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Eric T. Jennings. *Vanilla: The History of an Extraordinary Bean.* Yale University Press, 2025. 312 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-26453-1.

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Historiographies in environmental and global history have seen a flurry of commodity biographies, starting with Sydney W. Mintz's history of sugar in 1986 to the more recent histories of cotton and the oil palm.[1] Eric T. Jennings's ***Vanilla: The History of an Extraordinary Bean*** is one of the most recent additions to this field. As with other effective commodity histories, this book uses a commodity, vanilla, as a lens into broader developments, such as shifting labor and social relations, developments in science and technology, emerging trade networks, and changes in consumption habits and cultural meanings of the product.

In the introduction, Jennings explains his rationale for writing "a global history of the only edible orchid" (p. 5). He argues that vanilla's characteristics shaped its history and made it different from most other commodities, having high potential for the empowerment of cultivators due to its high value-to-weight ratio and for more sustainable ways of growing crops away from monocultural plantations as vanilla needs undergrowth to flourish. Vanilla also stands out compared to other plant commodities as its whole production process (from harvesting to shipping) is done in the Global South and requires manual labor at every stage. ***Vanilla*** is not a history driven by plant agency: Jennings clarifies early on that vanilla's traits play an important role but that human agency remains the focus of his narrative.

The first chapter sets out to provide the reader with background on the status quo of vanilla production and consumption prior to the discovery of the manual pollination method in 1841, which marked an important watershed in vanilla's history. Prior to 1841, the Spanish Empire held a monopoly on vanilla cultivation due to the dependence of vanilla on a local bee species in Mexico that was needed for pollination. Growing vanilla outside of Mexico was tried, especially by the French Empire, but never succeeded. Vanilla thus remained a costly luxury product, mostly consumed by elites in hot chocolate drinks and confectionery.

The two following chapters recount the discovery of a manual pollination method for vanilla, which made it spatially independent from Mexico's bees and thus broke Spain's monopoly over the plant. This discovery happened independently in two places: in Liège, Belgium, in 1836 by Belgian botanist Charles Morren and on a French sugarcane and manioc estate on Bourbon/Réunion in 1841 by enslaved teenager Edmond Albius. For various reasons, the manual vanilla pollination technique only took off after Albius's discovery. Despite various contestations, Albius received limited recognition for his findings and his method

spread steadily, "taking [vanilla] from a niche Mexican spice to a global commodity" (p. 78).

In the next three chapters, Jennings takes the reader to three of the places that vied for first place in the vanilla production competition: Réunion, Madagascar, and Tahiti. Using vanilla as a lens, Jennings gives the reader insight into the makeup of these societies, labor relations, and trade networks. Often, this is a colonial history of imperial rivalry between Spain and France and their predominance in the global vanilla networks. However, the plethora of actors involved in the vanilla sector shows that this bean's history cannot be flattened to making it one of colonial dependency only. The actors involved included navy officers, missionaries, French settlers, and various enterprising local populations. Depending on the context, vanilla could function as a crop providing social mobility (for example, for the Betsimisaraka people in Madagascar) but also as a tool for oppression (of coerced plantation labor) and racial discrimination (against Chinese immigrants in Tahiti).

Chapter 7, "Vanillamania," zooms out of the Indian Ocean and Pacific contexts of the main production sites, detailing how vanilla became increasingly popular after manual pollination enabled its spread and thus led to the decrease of its cost. As Mexico and France continued to compete for supremacy, other nations and transnational businesses became interested in the vanilla sector. Demand skyrocketed in the later nineteenth century with the main consumer being the United States. By the mid-twentieth century, vanilla had transformed from a luxury good to a ubiquitous flavor, seen by American consumers as a need. This change in consumption occurred simultaneously with two other developments, detailed in chapters 8 and 9 respectively: the advent of synthetic vanilla flavors (vanillin) and the shift in vanilla's reputation, becoming the emblem for everything bland, boring, and white.

Vanilla is an ambitious book, covering two centuries of history across several continents. Especially valuable are the insights into vanilla's embeddedness in the different societies responsible for the plant's cultivation and preparation for markets. Through vanilla, Jennings connects Indian Ocean and Pacific histories of production with European and US histories of trade and consumption. Following the plant from the soil to the spoon allows Jennings to uncover the various types of actors involved and shows how knowledge and changing perceptions of this plant have shaped its path.

Vanilla covers a lot of ground, which is reflected in the long list of archives consulted and the "global web" of collaborators—from librarians to research assistants—that Jennings acknowledges have helped him in this endeavor (p. 283). Despite the vast array of collections consulted, the narrative at times reads as if the archival sources on vanilla are rather thin. Jennings directly addresses this challenge at several points throughout the book and tries to solve it by diving into the respective historical contexts and a couple of digressions. Despite this, the last three chapters feel a little rushed. Moreover, while Jennings is careful about acknowledging agency and including marginalized historical actors, he could have done so more emphatically. For example, while he acknowledges that Morren's discovery of the manual pollination method was a "team effort," greatly aided by translations and drawings by his wife, Marie, the chapter ultimately revolves around Morren himself (p. 51).

All in all, *Vanilla* is a highly accessible narrative that presents global connections by combining insights into one commodified plant from its production to consumption sites. It demonstrates how a plant can be embedded socially and how cultural shifts as well as a flavor's changing associations affect global commodity chains. It is a welcome addition to the growing body of global commodity histories that will be of benefit to environmental

and global historians, historians of the French Empire, and anyone interested in the connections between knowledge and power more broadly.

Note

[1]. Sidney W. Mintz, ***Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*** (Penguin Books, 1986); Sven Beckert, ***Empire of Cotton: A Global History*** (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015); and Jonathan E. Robins, ***Oil Palm: A Global History*** (University of North Carolina Press, 2021).