

William Hesketh Lever and the Belgian Congo

During the Covid lockdown the wall plaque commemorating William Hesketh Lever, Lord Leverhulme, was removed by person or persons unknown, from the front of 16 Wood Street, Lever's birthplace in 1851. The exact date of its removal is also unknown. The club was closed for much of 2021, reopening for a few months in late summer and autumn, only to close again in December as Covid infection rates soared. The plaque's absence was first noticed in March 2022.

The plaque had been installed by Bolton & District Civic Trust in the early 1970s. Its removal prompted a discussion in the club and on both the Socialist Club and the Socialist Halls Committees. Following a period of reflection, research and debate both committees came to the unanimous decision that the plaque would not be replaced, nor would there be any other mention of Lord Leverhulme on the building. What follows sets out the reasons behind this decision.

Introduction

A plaque is not a simple, objective statement of fact. That Lever was born at 16 Wood Street is not in doubt, but so were numerous others through the years. For very particular reasons to do with his life, a decision was made to identify the building as Lever's birthplace, thus elevating him above those others born there and imbuing him with historical stature and importance. Far from encouraging a realistic appraisal of the man, as some have suggested, the presence of the plaque was more likely to discourage it. As Simon Scharma has put it *'It is more usually statues, (in this case a plaque) lording it over civic space, which shut off public debate through their invitation to reverence.'* (Quoted in "Empireland, Sathnam Sanghera p.44) To suggest otherwise is disingenuous, particularly when the orthodox version of Lever's life, shaped to a significant degree by a series of largely uncritical biographies, has dominated the public discourse since his death and has only been challenged substantially during the last twenty years. In this context the plaque was regarded as contributing to and supporting the orthodox narrative. If anything the plaque's removal has opened up a space where Leverhulme's legacy can be examined publicly and honestly and the existing orthodoxy challenged.

The world has moved on in significant ways since the plaque was installed in 1970. Much more is known about Lever's involvement in the Congo, particularly following the publication of former Belgian colonial official Jules Marchal's research into forced labour in the Belgian Congo, first in French in 2004 and in the 2008 abridged English version, 'Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts.' More recently a long overdue re-evaluation of the whole period of European colonialism has been gathering pace, (usually in the face of fierce criticism from Empire traditionalists who continue to insist on the largely Eurocentric belief that, despite the violence and racism that underpinned it, imperialism was a civilising force for good). This re-evaluation, by its very nature, raises uncomfortable questions about the treatment of the colonised people and the dehumanising racism to which they were subjected, a historical phenomenon which still bears heavily today on the national psyche.

The orthodox narrative has Lever the great philanthropist taking it upon himself to assist in imperialism's civilising mission in Africa by heeding the pleas of the Belgian government to

establish a palm oil processing plant in its African colony. Reeling from the scandal following the exposure of King Leopold's genocidal regime in the Belgian Free State, Lever was just the man to restore Belgium's international reputation and begin the process of bringing light, civilising instincts and worthwhile employment to the Congolese people. He would create another Port Sunlight, this time beside the forested rivers of the Congo. He would build houses, schools and hospitals and develop an industry that would benefit Lever Brothers, the Belgian government and, most of all, the Congolese people. Despite plenty of evidence to the contrary, the myth of this philanthropic endeavour has endured for decades. The reality, only recently revealed, was very different.

Jules Marchal's book 'Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts' provides clear evidence that while the worst excesses of Leopold's regime were no longer practised following the transfer of the territory from King Leopold to the Belgian government, the brutal system of forced labour remained in place. This, it seems, was a key factor in Lever's decision to set up operations there. As this new narrative emerged Lever's apologists mounted a vigorous defence: if bad things happened he was unaware of them. He was too far away in England to be able to control local managers, mostly Belgians who hadn't unlearned all the awful practices that defined King Leopold's regime. Much was made of the houses, schools and hospitals he built, evidence it's claimed, of his noble intentions. His racism was simply a reflection of the times he lived in and was in any case paternal in nature. Certainly he was nothing like King Leopold, whom his apologists make very clear, Lever never met personally (although it turns out that may not be true either.) The worst that could be said of Lever was that he was guilty of taking his eye off the ball and allowing terrible things to happen on his watch. But considered alongside all the good things he did at home, these are relatively minor failings which should not taint his legacy.

