

BOOK REVIEW

Gregg Mitman. *Empire of Rubber: Firestone's Scramble for Land and Power in Liberia*. New York: The New Press, 2021. xii + 312 pp. Notes. Index. \$18.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1620977965.

Gregg Mitman's *Empire of Rubber: Firestone's Scramble for Land and Power in Liberia* is about American capital, racial exploitation, and ecological violence. A historian of science, medicine, and environmental studies, Mitman did extensive archival research across the United States, and he also collected oral histories in Liberia. The result is the most comprehensive work to date on the impact of the imposition of corporate colonialism in Liberia by an American company. Mitman's subject is the Firestone Rubber Company, which arrived in Liberia in 1925 and established what would become the largest rubber plantation in the country.

While Firestone was there to extract Liberia's resources to produce rubber tires, Mitman argues that the company "[w]rapped its rubber venture in a missionary rhetoric of salvation through American capital, science and medicine" (140). Mitman asks: "Would Firestone prove to be an angel or a devil to Liberia?" (xiii), and his arguments support the latter answer. He demonstrates how land dispossession, low wages, forced labor, and environmental degradation became the hallmark of the company's operation in Liberia from the beginning, with disastrous consequences for Liberians well into the twenty-first century.

Empire of Rubber consists of seven chapters and an epilogue. The first chapter discusses company founder Harvey Firestone's decision to establish a rubber plantation in Liberia for his Ohio tire factory, after he failed to secure land and labor in southeast Asia for a plantation there. Mitman frames this story in the context of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century geopolitics, when Brazil, Great Britain, and the Netherlands dominated global rubber production. Chapter Two looks at how, in October 1925, Firestone secured a lease from the Liberian government for one million acres of land at six cents per acre. After signing the contract, Firestone amended it to disadvantage the Liberian government. He added a clause that required the government to accept a five million dollar loan from the Finance

Corporation of America to pay off its foreign debt. According to Mitman, “Debt was a powerful weapon in the armament of Yankee imperialism” (68).

Mitman makes it clear that American corporate racial exploitation and scientific research were intertwined. In Chapter Three, he shows that Firestone relied on the work of American scientific “experts” in such fields as anthropology, botany, and tropical medicine to justify the creation of his rubber plantation and his treatment of the indigenous workers. Dr. Richard P. Strong, head of the Department of Tropical Medicine at Harvard University, and his team conducted the first biological and medical survey of Liberia in 1926. Mitman writes: “The ethnic groups recruited for employment matched closely the recommendations that Harvard scientists Strong and Schwab made to Firestone in their pseudoscientific estimations of who, among Liberia’s ethnic groups, would make the best plantation workers” (188).

In Chapter Six, Mitman elaborates on Firestone’s implementation of scientific management. One key component of the enterprise was the task system, which was rooted in American slavery. He argues, “When cotton was king in the American South, plantation owners used it to organize the work and calculate the value of enslaved people” (192). Concerning Liberian rubber workers, he explains, “The task structured a tapper’s day. It set the average quota of work expected of each man” (192). Until 1950, tappers earned eighteen cents per day. With the system exacerbated by the US demand for rubber during World War II, workers who did not meet labor quotas were subject to deductions from their pay. Jim Crow policies also defined plantation life. While white employees basked in luxury, tens of thousands of indigenous workers resided in the lower layer of the plantation, which was too wet for rubber cultivation.

Mitman shows that the clearing of Liberia’s rain forest alienated indigenous people from their land and disrupted their spirituality, since they had previously lived in harmony with the land. Certain trees, such as the silk cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), were recognized as the dwelling place of ancestral spirits, and thus no one was allowed to cut them. Firestone used hazardous chemicals to treat rubber trees, with little regard for the health of the workers, and the toxic chemicals used to process latex contaminated the rivers.

Firestone’s exploitation in Liberia had geopolitical significance—it enabled the United States to gain influence in West Africa during the Cold War. Throughout the text, including Chapter Seven, Mitman presents Liberians not as hapless victims of American imperialism, but instead as active agents who sought to improve working conditions and maintain their own sovereignty. As Firestone attempted to secure a permanent labor supply by transforming Liberia into an American protectorate, Chapter 4 details the 1930 League of Nations inquiry into the issue of forced labor and slavery by the Liberian government—finding culpability and recommending annexation. Mitman analyzes the successful political maneuvering of the Liberian government in tandem with Pan-Africanists such as W.E.B. DuBois to prevent

this from happening. Mitman's centering of marginalized voices—bottom-up history—is a major strength of the text.

There are, however, a few critiques. Mitman's text would have benefitted from further contextualization of the threat Firestone posed to Liberia's sovereignty within a historical continuum that dates from the country's independence from the American Colonization Society in 1847. At independence, a clause mandated by the organization was added to the constitution which allowed it to continue to emigrate settlers to Liberia without official permission from the government. Also, a comparative analysis of the similarities between corporate colonialism in Liberia and other African colonies would have connected the study to African historiography more broadly.

The work is relevant to many studies, including colonial and economic history, political science, medical history, and environmental studies.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2023.55