

Report of Scoping Survey of the
Lever Brothers' Plantations in the Solomon Islands
and the Congo, 1900-1930

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List of Abbreviations

ANU – Australian National University

HCB – Huileries du Congo Belge

LBC – Lever Brothers' Correspondence

LBS – Legacies of British Slavery

LPPL – Lever's Pacific Plantations Limited

PSVT – Port Sunlight Village Trust

SAVCO – Savonneries du Congo Belge

UAC – United Africa Company

UARM – Unilever Arts, Archives and Records Management

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Abstract

In the summer of 2020, a number of community and activist organisations drew public attention to the activities of Lever Brothers in the Belgian Congo in the first half of the twentieth century. Through their subsidiary firm, *Huileries du Congo Belge*, Lever Brothers developed several palm oil plantations in the Congo in collaboration with the Belgian government. During this period Lever Brothers also established plantations in the Solomon Islands, in the Western Pacific. These plantations used local labour to extract natural resources for the manufacture of soap in Lever Brothers' factories. In some instances, local communities were coerced into working on the plantations and suffered abuse at the hands of the plantation managers. Responding to the increased public awareness of the conditions on the Lever Brother plantations and questions about the management of the plantations, Unilever sought to better understand this part of the company's history. To do so Unilever launched a four-month scoping project to survey current understandings of the Lever Brothers' plantations and establish where further work was needed. This report relates the findings of this research, providing an assessment of the existing literature on the history of Lever Brothers' overseas plantations, a summary of relevant archival material and an evaluation of the potential for future research.

Introduction

Between 1902 and 1930, the company of Lever Brothers managed a number of plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo. These plantations provided oil from palm and coconut fruits, which were used by Lever Brothers in the production of soap. The operations of the plantations were managed by two subsidiary companies: *Lever's Pacific Plantations Limited* in the Solomon Islands and *Huileries du Congo Belge* in the Congo. As branches of Lever Brothers, the direction of these companies was overseen by William Lever and his trusted managers. When Lever Brothers merged with the Dutch firm *Margarine Unie* in 1929, these plantations became part of Unilever. In the wake of Black Lives Matter demonstrations and in the context of a growing public awareness around the history of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in Britain, the activities of Lever Brothers in the Congo during the first part of the twentieth century have come under increased scrutiny. Questions have been asked about the treatment of Congolese workers on Lever Brothers' plantations and the use of forced and unfree labour. As a result of these questions, research was undertaken to better understand the activities of Lever Brothers both in the Congo and the Solomon Islands and ensure a transparent and balanced history of Lever Brothers was accessible to all.

Following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, global demonstrations by the Black Lives Matter movement led to a greater awareness of the systemic racial inequalities in society. Public and private institutions across the United Kingdom are examining their historical connections to slavery and colonialism. Many companies are investigating the sources of historical investment and the actions of their founders.¹ Firms and public institutions have issued statements expressing their commitment to presenting a transparent and balanced account of their history.² Businesses are also increasingly looking

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jun/18/barclays-hsbc-and-lloyds-among-uk-banks-that-had-links-to-slavery> [accessed 16th November 2021]

² See for example, Lloyd's of London's statement, <https://www.lloyds.com/about-lloyds/history/the-trans-atlantic-slave-trade> [accessed 1st December 2021] and The Rowntree Society's statement,

to partner with heritage and academic institutions in order to gain a better understanding of their connections to historical slavery and colonialism. In October 2020, the pub chain Greene King announced a partnership with the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, aimed at raising awareness and educating Greene King staff and the general public about the transatlantic slave trade.³ The Legacies of British Slavery project (LBS), led by University College London and funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council and the Economic & Social Research Council, is also working to trace the economic and social legacies of the slave trade in the UK.⁴ Projects like LBS are highlighting the long-lasting impact of Britain's involvement in the slave trade and the British Empire, and increasing public engagement with these challenging topics.

As part of this growing awareness of the involvement of British companies in the slave trade and, following abolition, the use of forced and unfree labour overseas, attention has been drawn to the activities of Lever Brothers in the Belgian Congo. In the summer of 2020, the memorial to Sir William Hesketh Lever, 1st Viscount Leverhulme was added to a list of statues and monuments which honour the beneficiaries of slavery and colonialism. Organised by the group Topple the Racists, the map reflects the growing public interest in Britain's colonial history and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. Topple the Racists is a crowd-sourced database, which aims to 'highlight the complicity and history of Empire and slavery.'⁵ The group encourages an open discussion about our history and the future of the statues highlighted in their interactive map.⁶ The Leverhulme Memorial, situated outside the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Port Sunlight, was constructed with funds raised by workers of Lever Brothers, following the death of William Lever in 1925. The memorial was highlighted by Topple the Racists because of William Lever's involvement in the plantation economy of the Belgian Congo and the recorded abuses against Congolese workers that occurred on these plantations. In response to questions about the recruitment and treatment of native workers on Lever Brothers' Congolese plantations, Unilever

<https://www.rowntreesociety.org.uk/news/statement-on-rowntree-colonial-histories/> [accessed 29th November 2021]

³ <https://www.greeneking.co.uk/newsroom/latest-news/new-partnership-announced-between-greene-king-and-the-international-slavery-museum/> [accessed 22nd November 2021]

⁴ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/> [accessed 22nd November 2021]

⁵ <https://www.stoptrump.org.uk/topple-the-racists/> [accessed 26th November 2021]

⁶ <https://www.toppletheracists.org/> [accessed 26th November 2021]

commissioned a four-month scoping survey to review the existing literature and evaluate the need for further research on the topic. This report presents the findings of the scoping survey and proposes a number of avenues for further research as well as a range of means of dissemination.

Recently interventions have been made in museums, galleries and other heritage spaces to increase accessibility to collections and to highlight some of the more challenging aspects of our collective history. In June 2021, the Port Sunlight Village Trust (PSVT) opened a new permanent gallery aimed at children between 8-12 years old, which explores how soap is made and what raw materials are used. The gallery, called ‘Soap Works’, includes information about the Lever Brothers’ plantations in the Congo. However, it was felt that a more in-depth discussion of this part of the company’s past was needed and in response PSVT developed a pamphlet entitled ‘Racism, the Congo and William Lever’ to help members of the public understand the issues surrounding Lever Brothers’ activities in the Congo. Interventions such as this contribute towards greater transparency in the telling of this history of William Lever, Port Sunlight and Lever Brothers. They also encourage an open discussion on issues of race, colonialism and slavery, subjects which are often absent in many forms of public history. Public interest in the history of Lever Brothers and William Lever has grown in recent months and this has been represented in cultural and media outlets. The BBC Radio 4 documentary series *Descendants*, which aired in May and June 2021, explored the connections between William Lever, Bolton, and the Congo.⁷ Bolton School, which received a large endowment from William Lever in 1913, has also encouraged its students to research William Lever’s involvement in the Congo and is engaging with local communities in relation to the renaming of streets and places in Bolton.

In this context, thorough, balanced and inclusive research into the life of William Lever and the history of the Lever Brothers’ plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo is vitally important. Although some aspects of this history are widely available, as this report shows, there remain many questions and gaps in our understanding. The practice of history is not the creation of a static truth. History is a collection of constantly evolving narratives that reflect the ways in which we see ourselves and the world we live in. It is hoped that this report will act as a tool for future research in illustrating

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09jgfmr> [accessed 28th October 2021]

the strengths of the current literature, highlighting gaps in the existing research and identifying new avenues of inquiry. This report is the outcome of four months scoping research into the existing secondary literature and the accessibility of primary material relating to the Lever Brothers' plantations. The first section of this report provides an outline of the relevant themes and arguments in the existing secondary literature, highlighting the sensitive issues of exploitation, abuse, corruption and the acquisition of native land. This first section of the report acts as a summary of what we already know about the Lever Brothers' plantations. From this examination of the secondary literature and reviewed primary material, the second section of the report identifies several emerging themes and research questions. These themes are areas that require further research in order to fully understand the history of the Lever Brothers' plantations. These include the relationship between Lever Brothers and the British Colonial Office, the role of individuals in William Lever's personal, political and business networks in facilitating the development and operation of the plantations, and William Lever's relationship with the Belgian Royal family. Further research on these themes would help to narrow the gaps in our current knowledge on the Lever Brothers' plantations and contribute to a number of other related areas of study, such as the role of private enterprise in the British Empire. The final section of the report outlines the potential for future research projects and collaboration. This section builds on the emerging themes and research questions examined in the previous section by identifying possible routes to pursue further research. This includes the potential to collaborate with a number of relevant institutions and community stakeholders, such as National Museums Liverpool, the Australian National University, The Leverhulme Trust, the British Museum and descendent communities in the UK, Solomon Islands and Congo. This final section also identifies potential means for disseminating research on the Lever Brothers' plantations, through heritage institutions, community organisations and creative responses.

