

Got Gas?

Mark Thomas Belches Out the Coca-Cola Company

B W A R D L A W

Mark Thomas, *Belching Out the Devil: Global Adventures with Coca-Cola* (New York: Nation Books, 2008), 365 pages, \$16.95, paperback.

Midway through his courageous and engaging book, *Belching Out the Devil*, Mark Thomas becomes intrigued by an offer on a Coke Web site, “If you want to know the truth about the Coca-Cola Company: Ask the farmer in India.”

Thomas, a British reporter and comedian best known for exposing political and corporate crime, ponders the invitation: “I do like it when companies write stuff like this...as if inviting all and sundry to drop whatever they are doing, travel to India, drive out to the farmer’s place and ask if he will vouch for Coke.” Although Thomas notes that “the company wasn’t terribly specific about which farmer they meant... [and] hunting representational composites is fiendishly difficult,” he nevertheless decides to take the Coca-Cola Company up on its invitation. Here’s what he found in the farming village of Plachimada in the southern province of Kerala.

In 1998, hoping for jobs for its people, Plachimada’s village council (or “Panchayat”) had allowed Coke to build a bottling plant on thirty-five acres that Coke had bought near the village. By 2002 villagers were picketing the plant in reaction to Coke’s daily extraction of approximately half a million liters of scarce water, that was causing wells in Plachimada and surrounding villages to go dry. In exchange for taking their water, Coke’s largesse was to give away sludge from its plant “free” for farmers to use as “fertilizer”—a bit of a problem, since the sludge contained high levels of both lead and the carcinogen, cadmium. Mental retardation and anemia in their children were not what villagers had bargained for when they had allowed Coke to build its plant.

So in 2004, Plachimada’s Panchayat voted to not renew the license. Coke mounted a formidable argument in its defense: the Panchayat

had the right to issue a license but *not* the right of refusal to renew it. The Panchayat sued and, aware of Coke's history of violence toward those who stand in its way, asked for police protection. By March 2004, when Coke was forced to stop production, an Indian lab testing Plachimada water found it so acidic that, if consumed, "it would burn up your insides. Clothes could tear in such water, food will rot, crops will wither." Anyone who actually drank Coke was no better off: between 2003 and 2006, India's Center for Science and the Environment found, after repeated testing, that both Coke and Pepsi products in India contained pesticide levels twenty-four to thirty-six times higher than would be allowed in the European Union.

In *Belching Out the Devil*, an energetic, well-researched book that adds immensely to our understanding of the Multi-National World Order, Mark Thomas's on-the-scene investigations are not limited to India. Thomas details the brutal murders of men who tried to organize unions at Coke's Colombian bottling plants; he exposes the extremely dangerous use of child labor in Coke's Salvadoran sugarcane fields; chronicles an unconscionable attack on men, women, and children protesting Coke policies in Turkey; and describes why Vicente Fox's move from President of Coca-Cola Mexico to President of Mexico barely constitutes career advancement. Thomas's work as a documentarian and professional comedian serves him well, and helps turn what could otherwise be an intolerably grim story into an irresistible one: a U.S. customs official, for instance, upon learning that Thomas has been in El Salvador to make a film, asks him conspiratorially whether he is a "porn star." Our author's aside: "If I can be mistaken for a porn star, then Coca-Cola is not the only industry that needs to review its standards."

Chapter one finds Mark Thomas in Atlanta, city of Coke's birth, where, around 1886, a druggist somehow came up with a hangover remedy—soon to become known as Coca-Cola. Here, Thomas invites us to join a hilariously revealing tour through "The World of Coca-Cola," a major Atlanta tourist attraction.

We begin with a gallery of display cases that hold Coke memorabilia "as if it were treasure from the time of the pharaohs." That room leads to "The Happiness Factory," where his fellow tourists participate in a sing-along of famous Coca-Cola jingles. Thomas groans, "Oh fuck, I'm in a cult—this is what the Hari Krishnas would be like if they took sugar in their chai." Moving along through this happiness, we reach "the final chamber, Coca-Cola's colon if you will," the tasting room, "packed with kids on a school trip, shouting over the music and tearing

from tap to tap with plastic cups while the teachers look on powerless to stop the sugar rush tsunami that is heading towards them.” And, ah yes, the exit from The World of Coca-Cola is via a gift shop: “The school kids from the tasting room will pass through here soon and at that thought I silently offer up a prayer to the god of small shoplifters.” Toward the end of this tour, Thomas notices a sign reading: “Do you have a favorite Coca-Cola story? Share your story with us...”

