



Empires in the Sun: The Struggle for the Mastery of Africa

Lawrence James

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In this compelling history of the men and ideas that radically changed the course of world history, Lawrence James investigates and analyses how, within a hundred years, Europeans persuaded and coerced Africa into becoming a subordinate part of the modern world. His narrative is laced with the experiences of participants and onlookers and introduces the men and women who, for better or worse, stamped their wills on Africa. The continent was a magnet for the high-minded, the philanthropic, the unscrupulous and the insane. Visionary pro-consuls rubbed shoulders with missionaries, explorers, soldiers, adventurers, engineers, big-game hunters, entrepreneurs and physicians.

Between 1830 and 1945, Britain, France, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Italy and the United States exported their languages, laws, culture, religions, scientific and technical knowledge and economic systems to Africa. The colonial powers imposed administrations designed to bring stability and peace to a continent that seemed to lack both. The justification for occupation was emancipation from slavery - and the common assumption that late nineteenth-century Europe was the summit of civilisation.

By 1945 a transformed continent was preparing to take charge of its own affairs, a process of decolonisation that took a mere twenty or so years. Yet there remained areas where European influence was limited (Liberia, Abyssinia). Through inertia and a desire for a quiet time, Africa's new masters left much undisturbed, and so this magnificent history also pauses to ask: what did not happen and why?

Empires in the Sun: The Struggle for the Mastery of Africa Details

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From Reader Review Empires in the Sun: The Struggle for the Mastery of Africa for online ebook

Becky says

A quick, condensed read that manages to touch on many events over many decades. A good teaser to encourage one to dig deeper.

E. Kahn says

I have very little interest in a book on colonialism that explicitly refuses to take a moral stance on the matter. Also,

"The metaphor for empire as a form of seduction has much to recommend it insofar as it suggests possession, usually by force or threat, and exploitation."

I wouldn't want this guy dating my sister.

Peter says

An entire continent can change significantly in less than a century. "Empires in the Sun" by Lawrence James is the explanation of interaction between Africa and Europe in the 19th and 20th century. The tone of this book is formal, which helps thoroughly convey facts and information. Most sentences are complex, making sure all points are completely introduced, elaborated, and concluded. The setting in which a discussed event is taking place is always noted. For instance, when a battle in Algiers is introduced, the date and location is given, and the reader can easily understand the description. Occasionally, imagery is used, which can make the reader feel like they are a witness of the event. For instance, the replica of a Dahomey village is described as "crowded with 'great negroes, still savages' who 'strode barefoot, with proud and rhythmic beating' while women pounded millet" on page 166. "Empires in the Sun" is a great book for anyone wondering about the history of Africa.

Jill Mackin says

Excellent easy to read history of colonialism.

David says

I was initially excited to see a new title from Lawrence James, but the excitement steadily waned as I dove into *Empires in the Sun*. There is nothing innately wrong with the book. It is a solid general survey of the early European forays into the continent, the abolitionist targeting of the slave trade, the colonial partition,

and world wars, but it lacks the depth and detail of James' earlier works. It was especially disappointing when compared with James' earlier works, especially the revised edition of *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire* and *Raj*. It is more limited in scope, but James showed greater tenacity and detail in shorter volumes like *Imperial Rearguard*. Consider this if you are looking for a parallel or supplement to *State of Africa*. Move on if you are not looking for such a pairing or have read history on modern African history and the colonial experience in particular.

Jim says

A very readable survey of the colonization of Africa-followed by the decolonization of the continent, all in not much more than a century. In 1830, European colonizers were still along the coast and had not penetrated into the great interior. In 1885, the Berlin Conference occurred at which the vast continent was divided between the European powers of Britain, France, Germany, Italy-and King Leopold II. Incredibly, a vast area called "the Congo Free State" was awarded to the "king of the Belgians" to rule as his private estate. Due to the massacres carried out and the epidemics that occurred, anywhere from one million to ten million black people died. It was a holocaust and the worst one in Africa, but not the only one. The war the Germans waged against the Hereros in German Southwest Africa (now Namibia) became a war of extermination as the Germans attempted to prove that "inferior races" could not stand in the way of the "progress" of the "superior race." Overall, the process of colonization was one involving continuous violence and bloodshed. At the beginning of the 20th Century, the Europeans looked like they were in Africa to stay--until World Wars I and II occurred. In 1945, the British Empire began to break-up, but not before crushing the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya. The French Empire also did not give up peacefully-the tragic Algerian War caused about a million Arab deaths before the French were forced out. But the great overall tragedy for the Africans was that independence happened in the midst of a Cold War in which the new African states became pawns in the global contest between the USA and the USSR. The story takes us to 1990 and the final decolonization on the African continent as white rule ended in South Africa and Nelson Mandela became president. With all the problems-social, political and economic-that Africans have, perhaps only now, for the first time in their history, the African people are able to begin to control their own destiny.

