Writing Another Continent's History: The British and Pre-colonial Africa, 1880-1939

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Tales of Britons striding purposefully through the jungles and across the arid deserts of Africa captivated the metropolitan reading public throughout the nineteenth century. This interest only increased with time, and by the last quarter of the century a corpus of heroes both real and fictional, be they missionaries, explorers, traders, or early officials, was formalized (for example, see Johnson, 1982). While, for instance, the travel narratives of Burton, Speke, and other famous Victorians remained perennially popular, a greater number of works that emerged following the 'Scramble for Africa' began to put such endeavours into wider historical context. In contrast to the sustained attention that recent studies have paid to Victorian fiction and travel literature (for example, Brantlinger, 1988; Franey, 2003), such histories have remained relatively neglected. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the way that British historians, writing between the Scramble and the eve of the Second World War, represented Africa.

It is often asserted that the British enthused about much of Africa's past. It is claimed that there was an admiration for a simplified, pre-modern existence, in keeping with a Rousseauean conception of the 'noble savage.' Some, particularly postcolonialists such as Homi Bhabha, have argued that this all added a sense of disquiet to imperialist proceedings. Bhabha claims that a colonizing power advocates a 'colonial mimicry', that is, it wants those it ruled over to become a 'reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*'. Such mimicry is

'constructed around an *ambivalence*'; the 'authority of that mode of colonial discourse […] is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal' (Bhabha, 1994, p.86, emphasis in original). In other words, for Bhabha, empire is constantly grounded in ambiguity. The British wished for the 'Other' to be both altered, in keeping with notions of the 'civilizing mission', and, at the same time, to remain different, in order that a space between 'them' and 'us' perpetuated British claims to the role of colonizer. Similarly, Frederick Cooper has argued that metropolitan attempts to find 'a balance between the poles of incorporation […] and differentiation' was an unstable process (2005, p.194).

By contrast, it will be argued here that when the British examined Africa's past, more frequently than not they felt this did not have much relevance to the 'modern' world. Therefore, despite a disinclination on the part of historians to treat the endeavours of the imperial exploratory vanguard in isolation, they nevertheless perpetuated the sense that the history of Africa was the history of white activity there. Furthermore, such activity was construed as unyieldingly positive, contrasted as it was to vague and fleeting articulations of Africa as 'wicked', 'primitive', and the remainder of the clichéd identifying tropes that surrounded the 'dark continent'. This has important implications for our understanding of this period, for instead of historians adding nuance or confusion to the overall picture, by showing to politicians and others the dangers of any cut and dried imperial policy, instead we see that historians legitimated imperial change and the reconfiguration of African societies. In this, they agreed with other British intellectuals – geographers, missionaries and even anthropologists, that body most frequently

deemed to have been wedded to the perpetuation of African 'tradition'.

Thus, the argument of the paper is that academics added their voices to a metropole-wide enthusiasm for the existence of British colonies in Africa. Their eagerness for an African modernity was symptomatic of wider trends in the intellectual life of the time, whereby a perpetuated faith in Britain as the globally-pre-eminent power fostered a sense of proactivism and moral universalism that has been written out of some recent histories, which tend to focus on the reactionary or conservative facets of imperial power (such as, for example, Cannadine, 2002, pp.139-40).

Examining those histories published between 1880 and 1914, there are usually scant details about life in Africa before the arrival of the British as colonizers. Of course, it could be argued that this can be partially attributed to a difficulty of finding sources. Oral testimony was felt to be the preserve of the anthropologist, not 'serious' historians. However, and more significantly, it was also because historians were not greatly interested. In contrast to what was written of pre-colonial India, for instance, a low racial perception of African societies meant it was natural that historians tackling Africa were more preoccupied with the British and what they had done. Any British actions in changing what had previously existed on the continent were construed as unremittingly good, with British historians constantly, albeit briefly, alluding to the bloodthirsty nature of certain peoples, most notably the Zulu (Low and Sanders, 1907, pp.316, 319), which conveniently tied in with perceptions fostered by fictional works such as Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (Haggard, 1994). This sense that before the British came there was only an unimportant ebb and flow of petty rivalries

between different tribes was compounded by other popular works, such as *Twilight tales of the Buganda* of 1911, by the wife of a C. M. S. missionary, Ruth Fisher, which describes the period since the British coming to Uganda as ushering in the country's 'awakening' (1911, pp.11–27).