A Review of the Literature and Collections

In order to identify gaps in our knowledge and areas for future research, it is important to consider what we already know about the development and operation of Lever Brothers' plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo. This section presents an overview of the existing literature on the history of Lever Brothers and a selection of primary material. The majority of the primary sources consulted during the course of this research are held in Unilever's Art, Archives and Record Management (UARM) collections located in Port Sunlight.⁸ The Unilever archives holds hundreds of documents, photographs and objects relating to the establishment, development, and operation of the plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo. This material is distributed across more than 16 different collections within the archive, including those of the United Africa Company, Unilever and Lever Brothers. The documents examined range from business correspondence to committee minutes, legal papers, annual reports, land deeds and the personal papers of company employees. The Unilever archives offer a rich and detailed account of the history of Lever Brothers and the company's related subsidiaries. However, the material found in UARM represents only one perspective of the company's history. Although business archives are invaluable in understanding the history of firms like Lever Brothers, it is necessary to look beyond the company archives in order to present a balanced and transparent narrative. For this report, records in the National Archives, the Lady Lever Art Gallery, the British Museum and Liverpool Record Office were also consulted. Many more archival collections have been identified as relevant to potential future research in this area and these are discussed in the final section of this report.⁹

By 1900, the soap manufacturer Lever Brothers was a vast global enterprise. Under the direction of its founder William Lever, Lever Brothers had built extensive soap works on the Wirral, a model village for its workers, named Port Sunlight after the company's well-known brand of soap, and had branches across the world, including in Australia and Canada.¹⁰ William Lever became one of Britain's leading

⁸ <https://www.unilever.com/our-company/our-history-and-archives/> [accessed 13th December 2021]

⁹ A database of relevant archival collections has also been developed as part of the four-month scoping survey. The database can be used a tool to guide potential future research on the history of Lever Brothers' overseas plantations.

¹⁰ Charles Wilson, *The History of Unilever: A Study in Economic Growth and Social Change*, (London: Cassell, 1970), pp. 105-6.

businessmen of the early twentieth century. Gaining significant wealth and advancing in social status, Lever became a prominent collector of contemporary art, entered politics, being elected an MP in 1906, and acquired extensive property on the Wirral and in London, Lancashire and Scotland.¹¹

The success of Lever Brothers' soap was partly due to the development of a product that used a blend of copra or palm oil, along with tallow and cotton oil. This combination of oils and fats prevented the soap from becoming rancid.¹² The key ingredients of copra and palm oil had to be imported from Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific. As the demand for household products and industrial lubricants grew, the global market for these oils became increasingly competitive. William Lever grew concerned that the high demand for copra and palm oil could threaten production at Lever Brothers as these essential ingredients grew scarce.¹³ Archival material indicates that, by developing his own plantations, Lever hoped to secure a steady supply of raw materials for Lever Brothers' factories and influence global market prices for copra and palm oil.¹⁴ The wisdom of Lever's decision to diversify into the production of nut oils has been questioned by a number of historians and business scholars.¹⁵ It is estimated that the Solomon Island plantations were capable of providing only 6% of the world's copra supply by 1930.¹⁶ The plantations of the Congo and Solomon Islands never reached their full productivity, and it is unlikely that the output from Lever Brothers' plantations could have ever had a significant impact on the global price of palm and copra oil. It remains uncertain precisely what Lever hoped to achieve by developing plantations for copra and palm oil.¹⁷ The purpose and value of the plantations to Lever Brothers was questioned several times throughout the twentieth century, including during William Lever's lifetime.¹⁸ In the 1970s, historian D. K. Fieldhouse argued that, 'from the standpoint of the men who had run the Lever empire after his death in 1925, the existing plantations were in many ways an embarrassment.' He further suggested that as Lever Brothers had expanded

¹¹ Brian Lewis, *"So Clean": Lord Leverhulme, Soap and Civilization*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 126; W. P. Jolly, *Lord Leverhulme: A Biography*, (London: Constable, 1976), pp. 76-7.

¹² Lewis, *So Clean*, p. 62; David Russell Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands': Charles Morris Woodford in the Western Pacific* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), p. 264.

¹³ D. K. Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas: The Anatomy of a Multinational 1895-1965*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978), p. 452.

¹⁴ Liam Byrne, *Dragons. Ten Entrepreneurs who Built Britain*, (London: Head of Zeus, 2016), p. 406.

¹⁵ Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, p. 451; Wilson, *The History of Unilever*, p. 160.

¹⁶ Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, p. 465.

¹⁷ Lewis, *So Clean*, pp. 158-9.

¹⁸ Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, p. 450.

through the early years of the twentieth century, their existence had ‘long outgrown logic’.¹⁹ However, considerable capital had been invested to establish and develop the plantations and it was unclear if this could be recovered through their sale. The plantations developed by Lever Brothers and the subsidiary companies which were established as a result hold a unique position within the firm’s history.²⁰ Unlike other branches of Lever Brothers, created to manage the company’s production and sales overseas, the relationship of the plantations to the parent company was both fluid and ill-defined. The plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo continued to be developed for many years, and despite setbacks and challenges maintained their position under Unilever.

The first plantation developed by Lever Brothers was located in the Solomon Islands, an archipelago in the Western Pacific, off the north-eastern coast of Australia. Lever Brothers established the subsidiary firm of Lever’s Pacific Plantations Limited (LPPL) in 1902 to oversee the development and management of the plantation.²¹ LPPL later became Lever’s Pacific Plantations Propriety Limited in 1928.²² Twenty years after the founding in LPPL, the company had a total 20 estates, each comprising between 600 and 1,000 acres.²³ The Solomon Island plantations managed coconut trees, harvesting the nuts to produce copra, from which oil was extracted. The Solomon Islands had been under British rule since 1893 when the British Solomon Islands Protectorate was formed.²⁴ Consisting of over 900 islands, the Solomon Islands presented the colonial government with a number of challenges. The difficulties of governing these disparate and remote islands were recognised by Resident High Commissioner for the Solomon Islands, Charles Morris Woodford. Woodford understood that, in order to maintain British rule in the Islands, the Protectorate would need to raise revenue.²⁵ The islands offered rich natural resources and mineral deposits for extraction and opportunities for the development of plantations. Woodford recognised that the efficient exploitation of the islands would require assistance from private enterprises who were willing to invest in the development of infrastructure and facilities.²⁶ Development

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 448.

²¹ Wilson, *The History of Unilever*, p. 160.

²² Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, p. 464.

²³ Ibid. p. 469.

²⁴ Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, p. 149.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 268.

²⁶ Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, p. 453.

of the land by private firms would also provide the colonial government with a rental income from the land leased.²⁷



Figure 1: 'Showing the completion of a conserver drain', Solomon Islands, 9th December 1924. UARM, SDC/3/2/11

The Solomon Island plantations presented LPPL and Lever Brothers with many challenges, most notably in relation to labour shortages, land agreements and the relationship with the colonial government. However, these obstacles did not weaken Lever's enthusiasm for the further development of plantations. After negotiations with the British Colonial Office over the rights to palm oil production in West Africa failed, Lever's attention was captured by opportunities in the Belgian Congo. Lever Brothers were offered five concessions in the Congo with exclusive rights to the production of palm oil in these areas.²⁸ Previously the private possession of King Leopold II, numerous crimes against the Congolese had been recorded in the Congo Free State, including the use of forced labour and dismemberment as a form of punishment.²⁹ Following the public revelation of these atrocities, the

²⁷ Deryck Scarr, *Fragments of Empire: A History of the Western Pacific High Commission 1877-1914*, (Canberra: ANU Press, 1968), p. 266.

²⁸ Benoît Henriët, *Colonial Impotence: Virtue and Violence in a Congolese Concession (1911-1940)*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), p. 4.

²⁹ Martin Evans, *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe: Leopold II, the Congo Free State and its Aftermath*, (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

Congo Free State was transferred to the Belgian Government in 1908 and renamed the Belgian Congo.³⁰ In an effort to reform the colony, the Belgian Government looked to private companies for investment to develop infrastructure and exploit the Congo's rich resources.³¹

In 1911, Lever Brothers established the subsidiary firm of *Huileries du Congo Belge* (HCB). The company was registered in Belgium, and had its head offices in Brussels, in accordance with the agreement of the Belgian government who stipulated that the Congo plantations must be managed by a Belgian company.³² By 1912, HCB had established five plantations, named Alberta, Elisabetha, Leverville, Brabanta and Flandria.³³ HCB established a number of factories and milling stations to process the palm fruits, obtain oil from the kernels and manufacture soap. In 1912, William Lever presented King Albert I of Belgium with a bar of soap that had been produced in the Congo as proof of the viability of HCB's enterprise.³⁴ Lever Brothers also established SEDEC, a trading company to handle the export of palm oil and kernels, which was in operation in the Belgian Congo from 1916.³⁵ They also attempted to capture a share of the market for soap in Central Africa through the establishment of SAVCO in 1922.³⁶ By 1925 Lever Brothers employed 25,000 in Central Africa.³⁷

Although separated by continents and ruled by different colonial regimes, existing research on the Lever plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo centres around four key areas. The first of these is the exploitation of the people and resources in and around the plantations. Labourers were placed on exploitative contracts, given unrealistic quotas to fulfil and coerced into working for HCB and LPPL. Secondly, alongside exploitative practices were instances of abuse and the mistreatment of workers and local communities by officials of HCB and LPPL. Many of these incidents were also facilitated or committed by colonial officials who worked closely with the plantation managers. Thirdly,

³⁰ Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State. Violence, Remedies and Reverie in Colonial Congo*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

³¹ Wilson, *The History of Unilever*, p. 167.

³² Reuben Loffman and Benoît Henriët, 'We Are Left with Barely Anything': Colonial Rule, Dependency, and the Lever Brothers in the Belgian Congo, 1911-1960', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 48/1 (2020), 75.

³³ Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, p. 4.

³⁴ UARM, Lever Brothers' Correspondence, Ernest Brauen, 1912-1922, GB1752.LBC/92.

³⁵ SEDEC was later amalgamated into the United Africa Company in 1929; Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, pp. 379-80.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 380.

