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Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. xii + 376 pp. Maps, plates, endnotes, and index. \$29.95 (cl). ISBN 978-0-23427-7.

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Readers beware: the first half of the title of Edward Berenson's excellent new book should not be read as a sign that this distinguished historian has somehow succumbed to hero worship. Rather, the "heroes of empire" in question refer to five individuals who were deemed so by their contemporaries because of the key roles these men played in promoting overseas colonies for either France or Britain in the "scramble for Africa" between the 1880s and 1914. As Berenson points out in his introduction, "Today we are justly skeptical of the heroism of such men, but in the late nineteenth century, most Europeans played down, denied, or ignored the violence that colonialism wrought, preferring to see our five exemplars of empire as extraordinary men" (p. 2). The pages that follow provide the first comparative history of the cult of colonial heroes in Britain and France, whose development was inseparable from the birth of the penny press, the upsurge of nationalism, and the crisis of masculinity all occurring in the fin de siècle. The heroes included are Henry Morton Stanley, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, Charles (Chinese) Gordon, Jean-Baptiste Marchand, and Hubert Lyautey. Overall, Berenson traces two major shifts in the kinds of heroes the public adored: in the 1880s it lionized the "peaceful conqueror," often viewed as a martyr to the colonizing mission. This image, however, lost ground to that of the violent "manly" hero in the 1890s as nationalism and fears of emasculation rose to a fever pitch. The post-Dreyfus, post-Fashoda Belle Epoque then returned to idolizing a more peaceful figure.

Berenson is careful at the outset to explain why these five colonial heroes deserve our attention. Inseparable from the age of conquest, they also gave imperialism "a recognizable, human face... that allowed citizens to understand overseas expansion as a series of extraordinary personal quests" (p. 2). For the public identifying with these quests, the outcome was not necessarily the most important element. In Berenson's grouping, only Lyautey won a territory for France. The rest failed to achieve their stated political goals: Stanley was legendary for the brutality of his African expeditions; Brazza could not stop the depredations of the concessionary companies in Equatorial Africa; Gordon died at Khartoum; and Marchand had to back down before Kitchener at Fashoda. Yet all five earned the "highest honors and created huge public enthusiasm," because they "braved the scarcely imaginable dangers of unknown places and 'savage' peoples" and revealed traits of character and personality widely admired in each society" (p. 3). These heroes, in short, achieved charisma in the Weberian sense: a public authority that was repeatedly validated by their followers who bonded emotionally with the hero, despite never in fact actually "knowing" him. Here Berenson also turns to recent work in cognitive psychology (Stephen Turner) and neuroscience (Jaak Panksepp) to offer a more fine-grained explanation than Weber's of the power of attraction exercised by his cast of adventurers: humans are wired to "seek," and the forays of courageous heroes willing to endure incredible pain and danger to bring "civilization" to the great unknown continent of Africa quite possibly triggered an intense and addictive vicarious thrill among their admirers—one that alleviated their fears about the future at a time of putative national decline.[1]

Hero worship in and of itself was, of course, not new in France and Britain, and Berenson believes that typical heroes in the past had been military ones. When an uneasy peace settled on Europe in the wake of 1870—making military heroes difficult to find—“heroic virtues” were then “rediscovered” among those exploring and conquering Asia, Oceania, and especially the continent closest to Europe but least familiar to it: Africa. The advent of literacy, cheap newspapers, new journalistic techniques such as interviews and illustrations, and the modern postal system quickly transformed hero worship into a mass phenomenon. In an era of universal male suffrage, heroes could and did erupt from the middling and lower ranks of society and appear to exemplify their nations. These men were more than celebrities; they had staying power due to their “charisma.” Hero worship and the ability of heroes themselves to manufacture to some degree their own fame, at a time when the reading public and policy makers alike were much less savvy about the media than today, provide a superb window into the popular culture of imperialism and prove beyond any doubt that British and French citizens alike cared deeply about their respective governments’ push into Africa in this period. Indeed, this emotional intersection between the new mass media and the “new imperialism” is at the heart of Berenson’s study. He has also unearthed hundreds of letters written by “ordinary citizens” to their idols, adding a rich new dimension to our understanding of even as familiar a figure as Stanley. Overall, this is an elegant synthesis of the more specialized literature on a critical phase of French and British imperialism in Africa, combined with a new analysis of the media and how to “read” it against the background of shifting gender norms, nation formation, and great power anxieties in the late Victorian era. The result is a great read, as well as an exemplary work of scholarship.