This, then, is exactly what Thomas has decided to do: travel around the world to hear, then report “stories from people whose lives have been touched by Coca-Cola and its bottlers.” It was at great peril that Mark Thomas investigated Coca-Cola practices in Colombia, Turkey, El Salvador, Mexico, and India, but he lived to light a bright fire under Coca-Cola’s feet. Crisply written, with a fine eye for detail and a well-tuned ear to cries of poverty, *Belching Out the Devil* quite convincingly documents many areas of Coke’s corporate irresponsibility and its lack of imagination for reversing the damage it’s caused. After all, Coca-Cola, with its unparalleled worldwide fleet of trucks, has long possessed opportunities to do wonders.

The World of Coke, our author observes, tells many stories about Coke’s history, but does not include: (1) the terrible irony that the cocaine in Coke’s early formula (which, along with extraordinarily heavy doses of caffeine, contributed to its early addictiveness, or “popularity”) came from Colombia—a country where, a century later, drug dealers conspire with union-busting politicians to keep Coca-Cola’s profits high; or (2) Coke’s willingness to give Hitler’s Third Reich a platform through its sponsorship of Berlin’s 1936 Olympic Games; or (3) the fact that, in Dr. Martin Luther King’s last speech—the one he made in Memphis just before he was murdered—he called for boycotting three corporations, outstanding for racist policies in hirings, firings, and promotions—one of which was Coca-Cola.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should now reveal that in 1919, my paternal grandfather was in charge of the bond department at the Trust Company of Georgia (now SunTrust), of which a man named Ernest Woodruff was president. It was my grandfather who went with Woodruff—“The Chief”—to New York to meet with folks at the Chase Manhattan Bank and at Guaranty Trust to complete the deal by which, with some fast and shifty footwork, Woodruff wrested control of the Coca-Cola Company from the Candler family. Because of this transaction, my family and I have been major shareholders in the Coca-Cola Company.

But questionable values were never new to Coke. Well before this takeover, Asa Candler, founder and president of Coca-Cola, had declared: “The most beautiful sight that we see is the child at labor; as early as he may get at labor, the more beautiful, the more useful does his life get to be.” Mr. Candler knew whereof he spoke. In *And the Dead Shall Rise*, a book about the 1913 lynching of Leo Frank, the Jewish manager of an Atlanta pencil factory, historian Steve Oney points out that, back in the early twentieth century, when Coke began its rise, Georgia was the only state that still allowed ten-year-olds to work eleven-hour days, six days a week in its mills and factories. Over half of Atlanta’s school children, black and white, suffered from “anemia, enlarged glands, heart disease or malnutrition.”

Twenty years later Granddaddy wrote Woodruff’s son, Robert, then president of Coca-Cola, recalling that August 1919 day:

Your father said: “Gentlemen, don’t forget that this is my deal and it is going to be handled my way. We will be back here at 12 o’clock, and in the meantime you can decide whether you will go along or whether you want to count yourselves out of the business.” We went back at 12 o’clock and the deal went through as he planned it. To see those bankers—who were accustomed to telling others to lie down, roll over and play dead—when someone else started putting on the show, was most interesting.

The moral of the story, as I heard it as a child, had something to do with Southern “gentility” and “pushy” Yankees, with the etymological connection between “gentility” and “Gentile” certainly implied. My grandfather’s father was one of nine South Carolina brothers who had fought for the Confederacy in the American Civil War. There had been passed on, from my grandfather to my father to me, a vague sense of differences between “us” (Atlanta bankers) and “them” (New York bankers) who, as I now understand, were seen as the spiritual, maybe even physical, descendants of those Yankees by whom the Wardlaw boys had been utterly defeated.