³⁷ Ian Bradley, *Enlightened Entrepreneurs. Business Ethics in Victorian Britain*, (Oxford: Lion, 2007), p. 200.

the exploitation and abuse of labourers and local communities in the vicinity of Lever Brothers' plantations often occurred due to various forms of corruption, both among company agents, colonial officials, and local leaders. Finally, the ways in which HCB and LPPL acquired land on which to develop plantations also requires further investigation. Although Lever Brothers' plantations were developed on land bought or leased through legal processes, often with the permission of the relevant colonial government, there remain questions regarding native rights to land and the way in which land was acquired from local communities by colonial administrations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.



Figure 2: Coconut Plantation, Solomon Islands, c.1948. UARM, UNI/GF/CR/5/19/6

The exploitation of local communities can be seen in many aspects of HCB and LPPL's practices. Despite Lever's stated commitment to the welfare of his workers, the directors of the plantations frequently placed the pursuit of profit above the improvement of living and working

conditions. Fruit cutters in the Congo were compelled to harvest greater quantities of fruits per month, regardless of the availability.³⁸ Child labour was used for jobs that required nimble hands and the company directors turned a blind eye to the issue of female portage.³⁹ Although the provision of housing, schools and medical facilities was presented as an integral feature of the Lever Brothers' plantations, by 1930 these amenities were far from the vision of recreating Port Sunlight in the colonies that had been touted.⁴⁰ The exploitation of Congolese and Solomon Island labourers eroded the relationship between local communities and the company. It impacted the daily lives of many of the plantations' workers and those who lived within the concessions. Alongside the daily exploitation, there are numerous recorded incidents of the abuse and mistreatment of native workers. Physical violence was commonly used as a form of punishment, including severe beatings.⁴¹ In some instances, plantation managers who were charged with abusing their workers were defended by Lever Brothers, their crimes being attributed to the stresses of life in the colonies.⁴² These examples are indicative of the attitude in Lever Brothers towards Solomon Islanders and the Congolese. While efforts were made to civilise their native workers, Lever Brothers expected labourers to conform to their standards and ideals. If the carrot did not succeed in creating model workers, HCB and LPPL were willing to try the stick.

The disparity between the policies and practices of the Lever plantations also presented a significant challenge. The business records of UARM demonstrate the inconsistencies between the directions of head office and the actions of managers and company agents on the ground. It was understood that plantation managers had some licence in the implementation of company policy and on occasion, directions from senior managers were purposefully vague.⁴³ Although Lever Brothers and William Lever himself, maintained a firm interest in the operations of HCB and LPPL, they were reliant on accurate and up-to-date reports from their managers. The distance between Lever Brothers and the

³⁸ Jules Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts: Colonial Exploitation in the Congo*, Translated edn (London: Verso, 2017), pp. 172-3.

³⁹ Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, pp. 112-3.

⁴⁰ Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts*, p. 143.

⁴¹ Hunt, *Nervous State*, p. 31.

⁴² UARM, Unilever, Global Functions, Legal Group, Records Relating to Incident Involving Charles Peter Munster, 1909, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/4/1158; UARM, Unilever, Global Functions, Legal Group, File on Killing by A. E. Hermes, 1909, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/4/1160.

⁴³ Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, p. 101.

head offices of HCB and LPPL, in Brussels and Sydney respectively, also allowed corrupt practices to proliferate in the plantations. In the Congo this manifested in the use of coercive methods of recruitment in collaboration with colonial officials. Although the involvement of representatives of the colonial government in the recruitment of workers for HCB was forbidden, the practice was common.⁴⁴ HCB recruitment agents frequently accompanied colonial officials to villages, drawing on the coercive power of the colonial system to force villagers to sign contracts.⁴⁵ These practices demonstrate the entrenched corruption amongst company agents and colonial officials, which was a fundamental aspect of life on colonial plantations.

There are few accounts of plantation workers in the archives. Colonised communities often leave little direct trace in written records. What we know of the lives of labourers on plantations in the Congo and Solomon Islands suggests that exploitation and abuse were commonplace. Although some provisions for housing, schooling and medical care were offered by Lever Brothers, these were both strongly criticised by several observers and colonial officials.⁴⁶ These experiences of life and work in the plantations are not universal but they indicate that Lever's plantation projects were not the pioneering models of the civilising mission in the colonies that he hoped they might be.

⁴⁴ Loffman and Henriët, 'We Are Left with Barely Anything', p. 85.

⁴⁵ Henri Nicolai, 'Le Congo et l'huile de palme. Un siècle. Un cycle?', *Belgeo: Revue belge de géographie*, 4 (2013), 12.

⁴⁶ Benoît Henriët, "'Elusive Natives": Escaping Colonial Control in the Leverage Oil Palm Concession, Belgian Congo, 1923-1941', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 49/2 (2015), 351; Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts*, pp. 23-5; UARM, Overseas Committee, Report on Mr. Muir's Visit to the Congo, GB1752.UNI/RM/OC/2/2/26/5; UARM, Legal, Special Report of the Commission of Enquiry to Investigate Native Labour Conditions in the HCB Lusanga Area, January 1931, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/1/486.

Future Research Potential: Emerging Themes and Research Questions

This section of the report outlines the key emerging themes for future research, based on the gaps identified through the collections and literature review. The themes and research questions raised in this section provide a framework for future research. Many of these themes draw on and contribute to existing bodies of research, such as the history of colonialism, the study of agency in colonised communities and British economic history. Although it represents a case study focused on a single company, it also offers a significant contribution to our broader understanding of global enterprise and trade in the early twentieth century. The themes discussed below also illustrate the relevance of this research to a wide range of stakeholders, from institutions and businesses to descendent communities in the Solomon Islands and the Congo. This section presents four key areas for further study:

- The integration of a broader range of perspectives on the history of Lever Brothers, including those of plantations workers and local communities.
- The relationship between the development of the Lever Brothers' plantations and the wider historical context of European colonialism and the extensive political and social networks that William Lever developed.
- The responsibility of individuals, including William Lever, within Lever Brothers, and the subsidiary companies of Huileries du Congo Belge and Lever's Pacific Plantations Limited, in directing company policy and practices on the plantations.
- The legacy of Lever Brothers' overseas plantations on local communities and ecologies, including the social and economic impact of the plantations.

New perspectives

One of the most significant absences in the history of the Lever Brothers plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Belgian Congo are the voices of the workers and local communities. Tracing the voices of those who worked on and lived near the Lever Brothers' plantations is key to understanding the

impact of the palm oil and copra trade on local communities. Although there is some evidence of these individuals in the existing literature on HCB and LPPL, the voices of the Congolese and Solomon Islanders are distinctly absent from the history of Lever Brothers. The voices of labourers, manual workers and operatives are rarely recorded in company archives. Colonial documents also seldom contain accounts by colonised communities. However, it is possible to piece together fragments of information to build a picture of what life was like for the workers on Lever Brothers' plantations through the examination of their lived experience and agency.⁴⁷

The provision of housing, education and medical facilities for workers was a fundamental article of HCB's agreement with the Belgian government.⁴⁸ Some research has been conducted into the extent of HCB's fulfilment of this promise and the access that HCB workers had to schools, hospitals and homes.⁴⁹ However, there remain a number of key questions around the intent of HCB to provide these facilities and the disparity between what was promised and what was achieved. There remain significant gaps in our understanding of life for Congolese workers and the impact of HCB's plantations on local communities. The efforts made by William Lever to 'civilise' the Congolese and recreate model villages in the heart of the Congo have been praised by many contemporaries and historians.⁵⁰ Yet, it remains unclear how far William Lever, Lever Brothers and HCB were committed to providing quality housing and developing infrastructure. There are also questions around the potential benefits to the Congolese of such projects, which represent the imposition of Western values and colonial ideology on existing local communities. A detailed review of Unilever and Belgian colonial archives is required to gain a clear understanding of the development of HCB's plantations, including the construction of housing, and medical and educational facilities. This would incorporate a comparative study of the proposed developments against the facilities that were constructed. Plans, reports and photographs in both UARM and the Belgian National Archives would assist in this research. In building a detailed picture of HCB's plantations, it will then be possible to examine the lived experience of Congolese

⁴⁷ Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, p. 13.

⁴⁸ Henriët, 'Elusive Natives', p. 342.

⁴⁹ See for example, Henriët, "Elusive Natives"; Loffman and Henriët, "We Are Left with Barely Anything".

⁵⁰ Lewis, *So Clean*, pp. 154-5; Bradley, *Enlightened Entrepreneurs*, p. 200; Adam Macqueen, *The King of Sunlight: How William Lever Cleaned up the World* (London: Bantam, 2004), pp. 192-4.

workers and local communities and assess the impact that the plantations had on life in the Congo. Using the lived experience of workers as a lens through which to examine the history of the plantations will enable the dissemination of new perspectives and voices on this challenging aspect of Lever Brothers' past.

Another tool for highlighting the voices of workers is to trace acts of resistance and evidence of agency. Actions that disrupt established power structures and hierarchies provide an insight into the lives of Congolese communities and their relationship with HCB. Some details are known about how Congolese communities enacted daily forms of resistance against agents of colonial and company control. Evading company recruiters and creating *villages doublures* represent expressions of Congolese agency and resistance against the control of HCB and the colonial government.⁵¹ The absence of the voices of native workers in written sources presents a number of difficulties to understanding how the plantations of Lever Brothers affected the lives of Congolese communities. However, through a close examination of a wide range of records, it is possible to identify acts of resistance and evidence of Congolese agency in the archives. Instances of large-scale resistance also offer an opportunity to hear the voices of local communities and workers. For example, the Pende Revolt of 1931 enables the examination of Congolese attitudes towards HCB and the colonial administration.⁵² Through large or small acts of resistance, communities under the control of colonial governments and company officials were able to exercise agency and make their voices heard. By studying these forms of resistance, it is possible to incorporate these voices into the history of palm oil production in the Belgian Congo.