Heroes of Empire proceeds chronologically, tacking back and forth between Britain and France. Of seven chapters, two each are devoted to Stanley and Brazza, and one each to Gordon, Marchand and Lyautey. Chapter one explains the “uncannily secure place in our historical memory” of the phrase “Dr. Livingstone, I presume,” uttered on the shore of Lake Tanganyika in late October 1871 and soon disseminated to Europe and America (p. 27). This particular news-event marked the ascendancy of the world’s first mass medium, the industrially-produced penny press, whose new sensationalized reportage “focusing on individuals while eschewing political argument and debate... lay behind the eruption of charisma at the end of the nineteenth century” (p. 26). The Welsh-American Stanley was an overseas correspondent for the *New York Herald*, sent to Zanzibar to await Livingstone’s emergence from the African interior. Intuitively understanding the public’s new hunger for a spectacular version of reality, he decided instead to *go find* Livingstone, thus placing himself at the center of the events he was purporting to cover.[2] The vivid dispatches he eventually filed gave newspaper readers the thrilling sensation of being there with him as he opened this part of the world to “civilization,” even though his articles were published six months after the fact and suppressed the horrific human cost of his eight-month trek. Stanley instantly became a celebrity in France and America, but not yet a hero in Britain.

Berenson moves next to Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, an explorer associated with the new Third Republic’s nascent imperial turn. The son of a liberal Italian nobleman who had chosen French naturalization and a career in the French navy after the Franco-Prussian war, Brazza set out on a modestly funded mission in 1874 to explore the interior regions of Central Africa. No one in France took much notice of his departure; yet when he returned three and a half years later, he found a press war being waged between, on the one hand, U.S. and British newspapers celebrating Stanley’s 1875-1878 rival expedition down the entire length of the Congo River in the service of King Leopold and, on the other, French papers touting Brazza’s “pacific” methods against Stanley’s “villainous” ones. On his next trip to Africa, Brazza secured a treaty signed by the hereditary ruler of the Bateke people, which placed a huge swathe of Congolese territory under French control. Berenson’s point here is certainly not to champion Brazza’s diplomatic methods over Stanley’s more rapacious ones. Rather it is to show how the French press’s constant invocation of the saintly Brazza provided a recently defeated and still divided nation with “precisely the kind of hero [it] seemed to require... a fresh national hero who could bring together conservatives and republicans, Catholics and anticlericals, the nation and the republic” (p. 70). After 1882, Brazza became “one of the most visible personalities in France” (p. 72).

The example of Brazza suggests how much the debacle of 1870 shaped France's imperial culture of the 1880s; absent a comparable trauma, British hero worship was initially suffused with evangelical religiosity and a need for exemplary stories of individuals "whose piety and service to God and country invited others to follow their lead" (p. 116). No one better incarnated these qualities than Charles "Chinese" Gordon, a "peace-loving" military officer (like Brazza) sent to Khartoum in 1884 to rescue its besieged British inhabitants and secure the Sudan for Britain; he died instead a martyr in early 1885 at the hands of Muhammad Ahmad, a self-styled Muslim savior who had declared himself the Mahdi, or Expected Deliverer, in 1881. Gordon is an exemplar of the ability of fin-de-siècle men to become heroes even when they failed militarily because of the powerful new role assumed by the press. Ironically, his death would lead many Brits to call for revenge and help unleash a no-hold-barred escalation of imperial conquest. One of the first beneficiaries of this imperialist turn was none other than Stanley, thanks to yet another three-year journey in Africa that he began in 1887, ostensibly to "rescue" the German-born Emin Pasha then serving as governor of Egypt's Sudanese province of Equatoria. It was his most killing expedition to date, costing "hundreds, perhaps thousands of lives," as Stanley wound his way from the east coast of Africa around the Cape of Good Hope, up the Congo River, across the vast Ituri rain forest (which no European had yet explored) to Lake Albert and a final 1,200 mile trek to the coast. His account, *In Darkest Africa*, was rushed into print within two months and sold a stunning 150,000 copies within the first several weeks (p. 151). The result was not just ordinary hero worship, but a genuine Stanley craze that lasted a full ten months with a knighthood to follow. More than any other British political figure or intellectual proponent of empire, Stanley turned his compatriots toward Africa in the 1890s and exacerbated the rivalry with France that pushed both nations to the brink of war at Fashoda.

