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## **The True (and Untrue) History of the “Food of the Gods”**

*The True History of Chocolate* written by Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe, two American anthropologists, is an interesting piece of scholarship about Mesoamerican culture before and after the Spanish conquest and a story of cacao seeds, chocolate manufacturing process and the ways and rituals of serving chocolate drinks. The book can be also contemplated for its intriguing metaphors which create a feast in itself and transport us to a forgotten and magic world of the Maya and the Aztecs, the first planters of the “food of the gods.” The European countries were conquered by chocolate in the sixteenth century, but in England it is not until the seventeenth century that we find Samuel Pepys’s diary entries about his indulgence in chocolate drinking. There are numerous references to chocolate in literature from the Age of Reason to the twentieth century, but there are two novels which seem to best illustrate man’s interest in the culinary qualities of the food of the gods: Laura Esquivels’s book of stories written in a form of recipes and Joanne Harris’s *Chocolat*. The latter novel is a luscious morsel of a book breaking into confectionary prose, which evokes the smells and textures of the chocolate shop and the chocolate war between the church and the inhabitants of a small French town before the Festival of Chocolate.

Since chocolate experts underline both therapeutic and pernicious influence of the food of the gods, it is more worthwhile to use the term “ingestion” rather than “digestion” in reference to chocolate. The brown coloured sweet delight provokes “indigestion,” “congestion” – or rather constipation – when eaten or drunk thoughtlessly, without following certain dietary in-

structions such as the necessity of consuming it two hours before the meal or dissolving it by water. The word “ingestion” once proposed by Ben Jonson is used by George Steiner in his *Real Presences* to indicate “an indwelling clarity and life-force when reflecting on artwork or musical score.” When we ingest or interpret the artwork we deepen our grasp of it and our consumption becomes inward, not physiological but concerned with psyche. What is reflected upon as inward, incorporated within us and recollected, becomes a kind of mental pabulum to which we succumb in solitude, private or public, as “kept inviolate on our psyche.” We may, similarly, ingest or indulge ourselves in (a history of) chocolate from the times when it became the food of the gods – to the times of contemporary consumption when it becomes sweet pleasure for the palate and the viand of the masses.

*Theobroma cacao*, the food of the gods and the original name for chocolate, was disseminated by the Spaniards throughout the Caribbean and south to Ecuador. It was carried in the form of cuttings and possibly seedlings in relatively fast, sail-driven ships. The Spanish botanists assure us that they have found wild *Theobroma cacao* populations in the Lacandon rainforest of the state of Chiapas, in south-eastern Mexico and in the neighbouring Usumacinta River drainage which divides Mexico and Guatemala. The Spanish conquest of Central America introduced chocolate to Europe where it first became a stimulating drink of kings, and then was popularized in coffee-houses. Columbus, in his fourth and final voyage, came across a great Maya trading canoe with cacao beans amongst its cargo. Among the Aztecs of Mexico, chocolate was in use both as drink and as currency. The Spanish invaders derived their earliest real knowledge of cacao from the Maya – not the Aztecs of the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America. It was the Olmec (the first civilization of the Americas) who first domesticated *Theobroma cacao* in the humid tropical forests. As a food for masses and a sweet indulgence, chocolate did not appear on a culinary stage of Europe until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the time of chocolate pots brewed ingenuity. There is also no doubt that the discovery of chocolate was the stimulus necessary to put Mesoamericans on the road to civilization and to the leisure in which people could enjoy sweet luxury.

The manufacturing of chocolate is an interesting sequence of four steps to be followed such as fermentation, drying, roasting and winnowing of cacao seeds or beans. During fermentation only seeds that germinate give chocolate flavour to the finished product (the astringency of the beans is lowered). Flavour and aroma are also developed; drying and roasting process which takes away moisture of the beans, makes them less astringent and gives them a richer brown colour. The Yucatan Maya merchants drank chocolate drinks during their rituals and feasts (banquets), and treated their guests to them

with lavish hospitality. During a baptismal rite the pagan Maya anointed babies with a liquid made of flowers and cacao pounded and dissolved in water. Similarly cacao was used for betrothal and marriage ceremonies, and it may be interesting to notice that in the Nahuatl language *chokolai* means to drink chocolate together at the festival,<sup>1</sup> which enhances the social connotation of the word.