As the new evidence emerged this narrative became harder and harder to sustain and even Port Sunlight Village Trust, following an intervention by the Black Lives Matter Movement, engaged in a re-evaluation of Lever Brothers presence in the Congo, commissioning what looks to be a serious attempt to bring clarity and honesty to this episode. Reference to this work is made later on.

This paper will address those claims made in Lever's defence and in the process set out the case for not replacing the wall plaque that was illegally removed from the wall of 16 Wood Street.

LEVER BROTHERS COLONIAL BUSINESS MODEL

The orthodox line, that Lever was invited to a reformed Belgian Congo after the carnage of King Leopold's tenure is, even if true, only part of a more complicated story. There had indeed been a connection between the Belgian royal household and Lever in 1903 at the height of Leopold's genocidal reign, when Leopold's son Prince Albert visited Port Sunlight. It was allegedly the influence of King Albert (as he became following Leopold's death) that assured Lever of a warm welcome from the Belgian government on his arrival in the Congo. Whatever the truth, Lever took a circuitous route to get there.

Lever's first attempt at establishing an overseas concession from which to source his raw materials was in the Solomon Islands, beginning in 1902. From the very beginning he had trouble recruiting labour. Most of the locals were involved in cash cropping and could not be tempted to work for Lever Brothers, where the conditions were appalling and the pay poor. Lever Brothers was among

those particularly singled out for the gross abuses perpetrated there, leading to the deaths of between 5 and 10 percent of the workforce. ('So Clean', Brian Lewis p.162.) Labour had to be imported from the neighbouring Malaitian Islands but it was never sufficient. Beginning in 1909 he began petitioning the British administration for permission to bring over indentured labour from India and China and continued to do so for a number of years. On each occasion he was to be rebuffed. Pressure had been mounting for some time to end the use of indentured Labour, which had been introduced in 1849 by John Gladstone to help fill the cheap labour void created by the abolition of slavery. By the time it ceased over 2 million Indian and Chinese workers had been recruited, often from famine ravaged villages, and sent overseas to work in British territories in South America, Africa and Asia. Very often illiterate, they signed with a thumbprint five, ten or twenty year contracts that deprived them of any human rights and provided no guaranteed passage home at the end of it. It was exploitative in the extreme, often brutal, and faced resistance from both the indentured labourers and the indigenous people, who saw the incoming workers as a threat to their livelihoods. By 1917 it had been banned by both British and Indian governments. According to Brian Lewis in his book 'So Clean', the reluctance of British administered territories to accede to his demands for indentured labour was the key reason for his setting off in search of a more compliant regime.

His next port of call in 1907 was in West Africa, where he attempted to secure a monopoly over huge areas of Nigerian territory which he hoped would provide him with access to palm groves and the captive work force he desired. The monopoly would deny the locals the right to cash crop their own plantations and sell the produce at the local market rate. Under Lever's proposals, ownership of the plantations would be transferred to Lever Brothers, leaving the locals no other means of earning a living except by working for the company. Once again he was thwarted by a British colonial administration no longer willing to give unfettered access to European corporations and was instead adopting a system of "trusteeship", granting indigenous people greater, though still very limited, control of their lives. (Nworah, K. Dike. "The Politics of Lever's West African Concessions, 1907-1913." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1972, pp. 248-64. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/217517>.)

It was in the Belgian Congo that he found a regime compliant enough to accept his business model, now refined to these basic elements:

- the establishment of a monopoly over a territory providing sole access to its resources and labour
- a reduction of wages to a level significantly below that which the local people had previously earned as independent cash croppers.
- the deployment of physical, financial and psychological coercion to force indigenous workers into working for Lever Brothers, preferably with the support of the colonial administration.

The Belgian Congo had just such an existing and still functioning infrastructure, one that was developed during the Congo Free State under King Leopold and which had never been dismantled.

