



Review of "Heroic Imperialists in Africa: the Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes" by Bernie Sèbe

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Berny Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa : The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes 1870-1939*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013

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When I was fourteen years old, in the 1970s, at a state-funded Catholic grammar school in the North of England, I was rewarded for good marks with a coffee-table book, on the occasion of the school prize-giving day. The title was *Clive of India*. Lavishly illustrated, it recounted the life of the eighteenth-century soldier of fortune and “great builder of Empire”. Strangely enough, I had no idea who the man was. The historical priorities of the colourful Father Cassidy, headmaster and chooser of prizes, were very different from those of the regional exam boards and the sometimes maverick history teachers who set the curriculum. I do not remember the empire in India or Africa ever having been the topic of a single history lesson. In school, we jumped from the Middle Ages and the difference between a serf and a villein directly to Napoleon’s good points and bad points, and the Corn Law, whereas the nineteenth century never left Britain.

Though I have now myself often taught the history of empire, the grand figures of Gordon, Kitchener or Livingstone have not been a central feature of my classes, so in Berny Sèbe’s book, I rediscovered British and French imperial heroes, albeit of a century later than good old Clive.

Berny Sèbe is lecturer in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Birmingham, and his aim in this work is to trace, not the lives of the imperial heroes, but the way they and their reputations were built up, marketed and politically utilized in the period from 1870 until the beginning of the Second World War. To do this, he mobilizes an impressive mass of material and presents the tale both in broad qualitative terms and in precise quantitative terms. The book fits very much then into the category cultural history/history of representations, a field which has been so dynamic in recent decades.

The comparative approach is particularly to be welcomed. Whether it be in the history of Empire or elsewhere, comparative studies make up a tiny proportion of historical works, a fact which owes more to the organization of historical studies and their institutions than to any reasoned justification.

The volume is divided into three. The first section traces the contexts which framed the marketing of these empire builders. First, a chapter explains the rise of new military heroes, symbolized by the sharp increase in the number of military medals available. Rapid urbanization in both countries meant more streets available to name after celebrities: the use of statues, schoolbooks, and naming ceremonies for the heroes is quantified and analysed. This in a context where public opinion was taking on a new importance, since, in 1871, universal male suffrage was instituted in France, and, after 1884, two thirds of British men could vote. Among the intellectual elite, institutions such as the Royal Geographical Society or the *Société de Géographie* served to bestow prestige upon colonial heroes, inviting them to give lectures on their adventures.

The author goes on to analyse the commercial interests which hoped to make money from selling imperial heroism. This includes a chapter on the printed word and the changes in published production accompanying the advance in mass literacy and cheap newspapers: after 1870, the mass print media was indisputably on the rise. The imperialist

messages of such papers as the *Daily Mail* in Britain, and the more muted expression of such papers as *Le Petit Parisien* are covered in some detail. The British press did not hesitate to use a tone of absolute hero-worship, whereas, in France, the real danger of a military coup d'état made media wary of putting too much stress on the individual hero. Popular British music-hall songs and printed biographies also praised Kitchener and others, but "hero books" were never guaranteed to make money; there was always an element of risk: "When family and friends sought to generate interest in a person whom they considered a potential hero, but the commercial profitability of a biography remained uncertain, publishing projects could take several years before being completed, if they ever were." (p.87)

The following chapter analyses other types of commercial media, beyond the printed word: paintings, drawings (from illustrated magazines to picture cards collected in packets of tea), and cinema. In 1925, the makers of the film *Livingstone* hoped to show it in the "hundred thousand schools and churches in the United States which exhibit films". As Mr Sèbe points out, "[q]uestions of profitability were clearly on the agenda before the film was shot," and money might be raised by public subscription as well as by investors.

The middle section of the book moves on to look at the various political uses that were made of the heroes. The chapter "Imperial heroes and domestic policies", as its title suggests, looks at their usefulness at home. In Britain, for example, General Gordon's death fighting for Empire in 1885 "was a godsent opportunity for Gladstone's opponents" (p 157) who could blame the Prime Minister for not having sent sufficient support to save the General.

The chapter after that one concentrates on "the values embodied by imperial heroes". The great ex-Chartist and Victorian moralist, Samuel Smiles, featured a portrait of Livingstone in the frontispiece of his best-selling book *Self-Help*, a work which glorified outstanding individual achievement, achievement which depended, for Smiles, purely on character and willpower. Meanwhile, children's books by George Henry and others hoped to inculcate in young minds the apparent values of their imperial heroes. In France, schoolbooks featured illustrations of Brazza freeing slaves in The Congo, and in both countries imperial expansion was presented as a Christian duty to counter the threat of Islam. In the cathedral at Khartoum there was a chapel dedicated to General Gordon.

The Great War marked a turning point. Since it was the ultimate challenge of the Empires, imperial heroes who were already dead, or too old to intervene in the war, were eclipsed by new, war-related legends. But more fundamentally, total war seemed to lead to a new populism, and the French *Poilu* or the British Tommy took on the mantle of new hero. For the old guard, the writing was already on the wall.

The final section of the book focuses in on two case studies, one for each country. Firstly, "The creation of the Marchand legend 1895-1906" looks at the myth of the man who worked to contest British superiority in parts of Africa. The last chapter deals with the 1898 book *With Kitchener to Khartoum*, a best-seller which did more than any other publication to establish the Kitchener legend. In a year and a half, 237 000 copies were distributed for sale. Detailed statistics on the print run are used to trace the mix of commercial and political motivations which framed its release.

In an appendix, short biographies of twenty two of the heroes dealt with are provided, since few readers will have a thorough knowledge of both the French and the British cast.

From the first sentence of the preface, the tone for the book is set: "Empires, for imperialists, have always been realms of fantasy". This book looks at the structure of vision and fairy tale constructed around European looting of the dominated South. It is a fascinating volume. Its limits are those which threaten all those who study the history of cultural productions: occasionally it is not clear what the relative weight of different facts is. How far does statue-building in the latter half of the nineteenth century reflect the opinions of the masses in society? If 67 000 copies of a biographical series were sold in France (p. 78), how significant was this?

The project is ambitious: characterizing for two societies over seventy years, processes of glorification and commemoration. If from time to time we may feel bogged down in the mass of facts, the work is a first-class contribution to understanding, and will hopefully open the way for more such comparative analyses.

John Mullen is Professor of British Studies at the University of Rouen. He has published widely on the history of British trade unionism, and the history of British popular culture. His book, *The Show Must Go On: Popular Song in Britain during the First World War*, was recently published by Ashgate.