

Book Review – Christopher Stephens

Traidcraft: Inspiring a Fair Trade Revolution

By Joe Osman

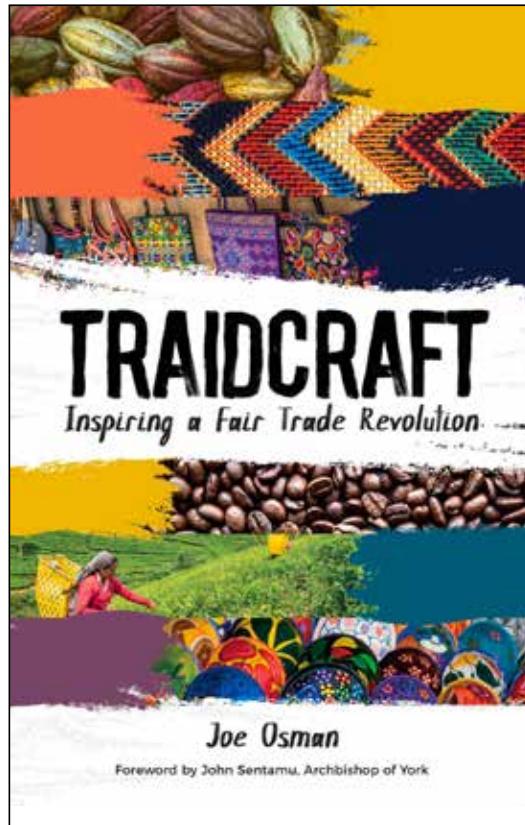
Lion Hudson, 2020, paperback, 272 pp, £12.99, ISBN 978 0 7459 8104 8

Joe Osman has done us all a huge favour. He has brought together in a single volume the story of Traidcraft and the Fair Trade movement over its forty-year life. He is far too modest to say this, but many of us who have touched this subject believe that Fair Trade stands in the great tradition of the church's concern for society: the early sponsorship of education, the provision of healthcare and the abolition of slavery being three obvious examples. Traidcraft has focused our attention beyond the products we buy to the needs of the producers, their working and living conditions, to the need for a fair deal between consumer and producer. It has brought substance to the belief that all human beings are God's children, created and loved by him in equal measure. It simply isn't acceptable that the rich thrive, while the primary producers are trapped in life-long poverty.

From Day One this has been the mission and purpose of Traidcraft, describing itself as a 'Christian response to poverty'. And it has remained true to this noble task while the wider church has enjoyed mixed fortunes and multiple other distractions. Joe tells the story engagingly. His book is a cracking good read with something of the story-teller and treasure-hunter about the way it is written.

Joe uses three quite different devices to cover the ground. In part, here are his own reflections of his involvement from almost the first day of the creation of Tearcraft, the parent to Traidcraft. He has the eyes of a participant and passionate believer, not merely an observer or commentator. It is clear that his belief is that of a convinced Christian

working out his faith in practical ways in an unequal world. Adding to his own experiences, Joe has tracked down many of the key players of the movement and has invited them to provide their own first-hand accounts of what actually happened. Much of this is quoted verbatim and makes excellent reading. Finally, he gives his own thoughtful



and critical analysis of the key themes – from structures and organisations surrounding the Fair Trade movement or nurtured directly by Traidcraft, to the many product categories (Coffee, Tea, Cocoa etc) which Traidcraft identified, imported and nudged towards full Fair Trade certification.

The story that unfolds is an extraordinary one. It demonstrates a level of pioneering and boldness

which was radical at the time and has since become mainstream. Here are just a few examples. First there is the far-sighted approach to international aid. Traidcraft insisted from the early 80s that it was building partnerships, not dependent relationships between donor and recipient. This in part led to the emergence of Traidcraft from its more evangelical parent, Tearcraft. Next, there is the fascinating move to become a public company with real shareholders, albeit patient ones, expecting a real financial return for their investment in this worthwhile company with important social outcomes alongside making money. This was an early version of the Community Interest Companies which are now increasingly well-established in the UK. The shareholding initiative was also seriously surprising for a Christian group to implement, many believers being sceptical of the merits of capitalism and preferring a wholly charitable environment in which to operate. Then there was the Fair Trade Foundation and the creation of the Fair Trade certification mark, a group convened by Traidcraft, together with Oxfam, Christian Aid and CAFOD as partners in this important venture. Now it is the standard bearer of the fair trade movement in the UK, certifying hundreds of millions of pounds of products each year and providing a fair trade premium to needy producers. Social Auditing was another example, unheard of in the early 1990s but now, 30 years later, a commonplace and precursor to the extensive Environmental, Social and Governance reports prepared by all today's publicly quoted companies. There is now a veritable and necessary industry



around these aspects of business life which barely existed when Traidcraft produced their first Social Audit. The organisation *Shared Interest* was yet another ‘step-child’, providing affordable capital to producers and artisans around the world.


Joe not only describes these ‘institutional’ initiatives that can trace their origins back to Traidcraft or to the diaspora of prophetic and radical leaders who passed through Traidcraft in the 1980s and 1990s. He also describes movingly the battles to get each product category into the fair trade family of products. Many still remember the early struggles with coffee, which didn’t suit every palate. But then there was tea, chocolate, and, of course, the much loved Geobar. Not one of these products had an easy journey into the Traidcraft catalogue or on to full certification. But once established, everyone wondered why it hadn’t happened sooner.

There are excellent sections on the links between our Christian faith and the mission of Traidcraft. Joe provides his own well-founded views as well as those of former executives and non-executives. The motivation and the underlying theology are both powerfully described.

It would be wrong not to mention some of the omissions about which Joe is entirely open: he barely covers the sales and marketing challenges, or the faithful role of church-based Fair Trader groups. He does not explore the implications of the concentration of food retailing on a small number of massive companies. Nor does he enter the tricky water of labelling, with a plethora of confusing endorsements such as the Rainforest Alliance, the Soil Association and so on, each with differing standards, different objectives and a variety of costs to the producer. He refers only briefly to the policy work of Traidcraft Exchange, attributing to it the emergence of the Grocery

Adjudicator, but not with the authoring of section 172 of the Companies Act, now the standard statutory basis on which companies are required to report their wider societal impacts, including labour standards and climate change.

Then there is the final chapter on current affairs. How is Traidcraft managing today? We get only the slightest glimpse of this and we are left rather tantalised. There was a decision to close the plc and separate it from Traidcraft Exchange. But, then, thank goodness, the plc seemed to begin to bounce back into life....and we are left guessing. It’s a bit like *The Crown*. We wonder if there will be another series?

None of this should take away from the value of this book. It is an honest account of a complex journey. The story is authentic and well-observed. The achievements of Traidcraft are really considerable and absolutely need to be recorded and understood. Joe has contributed hugely towards this. 



Christopher Stephens was chairman of Traidcraft from 2006–2011 when Paul Chandler was the CEO. He retired as Group Human Resources Director of Exel plc (now DHL) in 2004 and has held a number of appointments in the private, public and NGO sectors. From 2011 until 2016 he was chairman of the Judicial Appointments Commission.