The so-called Congo Free State had been the personal fiefdom of King Leopold II of Belgium. He had long sought an empire such as those enjoyed by other European monarchs and when the sub-equatorial regions of Africa were colonised for the first time by European nations in the

'Scramble for Africa' in the late 19th century, he was quick to lay claim to the vast territory bounded in part by the Congo River. Selling himself as a philanthropic king on a mission to rid the territory of the blight of Arab slavery and having already gained the support of the United States and Britain, he was able to convince other European nations of the rightfulness of his claim. He went to exploit the territory with such ruthlessness that from the beginning of his involvement with the Congo around 1880 until 1920 (that is, 12 years after control passed to the Belgian government) it's estimated that the population was halved, from around 20 million to 10 million. (Adam Hochschild, *Introduction to Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts*).

Jules Marchal is clear in 'Leverhulme's Ghosts' that, though the worst excesses of Leopold's regime were abandoned when administration of the territory passed to the Belgian government, the brutal methods of securing forced labour remained. Arbitrary killing, rape, the severing of hands and other barbarisms were curbed, but the chicotte, a whip made from dried hippopotamus hide with razor sharp edges remained, as did the physical coercion, imprisonment for absconding and extortionate taxes that left locals little option but to work for HBC (Huilières du Congo Belge, Lever Brother's Congolese business operation). Things only started to improve for the Congolese in the late 1920s when colonial officials realised that without change there would be no labour force left to exploit.

Such was the state of affairs when Lever began his involvement with the Belgian Congo in 1910. As Marchal details in his book, villages were coerced into sending men and children to HCB's plantations by various methods, including onerous taxation combined with force and the ever present threat of violence. Village chiefs who refused to send a full complement of workers had their families imprisoned. Workers who absconded had *their* families imprisoned. Food was inadequate and pay pitifully small. Children were pressed into work entirely unsuitable to their levels of physical development and death rates were appalling. Marchal cites Dr Emile Lejeune, the chief medical officer for the Congo-Kasai province, who reported in 1923 that mortality rates among some groups of workers was *'9% in three months, which is huge, but for want of reliable documentation is impossible to pin down precisely.'* Another Belgian official, provisional governor Alphonse Engels, when it was reported that 13 out of 60 workers had died, calculated that: *'the terms of service being for three months, the mortality rate would rise to 13 x 12 x 100 divided by 3 x 60 = 86.66%.'* (Marchal p.37)

As well as work related injuries, the main causes of death were bronchial infections and pneumonia, probably brought on by the low night time temperatures. The workers were supplied with no blankets despite the company being contractually obliged to do so.

With regard to the often vaunted claims about his house building, these should probably be seen for what they were, which is little more than a window dressing exercise. Marchal again quotes from Dr Lejeune's report of 1923: *'...at the Leverville complex there is a brick built camp, which would be good if there were latrines, kitchens and rubbish pits... Besides, this camp is only large enough for a small fraction of the workforce currently at the post.'* The number of brick built huts was woefully insufficient to house the number of workers on the various sites, which numbered around 23,000. At most 1,200 brick huts were constructed in the five areas of HCB's activity, sufficient to house around a twentieth of the workforce. Other camps had straw built huts where 10-20 men slept in accommodation built for 7-8 at most. Lejeune described these as being *'little better than a poor quality night shelter.'* Dr Lejeune rounded off his report thus: *'Personally, were I an administrator, I would not send a single worker to the company.'* (Marchal p.31) The

settlements were built near the processing plants because it was the intention of the company to forcibly uproot entire villages and move them to these settlements so they were closer to the work. The company constantly demanded of the Belgian administration that it provide more assistance in accomplishing this, including establishing a military post close by, a demand that was deemed a step too far even for the Belgian administration. In the end HCB formed its own 'recruiting force' comprising its own agents and a militia of armed men.

It's often claimed that none of this was known by Lever, and that only after his death did it become apparent that HCB could only become economically viable with the use of forced labour. Yet from the Solomon Islands, through West Africa, to the establishment of HCB in the Congo we see the same pattern repeated: a demand for monopoly control over territory and an exclusive access to labour. The practice of forced labour was baked into the agreements he made. Why else would indigenous workers work for less pay and under worse conditions than those available to them as individual cash croppers? It was precisely the access to a source of labour that could be coerced into service that made the Congo so attractive.

