

**A review of *Sugar: A world corrupted, from Slavery to Obesity* by James Walvin (London: Robinson, 2017)**

By Claire Morley

**Abstract:** This is a review of *Sugar: The world corrupted, from slavery to obesity* by James Walvin, a text that contains a plethora of facts and knowledge by one of the most credible writers in his field.

“Sugar is everywhere”, and James Walvin reveals how its addictive nature has held a grip on humanity throughout the centuries. *Sugar: A world corrupted, from Slavery to obesity* is a book that is focused primarily on the history of sugar as a commodity. It describes how the once luxury item that could only be afforded by the social elite eventually found its way to the common market in the sixteenth century from the cruel exploitation of slaves. Sugar is a product that is now a staple food within the modern diet and one of the leading causes of global health issues in the twenty first century.

The book is detailed with a plethora of knowledge, covering a range of topics, such as the more widely known history of slave labour, mass migration and indentured labour. Walvin also discusses lesser known contexts such as rum production, the rise of tea and toffee with sugar as an additive, the emergence of confectioneries, as well as ecological damage and the forming of new cultures. All these were due to the commercialisation of sugar.

The book comes across as biased against sugar, as if the commodity itself was the sole driving force behind the disgusting treatment of slave and indentured labour. For example, in the conclusion Walvin writes that a slave's job was only “To feed the pleasures and plates of the western world, and to profit their masters”. I doubt many slaves would have blamed the merchandise they cultivated over their brutish masters. Sugar was not the only product slaves produced: for instance, Walvin quotes Jamie Oliver that “Sugar is the new tobacco”, another highly addictive, substance that causes major medical conditions that was originally cultivated by forced labour.

James Walvin later turns his attention to the twenty first century battle with global obesity. The rise of obesity truly is a chilling aspect of modern life. Walvin devotes a small section to school yard taunts as proof that being overweight is undesirable, noting taunts such as “lardy, piggy, porker”. He blames advertisements and endorsements, uneducated parents and lack of self-control, modern living, food and drink corporations.

Walvin frequently talks about how obesity is at its highest amongst the poorer classes, but only briefly glosses over why that might be, when more analysis of the average food budget and wage for a working class family would reveal more: burgers, pizza, microwave meals, and packet foods are all sold cheaply, often for a pound or less. Compared with a pre-made salad, or the fresh ingredients used to make it, it is only natural a family might choose the items that are more filling and can be stretched longer, even if they are laced with sugar.

I was unable to acquire a text version of the book and instead I listened to it via audiobook. Listening to the audiobook is like having a one sided argument that you can not respond to. I might have had a better experience had I read the book instead. The information James Walvin presents is highly relevant and timely: sugar production has had a major impact on the world, mostly for the bad.