

BANANAS

Some went on a protest march to San José. Many absconded into the jungle; about sixty drowned in the mangroves. Keith's later chroniclers reached for some trusty explanations: the Italians had brought their 'secret societies' and 'feuding between family and villages' with them. But how Keith imagined a workforce from the foot of the Alps would toil productively in the hot lowlands of Limón was difficult to fathom.

He was saved by the quick bankruptcy of de Lesseps' Panama canal project. It left hundreds of Jamaicans to fend for themselves in the hills. Keith sent boats down to pick up his errant charges.

Costa Rica's railway pushed to completion sixteen years late in 1890, by which time Keith's status had risen from struggling storekeeper to living legend. Blond, blue-eyed, of medium height and slim, he strode about urging his men on. Stories had them so enamoured of their leader that when the money ran short they went without pay to see the project through. In the work camps he drank copious quantities of cheap whisky with them, the only 'medicines' thought effective against the rigours of the swamp. While the railroad claimed thousands of lives, Keith endured fevers but 'never took a day off sick'. He had plunged headlong into the tide of the Reventazón, Costa Rica's tempestuous principal river, in a sadly vain effort to save a monk on horseback; he barely survived when a bridge he was on collapsed into the torrent. At the end, the driver of the first train to cross the bridge over the Reventazón's last unconquered canyon refused the task, till Keith went ahead. He rode the cowcatcher, the Stars and Stripes cradled in his arms — according, at least, to a painting of the occasion. Bananas were arriving at such a rate in the US as to prompt a sharp change in their own status. Once bourgeois, the banana

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was now positively proletarian. Accordingly, magazines advanced the nutritious case for bananas and not just in relation to other fruits. They urged the hard-pressed mother struggling to feed her family to regard the banana as a meat substitute.

The crash of 1893 saw four million thrown out of their jobs. President Grover Cleveland was in the White House, a man with a solid reputation for work. He even answered his own phone. Some of those who got through to him, however, left much to be desired. He arranged to bolster the nation's dwindling reserves through a loan from J. P. Morgan, the bankers. Cleveland's critics denounced him for 'betraying the nation' to the big money-men of the east.

The debate had moved on a little since the recent times when the robber barons had been defined as the problem. It was now a little less personal, more institutional, and dangerously so. Once, Messrs Morgan, Rockefeller, Gould and others were imagined to rise each morning determined to do mankind down. Some of their number may well have done so. But lately there was a sense that something thrown up by 'the system' was at fault: the large banks and companies. They were known as 'trusts', from a term the economics profession used to denote large industrial and financial monopolies.

Their very name showed how devious they, or indeed economics, could be. The feeling was that they could be 'trusted' above all to feather their own corporate nests. Consequently, Washington introduced the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890 and more legislation soon followed. Initially the laws were to prohibit conspiracies between companies; the setting up of cartels and the like, that led to price fixing and other monopolistic practices.