

BOOKER GROUP BIG IN BRITISH GUIANA But the Company's Interests Are Widely Diversified

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GEORGETOWN, British Guiana—Most of the people in this colony refer to it as “B.G.” However, it is often a moot point whether the initials stand for British Guiana or Booker Group. This is because the big London-based Booker Group is the colony's largest landlord, manufacturer, retailer and employer, and has been for most of its 185-year history. To many, the story of Booker Brothers, McConnell & Co., Ltd., its present official name, might have come from the pen of Joseph Conrad.

It began in 1780, when Curtis Campbell came here to plant sugar and added storekeeping to his interests. The first Booker, Josias, came in 1815, and John McConnell came in 1846. Although usually identified with sugar, rum and retailing in the West Indies, Booker makes auto parts in western Canada, operates supermarkets in England, produces sugar machinery in India, manufactures plumbing fixtures in Belgium and operates plantations in Africa, to name just a few of its 100-odd business units.

Presiding over this vast empire is 53-year-old Sir Jock Campbell, chairman of the group and descendent of Curtis Campbell. Since he assumed the chairmanship in 1952, the unconventional industrialist has concentrated on three goals: reorganization of the group, improving the lot of its employees here and diversifying its interests.

Discussing its recent reorganization, Antony Tasker, chief of Booker operations in British Guiana, told a visitor recently “The group just grew over the years, filling vacuums. It was anarchy, plain and simple. Each company had its own czar and their contact among each other was often nonexistent. “Today, we have broken the mess into five basic categories—tropical agriculture, shops and wholesale distribution, engineering and industries, rum and produce, and shipping. Each group is controlled by a separate company.”

Sir Jock, meanwhile, has also been concerned with working conditions at its British Guiana enterprises. In a speech at the London School of Economics, of which he is a governor, he said a few years ago: “On my first visit in 1934, I was as appalled as I was fascinated by the sugar industry. The workers were treated as chattels. I was told either I did not understand or that “they are a different sort of people'.”

He ended his description of the human degradation he found here by adding: “Furthermore, Bookers in British Guiana were heartily disliked by the whole community and by many of their own employees.” Changing this situation has occupied this member of Britain's Establishment for a number of years. Since Sir Jock took command, efforts to erase the group's past have included the rehousing of 10,000 of the 28,000 sugar workers in their own homes with interest-free loans and in many cases free land. Medical and pension plans were introduced, and the salaries of cane cutters raised to an average harvest peak of \$18 a week.

Sir Jock is unusual also in that he is a director of the *New Statesman*, a pro-British Labor Party journal, and is active in the liberal Christian Action's Defense and Aid Fund for Southern Africa. Earlier this year, he told *Spotlight*, a Jamaica news magazine, that although he was knighted in 1957 and had a grandfather who was a governor of the Bank of England, he had never voted Conservative.

Nevertheless, Sir Jock has stressed repeatedly that the Booker Group is not abandoning British Guiana. With more than \$140 million invested in the sugar industry alone here, the company believes it has too big a stake in the country. Booker produces some 325,000 tons of sugar a year, or 80 per cent of the colony's output of that commodity. Sugar, in turn, accounts for half of the exports of the country and employs 70 per cent of its labor force.

Among the latest investments here are the expansion of the pharmaceutical and printing industries as well as the modernization of its department stores and other retail outlets. However, a much larger flow of new investment money has been directed toward Canada and Europe "as a hedge against possible hazards in British Guiana."



1968 Photo of Bookers Guiana Store

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