Very little has been written about the lives of plantation workers in the Solomon Islands and there remain many gaps in our understanding of LPPL's commitment to providing housing, health care

⁵¹ *Villages doublures* or secondary villages were Congolese communities which grew spontaneously around the HCB concessions. Built largely by migrant workers and their families, they also offered a place of refuge for those eager to escape the control of the Belgian colonial administration. As unregistered, make-shift villages, without chiefs and traditional hierarchies, the *villages doublures* were beyond the reach of the already stretched resources of the colonial government; Henriët, 'Elusive Natives'.

⁵² Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts*, pp. 148-9; Louis-Francois Vanderstraeten, *La repression de la révolte des Pende du Kwango en 1931*, (Brussels: ARSOM, 2001); Sikitele Gize a Sumbula, 'Les racines de la révolte Pende de 1931', *Etudes d'histoire africaine*, 5 (1973); Sikitele Gize a Sumbula, 'Les causes principales de la révolte Pende en 1931', *Zaire-Afrique*, 16/109 (1976); Herbert F. Weiss, Richard B. Woodward, and Z. S. Strother, 'Art with Fight in It: Discovering that a Statue of a Colonial Officer is a Power Object from the 1931 Pende Revolt', *African Arts*, 49/1 (2016).

and educational facilities. The existing literature offers some insights into daily life and the conditions on the islands' plantations.⁵³ However, a review of UARM's collections revealed a number of records relating to the development of the LPPL plantations that have not been thoroughly examined.⁵⁴ These documents provide an important insight into life on the plantations, the treatment of workers and housing. Colonial Office records also offer evidence of the living and working conditions on LPPL's plantations.⁵⁵ This is an understudied area of both the company's history and the history of the Solomon Islands. Further research in this area would contribute significantly towards understanding how Lever Brothers' overseas plantations operated and provide a comparative study for the Congo plantations. Currently, the history of LPPL is largely told from the perspective of corporate and colonial actors. The plantation workers, and the estate managers, are mostly absent from this narrative. As demonstrated by the research on the Congo, it is possible to integrate the voices of plantation workers and local communities. Similar research on the Solomon Islands would offer a much richer and more transparent history of LPPL's activities.

Further perspectives on the history of Lever Brothers' plantations can also be found in the contemporary criticism of HCB and LPPL's activities. Although William Lever was widely praised for his philanthropic endeavours, there were contemporaries who criticised Lever Brothers' activities in the Congo and the Solomon Islands. Organisations like the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society and the Congo Reform Association became outspoken critics of HCB's plantations. The subject of slavery and unfree labour was a frequent topic in the popular press throughout the early twentieth

⁵³ Judith A. Bennett, *The Wealth of the Solomons: A History of a Pacific Archipelago, 1800-1978*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987); Judith A. Bennett, "We do not come here to be beaten': Resistance and the Plantation System in the Solomon Islands to World War II", in *Plantation Workers: Resistance and Accommodation* ed. by Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro, and Edward D. Beechert (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993); Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*.

⁵⁴ For example, UARM, Small Deposits Collection, Joseph Meek, Letter from Lord Leverhulme to Joseph Meek, 8th March 1925, GB1752.SDC/3/4/1/4; UARM, Small Deposits Collection, Joseph Meek, Import of Indian Labour into Solomon Islands, 1911-1913, GB1752.SDC/3/2/4/2.

⁵⁵ The National Archives, Colonial Office, Western Pacific Register of Correspondence, 1894-1930, CO/492/4-16; The National Archives, Colonial Office, Western Pacific Register of Out-letters, 1887-1926, CO/493/2-7; The National Archives, Colonial Office, Correspondence, original, 1878-1951, CO/225/53/246; The National Archives, Colonial Office, Western Pacific Government Gazettes, 1914-1971, CO/692; The National Archives, Colonial Office, British Solomon Islands Protectorate Sessional Papers, 1921-1939, CO/856/1-3; The National Archives, Colonial Office, Western Pacific King's Regulations, 1879-1934, CO/665/1-2; The National Archive, Colonial Office, British Solomon Islands Protectorate Miscellanea, Blue Books of Statistics, 1920-1930, CO/723/1-10.

century as crises like the atrocities of the Congo Free State and the cocoa plantations in South America caught the attention of the public.⁵⁶ Although Lever Brothers' plantations did not receive the same criticism as the rubber industry in the Congo Free State, the legitimacy of HCB's activities in the Congo was publicly questioned. In 1912, The Anti-Slavery Society published their criticism of 'Messrs. Lever's Congo Concessions', highlighting their concerns that the rights of local Congolese communities were infringed under HCB's contract with the Belgian Government.⁵⁷ The criticism of Lever Brothers' plantations illustrates that there was a public awareness that the rights and welfare of native workers in the Congo were threatened by the development of palm oil plantations. Although histories of Lever Brothers' plantations often incorporate the criticisms of colonial agents and company officials, there has been little examination of the broader public debate and the role of organisations like the Anti-Slavery Society in building public awareness on these issues. A study of contemporary responses, beyond those of the company, to claims of the violation of workers' rights on Lever's plantations would further enrich the range of perspectives and voices visible in the history of Lever Brothers. It would also provide more detailed historical context on the attitudes of businesses, politicians and the general public to the exploitation of land and people in the colonies.

Historical Context

An examination of the wider historical context, as it relates to the development of Lever Brothers' plantations, is critical to understanding the political, cultural, and social environment in which the firm operated. Contemporary discourses around colonialism and paternalism influenced the attitudes and actions of businessmen like William Lever. Understanding how people are influenced by the ideas and beliefs that surround them does not diminish individual agency or excuse the actions of individuals or institutions. However, an understanding of this context can illustrate how and why certain actions, policies, choices and attitudes prevailed over others.

⁵⁶ Lowell J. Satre, *Chocolate on Trial: Slavery, Politics, and the Ethics of Business*, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005); Jonathan E. Robins, 'Slave Cocoa and Red Rubber: E. D. Morel and the Problem of Ethical Consumption', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54/3 (2012).

⁵⁷ 'Messrs. Lever's Congo Concessions', *The Manchester Guardian*, 1st July 1912, p.12.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, many European powers had vast global empires. Political, economic, social and cultural life was strongly influenced by imperial ideologies and attitudes. For companies like Lever Brothers, the empires of Europe offered access to new markets and raw materials. The history of the Lever Brothers' plantations offers an ideal lens through which to examine the relationship between large international enterprises and European imperialism. For a large part of its history, Lever Brothers operated within the framework of colonialism. The European imperial expansion of the late nineteenth century provided Lever Brothers with a number of business opportunities, including opening new markets for their products and land for the development of their overseas plantations.⁵⁸ The business philosophy of William Lever and his colleagues was also strongly influenced by imperial ideologies, such as the need to civilise the world and exploit the natural resources of the colonies.

The Lever Brothers' plantations were directly linked to the Belgian and British colonial systems. HCB and LPPL were both granted the right to develop plantations on colonised land and collaborated closely with the colonial authorities. The colonial machine made the plantations in the Solomon Islands and Congo possible. However, while European imperialism facilitated the development of the Lever Brothers' plantations, it also presented William Lever with a number of obstacles. One such obstacle related to the importation of labour into the Solomon Islands. As local labour on the islands was insufficient, Lever and the Chairman of LPPL, Joseph Meeks, looked for other sources of workers. Drawing on Britain's imperial network, Lever and Meeks proposed the importation of indentured Indian labourers into the Solomon Islands to the Colonial Office.⁵⁹ Numerous letters, committee minutes and reports in the UARM collections illustrate the belief within Lever Brothers and LPPL that importing indentured labour would resolve the labour shortage on the islands' plantations.⁶⁰ Securing labour under indenture contracts was not uncommon in the nineteenth and early

⁵⁸ Wilson, *The History of Unilever*, p. 157.

⁵⁹ Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, p. 474.

⁶⁰ UARM, Import of Indian Labour into Solomon Islands, GB1752.SDC/3/2/4/2; UARM, Letter from Lord Leverhulme to Joseph Meek, GB1752.SDC/3/4/1/4.

twentieth century, particularly in British colonies.⁶¹ Frequently, indentured labourers were exported from colonies, like India, to other parts of the Empire where labour was scarce. In exchange for transportation to the location of work, indentured workers were bound for a specified period of time to their employer, often for several months or years.⁶² Although most indentured labourers entered into contracts freely, bonded labourers were often exploited, faced harsh working conditions and low or no pay.⁶³ A key criticism of the export of labourers under indenture contracts was the lack of provision for workers to return to their home country on the expiration of their contract.⁶⁴ The system of indentured labour was still in operation in India until 1920 and the practice was still commonly used in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁶⁵ However, Lever and his directors showed their ignorance of the political situation and public opinion in hoping for such large-scale importation of indentured labourers.⁶⁶ Their first request in 1909 was met with approval from the Colonial Office but was rejected by the Australian and Indian Governments.⁶⁷ Later attempts to secure imported labour also failed, including proposals to import Chinese indentured labourers.⁶⁸ Few references to LPPL's attempts to secure indentured labour appear in the existing literature and the records relating to the proposed schemes are yet to be examined in detail.⁶⁹ A review of the UARM collections and Colonial Office records indicates this is an important area for further study. The issue of labour in the Solomon Islands illuminates the dynamic between colonial governments and how they interacted through and outside of the centralised Colonial Office. Understanding exactly how Lever Brothers was connected to British and Belgian colonialism is fundamental to evaluating the long-term impact of the plantations on local

⁶¹ Sunanda Sen, 'Indentured Labour from India in the Age of Empire', *Social Scientist*, 44/1 (2016); Deryck Scarr, 'Recruits and Recruiters: A Portrait of the Pacific Islands Labour Trade', *The Journal of Pacific History*, 2 (1967), 8; Frederick Cooper, 'Introduction', in *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies*, ed. by Frederick Cooper, Thomas C. Holt, and Rebecca J. Scott (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 1-32 (p. 22).

