



Book Review

Chocolate: How a New World commodity conquered Spanish literature

By Erin Alice Cowling

University of Toronto Press, 2021: 240 pages

Reviewed by Aqeel Ihsan

Erin Alice Cowling's *Chocolate: How a New World Commodity Conquered Spanish Literature* is a welcome addition to the existing literature on chocolate and its cultural, spiritual, and medicinal significance throughout history. Cowling traces the cacao bean and its derived products, mainly chocolate as a drink, from the pre-Columbian era to the mid-eighteenth century through various chronicles, medical and religious treatises, and literary texts. Though mainly a book on the early modern period, Cowling extends her source material into the eighteenth century to demonstrate how chocolate went from being a ceremonial drink and form of currency in Amerindian society to something that was consumed by Spaniards on a daily basis. According to Cowling, the main purpose of her book is "to look at the ways in which chocolate began to become constructed in literature, and how the literary sources that encapsulate the incorporation of chocolate into Spanish society also reflected the anxieties of the governing bodies of the day" (2021, p. 4). Cowling

uncovers numerous literary texts that mention chocolate but acknowledges that there may be texts that escaped her notice, which she may take up in future works.

Cowling begins her analysis in Chapter 1 by tracing the cultural significance of chocolate to Amerindian societies to see how they transmitted their knowledge of chocolate to European explorers upon contact. Cacao, according to early Mayan texts, was seen as a sacred object and was used for ritualistic purposes in sacrificial and religious ceremonies. These early texts also discussed cacao and chocolate as having medicinal uses and not being considered suitable for daily consumption.

Chapter 2 focusses on some of the texts written by the first Spaniards to encounter chocolate, which would have included soldiers, conquistadors, and missionaries. Early writings discussed the cacao bean as currency, the use of chocolate as a drink in ceremonies and for gift-giving, the cultivation of cacao trees and the

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processes of creating the drink, and its uses as a health supplement by the Indigenous peoples and its implications for the health of Spaniards. The monetary nature of the cacao bean was instantly attractive to Spanish soldiers, and it was something they placed importance on after gold and silver. Hernán Cortés, an early conquistador, is cited by Cowling as most likely the first to actually try chocolate as a drink. It is also Cortés who writes about the importance of cacao beyond just a drink, maybe of equal importance in terms of its value and necessity as maize and beans. Though Spaniards saw the export potential of cacao, they were not thrilled by the taste or preparation of chocolate, seeing it instead as an acquired taste, something that would change centuries later.

Chapter 3 traces how chocolate came into popularity in the Old World, first as something consumed by the nobility and the wealthy, and later becoming commonplace amongst Spaniards. For Cowling's purposes, she traces how common references to chocolate became in literature and local terminology. Some of the early references she cites are comedies, where chocolate is a symbol of "Otherness," as a bad habit from the New World, and as representing undesirable qualities. These references encapsulated how chocolate outside of the nobility was viewed as an inferior product that one should not indulge in. Despite the early negative accounts in literature, the popularity of chocolate rose quickly, so the negative reactions in literary sources seemed unrelated to the commercial success of cacao. As chocolate became more common, that too was reflected in the literary sources and plays, which began discussing the immense value chocolate had when it came to gift-giving, paying and repaying debt, replacing a women's dowry, and as a symbol of wealth.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine the religious and medical debates surrounding chocolate. Here, Cowling asserts

that though the Catholic Church and medical practitioners were concerned about the health benefits of chocolate as it pertained to fasting and everyday life, for the layperson, the consumption of chocolate was a non-issue. As a product, it was contained and controlled by the Spanish Empire, and for Spaniards, it was something they saw value in and consumed for a variety of purposes. Lastly, Chapter 6 focuses on the dark side of chocolate and the ways in which it was sexualized and demonized in historical and literary sources. Chocolate as a vice appears in the sources as having connections to witchcraft and having a role in inducing people to commit some of the seven deadly sins.

Cowling does well to show the relationship between chocolate and imperial Spanish society through an interdisciplinary lens that incorporates both literary and historical documents written in the Spanish Empire. However, the title of her book does not accurately convey the central theme of the book itself. Chocolate as a new world commodity, as demonstrated by Cowling, did not "conquer" Spanish literature. This is acknowledged by the author in her conclusion, where she states that "some of the literature seems to indicate an early, generalized knowledge of the drink...while other, later sources...seem to indicate that it is still not as well known as we might expect, even in the second half of the seventeenth century" (2021, p. 163). Cowling further goes on to say that "we cannot be fully sure how much, or when, chocolate is being consumed by the various classes," but only that its presence is evident in the literature of the time (2021, p. 163). The title aside, *Chocolate* is a useful read for food historians in that it goes beyond looking at the material links that chocolate had in the New World and how it was assimilated into European society, as previously discussed by scholars like Marcy Norton in *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World*

(2010), and instead contextualizes a commodity in Spanish literature and other sources that food historians may sometimes overlook.

Aqeel Ihsan is a PhD History Candidate at York University, specializing in migration and food history. His research interests focus on the South Asian diaspora currently residing in Canada. His doctoral research seeks to conduct a food history of Toronto by placing 'smelly cuisines' at the centre and chronologically tracing the history of the most prominent site where South Asian immigrants could purchase and consume South Asian foodstuffs, the Gerrard India Bazaar.

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