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Please, No More Bananas

The story of Sam Zemurray's rise from peddler to power broker has been told many times, but for want of reliable sources, factual details vary.

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By **MARC LEVINSON**



What is it with bananas? That's the first question that comes to mind in considering Rich Cohen's biography of Samuel Zemurray, the Russian-born peddler who started out selling worthless overripe bananas and ended up running the storied and controversial United Fruit Co. Yes, the banana industry was built by swashbuckling capitalists who hacked plantations out of dense jungle, assembled private armies, overthrew governments and strong-armed competitors. Yes, its history involved enough imperious diplomats, corrupt dictators, rapacious tycoons and exploited workers to fill many volumes. And, yes, turning an obscure tropical fruit into a staple in kitchens all over North America and Europe was no mean feat. But while the banana industry has long been an overwhelming presence in Central America, it hardly registers in the United States. "The Fish That Ate the Whale" is the fourth book on the banana barons to be published in English in the past five years, and even interested readers may by now be suffering banana fatigue.

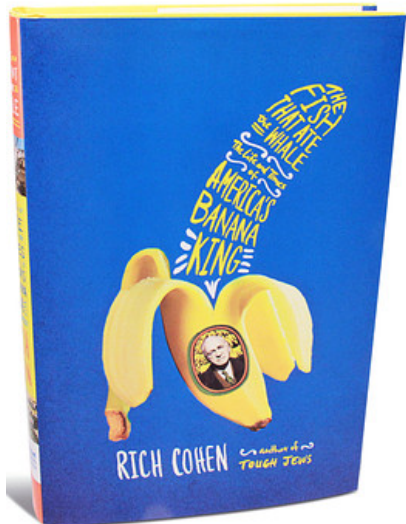
The industry developed in the final quarter of the 19th century as adventuresome Bostonians figured out how to get bananas from tropical ports to American consumers before rot set in—the method called for shipping the fruit green and letting it ripen en route aboard a high-speed steamship. The need for a reliable supply of fruit soon led to vertical integration, as banana distributors bought ships, built plantations and learned to grow fruit on an industrial scale. Competition was intense. To tame it, the entrepreneurs Minor Keith, Lorenzo Baker and Andrew Preston set up the United Fruit Co. in 1899, buying up smaller players to become the dominant force in the banana trade.

Sam Zemurray, Mr. Cohen's subject, entered the picture as a small-time banana dealer in the 1890s. Around 1905, he and a partner purchased a steamship company and the troubled Cuyamel Fruit Co., which owned banana lands in Nicaragua. United Fruit secretly took stakes in both. Unfortunately for history, Zemurray preferred to do business face to face; Cuyamel seems to have left no corporate records, so accounts of how it carved plantations out of Nicaraguan jungle appear to be based on interviews granted years later. The story of Zemurray's rise from street peddler to Nicaraguan power broker has been retold by many authors, but for want of authoritative sources, even factual details, such as the extent of United Fruit's secret ownership, vary from one telling to the next.



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Like most other popular books on this subject, "The Fish That Ate the Whale" has scant and imprecise source notes, so the reader must take much of the story on faith. And what are we to believe?



Enlarge Image

The Fish That Ate the Whale

By Rich Cohen
(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 270 pages, \$27)

Zemurray meeting, not mentioning that the meeting may never have happened.

Mr. Cohen is a lively writer, but his poor source notes make it impossible to know the basis for many statements in the book. His bibliography is short on Spanish-language sources, and many of the books on which he relies are themselves of dubious reliability. For example, his account of the early growth of the banana industry appears to rely heavily on a 1914 work by F. Upham Adams, "Conquest of the Tropics." A publisher's note at the front of that volume states: "A large part of the information as to facts has been obtained through courtesy of officials of the United Fruit Company." Caveat lector.

The lack of sources is a difficulty for any biographer, but Mr. Cohen compounds the credibility problem by his strenuous efforts to avoid the boring details of business. He tells us that Cuyamel Fruit Co. was "the best banana company in the world." But the book contains no financial data to support the claim. Equally problematic is Mr. Cohen's recounting of how in 1933, three years after merging Cuyamel into United Fruit and retiring, Zemurray waged a successful proxy fight to oust the Boston Brahmins who ran the company and took charge himself. This event, described in the press as the fish eating the whale, provided Mr. Cohen with his title. But the event is hard to understand, because only a few pages earlier he states that the 1930 merger had made Zemurray the "majority owner" of United Fruit. Were that true, why would he have needed to wage a proxy fight? We receive no explanation.

"The Fish that Ate the Whale" is at its most interesting when Mr. Cohen muses on the relationship between Zemurray's business practices and his Jewish identity. But beyond that, the author has disappointingly little that is original to tell us about Zemurray and the companies he led. Call me old-fashioned, but I expect a biography to reflect careful scholarship, not just clever writing. Perhaps Mr. Cohen undertook such scholarship, but the evidence did not make it into this book.

Mr. Levinson's most recent book is "The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business

Consider a key incident in Zemurray's ultimately successful campaign to overthrow the Honduran government. Mr. Cohen tells us that in the summer of 1910, just a few months after Zemurray moved to Honduras to build up Cuyamel's plantations, he was summoned to Washington to meet with U.S. Secretary of State Philander Knox. The Hondurans were threatening to withhold payments owed on their bonds, and Knox's solution was to have J.P. Morgan's bankers take charge of Honduran customs collections and pay the bondholders. Zemurray strenuously objected, because Knox's plan voided his sweetheart deals with the Honduran government. Knox supposedly called him into his office, dressed him down and ordered him to steer clear of Honduran politics. But did he? As British journalist Peter Chapman noted in "Jungle Capitalists" (2007): "No record suggests [Zemurray] ever met Knox." Mr. Cohen devotes three pages to the Knox-

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