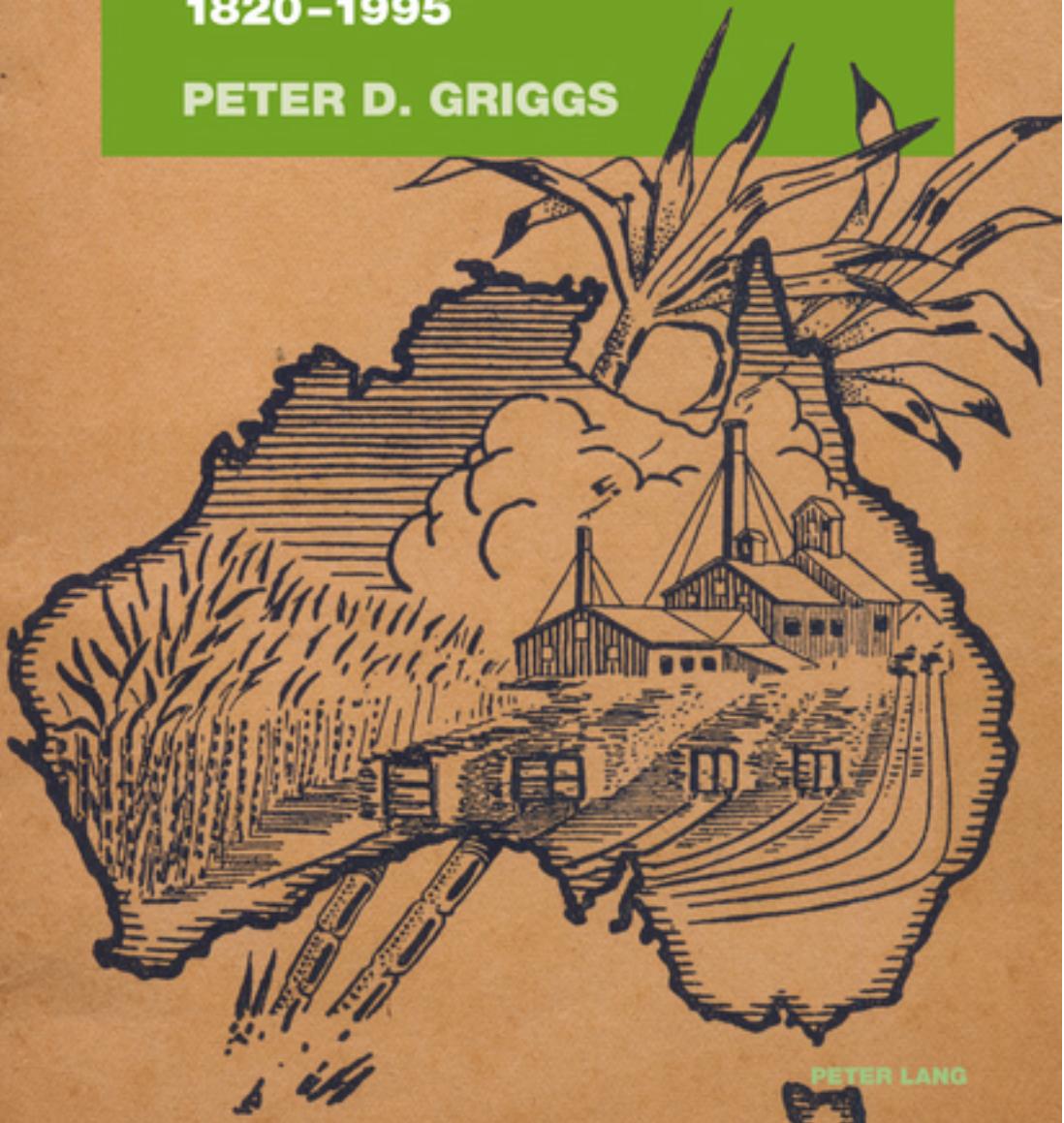


**GLOBAL INDUSTRY,  
LOCAL INNOVATION:  
THE HISTORY OF  
CANE SUGAR  
PRODUCTION IN  
AUSTRALIA,  
1820–1995**

**PETER D. GRIGGS**



PETER LANG

Between 1860 and 1915, the river valleys of most coastal regions between Grafton in New South Wales and Mossman in North Queensland were transformed as the forests were cleared and replaced by fields of sugar cane. Several thousand Europeans eventually settled along these river valleys, making their living from the growing of sugar cane, either directly as farmers or as workers in the sugar mills erected to crush the crops of cane. Other settlers followed, providing the goods and services needed by the farmers and workers. At times during this period, thousands of indentured Pacific Islanders also called these river valleys home; historians have estimated that some 63 000 Pacific Islanders, mainly from the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, laboured in the Australian sugar cane fields between 1863 and 1904.<sup>1</sup> They were also joined by Chinese, Japanese, Javanese and Indians in lesser numbers. The Aboriginal peoples – the traditional occupiers of these river valleys – sometimes resisted this invasion by European agriculturalists and their indentured workers, attacking the livestock on the sugar plantations or occasionally burning crops of cane.<sup>2</sup> Eventually, some Aborigines worked as labourers on the sugar plantations and/or small sugar cane farms. This great transformation in the tropical and sub-tropical littoral of north east Australia took place to satisfy those Europeans living in temperate Australia, who demanded ever increasing amounts of sugar.

Europeans during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially the British and French, developed a taste for sweet things. As a result, sugar had become an important commodity. Traditionally, sugar for European consumption had been manufactured in the Lesser Antilles (or West Indies), Cuba, Brazil and Louisiana. During the nineteenth century, sugar production in these traditional areas expanded to meet this demand. In addition, sugar production spread to new regions such as Java, Argentina, Natal, Peru, Hawaii, Fiji and Australia. The emergence of an Australian sugar industry was, therefore, part of a wider nineteenth century dispersal of commercial sugar production around the globe.

The Australian sugar industry that developed between 1864 and 1884 had many similarities with other cane sugar industries around the world. The sugar cane was grown on plantations or large estates where indentured labourers worked in both the fields and the estate's own sugar mill. These indentured workers, however, were mostly Pacific Islanders, instead of Indians, Chinese or Japanese who made up the bulk of indentured sugar workers elsewhere around the globe. The sugar produced in northern Australia was sent south to capital city-based sugar refineries, much like the movement of sugar from the West Indies to the sugar refineries in Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool or London. The