In the culinary history the Maya, who are now believed to have brought chocolate to the world and taught the Old World how to drink it, were the first people who gave our civilization the word “cacao.” The conquest of Mesoamerica by the Spaniards (1521) and the arrival of the first missionaries, the mendicant friars who managed to learn Nahuatl, the Aztec tongue, with the hope of converting them to Christianity became a crucial step in the intellectual evolution of the New World. In the *General History of the Things of New Spain* (12 volumes richly illustrated) written by a missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagún we can find, as the D. Coes remark, one of the first mentions of the use of cacao and chocolate on the Aztec land.

The reason why the Aztecs took interest in chocolate was basically religious, since their native drink “octli” (wine) was alcoholic, which became a danger for a relatively quiet and puritanical [Aztec] society (*octli* was made of the juice of a few species of agave, the juice which was left to ferment thus turning into the alcoholic drink).<sup>2</sup> Drinking chocolate helped the Aztecs survive the day without eating much food because chocolate drink was the sufficient sustenance. It is interesting to know that in order to make their drinking chocolate tasty, the Aztecs used a grooved wooden beater or swizzle-stick called *molinillo* (a rotary whisk) to make the frothy bubbles (instead, as before, pouring the liquid from a height, from one vessel into another). Other utensils were stirrers or stirring spoons made from tortoise or sea-turtle shell. There were several “cacao-extenders” added into drinking chocolate, among others the spice such as chilli, which was dried and ground to a powder to prevent the danger of indigestion. The word that we find in Alonso de Molina’s Nahuatl-Spanish Dictionary of 1571 sounds very similar to contemporary “chocolate.” The drink’s name was *chilcacahuatl* and it was prepared with chilli powder giving a pleasant “afterburn” to each sip.

Three flavourings, sometimes called the “aphrodisia trio”, were highly prized by the Aztecs, the ear-shaped petal of the flower *Cymbopetalum perduliflorum*, a tree of the custard-apple family, named also “hand flower” by its resemblance to a tiny hand (tasting like black pepper with resinuous bitterness, or nutmeg,

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<sup>1</sup> Sophie D. Coe & Michael D. Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (Thames & Hudson, London 1996), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

all spice and cinnamon). The second was “black flower,” vanilla with its black pods, and the last one was the “string flower” related to black pepper, the most curable flavouring since it warmed the stomach, perfumed the breath and alleviated intestinal pains. The plant is known today as *acuyo* and is used to flavour foods (especially fish) giving it a pleasant, tarragon or anise-like taste.

The Spanish conquistadors who conquered Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century felt aversion both to the chocolate drink as well as herbs and vegetables offered by the native diet in which, unlike in Spanish cuisine, oils and fats did not exist. The Spaniards craved sugar, which the Maya and the Aztecs did not know, and so they drank bitter chocolate drinks so much disliked by the conquerors. Mixed marriages created the creolized culture which paved the way for chocolate to come to the colonial cuisine of New Spain and eventually, via Old Spain, to the rest of Europe. The original bitter, cold and unsweetened drink had to undergo transmutation since the whites preferred to take chocolate hot.

The journey cacao made to conquer Europe started in the Renaissance, but it was in the Baroque Age that it became the drink (an elite drink) of the wealthy and powerful in European palaces and mansions. Chocolate appeared and reigned supreme in European homes and courts as a drug, medicine and a filling beverage appreciated for its taste and stimulation. Spain was not the only country linked with Mesoamerica to which chocolate was disseminated. Italian convents and monasteries always linked Europe with Latin America and in the court of Tuscany chocolate was drunk with the “fresh peel of citrons and lemons, and the very genteel odour of jasmine.” There were also perfume-laden flavours added such as cinnamon, amber, musk, and vanilla which had a prodigious effect upon the chocolate gourmets.<sup>3</sup> With its advent to Europe chocolate had to cross the ecclesiastical barriers, especially when there was a question of fasting in Lent or whether it was a food or a drink.