Hylke says

wow this was depressing.

otherwise interesting but not the most engaging writing style

Randall Harrison says

A good general survey, although kind of weak on the post-independence period. I especially enjoyed the sections about the period between the world wars.

Given my background studying African history, I enjoyed reading the book and learning some new details about subjects with which I was already familiar. I'm curious though why James choose to go into detail on particular subjects, while glossing over others.

The sections about the French experience in Algeria were most edifying, given that subject matter is not widely covered in most surveys of Africa. The Maghreb and Sahel are not often included in general works on the remainder of the (sub-Saharan) continent.

James spent a good deal of time discussing the liberation struggles in the front-line states in the last decades of the 20th century. It disappointed me he didn't follow up that discussion with a more detailed look at the atrocious rule of Robert Mugabe in independent Zimbabwe, other than a brief passing comment.

That is one of the most egregious, yet telling, examples of why the continent continues to suffer deprivation, poverty, famine and political corruption one, two or three generations after independence. Certainly neo-colonial power structures and economic marginalization contribute to the sad state of Africa today. However, its venal, corrupt leaders across the continent play a major role too.

Like many historical texts, this contained a great deal of description but very little prescription, i.e., any significant analysis of what James thinks the future holds based on his historical survey. Maybe that wasn't his goal; it would have been nice to see a little more depth to the summary. That though didn't keep me from enjoying the book. Rather it left me wanting more. Maybe that the subject of his next book!

This would be an excellent read for those without any background in African history.

Peter Tillman says

A mixed and critical review-essay at NYRB:
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/...>

A letter from Afonso, the King of Kongo, to the King of Portugal, 1526:

Each day the traders are kidnapping our people—children of this country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our family. This corruption and depravity are so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated. ... It is our wish that this kingdom not be a place for the trade or transport of slaves.

The Kongo kingdom and its immediate region lost around a third of its population to the European slave trade. Between 1500 and the late 1800s, tropical Africa altogether lost roughly 18 million people to the slave trade.

Of about 12 million African slaves transported to the New World, around 1.5 million died en route, and an additional 4 million may have died after capture (but before shipment) in West Africa. Source for this para: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_Slave_Trade...

There's plenty of blame to go around for the African slave trade, but it was an extraordinarily profitable business for everyone involved. Well, except for the slaves.

Phil says

Note - having watched the fascinating documentary on BBC4 "Africa's greatest civilisations" I have decided

to down rate this as the documentary is bring a lot better information on life in the African continent

This is a book I had bought on impulse because of my interest in moving borders and former countries. It is split into four parts, 1830 - 1880, 1881 - 1918, 1918 - 1945 and 1945 - 1990. It does focus on some countries more than others. Some parts are more interesting than others as with most books of this type like how USA and USSR tried to gain spheres of influence in Africa through gifts and loans to the new states.

Overall, it is a nice read but it does have its flaws. One error being in a footnote on Page 139, he writes that Captain Frank Crozier "took brief charge of the infamous Auxiliary Police during the 1919-22 Irish Civil War [1919-21 Irish War of Independence?]." I'm not quite if that bit in the box is an editors note that should have been amended or what. I know this is a small error and I know it is do with a brief sentence about Ireland but it does makes me wonder about other fact checking in it that he got both the war and dates wrong (the [] bracket was right which suggests to me that this is an editor note) and this leads me to wonder what other things might be wrong in it.

Another error was in the maps at the front of my edition, the map marked c1850 should be 1914 and the map marked c1850 should be marked 1914. Any reader should realise the mistake (and probably a lot quicker than me who was perplexed and looked at it for several minutes) and this is a small error but disappointing.