⁶² Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons*, p. 153.

⁶³ Sen, 'Indentured Labour from India', pp. 36-7.

⁶⁴ Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons*, p. 152.

⁶⁵ Cooper, 'Introduction', p. 22.

⁶⁶ Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, p. 475.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 474.

⁶⁸ UARM, Import of Indian Labour into Solomon Islands, GB1752.SDC/3/2/4/2.

⁶⁹ Wilson, *The History of Unilever*, pp. 164-5; Fieldhouse, *Unilever Overseas*, pp. 474-5; Lewis, *So Clean*, p. 162.

communities. It also raises questions around the influence of prominent businessmen in colonial politics and the political and social networks, on which men, like Lever, relied to facilitate business.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the development of the British economy was closely linked to imperial expansion and the exploitation of the colonies. A principal element of imperial ideology was the belief that it was the duty of the more advanced European nations to civilise the 'savage' people of the world. Sometimes referred to as the 'civilising mission', this concept was used to justify imperial expansion and to enforce western norms onto colonised communities.⁷⁰ Closely allied to the narrative of the civilising mission was the promotion of paternalism amongst Britain's social elite. The administration of colonial governments was often said to be led by the principles of paternalism, including in the Solomon Islands, which Charles Morris Woodford described as a 'firm but paternal government.'⁷¹ The paternalistic values of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are often linked to the charitable and philanthropic work of prominent businessmen like William Lever. The model or workers village has come to represent the idea of paternalism during this period. Villages like Saltaire, Bourneville and Port Sunlight were intended to house industrial workers in clean and respectable homes. William Lever believed that by providing his workers with homes, schools and recreational facilities, they would be healthier and harder working.⁷² 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.⁷³ The recorded experiences of those who lived and worked in Port Sunlight are largely positive.⁷⁴ However, as an example of nineteenth-century paternalism, Port Sunlight raises a number of questions about the motivations of William Lever, inequality of power between the company and its workers, and how these paternalistic practices were translated to the Solomon Islands and the Congo.

⁷⁰ Shelia Pelizzon and Cem Somel, 'Eurocentricity', in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, ed. by Immanuel Ness (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 827-33 (p. 830).

⁷¹ Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, p. 7.

⁷² Lewis, *So Clean*, p. 100.

⁷³ W. Ashworth, 'British Industrial Villages in the Nineteenth Century', *The Economic History Review*, 3/3 (1951), 387.

⁷⁴ Lewis, *So Clean*, p. 117.

On his death William Lever was praised for his attempts to civilise the natives of the Solomons and the Congo. One obituary claimed that ‘Lord Leverhulme brought remote and semi-savage communities to a higher spirit of development than they would have reached by their own unaided efforts and made them productive agents for the supplies of the world’s markets.’⁷⁵ Others have compared the provision of housing on Lever Brothers’ plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo to that of Port Sunlight.⁷⁶ Although there remained a distinct racial hierarchy, wealthy individuals such as Lever saw it as their duty to intervene to improve the lives of the British working classes, just as it was their duty to civilise the native populations of the colonies.⁷⁷ However, more recently, as the conditions in Lever Brothers’ overseas plantations have become more widely known, Port Sunlight has been placed in opposition to towns like Leverville, in the Congo, and the Stanmore estate in the Solomon Islands. In the light of increasing evidence of the unsatisfactory conditions on the plantations and of the mistreatment of native workers, Port Sunlight has been held up as an example of the successful application of Lever’s philanthropic principles, against the relative failures of the Congo and the Solomon Islands. To a certain extent, the conditions in Leverville, for instance, have been mobilised to highlight the achievement of Port Sunlight. However, seen through the lens of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ideas on class and race, Port Sunlight and the villages built around Lever Brothers’ plantations should be seen as sharing the same ideological foundation. Mapping similarities and differences between Port Sunlight and the plantation villages of the Congo and the Solomon Islands will allow for a greater understanding of how contemporary attitudes influenced the actions of the company. It will also recognise the contribution made by workers in the Solomon Islands and the Congo to the success of Lever Brothers, placing these communities alongside that of Port Sunlight in the history of the company.

Closely linked to the ideas of the civilising mission and paternalism is the contribution of the Church and missionary groups to the development of the plantations. European imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was dependant on missionary groups to establish contact with

⁷⁵ T. P. O’Connor, *Daily Telegraph*, (1925).

⁷⁶ Lewis, *So Clean*, p. 154.

⁷⁷ Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, p. 4.

colonised communities, disseminate European ideals and to act as regulatory force in more remote areas.⁷⁸ By the late nineteenth century, missionary groups were also integral to the provision of educational and medical services in many British and Belgian colonies, including in the Solomon Islands and the Congo.⁷⁹ Missionaries were particularly important in the Solomon Islands where the geographic distribution of native communities challenged the effective governance of the more remote islands by the colonial administration.⁸⁰ The Melanesian Mission, a branch of the Anglican Church, was active in the Solomon Islands prior to the establishment of a colonial administration.⁸¹ Archival material indicates that LPPL drew on the resources of the Melanesian Mission but also came into conflict with them when their interests diverged.⁸² In the Belgian Congo, HCB worked closely with missionaries to provide medical and educational facilities on their plantations.⁸³ This led some contemporaries to argue that HCB was neglecting its responsibilities to its workers by delegating them to the missionaries.⁸⁴ It is clear from the existing literature and collections review that various missionary groups in the Solomon Islands and the Congo had contact with the workers and management of the Lever Brothers' plantations. Yet, the precise relationship between the company and the missions remains unclear. Often diligent record keepers, the missionaries offer another perspective on the practice of paternalism in the colonies and how local communities responded to the initiatives of HCB and LPPL.

Missionary records may also help to examine the ways in which the policies and practices used prior to the establishment of LPPL and HCB continued under their management. From the mid-nineteenth century, the Solomon Islanders were recruited to work in Australia and this migration continued into the first decade of the twentieth century.⁸⁵ The labour trade in the Western Pacific was criticised on a number of occasions for a lack of proper regulation and the poor conditions that many migrants faced on board the ships.⁸⁶ Under King Leopold II's rule, slavery and the use of forced labour

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 142.

⁷⁹ Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts*, pp. 72-3; Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons*, p. 193.

⁸⁰ Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, p. 41.

⁸¹ David Hilliard, 'Colonialism and Christianity: The Melanesian Mission in the Solomon Islands', *The Journal of Pacific History*, 9 (1974), 97.

⁸² UARM, Records Relating to Incident Involving Charles Peter Munster, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/4/1158.

⁸³ UARM, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/1/486; UARM, Lever Brothers' Correspondence, Max Horn, GB1752.LBC/227.

⁸⁴ UARM, Report on Mr Muir's Visit to the Congo, 1932-3, GB1752.UNI/RM/OC/2/2/26/5.

⁸⁵ Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, pp. 40-1.

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 41.

in the Congo was common practice along with violent and brutal punishments.⁸⁷ Blackbirding in the Solomon Islands and the cruelties of the Congo Free State left lasting legacies.⁸⁸ Despite changes to legislation and increased regulation, the shift away from these practices was not immediate. Although the Belgian Government implemented a number of policies to outlaw the use of unfree or forced labour, the regime change was not felt so clearly in the Congo. Many of the officials and agents of the Congo Free State retained their positions under the Belgian Colonial Government and continued much as before.⁸⁹ The patterns of exploitation which characterise the history of labour in the Solomon Islands and Congo raise important questions about the role these continuities played in the development of the Lever Brothers' plantations. Did the legacy of slavery and forced labour in these communities enable or encourage the continued exploitation of local labour forces? To what extent did existing forms of governance, community hierarchies and patterns of trade resist the transition to fair and free labour practices? The continued exploitation of local communities and labour also highlights the role of existing local and colonial networks in facilitating and obstructing the enactment of fundamental change.

The power of William Lever's political, social and economic networks is also visible in the history of the development his overseas plantations. As a wealthy entrepreneur, Lever was well-connected and established a wide network of political and commercial relationships over the course of his life. These networks provided important allies in business but also close personal friends. Throughout his career Lever encountered many powerful men with whom he cultivated relationships. William Lever was an avid letter writer, and the extent of his influence can be seen in the business correspondence held by UARM.⁹⁰ In relation to the plantations, some of Lever's most important contacts were in the British Colonial Office and the Belgian Ministry of Colonies. Lever developed a very close relationship with Max Horn, a representative of the Belgian Minister for the Colonies, Jules

⁸⁷ Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*.