Similarly, the idea that Lever was unaware of what his managers in the Congo were doing is simply not credible. As his own son wrote: *'In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the organisation which came into being – from the shipping base at the port of Matadi and the headquarters at Kinshasa to the farthest reaches of Elizabetha, over a thousand miles from the Congo mouth – was his personal creation.'* (Lewis p.174)

A booklet produced by the Port Sunlight Village Trust is quite explicit on this point: *'The use of forced labour in African colonies was no secret back in Britain. Lever and other people in the company, including in Port Sunlight, were aware of the low wages and use of forced labour in the Belgian Congo. Some research has also suggested that local HCB administrators may have covered up the scale of these conditions. But even in the British parliament, where Lever was a Liberal MP (1906-1909), HCB's working conditions were known about. There were appeals made to protect African people from 'the soap boilers of the world.'* (

https://www.portsunlightvillage.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/PSVT_Booklet_Racism_the_Belgian_Congo_and_William_Lever_-_V_FINAL_14.06.22.pdf)

And Dr Josephine Tierney, in a 2021 scoping report commissioned by Unilever writes: *An examination of the correspondence and records relating to the Solomon Island and Congo plantations in UARM (Unilever Archive and Records Management) indicates that William Lever, and other high-ranking individuals within Lever Brothers, were aware of the unsatisfactory working and living conditions William Lever was intimately involved in a number of key decisions relating to the running of the plantations, including the recruitment of labour, housing and the provision of medical care. Alongside the correspondence, regular reports were relayed to head office and William Lever, many of which included a summary of the conditions for labourers on the plantations.* (Report of Scoping Survey of the Lever Brothers' Plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo, 1900-1930 p.31).

If there is nothing in Lever's own written material to indicate his awareness it's almost certainly because he made sure there wasn't. He knew the company's practices were both a betrayal of his stated beliefs and banned in British administered territories. As Brian Lewis writes: *'Of course Lever*

must have known, but he was too shrewd to talk about it explicitly. He neither condemned nor condoned it, but he needed it: forced labour was built into the system.' (Lewis p.185)

If, as some claim, Lever had the welfare of his fellow man at heart, he certainly didn't let it get in the way of business.

Another claim frequently made is that the blame for the brutality lay at the feet of the Belgian colonists, and that had he been able to employ more British workers things may have been different. Indeed they might, but his principle motivation for being in the Belgian Congo in the first place was to escape the restrictions placed upon his company in the British controlled territories. Lever himself seems to have had no compunction about working with Belgians. His first appointment for the Congo enterprise was one Henri Dekeyser, a Belgian commissioned by Lever in 1910 to seek out territory in the Congo on behalf of Lever Brothers. Dekeyser was known in England after the British press drew attention to his role as commander of troops in the Congo who cut off the feet of an African princess to seize her brass anklets 1896. In 1904 he was again in the news when he was named in a book as the perpetrator of atrocities in the Basoko district and a widely publicised court case ensued.

Letters between HBC and the local administration actually suggest the opposite, that the Belgians running the territory acted as a restraint on HBC. They highlight the company's repeated requests for increased support with labour recruitment and a more proactive approach on the part of the Belgian administration, including the building of military outposts and more severe punishments for non-compliance among the Congolese.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It's often claimed that people such as Lever should be judged on the standards of his day. Leaving aside the fact he was already at odds with British government policy on indentured labour, this notion seems to rest on an assumption that there were no countervailing voices to the main currents of thought in his time. In fact there were plenty. Among them E D Morel, whose campaigning work did so much to expose the atrocities of Leopold's regime. After initial enthusiasm for Leverhulme's involvement, he made his opposition known when it became clear that HBC had acquired a monopoly which would prevent the indigenous people from working as independent harvesters.