The French, whose courts indulged in drinking coffee, introduced the chocolate-pot, the *chocolatière*, in the eighteenth century. The chocolate-frother was covered with a wooden lid, with a hole in the middle for the *molinillo* handle. In the age of Enlightenment Europe was linked with three other continents: Asia, Africa and America through three alkaloid-bearing drinks such as tea, coffee and chocolate, the latter soon ousted by the former two. Chocolate came to England from Jamaica after Cromwell’s forces had taken the island from the Spaniards (1655). One of the most famous chocolate gourmets in seventeenth-century England was Samuel Pepys, in whose diary we find several entries referring to chocolate he must have much

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

enjoyed. Pepys called his favourite drink “my morning draught in good Chocolate” or “Jocolatte,” which he drank with pleasure in a coffee-house.<sup>4</sup> In the age of Enlightenment the average nobleman drank chocolate for a leisurely breakfast, while a bourgeois businessman was woken up by coffee in the morning. The Lutheran J. S. Bach (it was believed that coffee was a drink of northern, Protestant and middle-class people, while chocolate, of southern and Catholic and aristocratic) composed, however, not chocolate but *Coffee Cantata* in praise of coffee. In *Coffee Cantata* coffee was the drink venerated by Leishe, the daughter of Schlendrian who persuaded his daughter to abstain from the drink. She eventually agreed to give up the habit on condition that her father would find a husband for her. When the man was found, she made him sign a marriage contract with a clause that she would not stop drinking coffee.

In his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* written in 1859, Dickens, in the chapter “Monseigneur in Town,” describes the ceremony of chocolate drinking in the grand hotel in Paris:

It took four men, all four ablaze with gorgeous decoration [...] to conduct the happy chocolate to Monseigneur’s lips. One lacquey carried the chocolate pot into the sacred presence; a second, milled and frothed the chocolate with a little instrument he bore for that function; a third, presented the favourite napkin; a fourth poured the chocolate out.<sup>5</sup>

The servants who bring chocolate drinks to their aristocratic lords and mistresses often lament that they cannot taste the sweet beverage but only smell it. In the scene of Mozart’s opera *Così fan Tutte* we find two flirts in the drawing-room, Fiordiligi and Dorabella, served with chocolate by the maiden who complains:

What an abominable life a lady’s maid leads! [...] I have been beating the chocolate for half an hour, now it’s ready, and is it my lot to stand and smell it with a dry mouth? Isn’t my mouth just like yours? Oh gracious mistress, why should you get the real thing and I only the smell of it? By Bacchus, I am going to taste it. (*She does so*). Oh, it’s good.<sup>6</sup>

In his 1728 report about chocolate the physician to the Tuscan court, Dr. Giovanni Batista Felici notes what follows:

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Wordsworth Classics, 1993), pp. 83-84.

<sup>6</sup> Coe, pp. 206–207.

I know certain serious and taciturn persons, who by virtue of this drink, become for a while the greatest chatterers, some lose sleep and get hot-headed, others become angry and shout. In children it awakens such an agitation that in no way can they be quiet or sit in one place.<sup>7</sup>

Chocolate was most venerated by the Jesuits in Spain; as it was reported by the French duke who was ambassador to Spain in 1721 the best chocolate ever tasted was made in Loyola. In Spain, chocolate was a drink of the upper and middle classes, who breakfasted on it after a preliminary glass of cold water. The established guilds of chocolate grinders guarded against adulteration by unscrupulous grinders who added numerous ingredients (and high-tasting flavourings) such as almonds, even coffee, flour, acorns and also dried and ground orange peel. During the longest conclave of 1740, before the election of Benedict XIV, 30 lbs of chocolate were delivered to the Sistine Chapel for the refreshment of the cardinals.<sup>8</sup>

