
OTHER TITLES

History

THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA: The White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912. By Thomas Pakenham. Random House. 738 pp. \$32

Africa during the last 100 years is history in fast motion. When the explorer Dr. David Livingstone died in 1873—the incident that opens this narrative—Europeans had established only a few colonies in Africa, including Mozambique and the Gold Coast. By 1912, the entire continent, apart from Liberia and Ethiopia, was in the hands of one European nation or another. In 50 years, those same European powers were gone—or would be soon.

Pakenham, author of the monumental *The Boer War* (1979), has written the first comprehensive account of the European whirlwind that twisted its way across Africa. But that is not the only distinction of his book. Early histories of Africa are mainly Eurocentric accounts based largely upon the records of diplomats and explorers who invaded a continent that, judged by their words, might as well have been unpopulated. More recent African historiography has attempted to recapture the experience of the Africans themselves. Pakenham combines both perspectives into a chronicle that reads with the narrative force of a novel.

But a novel without heroes, black or white. The Mahdi, a Muslim leader who drove the British from the Sudan in 1885, might have served as an African savior, but he initiated such a brutal slave trade that 15 years later, when the British reconquered the country, they were welcomed as liberators. As calamitous as the Mahdi's policies was the British decision to ensure their own control by partitioning the Sudan into north and south—a division that led to civil strife that persists to this day.

Whatever horrors they inflicted, the Europeans justified their presence by invoking the "3 C's"—the Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization that all claimed to advance. At times the

mask of benevolence fell. "I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake," King Leopold II of Belgium declared in 1876. Yet European colonization, if disastrous for the Africans, nearly wrecked Europe too: "By the end of the century," Pakenham writes, "the passions generated by the Scramble had helped to poison the political climate in Europe, brought Britain to the brink of a war with France, and [started a war] with the Boers . . . one of the most humiliating in British history."

A generation ago it was fashionable to denounce European colonialism in terms resembling Joseph Conrad's indictment: "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience." Pakenham here substitutes understanding for moral indignation, knowing that the worlds of the traditional Africans and of the confident European empire-builders are both gone forever. We live in a different world entirely, one in which last year—as no colonialist ever would have dreamed possible—all but one of the finalists for Britain's most prestigious literary prize were from former colonies. The winner was a Nigerian.

AZTECS. By Inga Clendinnen. Cambridge. 398 pp. \$29.95

When Hernando Cortés entered the great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1519, he was stunned by a practice that later perplexed students of this once-formidable empire. In the temple of the god Huitzilopochtli, human hearts smoldered in braziers, and a nauseating stench rose from the blood-stained floors and walls. Human sacrifices might have been commonplace in most advanced Mesoamerican societies, but nowhere else was ritual sacrifice combined with so aesthetic a culture and such fastidious social graces as among the Aztecs, "a people notable for a precisely ordered polity, a grave formality of manner, and a developed regard for beauty."