⁸⁸ Scarr, 'Recruits and Recruiters', pp. 23-4; Hunt, *Nervous State*, p. 3; Julia Seibert, 'More Continuity than Change? New Forms of Unfree Labor in the Belgian Congo. 1908-1930', in *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-Term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* ed. by Marcel Van der Linden (Lieden: Brill, 2011), pp. 369-86.

⁸⁹ Seibert, 'More Continuity than Change?', p. 375.

⁹⁰ UARM, Lever Brothers Correspondence, GB1752.LBC.

Renkin.⁹¹ In this role, Horn attended the Board and General meetings of HCB on a regular basis and held a consulting vote.⁹² Although it was clearly stated by Renkin that ‘no expression of opinion on the part of Mr. Horn can however be considered as a vote, nor be regarded as such in the minutes of the meeting’, the role of Horn in the direction of HCB is significantly blurred.⁹³ Horn also accompanied Lever on his tours of the Congo and was a frequent guest of the Lever family, both at The Hill in Hampstead and at Thornton Hall on the Wirral.⁹⁴ The archives indicate that Horn became a confidante and trusted friend of William Lever, who was intimately involved in the direction and management of HCB. The example of Max Horn illustrates how business and pleasure frequently overlapped in William Lever’s life. There are also indications in the business correspondence that Lever may have personally known King Albert I of Belgium.⁹⁵ Other contacts, like Lord Frederick Lugard, who was Governor-General of Nigeria from 1914 to 1919, show how Lever was connected to the extensive political and colonial networks in Britain.⁹⁶ The networks that Lever developed during his career were key to his success as an entrepreneur and a sign of his influence beyond the world of business. Mapping these networks is crucial to understanding how and why certain decisions relating to the plantations were made and what external influences guided Lever’s choices. This research would also clarify the relationship between Lever and the Belgian Royal Family, including his ties to Leopold II and Albert I.⁹⁷

Responsibility

Several popular reoccurring narratives persist in the history of William Lever, Lever Brothers and Unilever. These have developed over the life of the company, partly as a result of the careful curation

⁹¹ Marchal, *Lord Leverhulme's Ghosts*, pp. 11-2.

⁹² UARM, United Africa Company, Huileries du Congo Belge: Board Minutes, GB1752.UAC/2/36/1/2; UARM, United Africa Company, Huileries du Congo Belge: General Minutes, GB1752.UAC/2/36/1/5.

⁹³ UARM, United Africa Company, Huileries du Congo Belge Board and General Meetings, 1911, GB1752.UAC/2/36/2/1.

⁹⁴ UARM, Max Horn, GB1752.LBC/227.

⁹⁵ UARM, Ernest Brauen, GB1752.LBC/92; UARM, Max Horn, GB1752.LBC/227.

⁹⁶ Lord Lugard was also elected an *administrator* of HCB, an appointment that was warmly welcomed by the Belgian Government; UAC/2/36/1/2/2

⁹⁷ Lever visited King Albert in 1925, on the return from his last trip to Africa and shortly before his death. Bradley, *Enlightened Entrepreneurs*, p. 201.

by Lever of the company's brand and his personal legacy. Many of the questions surrounding Lever Brothers' overseas plantations relate to William Lever's role in the establishment and operation of these plantations. Lever's prominent place in British business and social history, and the continued visible presence of the Lever name across the Wirral, Liverpool and Bolton has raised important questions around William Lever's knowledge and possible promotion of exploitative practices in the Congo and Solomon Islands.

An examination of the correspondence and records relating to the Solomon Island and Congo plantations in UARM indicates that William Lever, and other high-ranking individuals within Lever Brothers, were aware of the unsatisfactory working and living conditions.⁹⁸ Although communication between Port Sunlight and the overseas plantations was not always easy due to geographical and technological limitations, there was frequent correspondence between the various branches of Lever Brothers, including with the plantations. 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰ Reports were also produced in direct response to criticism and concerns about life for workers on Lever Brother plantations.¹⁰¹ William Lever and other important figures in the directorship of Lever Brothers, HCB and LPPL were not ignorant of the numerous failings in working conditions on the plantations. On a number of occasions, Lever Brothers' leadership acknowledged that more needed to be done to improve life for their native employees. William Lever was also known for being a poor delegator and continued to contribute to the day-to-day running of the business until his death. As one of the eponymous founders of Lever Brothers, William Lever, even in death, is inseparable from

⁹⁸ UARM, Records Relating to Incident Involving Charles Peter Munster, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/4/1158; UARM, Special Report of the Commission of Enquiry to Investigate Native Labour Conditions in the HCB Lusanga Area, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/1/486; UARM, Report on Mr Muir's Visit to the Congo, GB1752.UNI/RM/OC/2/2/26/5.

⁹⁹ UARM, Max Horn, GB1752.LBC/227; UARM, Import of Indian Labour into Solomon Islands, GB1752.SDC/3/2/4/2; UARM, Letter from Lord Leverhulme to Joseph Meek, GB1752.SDC/3/4/1/4.

¹⁰⁰ See for example, UARM, Report on Mr Muir's Visit to the Congo, GB1752.UNI/RM/OC/2/2/26/5.

¹⁰¹ UARM, Special Report of the Commission of Enquiry to Investigate Native Labour Conditions in the HCB Lusanga Area, GB1752.UNI/GF/LG/1/1/486.

the company. Understanding more about Lever, his business practices, ideologies and motivations will further our understanding of the structure and direction of Lever Brothers and its subsidiaries. It is also important to know more about the role of William Hesketh Lever's son, William Hulme Lever, and his potential involvement in the operation of the plantations. Lever's close connection to the company also raises questions about the separation between his personal finances and those of the company. Records in UARM indicate that there was a degree of fluidity between Lever's capital and that of the Lever Brothers' companies. Quantifying Lever's personal wealth is also key to evaluating the extent to which William Lever and Lever Brothers benefited from the use of unfree and forced labour.

Legacy

The development of plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo by Lever Brothers had a lasting impact on local communities and ecologies. Whether the influence of HCB and LPPL on these regions is seen to be fundamentally positive or negative, the presence of European enterprise brought dramatic and persistent change. The example of Lever Brothers is not unique and reflects the history of colonialism and the extractive imperial economies of the nineteenth and twentieth century. The deep and on-going impact of colonisation may not be truly understood for many more years. However, through research such as this, we can gain a greater appreciation of the legacy of colonialism and the colonial economy. An examination of the history of the Lever Brothers' plantations demonstrates the extractive power of companies like HCB and LPPL. Although the Lever plantations struggled to increase productivity and maintain output, HCB and LPPL were responsible for the extraction and exportation of significant quantities of copra and palm oil during their operation. In both the Congo and the Solomon Islands, land was cleared to plant palm and coconut trees, establishing large-scale monoculture plantations.¹⁰² The creation of these plantations altered the local ecology and decreased access to food and resources for local communities. Research into the impact of plantation economies on the environment and local communities is growing, with case studies of American cotton plantations

¹⁰² Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, pp. 44-6; Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons*, pp. 185-6.

and the palm oil plantations of today contributing to our knowledge.¹⁰³ A study of the legacy of the HCB and LPPL plantations would also make a valuable contribution to this area of research and their role in the colonial and post-colonial era.

The development of the Lever Brothers plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Belgian Congo required vast areas of land. The acquisition of land by Lever Brothers and their subsidiaries was part of a number of complex processes, facilitated in part by the British and Belgian colonial administrations. In order to buy or lease land in the Solomon Islands and the Congo, Lever Brothers had to meet the requirements of the relevant colonial government. However, as governance in these colonial outposts could be fluid and inconsistent, in reality land acquisition during this period was often the result of negotiation with colonial officials, both on the ground and in the imperial centres of London and Brussels.¹⁰⁴ As Resident Commissioner for the Solomon Islands Charles Morris Woodford noted about the early acquisition of land: ‘no attempt was made to enquire into the title of the native who was supposed to sell the land. The first native encountered on the beach was considered good enough to purchase from.’¹⁰⁵ In 1900, the Solomon (Waste Land) Regulation allowed the transference of land, which was deemed by the colonial administration to be unoccupied, to European claimants on a 999-year lease.¹⁰⁶ The waste land regulations in the Solomon Islands were repealed in 1914 and a leasehold system was established.¹⁰⁷ However, by 1905, LPPL held around 80,000 acres of land in the Solomon Islands, about 29,000 of which had been acquired from local communities and individuals.¹⁰⁸ It is also believed that 250,000 acres of land were alienated through the waste land regulations, 220,000 of which were granted to LPPL.¹⁰⁹ As the colonial government made a series of changes to land regulations,

¹⁰³ Jonathan E. Robins, *Oil Palm: A Global History*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, p. 244; Brij V. Lal, Doug Munro, and Edward D. Beechert, 'Plantation Workers: Resistance and Accommodation', (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993); Peter Corris, *Passage, Port and Plantation: A History of Solomon Islands Labour Migration 1870-1914*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1973); Bennett, 'We do not come here to be beaten'; N. Shanmugaratnam, 'Impact of Plantation Economy and Colonial Policy on Sri Lanka Peasantry', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 16/3 (1981).

¹⁰⁴ Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, p. 255; Bennett, *Wealth of the Solomons*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁵ *Annual Colonial Report, British Solomon Islands 1900-1901*, (London: HM Stationery Office, 1902).

¹⁰⁶ Lawrence, *The Naturalist and His 'Beautiful Islands'*, p. 246.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* p. 268.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p. 267.