That this should happen is not surprising. This period was, after all, one of great optimism for the imperial mission, the so-called era of 'high imperialism' where most endorsed the further acquisition of territories in Africa or, at least, the consolidation and exploitation of those areas already marked red on the map. Therefore, the focus here is instead upon the years after the First World War. In 1929, Ifor L. Evans, a fellow at St. John's College, Cambridge, wrote a history of the British in tropical Africa. He praised Captain George Maclean, the first governor of the Gold Coast proper, for taking matters into his own hands and formalizing British claims to territory further inland away from the West African coast. He was justified in doing this, according to Evans, because his actions were proved correct in retrospect. For Evans, Maclean's decisions were borne out by the popularity of the new regime amongst the 'natives', who gladly availed themselves of the possibility of referring their disputes to the Governor's Court, and who enjoyed the growing prosperity of the country (Evans, 1929, p.89). This is, as before 1918, juxtaposed with traditionally negative depictions of 'barbaric' indigenous practices.

So, for Evans, Africans lost their right to their own claims to sovereignty on the basis that their conceptions of what constituted indigenous practice did not live up to the standards expected of the British, who were universalistic in their approach to governance. After all, it was felt Africans would have surrendered such rights as

they did have once they had fully realized the benevolence of British rule. Thus, Britons had their expansionist cake and ate it; African claims to indigenous sovereignty were written out of the equation in the general tumult of Africans rejoicing in trade and getting their grievances settled.

However, Evans was writing a history primarily intended to be a manual on the recent past for Colonial Service Probationers training, prior to heading off for the continent for themselves, and so it was therefore unlikely that such a work would ever deviate from that which was endorsed by the Colonial Office elites. And yet Evans was not alone. His words were matched by those of C. P. Lucas (1922), and by the general secondary school and university textbooks of the time, such as those by A. P. Newton and J. Ewing (1929, p.190), and L. Suggate (1929, pp.58, 115, 131–2, 142, 156, 164, 172).

Upon initial inspection, that this celebration of British actions and the disinclination of historians to tackle pre-colonial Africa continued as the British moved into the interwar period is surprising. It does not seem to be in accord with other aspects of Britain's interactions with the empire. Firstly, the interwar years were ones of increasingly specialized interest in Africa. There was the rise of anthropology as an institutionalized discipline. This was the era of Bronisław Malinowski and Edward Evans-Pritchard, the latter of whom went out to the Sudan researching the customs of the Nuer living in the south of the country. This increased academic interest in African custom was also reflected in wider educational changes. For instance, the School of Oriental Studies become SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies, in 1938.

There was an increased sense that the use of geography, ethnography and so on would be of use in training the young officials how better to manage the African environment and the Africans themselves. More was being written about how customs were the key to understanding how best to run things. It would seem obvious that the British historians would have taken advantage of this increased interest in 'traditional' Africa in order to get a better sense of what colonizers had modified or caused to die out among the Africans under imperial rule.

The second reason why it initially appears surprising that there was a marked reluctance among historians to engage with African custom is that after 1918 there was a move away from the bombast that marked the pre-1914 years. There was an increasing disinclination to unanimously praise the actions of the British. By the early 'thirties in particular, Britons were increasingly sending themselves up for parody. While in the first decade of the twentieth century Lord Kitchener was commended for his supposedly 'well-planned and well-managed campaign' in recapturing the Sudan in 1898 (Low and Sanders, 1907, p.441), by the 'thirties the same actions were deemed slightly foolhardy, it being fortuitous that the British had got as far as Khartoum alive and intact (Royle, 1985). Similarly, while the 1902 novel by A. E. W. Mason, *The four feathers*, had praised the actions of those who had fought in North East Africa (Mason, 2001), by the time Alexander Korda came to remake the novel as a movie in 1939, some of the men involved in this campaign were portrayed as bumbling old fools, repeatedly telling the same old dull stories during after-dinner brandy and cigars (1939). There was a switch to a more pragmatic vision of empire embodied in Leo Amery's Empire Marketing Board, established in

1926 (Constantine, 1984; Constantine, 1986). A marked shift in approach to empire had occurred. In the late nineteenth century, there was a sense of 'imperial mission'. The British felt that they were giving something to the rest of the world. This gradually shifted, so that by the interwar period, the British were increasingly asking what their empire could provide for them. Although they failed to effect a change in British economic policy, the Tariff Reform campaigns of the first years of the twentieth century are indicative of this shift, whereby the British were increasingly concerned with themselves. This is not to say that the imperial mission of the nineteenth century had been a model of altruism, because it was not. Nevertheless, after the First World War in particular, empire for racial glory became instead empire for enhanced security and stability.