Other voices, while in a minority, were widely recognised and authoritatively opposed to racism, colonialism and to the use of indentured labour. The African American intellectual W B Dubois in the United States for example, had written extensively about racism and was instrumental in convening in London the first Pan African Congress of 1900; Mahatma Ghandi had campaigned in South Africa from 1894 to 1913 on behalf of indentured Indian workers and afterwards in India against British imperialism. Significant too was the Anti-Imperialist League, founded in the USA in the 1890s in response to the proposed annexation of the Philippines, (whose promotional material quoted Abraham Lincoln's, '*No man is good enough to govern another with consent,*') and which included among its number Andrew Carnegie and Mark Twain.

We should also mention, because they have until very recently been entirely omitted, the voices of those oppressed in their own homelands by European imperialism. Their voices, like their culture and history have been, and continue to be, denied by the orthodox narrative of empire. Their

opposition to the way they were treated, though sparse in the written record, is stated eloquently in their resistance to colonial oppression. It began with the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and continued throughout the entire age of empire. Every act of dissent, every instance of foot-dragging, every abscondment, revolt and attack on property was a statement of opposition. Thus the abolition of the slave trade by the British government in 1807 was preceded in 1804 by the Haitian Revolution led by Toussaint L'Overture. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was preceded by the Jamaican Slave revolt of 1831. These and every subsequent step towards liberation and independence, including the banning of the use of indentured labour by Britain in 1917 and the refusal to allow large corporations to establish monopolies over colonial territories in the British Empire, was fought for and won by indigenous people. None of these concessions was granted willingly; everything had to be fought for, often alongside European and American allies such as William Wilberforce and E D Morel. What's more, none of this would have been unknown to Lever.

That these voices were heard loud and clear at the time, is demonstrated by the political and legal shifts that followed. Yet their presence was denied then and have until very recently remained unacknowledged by the orthodox historical narrative. On the few occasions when these liberation struggles (which is what they were) get a mention they are almost exclusively referred to in terms of betrayal and treachery: The Indian Mutiny of 1857, (or the First War of Indian Independence as it's known in that country), The Arab Revolt of the 1930s in Palestine, or the Mau Mau Rebellion of the 1950s, when Kenyan freedom fighters were demonised as savages at the same time as they were being tortured and castrated by the British Army. It's only very recently that these voices, expressed through their militant opposition, have found a place in the historical narrative that colonial apologists still seek to control. It's precisely the silencing of these voices that allows the claim "he was simply a man of his times" to have any resonance, as though the voice of power was the only voice. Once these other, opposing voices are factored in, the ideological landscape is dramatically altered.

The racist ideology that underpinned European imperialism did not arrive out of nowhere, as some kind of natural phenomenon. It was a pseudo-scientific, ideological construction that developed alongside, and in the service of Empire. Its development began in the early years of European imperialism with scientists like Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus in the mid 17th century, who categorised human beings into racial groups in the same manner as he had plant life. His ideas, which had no scientific basis, were developed further by Friedrich Blumenbach who established a ranked order based mainly on cranium size of Caucasian, Mongoloid, Malayan, American and Ethiopian. Caucasians were placed at the top and Africans at the bottom. (Lewis p.156) In Britain, the Scot Robert Knox published his book 'The Races of Man' in 1850. It set out to justify, again on the basis of no scientific evidence whatsoever, the extermination of the 'darker' races at the hands of 'Saxons'. It was, he claimed, the unavoidable consequence of the superiority of the white race. (Exterminate the Brutes, Sven Lindqvist pp.127-141). Darwin had listened to Knox's lectures as a young man and though it neither confirmed nor denied Knox's theories, the theory of evolution set out in Origin of Species was clearly useful to white supremacists looking to validate their theories. In some minds genocide became a means to expedite what evolution in any case made inevitable.