The nineteenth-century story of chocolate and sweets can be found in a fairy world of E.T.A. Hoffman's tale *The Nutcracker* and also in Tchaikovsky's ballet of the eponymous title. In Hoffman's story of 1816, a girl finds herself in her dream in a fantasy world where the battle is fought between the King of Mice and her favourite nutcracker, which she received as Christmas present from grandfather (grandpa) Drosselmeier. The story takes place in Nuremberg, a German town famous for toys in the nineteenth century. Marie helps a wooden nutcracker defeat a nasty squeaking army of mice, which appear as fighting in her magical dreamworld of the Land of Toys. Drosselmeier finishes the tale by telling the Stahlbaums children, Marie and Fritz, more stories of the kingdom of sweets and princess Pirlipat. Marie, like Alice in Wonderland, is drawn deeper into a dreamlike world.

In her dream she finds herself falling into Candy Meadow, a sweet-scented field from which, accompanied by the nutcracker whom she saved from the mice, she enters the glimmering Christmas forest through the gate of sugared almonds and raisins. In the nearby village Sugarwell she finds ginger-bread houses plastered with lemon peel and almonds and meets the inhabitants who, though good-looking and nice, are rather bad-tempered because they constantly suffer from tooth-ache. At the market place of Bonbon town Marie and Nutcracker meet thousands of people unloading carts full of sticky paper and slabs of chocolate. The King of Chocolate sent paper to fortify their town against attacks by the Fly-Admiral. Finally, Marie and Nutcracker are taken in a boat to Sweetmeat City with Marzipan Castle with one of the sparkling roofs missing. As it turns out, it was once bitten

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

off by the Giant Sweet Tooth, much to the inhabitants' dismay. Marie's dream comes true when she is visited by the real Nutcracker, who appears to be Drosselmeier's nephew. The young man looks exactly like the fairy nutcracker, but transforms into a real prince and asks her to marry him and become the Queen of the Sweetmeat Kingdom.

The magic world of chocolate in twentieth-century Europe and Americas can be found in Laura Esquivel's fairy-tale soap-opera romance and Mexican cook-book *Como Agua para Chocolate (Like Water for Chocolate)*, a collection of stories interspersed with recipes for traditional Mexican dishes which can be savoured through the book. It is a tale of De La Garza family life in Mexico, which, like chocolate, consists of a blend of astringent romance and sweetbitter wit. Tita, a spinster tormented by her tyrannical mother whom she has to look after until she dies, finds her destiny in the kitchen of the family ranch, in which she prepares her recipes for Mexican dishes. After her romance with Pedro she is rejected by the man she loves because of her big body, obesity and the symptoms of indigestion caused by chocolate overdrinking. In a desperate gesture of passion Pedro marries Tita's sister Rosaura only to stay close to his beloved, with whom he finally reunites after the death of his wife (Rosaura dies of "terrible digestive problems," her death preceded by the battle over her daughter's marriage). Pedro and Tita's burning passion becomes alleviated like chillies in walnut sauce, the final recipe of the book.

In the novel's chapter on chocolate we find a recipe of the Three Kings' Day Bread. We are recommended not only to use three kinds of chocolate such as Soconusco, Maracaibo and Caracas but we are also warned not to use earthenware griddle while toasting the chocolate beans because it soaks up the oil given off by the beans. The oil thus extracted is mixed with sweet almond oil and used as ointment for chapped and cracked lips in winter. In the story Tita makes hot chocolate as she learnt it once at home and which was regarded as home speciality. Not to under- or overcook it or make it too thick or burnt, she heats a tablet of chocolate in water and then beats it with a chocolate-mill to make smooth blend with water. The mixture is brought to the boil and beaten three times after which it is served with foam on the top; "hot chocolate made with water is more digestible than that made with milk."<sup>9</sup> When Tita makes chocolate tablets, she uses the traditional *metate*, a kind of table beneath which the Maya Indians placed a pan on a hot fire and ground the chocolate by pounding it with a mallet.<sup>10</sup> The traditionally made chocolate recalls the smell and taste of the maternal home.

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<sup>9</sup>Laura Esquivel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, tr. Carol & Thomas Christensen (Black Swan, 1993), p. 162.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.152.