So why, in an era of an increasing interest in Africa and a reduced tendency to uncritically hold up previously-untouchable Victorian heroes as essential men to emulate, was there a perpetuated sense that African history only commenced with the coming to the continent of foreign powers? And why the perpetuated sense that the only way for things to progress was for Africa to be rescued from itself? The first reason is that anthropologists were, like historians, closely affiliated with the colonial regimes, both emotionally and practically. In some instances, this is hardly surprising. For example, R. Sutherland Rattray, a pre-eminent anthropologist in the Gold Coast, was once a colonial administrator (Robertson, 1975, p.55; Rattray, 1928). Others, such as Evans-Pritchard, were reliant upon colonial administrations for assistance, and certainly did not think that the British in the Sudan was a bad thing at all.

In this context, the majority of anthropologists were keen on imperial rule and were not emotionally attached to the pre-colonial past. At the start of his study on those living in the north of the Gold Coast, A. W. Cardinall rejoiced that Africans will 'in no long time […] neglect and forget these hampering fetters of old-age custom which in the following pages I have endeavoured to record' (Cardinall, p.xi). Despite describing the Kassena language in exhaustive detail, Cardinall showed no signs to his readers of any despondency at the inevitable passing of the language; rather, he considered it an archival curio, something to be preserved on the page for the day it no longer existed. Similarly, others such as Diedrich Westermann, the director of the Institute of African Languages and Culture, wanted to simplify African language as a means of making the task of governance easier (Westermann, 1927; Westermann, 1928, pp.107-11; Newell, 2002, p.64).

Anthropologists did feel that there were sections of African life deemed worth saving, such as the tribal structure it was felt dominated social life on the continent, but these were only useful insofar as they were the bases by which changes were effected, such as the introduction of Western notions of what constituted legal fair play, legislative accountability, and so on. This sense of a balance between the 'traditional' and the 'new', rather than any blanket opposition to change at all costs, was also the basis for the majority of British administrators' stance towards 'indirect rule'. To effect change, officials merely studied what went on in front of them and worked out what was good about it, prior to their making any attempts at gently pushing – or punishing – those Africans who deviated from British conceptions of what was 'correct'.

It was only a distinct minority of anthropologists, such as the German Bruno Gutmann, who criticized colonial activities with any vigour (Gutmann, 1928, pp.429-45). The same was true of most specialist fields engaging with the empire in Africa. While the empire was not devoid of domestic criticism, those who put forward the critiques that were listened to were very much insiders asking for slight reform over extensive change, let alone a dismantling of the system, rather than outsiders such as Gutmann. For example, W. R. Crocker, who had served as an official in Nigeria, attracted interest following the publication of his *Nigeria: A critique of British colonial administration* in 1936. However, Crocker's complaint was merely that the British had a 'hand-to-mouth' manner of going about administering Africa. He called for a more planned, systematic adoption of the principles surrounding 'indirect rule', of which he was a keen advocate (Crocker, 1936, p.189). This was not anything approaching an indictment of the right of the British to rule in Africa, or even of the idea that the British were not 'superior' or 'correct' when compared to Africans. The radicals were ignored. Despite Henry Campbell-Bannerman's expressing alarm to a friend in 1903 at the 'trenchant' nature of the radical liberal economist J. A. Hobson's writing (Spender, I, p.87), the ideas contained in the now-seminal *Imperialism: A study* (1902) went largely unnoticed at the time of the work's original publication. Hobson was little known outside of the liberal *Manchester Guardian* circle (Freeden, 1988, p.16) and, even then, his 'lack of faith in the ability of Britons to run an empire, and in the possibilities of empire unity' greatly undermined his support among even New Liberal peers (Cain, 2002, p.164). It was only in the increasingly self-critical pessimistic mood of the late 'thirties that Hobson's arguments started to be taken seriously,

prompting a third edition of *Imperialism: A study* to be produced in 1938, but even then such newfound acceptance was the preserve of the left (Cain, 2002, pp.226-33). There is plenty of evidence from other sections of British commentators, including geographers and missionaries, which suggest that a remarkable similarity of opinion prevailed across the board (for example, see Stanton, 1928, p.108; Hingston, 1931, p.404).