A remark in chapter 5 was about how soldiering was for "petty criminals, casual and unemployed workers and the destitute. Ireland was full of such creatures, which was why Irishmen made up over a third of the British army in 1841" I don't know if the remark was in jest or serious but while such a figure of a third being Irish be surprising given today's population difference, when you consider Ireland had over 8 million, England & Wales 15.5 million and Scotland 2.5 million in 1841's census, the disparity between various group is not that great with Ireland making up 31% of the population of the united kingdom in 1840 compared to a third of the army. In the context of 1840, there isn't a great disparity. Greater socioeconomic research would be needed in this or referred to rather than a throwaway remark. I know 2 of the flaws I post about are very irish-centric on a book about Africa but that is a subject I know a wee bit about. (Wee being a word used in Ireland for small)

It does help however in an area I am interested in and a good guide nonetheless.

Chase Parsley says

A fantastic book! Lawrence James does a great job and I recommend this book as highly as possible to anyone out there who wants to learn more about African and imperialist history.

First off, this age is much more complicated than many give it credit for. Some themes overlap, but many topics are unique to their time and place. James balances this well; I came away feeling like I learned a ton about the overall era, as well as a lot about individual countries and case studies.

Some parts of the book that I liked: how the different European powers justified this era, Social Darwinism and racism's role, how the Europeans ended the African slave trade (both in the Atlantic and later, often forgotten, in East Africa), the horrors of the Belgian Congo, Islam and Christianity's influences, Egypt's complex history, South Africa's checkered history with racist Boers, Sparta-like Zulus, the English; and how

the Cold War influenced everything after WWII. James covers most of the colonies and colonial powers, but, unsurprisingly, spends more time with the British and French ones. In particular, he really knows British history and it shows.

It would be interesting to hear what James thinks of the era's legacy; the book finishes after the independence struggles end. Africa, Europe, and the rest of the world have all been impacted by this enormously important era.

Geevee says

To write a history of Africa in regards to colonialism and its effects on peoples, societies, trade and political power would challenge the best of writers and would likely be a life's work stretching to many volumes.

Lawrence James offers in his one volume work a history that provides a mouth-watering overview that offers the reader a wide-ranging, accessible and highly informative account of this rich, beautiful and complex continent.

Starting with the European powers exploration and "civilisation" he weaves a story of characters - some well-known and others less so - who went to work for their king, emperor, queen or president.

The progress in time and colonialisation treads across the decades and links the world wars and sacrifice to vain hopes (at first) of franchise and self-government and finally to colonial withdrawal, complicated by a Cold War between communism and capitalism. This last aspect was fascinating in how the colonial powers handed over power, sometimes competently and quietly or in others following insurgencies or rushed exits after 1945. But what made it even more riveting was the complexities that Russia and America added with their billions of roubles and dollars, tens of thousands of advisors, myriad of weapons systems, wars by proxy and a good spattering of dictators who had little real allegiance to either side and feathered their own nests; in some cases exacerbating national debt that set a framework for failing nations and inter-nation and tribal wars from the 1960s onwards.

Within this story of time and nations we hear also of the peoples who were to be educated, civilised and controlled. Slavery (by and for Europeans, Americans, Arabs and yes Africans), raw materials, religion, alliances, wars, geographies, diseases, technology, weapons and transport routes are some of the aspects that feature in this simple yet readable work.

This is not the detailed multi-volume history that Africa deserves, especially now with Chinese money and expertise playing a part, but it is a very good introduction providing also a level of sources and bibliography that sets the reader on a path to learn more on one or many subjects.

To try this perhaps as your single book on Africa this year should you be looking for a good history and story would be one recommended by this reader.

Cheryl says

This book was a really good history of colonialism in Africa. The book was easy to read and interesting. The author was able to capture a great deal of history and enables the reader to get an understanding of what went on during the time of colonialism. This is by no means a deep dive into the history, however, it enables the reader to gain a cursory knowledge of the conflicts and struggles. I plan on reading more from this author at some point.

Jim Miller says

One of the most important books I have read. I'm a little embarrassed at how little I have known about Africa's history, including its complete colonization by Europe in the span of half a century and the struggles for independence during the Cold War that left disastrous dictatorships in its wake. A must read for those who care about world history.
