many of the enslaved were captured in the interior of Angola, and gangs were driven, often in shackles, down to the coast by slave traders, under conditions of appalling hardship and cruelty. At the ports there was a farcical signing of contracts, written in Portuguese, a language unknown to the majority, by which they went to the islands for a fixed term. In São Tomé a repatriation fund was solemnly accumulated, and at the end of a labourer's term of contract there was a formality of asking him if he wished to re-contact for a further term. In fact, no single man or woman had been repatriated up to that time, and children born on the Islands were regarded as the absolute property of the estates where they worked. A mortality rate of over 10% of young adults was admitted even on the best run estates. The largest number of deaths occurred among the newly imported labourers. On one plantation Burt found that 80 deaths had occurred out of 150 newcomers. On Príncipe sleeping sickness was widespread.

The substance of Burt's investigation was confirmed by the journalist, Henry Nevinson whose harrowing account of slavery in Portuguese West Africa was published as a series of articles in 'Harper's Monthly Magazine' and then in 'A Modern Slavery' a book he published in 1906.

Burt's report was given to the Foreign Office who presented it to the Portuguese Government in 1907. Meanwhile William and Burt travelled to Lisbon and laid it before a committee of the proprietors of the São Tomé estates. Six months later, when the Colonial Minister had returned from Africa they met him in Lisbon. He expressly promised in writing that the irresponsible recruiting agents in Angola would be replaced by a properly conducted government system and that the São

Tomé labourers would be repatriated at the end of their service. However, three months later there was a change of government and the Colonial Minister was replaced.

On the advice of the Foreign Office, William delayed publication of the Burt report and also on their advice waited a further year for the new Lisbon regulations to take effect.

In October 1908 William Cadbury and Joseph Burt embarked on a visit to the São Tomé and Angola to see at first-hand how the reforms were progressing. In spite of a letter of introduction from the Colonial Minister in Lisbon their investigations were obstructed by local officials both in São Tomé and Angola. Even so it was apparent that the situation was unchanged in all respects.

On William's return to England in March 1909 Cadbury Brothers announced that they would make no further purchases of cocoa produced in the Islands. Similar announcements followed from Fry's, Rowntree and Stollwerck.

George Cadbury was a very active supporter of the Liberal party (then in power) both financially and through his newspaper the 'Daily News'. So it was that in September 1908 the Conservative 'Standard' published an article accusing Cadbury Brothers of laggardliness, indifference and hypocrisy regarding the use of slave labour to produce the cocoa they obtained from São Tomé. The accusation was so malicious and untrue that the company decided to sue for libel.

The following year the case came to court and the 'Standard', represented by the formidable Sir Edward Carson took the unusual step of calling no witnesses to substantiate and defend the libel but instead sought to influence the jury with a brutal cross examination of William and George Cadbury.

George Cadbury in a letter dated 7<sup>th</sup> December 1908 wrote as follows: -

*'Just a line to say how thankful we are for the result of the trial. All those who understand Birmingham juries and their evident bias shown by their laughing and by their gestures at any hit made by Sir Edward Carson, feared a verdict against us, but the noble summing up of the Judge was absolutely impartial; he quite grasped the subject, and it has cleared away many of the slanders that have of late been hurled against us, and which would have abounded on every side in the coming election. William did magnificently in the box during his four days, dealing with the best cross questioner in England with calm, much dignity and as far as I could trace he did not make a single mistake in his answers.*

*We told our Counsel Mr Rufus Isaacs, we had no wish to be vindictive. The 'Standard' will have to pay costs, which will probably be between £10,000 and £20,000, and that is quite punishment enough to make them careful what they say in future. You will notice that they dared not bring one single witness on their side – Nevinson was there but they dared not call him up, so that all the cross questioning came from the other side, they dared not give our Counsel a chance of cross examining a single one of their witnesses.*

*It has been a long ordeal.'*

The case drew so much attention to slavery in the Islands that the six leading American manufacturers joined in putting pressure on the Portuguese, who did eventually greatly improve conditions. In the two and a half years from 1914 more than fourteen thousand labourers were repatriated, repatriation became the rule and genuinely voluntary workers were recruited.

William's untiring efforts had not been in vain. However, a high death rate on the Islands continued.

Sources:

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