

BOOK REVIEWS

The Heineken Story

By Smit, B.

London: Profile Books

2014, Pp.x & 342, £9.99

ISBN 978-1-78125-360-1

Heineken in Africa: A Multinational Unleashed

By Van Beeman, O.

London: Hurst & Company

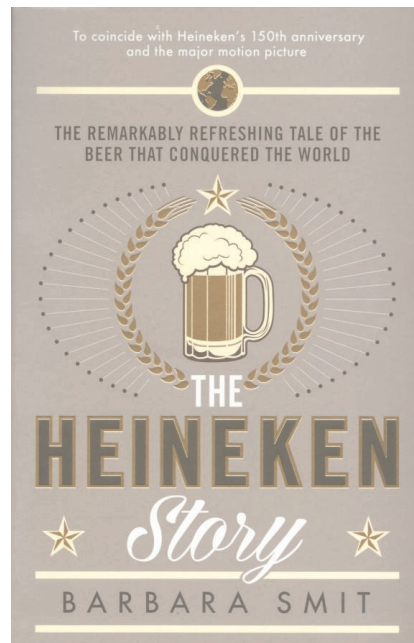
2019, Pp.xvi & 307, £20.00

ISBN 978-1-84904-902-3

Five years ago Barbara Smit's *The Heineken Story* was published, a book which, for some unknown reason, seems to have gone under the radar. Based on over 200 interviews, internal documents, newspaper articles and company reports it describes Heineken's growth, from its founding in 1864 by Gerard Heineken up to 2014. Much of the book is taken up by the role played by 'Freddy' Heineken who controlled the company for roughly 40 years during the second half of the twentieth century. He does not come across as a particularly pleasant man and after five 'introductory talks' he tried to stop Smit from undertaking further research by 'making ludicrous threats and sometimes carrying them out' (p.304). It is surprising, therefore, that she manages to produce such a detailed and wide-ranging company history, one worth reading for the description of Freddy's kidnapping in 1983 alone. However, there is one major gap in the book; little mention is made of Heineken's presence in Africa. Its expansion throughout Europe, the Americas and Asia are discussed, but there is only one paragraph dedicated to Africa.

Fortunately this gap has now been filled by Olivier van Beeman's *Heineken in Africa*. Originally published in Dutch a year after Smit's book the English translation

has been updated to include additional information. Van Beeman's relationship with Heineken has been more cordial than Smit's, but not overtly helpful. The book's epigraph, 'transparency is beautiful if you have nothing to hide', is an advertising slogan taken from the company's marketing campaign in Sierra Leone and is obviously ironic. The Dutch firm began exporting beer to Africa in the 1890s and in 1930 it acquired its first breweries on the continent in Morocco and Egypt. Despite the problems for international companies brought about both by the independence movements of the 1960s and '70s and more recent civil wars the brewers have weathered these storms better than most. In 2006 an American diplomat was quoted as saying 'the beverage industry seems to stand nearly alone in many



post-conflict African countries as a successful manufacturing sub-sector' (p.174). One example of Heineken's success is that 'in absolute terms, selling beer in Nigeria is more lucrative than in Great Britain, even though consumption in the latter is 2.5 times higher' (p.32). The company's strategies to sustain their market share and promote their products are the main focus of this book. Tactics range from dubious relationships with brutal regimes (and their equally brutal opponents) to the employment of 'promotion girls'. The evidence presented by van Beemen is damning and one is left feeling very little sympathy for the company. There is also the nagging question as to how distinct Heineken is, have other brewers acted in much the same way in Africa? This thoroughly researched work makes occasionally harrowing reading - how many companies can claim they have kept the bodies of at least three national leaders in their cold store facilities - but one that is essential in trying to understand the international nature of contemporary brewing.

TIM HOLT