milling sector of the Australia sugar industry, like the sugar factories in other sugar-producing regions, had been modernised by the adoption of improvements in machinery (e.g. vacuum pans; multiple evaporators) and industrial processes (e.g. double or treble crushing). In contrast, the agricultural sector of the Australian sugar industry remained labour-intensive, just like the field practices of canegrowers in the Americas, Asia and rest of Oceania.

Despite these similarities, there were early signs that the Australian sugar industry would not evolve exactly as its overseas counterparts. During the 1870s, the central milling system emerged in New South Wales. Here, European small farmers, mostly without the aid of indentured workers, grew the sugar cane, and the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), a joint stock company, operated three, large central sugar mills equipped with the most up-to-date machinery. This arrangement spread to Queensland after 1884, although the Queensland government, not private enterprise, provided the funds to farmer co-operatives to erect their own central sugar mills. This transformation came about because of Queensland government policies that supported the creation of a class of European farmers for social and political reasons. Other Queensland sugar planters during the 1890s and 1900s became proprietary central mill-owners, creating tenanted estates and concentrating their resources on the manufacturing side of operations. In addition, most indentured workers brought to Queensland were not allowed to settle in Australia as workers or small farmers, unlike other sugar-producing regions (e.g. Fiji; South Africa; Mauritius; British Guiana). The newly formed Commonwealth government of Australia introduced legislation in 1901 which applied a protective duty to sugar imports, prohibited the recruitment of Pacific Islanders into Australia after 31 March 1904 and required the majority of Pacific Islanders to be repatriated to their home islands after 1906. Europeans who were paid higher wages took their places in the sugar mills and fields. Consequently, the Australian sugar industry in 1915 was characterised by central mills supplied with cane from family farms owned by Europeans and European field and mill workers (mostly of Anglo-Celtic descent). This system was unique amongst the world's cane sugar industries.<sup>3</sup>