With Joanne Harris we enter the magic world of Easter Festival of Chocolate in a small French village of Lanquasnet-sous-Tanne. It is here, between Toulouse and Bordeaux, where Vianne Rocher arrives during the time of Lent to open up a luxuriant chocolate boutique Chocolaterie Artisanale, which sells confections and hot chocolate drinks. The time is most unfavourable for the indulgence in sweets because it is Lent, the traditional season of self-denial, and the shop is located opposite the church administered by the austere parish priest, father Francis Reynaud. The village people divide into two groups, one that cannot resist sweets and is tempted by chocolate paradise and the other group which sides with the reverend father and listens to his sermons of the angelic heaven. The contention is over when Vianne announces a Grand Chocolate Festival that will be held on Easter Sunday. The war between church and chocolate, gluttony and moderation, temptation and renunciation, love and dogma is over. The finale of the book is most surprising and arresting, the most delicious dessert that the author can offer. On the day of Resurrection Sunday father Reynaud steals to the chocolate shop early in the morning with an intention to damage the meticulously arranged display of home made chocolate, which kept him awake for so many nights. Instead, we see him penetrating into and indulging in real chocolate sweets which he could not resist the moment he surreptitiously entered the shop. He recalls how in his childhood he was unable to buy chocolate sweets since they were very expensive.

The metaphoricity of the final part of the book is immediate – for a celibate priest the indulgence in sweet forbidden fruits which he secretly consumes in the chocolate boutique is like tasting female flesh that Harris's narrative makes illuminating in one of the most succulent descriptions of worldly temptations. The priest confesses:

It is an amazement of riches, *glacé* fruits and marzipan flowers and mountains of loose chocolates of all shapes and colours, and rabbits, ducks [...] gazing out at me with merry-grave chocolate eyes like the terracotta armies of ancient China, and above it all a statue of a woman, graceful brown arms holding a sheaf of chocolate wheat, hair rippling. The detail is beautifully rendered, the hair added in a darker grade of chocolate, the eyes brushed on in white. The smell of chocolate is overwhelming, the rich fleshly scent of it which drags down the throat in an exquisite trail of sweetness. The wheatsheaf-woman smiles very slightly, as if contemplating mysteries. *Try me. Test me. Taste me.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Joanne Harris, *Chocolat* (Black Swan, 1999), p. 310.

Obsessed with and seduced by chocolate luxury he could hardly afford in the past, and later, when the shepherd for his flock, the priest finds an ever new excuse for “basking-rooting-gorging” himself in the sweet paradise. He first reads the most intriguing names of sweets written in cursive script, but then stops reading the labels cramming chocolates into his mouth at random:

The names are entrancing: *Bitter orange cracknel. Apricot marzipan roll. Cerisette russe. White rum truffle. Manon blanc. Nipples of Venus.*[...] And yet they look wonderful, plumply white in the light of my torch, tipped with darker chocolate. I take one from the top of the tray. I hold it beneath my nose: it smells of cream and vanilla [...] There are *layers* of flavour like the bouquet of a fine wine, a slight bitterness, a richness like ground coffee; warmth brings the flavour to life and it fills my nostrils, a taste succubus which has me moaning.

The sounds of Resurrection liturgy reverberate in his ears reminding him of the Holy Mass, which he will not be able to celebrate. The sounds of his own eating and moaning, mouth bulging and hands full of sweets seem to spell “the curse of death by gluttony.”<sup>12</sup>

When the preparations for the grand festival of chocolate were still under way, Father Reynaud suspected each of his parishioners of chewing chocolate even on the steps of the confessional. He heard the sucking sound of saliva in each voice and his rage flared when he heard the penitent entering the cubicle. Temptations were lurking everywhere, especially at the square market, where the “air perfumed with bewildering scents of ginger and spices” and “a concentration of sweetness became a half-fulfilled promise of the forbidden”<sup>13</sup>:

In a lull between the verses of a hymn I hear the delivery-van’s horn as it pulls up in front. During the sermon – the very sermon [...] I stop mid-phrase, certain I hear the rustle of sweet-papers.<sup>14</sup>

