

Review

Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa

Author: Edward Berenson

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“Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” The infamy of these words can be traced to the new cultural force beholden to the penny press. Henry Morton Stanley’s expedition to meet Scottish explorer David Livingstone on Lake Tanganyika effectively engaged the British public on its expanding empire in Africa. Compelling men like Stanley stood as charismatic ‘heroes’ who fostered an emotional connection between foreign imperialism and citizens in the metropole.

Heroes studies five imperial figures – Henry Stanley, Charles Gordon and Hubert Lyautey of Britain and Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza and Jean-Baptiste Marchand of France. While he has written the first comparative history of colonial heroes, Berenson admittedly joins a variety of scholars who have analyzed empire through the paradigm of heroism. John M. Mackenzie, Walter Houghton, Kathryn Tidrick and Graham Dawson are a mere few, all of whom inspired the author.

His most notable inspiration was the post-colonial approach to understanding imperialism as a cultural phenomenon. Rather than possessing an ‘official mind’, empire was in essence everywhere. Press, advertisements and popular entertainment all exhibited explicit and clandestine colonial themes. The author reflects on this new orthodoxy in imperial historiography and forges a critical link between the explosion of newsprint, its new audience and its influence on imperial policy.

The book makes extensive use of primary source material, drawing on a wide variety of newspaper articles and visual images. They depict a sensational, glamourized portrait of our respective idols. An image published in *L’Illustration* July 1882 portrays Brazza sitting under a guarded tent as bare-breasted Congolese women queued to bow before the French explorer. They illustrate masculinity and racial superiority in order to extort national sentiment and protract the chauvinistic element used to stabilize imperialism.

Correlations are finely formed between the exploits of these figures and colonial policy. French diplomats considered Brazza’s efforts whilst deciding the French position in the Congo at the Berlin Conference 1884, lest they upset him and, effectively, the French populace. Equally influential were the British imperial emblems; during what Berenson dubs the ‘Stanley craze’, the explorer directly affected British policy in east Africa by forcing Prime Minister Salisbury to act against the threat of German penetration, despite Salisbury’s disinterest in the region.

The author is persistently cognizant of Europe's violent and demoralizing project in Africa, leaving no hint of nostalgia for empire. The sensibilities and attitudes of these men were never in question, rather the objective was "to examine how their contemporaries viewed them and understood the meaning of what they did". Indeed, Africa serves only as a backdrop to express these European narratives.

Heroes couples a dramatic non-fiction prose with fluid narration. Despite failing to jostle the precincts of historiography, it complements existing literature on the power of public opinion vis-à-vis imperial policy. The books seemingly mundane structure disguises the nuanced analysis stored within its pages, befitting for the esoteric to the universal.