These ideas began to feed into the imperial narrative around the latter part of the 18th century, particularly following the corruption scandals involving the East India Company, when the ruthless plundering of Indian riches for personal gain resulted in the impeachment of Warren Hastings. A

revised version of Britain's imperial aspirations was required, one that transformed its endeavours into something more noble than a simple lust for wealth and power. In her book, 'Legacy of Violence' historian Caroline Elkins attributes that shift to the ideas of Whig politician Edmund Burke, who, during the seven year long Parliamentary impeachment proceedings that ended with Hastings' acquittal, introduced the notion of Britain's *'sacred responsibility to subject populations and territories. Empire was transformed into a national project that could no longer be trusted to the likes of Hastings. Instead it became the natural extension of British Sovereign and commercial rights ... and an affair of state answerable to the nation.'* (Legacy of Violence p.43)

A rewriting of history followed (as did the eventual rehabilitation of Hastings) in which the cultures and peoples of the colonies, including not only people of colour but restive Afrikaners in South Africa and the people of Ireland, were rendered devoid of civilised virtues and in need of Britain's nurturing hand to guide them along the path towards civilisation. Intellectuals of the day such as James Mill declared in typical fashion that Indian society was morally degraded and had never possessed 'a high state of civilisation'. Others, including Thomas McCaulay, continued this rewrite of the past, now lionising Hastings and Robert Clive, whose disregard for human life and unbridled greed were now deemed necessary characteristics for carrying out the noble task of bringing civilisation to the unenlightened masses of the Empire. In 1859 John Stuart Mill, son of James, offered a more refined version of this notion: *'Despotism is a legitimate mode of government, and the means justified by actually effecting (sic) that end.'* (cited in Legacy of Violence p.50) The end being not simply the enrichment of the colonising nation but the civilising of the subject people, a centuries long obligation eulogised in verse in 1899 by Rudyard Kipling in the 'White Man's Burden.'

There would be times, inevitably, when the 'guiding hand' would have to resort to stern measures to keep the subject people on the straight and narrow, though always in the interests of the long term benefit of the 'lower races.' Conquest, subjugation and colonial exploitation now came with an ideological justification and Empire's civilising mission, complete with its underpinning of state sanctioned violence, continued unabated in places as disparate as India, South Africa, Ireland and Palestine, right up to its post-war collapse, and the savage reprisals against the people of Kenya, Aden and Malaya as they fought to determine an independent future.

Wealthy, powerful imperialists like Lever espoused this ideology wholeheartedly; the violence that of necessity accompanied forced labour was now an essential factor in developing the work ethic and sense of responsibility essential for the eventual creation of civilised society among the Congolese. (That the barbaric treatment of his workforce also happened to be the only way to make his African project profitable was for the company a happy coincidence.) But Lever and other Empire expansionists - Cecil Rhodes, Prime Minister Lord Salisbury for example - were not merely swept along by a prevailing tide. They were, through their writings and influence, drivers of the racist ideology they espoused. There was nothing inevitable about the decisions they took, and we should not look to normalise their racism by blaming the ideological currents of the time, against which voices were raised from the very beginning. It's one thing to contextualise the barbaric treatment of colonial peoples within the dominant white supremacist ideology of the era (although many white supremacists deplored the brutality meted out by European colonisers), but those who championed it, whether out of blind prejudice, imperial arrogance or for personal gain, should not be excused responsibility. By that measure, to use a contemporary analogy, we should

also absolve Thatcher, Reagan and other proponents of neo-liberalism from any responsibility for the vast social inequalities and the acceleration of climate change it has generated, on the grounds that they were only going with the flow; or lay the blame for the holocaust on Nazi ideology while exempting its leading proponents from any personal culpability.

There has always been opposition to neo-liberalism, just as there was always opposition to Nazism. In the same way there was always opposition to the racist ideology that underpinned European imperialism and to the brutality deployed in its service. The difference seems to be that while the opponents of Nazism were and are, quite rightly, honoured, opponents of the state endorsed racism of British imperialism have been written out of history. Those voices in Europe and the USA were an inconvenient minority, while the indigenous voices of the colonised were simply ignored. Lever was a powerful figure, a member of Parliament and later a Lord. Regardless of his upbringing and education, he wielded significant influence and much of that influence was employed in the service of perpetuating notions of white supremacy. He may have cleaved towards what some consider a more paternalistic version of this ideology, but its inherent racism meant the brutal inhumanity meted out to his Congolese workers was easily accommodated when deemed necessary to the success of his business. The irony is that Lever, the Empire expansionist, had to escape the restraining influence of British colonialism in order to apply the 'stern, guiding hand of civilisation' to his own colonial workforce.