Last but not least, Harris’s novel bears the smack of alchemy and both, Vianne Rocher and her mother are portrayed as witches, involved in the art of sorcery. Their production of chocolate drinks and their making of sweets wields marvels like in magic. Vianne, like the Aztec shaman, is well familiar with each of her customers’ appetites, tastes and dreams and their small and introverted sweet concerns. As a tame alchemist, Vianne enjoys her art in the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

culinary laboratory, a kind of “sorcery in all cooking: in the choosing of ingredients, the process of mixing, grating, melting, infusing and flavouring, the recipes taken from ancient books, the traditional utensils – the pestle and mortar [...]”<sup>15</sup> Vianne’s culinary art and the collections of her recipes from all geographical regions of Europe are compared to maps. Each (cultural) region is marked by its most unique culinary landmark: “Paris smells of baking bread and *croissants*; Marseille of *bouillabaisse* and grilled garlic. Berlin was Eisbrei with *Sauerkraut* and *Kartoffelsalat*, Rome was the ice-cream.”<sup>16</sup> But it is chocolat(e) that links Europe with the rest of the world, especially America. In the “alchemical transformation of base chocolate”<sup>17</sup> into chocolate artworks that Vianne manufactures in her kitchen there is something that makes her “clear her mind and breathe deeply.” Her chocolate laboratory is the place which transports her back to the times of the Aztecs and the rainy forest, in which the cocoa beans were first grown and revered:

The mingled scents of chocolate, vanilla, heated copper and cinnamon are intoxicating, powerfully suggestive; the raw and earthly tang of the Americas, the hot and resinous perfume of the rainforest. This is how I travel now as the Aztecs did in their secret rituals. Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia. The court of Montezuma. Cortez and Columbus. The food of the gods, bubbling and frothing in ceremonial goblets. The bitter elixir of life [...] Magical properties were attributed to it. Its brew was sipped on the steps of sacrificial temples; its ecstasies were fierce and terrible [...] Scrying with chocolate is a difficult business. The visions are unclear, troubled by rising perfumes which cloud the mind.<sup>18</sup>

Harris’s novel proves that in the twentieth century chocolate becomes the food of the masses, available to all. Though chocolate has been transmuted from a costly drink to a cheap food challenged only by tea and coffee, there are still such artisans who uphold the Mesoamerican tradition of grinding the cacao on the *metate* or using the frother (*molinillo*) to produce foam on top of the liquid.

John Cadbury, a Quaker chocolate capitalist, opened a coffee-and-tea shop in Birmingham in 1824 and he sold there the traditional chocolate drink. In the Birmingham suburb of Bournville the Cadburys created “a model factory town with adequate housing for their workers, a dining room and reading room.”<sup>19</sup> Among Swiss chocolate makers, Cailler, Suchard, Henri Nestle and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>19</sup> Coe, p. 245.

Daniel Peter fabricated the first milk chocolate bar ever produced. The most famous Swiss chocolate confectionery producer was Rudolph Lindt who invented “conching,” the process named after the machine, “conche,” so called for its shell-like shape. The machine’s roll-and-roll treatment of the chocolate mass allows it to reach the desired flavour and a high degree of smoothness (therefore it is called “fondant” after the smooth sugar creams of that name).<sup>20</sup>

Milton Hershey (died in 1945) from Pennsylvania was the “Henry Ford” of the American chocolate industry. The streets of a little town bear the names of the places from which Hershey’s cacao beans came: Caracas, Trinidad, Java, Ceylon and others. His chocolate empire was ruled by the benevolent dictator and a marketing genius, Milton Snavely Hershey. The most popular were “Hershey’s Kisses,” little bite-sized, flat bottomed drops of milk chocolate individually wrapped. In contemporary world one of the biggest chocolate empires is that of Jim Walsh in Hawaii with, as he claims, high population of midges, cacao’s main pollinators. In a big postmodernist chocolate empire Walsh still belongs to those chocolate lovers who believe in traditional methods of chocolate manufacturing from the early stage of harvesting most favourable beans to the final product of the delight of the masses.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 251.