But it’s one thing to learn about the abuses of Coca-Cola, another thing to stop them. As inheritors of Coca-Cola wealth, my family and I, in our attempt to influence Coke’s business practices, are intent on introducing shareholder proposals. We’ve used that forum to warn against such dangers as the surrender of millions of acres of land to genetically engineered corn, and have—without success—tried to convince Coke to stop using that corn in producing its corn syrup. Again and again, in the years preceding the Beijing Olympics—also without success—we asked Coke to join a group of corporations that

were meeting with human rights organizations to discuss complicated issues regarding doing business in China.

Because of my efforts, I'm acquainted with wonderful activists, such as Ray Rogers, creator of the Killer Coke Campaign (see killercoke.org) and a network of anti-Coca-Cola organizers. It was because they suggested me to Mark Thomas that, late in 2007, Mark came to my hometown of Takoma Park, Maryland to interview me. He writes that, given my "casual" style of dressing, my Southern drawl, and scraggly gray beard, his first thought was: "Colonel Sanders with a hangover."

We spent a great hour together, finding similarity in many of our views about Coke, and a similar tendency to laugh in the face of the absurd. A year later, in April 2008, *ah wuz delighted*, upon arriving at Wilmington, Delaware's elegant Hotel DuPont for Coke's annual shareholder meeting, to rediscover Mark, who was making a final stop on the last of his grueling investigative trips.

"B Wardlaw," he writes, "help[s] finance a homeless shelter in Atlanta: 1,000 people drop by in the day, 600 sleep there at night. The homeless repay this charity by giving B fashion advice, which he appears to have accepted today." Among my friends who are homeless, there was general consternation that their dress codes could be equated with mine.

I had arrived at the 2008 meeting in Wilmington to introduce our proposal that Coca-Cola's Board of Directors create a permanent committee of the board that would study various actions the company might take regarding human rights, and advise the company on consequences that could be expected. The meeting—as I experienced it and as Mark writes about it—showed, in microcosm, the opportunities and challenges of the Coca-Cola Company. The good news from the DuPont Hotel is that the entire shareholder meeting was dominated by these concerns, putting Coke's hierarchy on the defensive, and that over 50,000,000 shares of Coke stock were voted in favor of our various proposals. The bad news is that over 1,000,000,000 shares were voted along company lines.

Beyond shareholder meetings and corporate boardrooms, Coke's egregious violations of human rights continue on many fronts. Regarding the murders of union organizers in Coke's Colombian bottling plants, Coke must stop hiding behind its flimsy evasion, "Oh, that's the responsibility of the bottlers, not us." Regarding the depletion of water from aquifers in India, Coke needs to understand and acknowledge that it cannot build bottling plants in areas of the world where water is so scarce that Coke's operations cause wells to go dry in surrounding villages. And it must acknowledge and address

problems related to contamination of water, land, and air via waste from all its plants. Coke needs to deal honestly with the reality that many of its suppliers are exploiting the labor of children. And Coke should be forced to weigh, very carefully, the human rights climate in every country in which it chooses to do business.

After these many years of trying to convince the Coke hierarchy to avail itself of its opportunities, I feel that I'm running out of ideas. Although Ray Rogers's Killer Coke Campaign is going after Coke with determination and in creative ways—and there have been efforts in India, Mexico, and other developing countries to devise local alternative soft drinks—those efforts, as Mark Thomas shows, come up against the enormous political and public relations power that Coca-Cola is not shy about wielding. (Hey, are there young—or old—people out there with fresh ideas and fresh energy?)

Mark Thomas, however, is in no way discouraged and certainly not defeated. Back at the Hotel DuPont, he leaves the shareholder meeting, and picks up a free Coca-Cola commemorative pen. “Wow,” he remarks, “they even give me the ink with which to write.” Obviously, what Mark writes is not what Coca-Cola wants us to read—but I think you will not be disappointed if you do.

B WARDLAW is a third generation Coke addict, his grandfather having invested in the company as soon as it went public. He is the author of *Receptive to Fire*, a series of sonnets on human evolution, and the soon-to-be-published *Coca-Cola Anarchist* (see cocacolaanarchist.com). His friends call him Beelzebubba.