¹⁰⁹ The term alienation is used to refer to the acquisition of land by colonial governments, through processes that often failed to properly recognise the customary land rights of local communities. Judith A. Bennett, *Pacific*

LPPL's claims were renegotiated a number of times between 1902 and the mid-twentieth century. Between 1919 and 1925, the Land Commission returned 508 square kilometres of land to the original holders and the majority of this land had been occupied by LPPL.¹¹⁰ Under colonisation, land in the Solomon Islands and the Congo was sold and leased to private companies, like Lever Brothers, under the authorisation of the colonial administration. The confusion over native rights to land under the colonial regime and the frequent changes to land regulations demonstrates the difficulties in determining the legitimacy of land claims established during this period. It also highlights the complex issue of the ownership of resources and the wealth obtained from them, in the context of an extractive colonial economy.

Historians and activists have stressed the enduring impact of European imperialism on colonised communities. They cite psychological, social and economic effects which are still visible today.¹¹¹ The Lever Brothers' plantations were owned and managed by private companies that operated in British and Belgian colonies. HCB and LPPL interacted with the colonial regimes but existed outside of the official colonial framework. The position of the Lever Brothers' plantations, both as part of and outside of the colonial infrastructure, raises a number of challenging questions relating to their legacy. To what extent can the activities of HCB and LPPL be separated from those of the colonial state they operated in? Can the impact of the plantations be evaluated in isolation, separate from the impact of colonisation? How did the plantation subsidiaries respond to decolonisation and what was their relationship with post-colonial governments? These are important questions for future research and contribute to a more transparent and inclusive history of Lever Brothers.

Forest: A History of Resource Control and Contest in Solomon Islands, c.1800-1997, (Leiden: Brill, 2000), p. 42.

¹¹⁰ Judith A. Bennett, 'Forestry, Public Land, and the Colonial Legacy in Solomon Islands', *The Contemporary Pacific*, 7/2 (1995), 247.

¹¹¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in our Times*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); Loffman and Henriet, 'We Are Left with Barely Anything', p. 92; Seibert, 'More Continuity than Change?', pp. 369-70.

Future Research Potential: Collections, Collaborations & Methodologies

The themes and research questions outlined in the previous section relate to a number of different areas of academic study and also offer the opportunity for widespread engagement with the heritage sector and communities across the globe. The final section of this report highlights the collections and archives which will provide new perspectives on the history of Lever Brothers' plantations. These include archives within the UK, the Solomon Islands and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as in Australia, New Zealand and Belgium. It also outlines the potential partnerships and collaborations that could be built around future research on this topic. These include the strengthening of existing relationships, such as with local institutions like the Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight Village Trust and the University of Liverpool, local community groups like The Congolese Association of Merseyside and descendant communities in the Western Pacific and Central Africa. This section of the report highlights several key areas for further development, including

- The examination of a range of archival material beyond the company archives held by UARM, including colonial archives, missionary records and papers relating to organisation such as the Anti-Slavery Society and individuals such as Frederick Lugard.
- The development of collaborations with relevant institutions and organisations, and descendent and diasporic communities in the UK, Belgium, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Western Pacific. Cross-disciplinary collaborations, with colleagues in fields including archaeology, anthropology, business studies and geography, are also central to further research on this subject.
- The broad dissemination of research to wide range of audiences, drawing on traditional forms, such as publications and museum exhibitions, but also on creative responses, such as films, installations and podcasts, to engage with communities across the UK, Belgium, Central Africa and the Western Pacific.

This research has identified a number of collections that are relevant to the history of Lever Brothers' plantations and activities in the Congo and the Solomon Islands. Some of these collections have been previously examined by scholars researching the history of Lever Brothers, British and Belgian colonial history and the history of global trade in the twentieth century. However, other collections are yet to be studied in this context and may offer new perspectives on the organisation of labour, the relationship between Lever Brothers and the British and Belgian colonial administration, the acquisition of land by HCB and LPPL and the attitudes of those within and outside of the Lever Brothers to their activities in the Congo and Solomon Islands. This section outlines a number of relevant collections which can further our understanding of Lever Brothers' overseas plantations.

The national archives of Britain and Belgium hold valuable material on the policies and practices of the colonial administrations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo. In the UK, The National Archives maintain the official papers of the Colonial Office. These documents include copies of leases for land in the Solomon Islands, correspondence between the Colonial Office and Lever Brothers, and internal communications relating to the governance of the islands.¹¹² Other relevant records can be found in the collections of the Dominions Office, Foreign Office and Treasury.¹¹³ The online database of U.K. Parliamentary Papers features the annual reports of the High Commissioner of the Solomon Islands, which provide details of trade, agriculture and legislation in the colony.¹¹⁴ These reports also include references to the development of LPPL. The Belgian National Archives, located in Brussels, relate to the colonial administration in the Congo, including reports on HCB and documents relating to the Pende Revolt.¹¹⁵ Also in Belgium, the AfricaMuseum, in Tervuren contains the private archives of

¹¹² The National Archives, Western Pacific Register of Correspondence, CO/492/4-16; The National Archives, Western Pacific Register of Out-letters, CO/493/2-7; The National Archives, Correspondence, original, CO/225/53/246; The National Archives, Western Pacific Government Gazettes, CO/692; The National Archives, British Solomon Islands Protectorate Sessional Papers, CO/856/1-3; The National Archives, Western Pacific King's Regulations, CO/665/1-2; The National Archive, British Solomon Islands Protectorate Miscellanea, Blue Books of Statistics, CO/723/1-10.

¹¹³ The National Archives, Foreign Office, Flint Island Lease, 1906, FO 371/159/142; The National Archives, Dominions Office, License, Coconuts & Copra, 1902, DO 118/133/7; The National Archives, Dominions Office, Surrender of License, 1911, DO 118/133/24; The National Archives, Treasury, Termination of Licenses held by Lever's Pacific Plantations Limited, 1914, T 1/11658/16367.

¹¹⁴ <https://parlipapers.proquest.com/profiles/hcpp/search/basic/hcppbasicsearch> [accessed 2nd December 2021].

¹¹⁵ Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, p. 20.

Sidney Edkins, who was the General Manager of HCB.¹¹⁶ These papers include material on HCB's relationship with the Kwango Jesuits, a missionary group in the Leverage concession.¹¹⁷ The personal archive of Thierry d'Huart, who was employed by HCB, is also held in Tervuren and comprises photographs and documents relating to the Congo.¹¹⁸ A number of collections which are of relevance to research on the Solomon Islands are held in Australian archives. The Australian National University, in Canberra, holds papers relating to Joseph Meeks, business records of Lever's Pacific Plantation Limited and official documents from the Western Pacific High Commission. Reports on the export trade in copra from the Solomon Islands are held in the National Archives of Australia. Correspondence and documents from LPPL are also located in the National Library of Australia and Alexander Turnbull Library, in Wellington, New Zealand.

A number of archives relating to anti-slavery movements in the early twentieth century offer valuable collections through which to explore contemporary criticisms of the working conditions and treatment of labourers on HCB's and LPPL's plantations. These include the papers of E. D. Morel, a prominent figure in the fight against the crimes of Congo Free State and founder of the Congo Reform Association, which are held by the London School of Economics. Morel was initially a supporter of Lever, believing that Lever Brothers could achieve the success of Port Sunlight in the Belgian Congo, bringing education, health care and improved living standards to their workers.¹¹⁹ However, he soon raised concerns over the operation and development of the HCB plantations, publishing his criticisms in 1912.¹²⁰ The collections of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society also contain documents relating to Lever's plantations and correspondence between John Harris and William Lever. The Society's photographic collection, mostly taken by Harris's wife Alice Seely, contains images of the Congo from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s.

Other important collections include the personal papers of Frederick Lugard, held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford; a collection of photographs of the Lever plantations in the Solomon Islands

¹¹⁶ AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium, The Private Archives of Sidney Edkins, 1905-1947, RMCA 54.85.171, 184 and 184.

¹¹⁷ Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, p. 22.

¹¹⁸ AfricaMuseum, Tervuren, Belgium, Thierry D'Huart Deposit, 1911-1951, HA.01.0751.

¹¹⁹ Henriët, *Colonial Impotence*, pp. 38-9.

¹²⁰ LBC/22, to Lever from Horn, 18th May 1912.

in the Archives and Manuscripts collection at Duke University, North Carolina; the records of the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce held in the Liverpool Record Office; a series of photographs of Leverville dating from 1920-1940 in the International Mission Photography Archive in the Yale Divinity School; and the papers of the Melanesian Diocese, 1838-1958 in the Bodleian.

The Lady Lever Art Gallery holds a number of ethnographic objects relating to William Lever's world tours and Lever Brothers' plantations. These objects, many of which were collected by Lever during his travels, offer an insight into Lever's relationship with the communities living on or near Lever Brothers' plantations, his attitude towards different cultures and the personal connections he forged while traveling the globe.¹²¹ From the late nineteenth century until his death in 1925, Lever collected over 1,000 ethnographic objects.¹²² Many of these objects originated from the Congo, West Africa and the Western Pacific.¹²³ The objects vary from ceremonial artefacts and weapons to items of daily life, such as eating bowls, and on his 1913 world tour, Lever acquired two war canoes in the Solomon Islands.¹²⁴ Entries in Lever's diaries during his travels in the Congo record how he acquired some of the objects in his collection.¹²⁵ Lever intended to include a 'museum' within the Lady Lever Art Gallery, which would display a number of his ethnographic artefacts.¹²⁶ The history of Lever Brothers' plantations and William Lever's ethnographic collection are connected through Lever's voyages to the Solomon Islands and the Congo.¹²⁷

Unlike Lever's art collections, the ethnographic objects were not acquired for their aesthetic or commercial value. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the collection of artefacts from what were perceived to be 'exotic' cultures from around the world was a common pastime for wealthy Europeans.¹²⁸ These objects, considered to be evidence of savagery and a lack of civilisation, provided contemporaries with a justification for the expansion of European

¹²¹ Andrew West, 'The Business of Ethnography: W. H. Lever, Collecting and Colonialism', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 9 (1997), 101.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Lady Lever Art Gallery, Ethnographical, Egyptian, Greek and Misc. Objects, LLAG 731/A/14.