Furthermore, the move towards parodying the great men of the nineteenth century mentioned above was not total. People still believed in certain heroes as the exemplars of goodness, of the 'great' things that empire could achieve. In 1907, a historian and fellow of King's College, London, Sidney Low, would write that General Gordon had 'extraordinary' powers of leadership, and that the 'memory of Gordon's wonderful exploits in China, [and] his masterful government of the Sudan […] had deeply impressed the public imagination' (Low and Sanders, 1907, pp.357-8). Such a depth of impression may be demonstrated by the public reaction to Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* of 1918; despite it being a relatively mild criticism of General Gordon, at least by today's standards, it was heavily attacked by most, and somewhat breathless biographies of Gordon as the archetypal English hero were reprinted long after they had been written.[1]

Concomitant to this, there was no sense that there existed any other power or institution better placed to alter Africa for the 'better' than the British Empire. Indeed, in this bubble of optimism, those events that we today would argue were signs of imperial weakness were at the time construed by historians as being of positive value.

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[1] Strachey, 1971, pp.189-267; Holroyd, 1967, pp.50, 163-4; Holroyd, 1968, pp. 309, 322; Rosenbaum, 1994, Volume Two, pp.117-9; May, 2001, p.137; Allen, 1931, pp.83-101; Johnson, 1982; Daly, 1986, p.358; Butler, 1889.

For instance, in his noted *History of England*, G. M. Trevelyan argued that the Boer War was a cause for celebration, for it 'put an end to the somewhat boastful type of imperialism which dominated the last years of the nineteenth century [… making] men of all parties take a more sober and broad-minded view of imperial duties and destiny' (1926, p.783). Furthermore, the war was constructed as an impetus for military reform, without which the Great War might not have been won (1926, pp.794-5).

Just as important in explaining why British historians did not believe that pre-African history was worth reconstructing was the fact that there had been no significant reappraisal of the abilities of the African. For the explorer, colonizer and historian Harry Johnston in 1899, it was nigh-on impossible to imagine Africans ever demanding autonomy and 'putting an end to the control of the white man' (1899, p.284). Similarly, for Lord Lugard writing in 1922, those who had examined the continent correctly would realize that African self-determination was not even 'visible on the horizon of time' (1922, pp.197-8). This stance was maintained by the majority of imperial commentators despite a slight softening of racial attitudes amongst British administrators after the First World War. It was merely now the case that African cultural traits were added to the racial mix in helping to supposedly explain why the moving of the African up the so-called 'ladder of civilization' was such a painfully slow process. African nationalist parties had yet to make their presence felt to any significant degree; nothing, with the exception of isolated outbursts such as the White Flag revolt in Khartoum in 1924, had shaken the British from their imperial somnolence in Africa when it came to indigenous anti-colonial movements. It would only be with the seismic impact of the Second

World War that things would change. The British failed to fully appreciate the extent to which certain Africans' mentalities had been altered under colonialism and a partially-Westernized education. Writing in his private notebook in the early 'thirties in Southern Rhodesia, Thompson Samkange, who would later become President of the Bantu Congress, noted that the European has 'changed our world [...] He has aroused in us the stirring of divine discontent [...Yet] it is amazing how little the white man really knows of the stirring of new life in native peoples living in his midst' (Ranger, 1995, p.15).

Therefore in conclusion, in contrast with what some postcolonialists now believe, British commentators were invariably of one mind as to the need for the colonial state to partially overwrite that which they felt was 'old' and 'traditional'. There was little sense that what the British were doing was damaging the African environment or Africans themselves. In this belief, there was little dissent from anthropologists and others who were felt to be in positions of discursive authority in the British metropole prior to the Second World War. Furthermore, to most of those who were not anthropologists, African customs were a curiosity, but no more. Instead, it was the actions of the British that were of interest. Hugh Trevor-Roper famously later argued that pre-colonial sub-Saharan Africa had no history (Trevor-Roper, 1966, pp.9-11), and his predecessors would have agreed with him. Concomitantly, deviations from a faith in imperial actions and strength were slight, despite the lack of bombast that marked the post-1918 period. Even Lord Hailey's *An African survey* of 1938, widely adjudged today as the book that heralded the move from paternalism to modern developmental policy (Roberts, 1986, pp.63, 66, 76; Nwauwa, 1997,

pp.35–100; Havinden and Meredith, 1993, p.167), was cautious, full of caveats, and it did not strongly criticize Lugardian notions of indirect rule (Hailey, 1938, pp.247, 537–8, 542, 1207, 1280, 1290; Bush, 1999, p.263). Historians were no exception to this general rule. They wrote their histories with the British cast as pre-eminent, and the Africans the grateful recipients of Western knowledge. African nationalist movements would ensure that this sense of surety would have eventually come undone. However, the sudden metropolitan recognition that the end of empire was impending was only engendered by the plans of men sat at far away desks in Berlin and Rome.

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