LEVER AND RACISM

A Port Sunlight Village Trust leaflet, commissioned in the aftermath of the outrage following the killing of George Floyd in the US, includes this observation on racism.

Racism has many definitions. At its core is the false belief that there are distinct 'races' of humanity, defined by a person's skin colour and cultural background. This thinking wrongly holds that the 'racial' traits of white people make them superior to Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. Racist ideologies create structural racism: embedded processes in society that exert power and privilege according to 'race'. It manifests in discriminatory attitudes, behaviours, and practices towards Black, Brown, and Indigenous people.

(Port Sunlight Village Trust leaflet: Racism, the Belgian Congo, and William Lever. Second edition, June 2022. See above for link.)

This chimes very closely with Article 2 of the UNESCO declaration on race and racism of November 1978

Article 2

1. (Racism is) Any theory which involves the claim that racial or ethnic groups are inherently superior or inferior, thus implying that some would be entitled to dominate or eliminate others, presumed to be inferior, or which bases value judgements on racial differentiation, has no scientific foundation and is contrary to the moral and ethical principles of humanity.

(https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.11_declaration%20on%20race%20and%20racial%20prejudice.pdf)

Lever's racism is often characterised as being paternalistic in nature. In this way the colonial mindset relegates, or ignores completely, the impact of racism on its victims, and instead foregrounds the mentality of the racist. Paternalism is a useful term for those wishing to neutralise the effects of racism, or to couch it in more 'acceptable' terms. It brings with it a suggestion of

familial affection and concerned, if slightly aloof, attentiveness. In the context of racism this is patently absurd. At racism's core is a contempt for people of different ethnicities, as is made clear in both the PSVT leaflet and the UNESCO declaration. Its horizontal axis does not begin at some point of deluded paternalism. It starts at contempt and its direction of travel is towards genocide. The past 100 years of European history alone illustrates this. Regardless of how Lever may have seen himself and regardless of how his apologists see him today, the racist working practices at HCB led to thousands of unnecessary deaths and imposed misery on the lives of the indigenous people of both the Congo and the Solomon Islands. When we look at its impact it's clear that Lever's racism was anything but 'paternalistic' and certainly not benign. Here is writer Rene Eddo-Lodge, astutely cited in the same Port Sunlight Village Trust booklet: *"Racism's legacy does not exist without purpose. It brings with it not just a disempowerment for those affected by it, but an empowerment for those who are not."* (Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*)

A defence of Lever's racism is sometimes made through a comparison of Lever with King Leopold. 'The King of Sunlight' author Adam McQueen does this in a blogpost of 2020 in answer to criticism of his portrayal of Lever: *"I describe his (Lever's) approach to overseas plantations as 'imperial arrogance at its most basic' at one point, but compared to the utterly inhuman and horrific treatment in the Congo by Leopold II he was in a completely different category."* (<https://adammacq.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/lord-leverhulme-16-years-on/>)

It would seem obvious but apparently needs be said, that a favourable comparison with a genocidal megalomaniac does not make Lever's racist business practices acceptable, only less bad than the man with more blood on his hands than probably any other of that very bloody period. In fairness to McQueen he was responding to a publisher's blurb that linked Lever to the regime originally created by King Leopold and at least he had the good grace to offer up an apology of sorts, reluctant though it was. In the same blogpost he writes, in recognition of the impact of Marchal's book.

'So: Mea Culpa If I was writing it now, I'd write it differently, and I definitely wouldn't call the chapter "A Good Man In Africa" which is a rubbish title anyway. I still stand by my original point that Lever wasn't even close to King Leopold's league, but he and HCB didn't deserve a belated PR job, and I'm sorry that was what I delivered in pages 214-222. I went into detail on this stuff in the chapter about his plantations in the Solomon Islands, and I should have found out more about the ones in the Congo, as I now have.

The 'PR job' offered up in his book was the latest in a long line of PR jobs produced by a succession of biographers, keen to burnish the reputation of William Hesketh Lever, among them Lever himself, who was as accomplished at selling himself as he was soap.