¹²⁴ Andrew West, 'The History of the Ethnography Collections of W. H. Lever', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 4/2 (1992), 277-8.

¹²⁵ UARM, Lever Brothers' Correspondence, William Lever's Diary, 1912-3, GB1752.LBC/637.

¹²⁶ West, 'Business of Ethnography', p. 102.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 103.

¹²⁸ Andrew West, 'The Ethnography of Curiosities: Being the Problem of Describing Lord Lever's 'Ethnographic Collection'', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 5 (1996), 37.

imperialism. They represent the material culture of global trade and colonial identity during this period.¹²⁹ As art historian and curator of the Walker Art Gallery Edward Morris stated, Lever's ethnographic collection was a symbol of 'the success of his company in developing and improving the Third World.'¹³⁰ The recent recognition of the significant number of looted and stolen artefacts in public and private collections has led a number of museums to further examine the provenance of the objects in their care. Where it can be shown that an object was acquired illegally, the question of restitution to the source community arises. Institutions with large ethnographic collections that were acquired during the colonial period, like the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, have faced pressure to return looted artefacts and provide greater transparency on the way their collections were developed.¹³¹ Other institutions have begun the process of returning artefacts that have been proven to be looted objects, such as the University of Aberdeen which returned a Benin Bronze in October 2021.¹³² In this context, a detailed appraisal of Lever's ethnographic collection and an examination of how he acquired these objects, where possible, will be an essential process.

After Lever's death the ethnographic collection became scattered, with a selection of the objects remaining at the Lady Lever Art Gallery while several artefacts were donated to the British Museum.¹³³ Records relating to William Lever's will also indicate that a number of objects were sold privately to unknown buyers.¹³⁴ The collection held by the Lady Lever Art Gallery was catalogued some years ago. However, the provenance of many of the items is unknown and little of the collection is currently on display. A preliminary examination of the Gallery's archives indicates that there may be further information relating to the deposit of these objects but these archives are not fully catalogued or accessible.¹³⁵ Acquisition records for the artefacts held in the British Museum would also shed light on how the collection was distributed after Lever's death.¹³⁶ Lever's ethnographic collection offers a lens

¹²⁹ West, 'Business of Ethnography', p. 101.

¹³⁰ Edward Morris, 'Introduction', *Journal of the History of Collections*, 4/2 (1992), 170.

¹³¹ Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

¹³² <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/news/15479/> [accessed 29th November 2021].

¹³³ West, 'The Ethnography of Curiosities', p. 41.

¹³⁴ UARM, Small Deposits Collection, Minutes of Executors and Trustees, GB1752.SDC/1/9.

¹³⁵ West, 'The Ethnography of Curiosities', pp. 40-2.

¹³⁶ British Museum, Acquisitions Papers (Donations and Purchases), CE 31.

through which to study the global connections of Lever Brothers and Port Sunlight. It also provides a means of engaging a wider public audience, across multiple institutions. The use of objects can facilitate the telling of complex and challenging histories, and also integrate new historical perspectives into public narratives. Recent public history projects have demonstrated the benefits derived from using historical artefacts to engage African diasporic communities.¹³⁷ Lever's ethnographic collections could act as a tool for engaging with relevant communities and help to explore some of the challenging issues raised by the history of the Lever Brothers' plantations.

Collaboration with museums and heritage institutions offers one way of disseminating the research on the Lever Brothers plantations to a wider public audience. The installation of information panels or the production of a temporary exhibition in the Lady Lever Art Gallery or the International Slavery Museum would make the research accessible to many across the Wirral and Liverpool. Currently the objects donated by Lever are not on display in the British Museum. However, a temporary intervention presenting a selection of the artefacts alongside interpretations by curators and community researchers would further disseminate the research outside of the North West and to Congolese and Melanesian communities in the UK. Collaborations with institutions in Belgium, Central Africa and the Western Pacific will also be central to engaging with the diverse audiences that share a collective past through the history of the Lever Brothers' plantations. Working with descendent communities in the Congo and the Solomon Islands is central to the production of a transparent and balanced account of the Lever plantations. Although this presents a number of logistical and methodological challenges, it also offers an opportunity to record the history of Lever Brothers from the perspective of Congolese and Solomon Island workers. This history is present in the collective memory of these communities, in traditions, song, material culture and oral history. Using a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach, it is possible to give a voice to those who worked on Lever Brothers' plantations. By using a cross-disciplinary approach, it will be possible to draw on methodologies in fields including archaeology, business studies, anthropology, geography, environmental studies, architecture and design studies to

¹³⁷ <https://www.horniman.ac.uk/project/rethinking-relationships/> [accessed 11th December 2021].

develop a rich account of Lever's overseas plantations, which represents the global history of Lever Brothers.

During this project, an informal research network has developed which includes a number of academic and support staff at the University of Liverpool, curatorial staff at National Museums Liverpool and other stakeholders. These local connections illustrate the potential impact of this research to a wide variety of disciplines, institutions and communities. This research will fulfil a significant gap in the current understanding of Lever Brothers' activities overseas but will also contribute to a number of broader topics, including history, archaeology, architecture, ethnography and business studies. The potential for interdisciplinary collaboration has been already highlighted through the informal connections made with the Leverhulme Trust funded project 'The Architecture of the United Africa Company.' Led by Professor Iain Jackson of the University of Liverpool, the project investigates the UAC's contribution to the built environment in West Africa.¹³⁸ Collaboration with projects such as this will significantly enhance the scope and impact of future research relating to the Lever Brothers' plantations in the Congo and Solomon Islands. Drawing on these networks to provide specialist expertise, connect researchers and Unilever to relevant communities, and assist in sourcing funding is vital to the success of future research. A round table held at the University of Liverpool in November 2021, confirmed the need for a multidisciplinary approach that engages closely with the local community and both descendant communities in the Congo and Solomon Islands, and their respective diasporas.

The importance of an interdisciplinary approach to further research on the history of Lever Brothers also reflects the need to engage with multiple disciplines in the dissemination of the research. Museums and heritage institutions play an important role in constructing historical narratives and these mechanisms will be important in the telling of the history of Lever Brothers. However, the history of the Lever Brothers' plantations is relevant to a diverse range of communities across the globe. Alongside prominent stakeholders such as Unilever, the Leverhulme Trust and the University of Liverpool, descendent and diasporic communities in or with connections to Central Africa and the

¹³⁸ <https://transnationalarchitecture.group/tag/mercantile/> [accessed 30th November 2021].

Western Pacific share a claim to this part of Lever Brothers' past. It is vital that in constructing and disseminating the history of Lever Brothers' plantations, community stakeholders across the globe are given the opportunity to share their voices and engage with each stage of the research. This could be through the establishment of community engagement projects, community research forums or a number of creative responses, such as podcasts, vlogs and collaborations with artists and designers, to commission artistic responses to the research. Drawing on modes of dissemination beyond traditional academic publications and museum exhibitions, to encompass creative and artistic responses, is central to establishing an inclusive history of Lever Brothers that engages with the communities affected by the development of plantations in the Solomon Islands and Congo.

Conclusion

The development of Lever Brothers' plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo has been studied by historians, journalists, politicians and fellow entrepreneurs since the 1950s. The plantations have been seen as an anomaly in the history of Lever Brothers, as a vanity project of William Lever as much as a commercial enterprise. In establishing the plantations in the Solomon Islands and the Congo, Lever was attempting to bring his personal belief in paternalism together with private enterprise and European imperialism. Since the early 1900s, William Lever and Lever Brothers have received both praise and criticism for their ventures in the Solomon Islands and Belgian Congo. Contemporaries and historians have highlighted the exploitation of labourers, the poor living and working conditions on the plantations, the frequent abuse of power by company officials and the insufficient recognition of native land rights. Accounts of these failings have been discussed in several academic publications and popular works on the history of Lever Brothers.

Yet, there remain many questions about the activities, policies and practices of Lever Brothers and its plantation subsidiaries. This report illustrates the importance of further research to enrich our understanding of the lived experience of plantation workers and the lasting impact of the plantations on local communities in the Solomon Islands and Congo. In the history of Lever Brothers, the voices of Congolese and Solomon Island workers are frequently absent. Employing new methodologies to trace

the lived experience of plantation workers and their families will make a significant contribution to a more transparent and inclusive history of Lever Brothers. Engaging with descendent communities in the UK, Western Pacific and Democratic Republic of Congo will enable the development of new narratives in the history of Lever Brothers. It will also add to our knowledge of how the forces of paternalism, capitalism and colonialism interacted in the early twentieth century and how they impacted the daily lives of colonised communities. By collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders, from heritage institutions to community organisations and creative collectives, we can ensure that a balanced and inclusive history of Lever Brothers is disseminated to a wider audience. Through further research and public engagement, we can better understand this challenging aspect of our shared past, recognising its lasting impact and identifying potential avenues for restorative justice.

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