LEVER AND PORT SUNLIGHT

Lever's reputation as a philanthropist rests largely on the 'good works' he was responsible for in England, particularly the Port Sunlight development. He wasn't the first factory owner to build good houses and public amenities for his workers. That began much earlier when wealthy industrialists realised the economic benefits of having a healthy workforce living in close proximity to the factory. When Lever was growing up in Bolton there were several such developments in existence, including those attached to factories at Egerton, Barrow Bridge and Eagley Mills. As well

as enjoying the obvious benefits of good, sanitary housing, tenants paid rent (which secured a return of 7 or 8 percent for the Ashworth Brothers, owners of cotton mills in Egerton and Turton) so it was certainly sound economics. (Lewis, p.96). Work on Port Sunlight began in 1888 and took place against a background of increasing working class organisation. The trade union movement was expanding, radical political parties such as the Marxist Social Democratic Federation and the Independent Labour Party were being established. Demands for better pay and improved working conditions were growing, particularly as Britain wallowed in the Long Depression of the 1870s and 80s. These factors would certainly have provided a spur to Lever's philanthropy, which created among his workforce a powerful incentive to turn away from class based activism. Not that everyone was happy having their lives micromanaged by Lever. The secretary of the Engineers Union wrote around 1920 when a strike closed the factories for 21 days: *'No man of an independent turn of mind can breathe for long the atmosphere of Port Sunlight. That might be news to your Lordship, but we have tried it. The profit-sharing system not only enslaves and degrades workers, it tends to make them servile and sycophantic, it lowers them to the level of machines tending machines.'* (McQueen KOS p283)

It was, regardless, a visionary project. Port Sunlight was much grander in scale than any of the earlier developments, which might be attributed to a number of factors; Lever's deep seated paternalism, his sound grasp of economics and not least his ego, which demanded a lasting monument to itself. As Dr Tierney writes: *Although businessmen like William Lever were concerned about the welfare of their workers, the construction of model villages was also an expression of their authority and the dependence of their workers on their charity.* (Report of Scoping Survey of the Lever Brothers' Plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo, 1900-1930 p.26).

It should be added of course that the enormous wealth that allowed Lever to build Port Sunlight was created by his workforce. Not a single bar of soap was boiled, cut, wrapped and delivered to the retailer without the labour of his workers, and even as gifted an entrepreneur as Lever was not capable of creating his empire without them.

Port Sunlight and his other worthy acts are often grouped together as a sort of counterbalance to his activities in Africa and the Solomon Islands. The Port Sunlight Village Trust booklet wisely avoids this moral equation, and with good reason, bluntly stating: *We know that Lever, his company Lever Brothers, their shareholders, and Port Sunlight all benefited from forced labour in the Belgian Congo.* (PSVT leaflet) Taken separately as facts, his Congo business activity and his worthy acts at home reveal a man of many contradictions. Placed adjacently and separated by "but" or similar qualifier, actual or implied, they become something else: "Yes, he was responsible for some terrible things in the Congo, but look what he achieved at home." In this configuration we are invited to accept that the good works cancel out the bad, a formulation that only works of course if we accept the logic of Lever's own ideology; that the lives of white people are of more value than those of people of colour.

Chris Chilton, October 2022

Further reading.

Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts, Jules Marchal (English trans. 2008 Verso)
'So Clean', Brian Lewis (2008 Manchester University Press)
The King of Sunlight, Adam McQueen (2004 Bantam Press)
The Soap Man, Roger Hutchinson (2003 Berlinn)
King Leopold's Ghost, Adam Hochschild (1999 Macmillan, updated 2006 Pan Books)
Exterminate All The Brutes, Sven Lindqvist, 1992 (trans 1996 Granta)
The Scramble For Africa, Thomas Pakenham (1992 Abacus)
The Black Jacobins, CLR James (1980 Allison & Busby)
Empireland, Sathnam Sanghera (2021 Penguin)
Legacy of Violence, Caroline Elkins (2022 Bodley Head)
Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race, Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017 Bloomsbury)

Online resources

Coolies

<https://www.documentarystorm.com/coolies-how-britain-reinvented-slavery/>