Berenson's final three chapters are devoted to France between 1899 and 1914, as imperialist fervor—and hero worship—reached ever greater heights, initially in the midst of the Dreyfus Affair. The return to France of the "hero martyr" Marchand, in that over-heated month of May 1899 after a humiliating showdown with Kitchener on the Upper Nile, actually "helped submerge the Dreyfus crisis beneath a thick layer of patriotic and fraternal consent" (p. 168). The Fashoda fiasco—much like the defeat at Sedan—was soon interpreted as a moral victory for France "and the first stage in the inevitable triumph to come" (p. 167). This cathartic message not only united the country again, but paved the way for the first real consensus across the political spectrum in favor of colonialism. Yet with growing consensus also came greater scrutiny, from within and without, of colonial abuses by those who believed seriously in France's overseas mission—and a press ready to cover whatever topic sold. When in 1905 three French administrators in Central Africa blew up a young African with dynamite for the fun of it, the government reluctantly called the charismatic Brazza out of semi-retirement to lead the investigation. A genuine reformer, Brazza died on the trip home from Africa to Paris, and his damning report with him. He would undergo a kind of "secular beatification" at his massive funeral in Paris as one of France's truly great "civilizers," but brutal methods remained the norm in the French Congo. Nevertheless something of the tradition of "pacific conqueror" lived on in Berenson's last hero, the socially conservative Resident General of Morocco (as of 1912) Hubert Lyautey and the only man of letters of the cohort: he corresponded with no fewer than a thousand people and became a member of the French Academy (p. 258). With the threat of war with Germany looming, Lyautey's campaign in North Africa produced a virtual "Morocco Mania" in France, as the worried public rallied to the "heroic" victories of this simultaneously elegant and erudite general — a man who embodied the "essential qualities of Frenchness itself" (p. 262).

This summary does not do justice to the richness and breadth of Berenson's research, conceptual framework, and vividly told tales. His seamless narrative makes clear how interconnected the careers and lives of these men were and how transnational the culture of colonial hero worship became in the fin de siècle. Berenson is particularly good at recapturing what it was like to live in the first age of mass journalism, and his close reading of the letters sent to Lyautey and Stanley as well as of the media

trumpeting these men proves that a worshipful public really did exist in this period. Charismatic colonial heroes and their backers in the media did deep “emotional work” in an age of ideological fracture, growing bureaucratization, and fears of degeneration, helping “questing” citizens in Britain and France to view a faraway empire as their own. Berenson thus innovatively moves discussions of the French and British sense of mission in Africa into a different register than that analyzed previously by historians—that of feelings rather than culture or ideology or of practices in Africa itself. He sees this malleable and gendered civilizational discourse as particularly sensitive to metropolitan political shifts: how and why individuals became charismatic heroes often had less to do with their always violent behavior as imperialists or the particular conditions they met with in the colonies, than with the dominant trends in their respective metropolises. In this context, Berenson might be interested in the recent findings of the American historian Randy Roth, who has argued that “the best predictor of increases and declines in America’s homicide rate has been the percentage of new counties named for national heroes...the homicide rate was lowest in the 1820s and 1830s, when the proportion of new counties named for American heroes reached its peak.”[3] One of the many strengths of Berenson’s stimulating book is to remind readers that in the case of late nineteenth-century Britain and France, the growth of patriotic sentiment was most certainly mediated by the meteoric rise of virile and ostensibly humanitarian “colonial heroes” whom both the press and the crowds came to adore. To what degree this escalating hero worship between the 1880s and 1914 postponed (pace Roth) or made possible the intra-European slaughter of the Great War remains an interesting question for others to explore.

NOTES

[1] Stephen Turner, “Charisma and Obedience: A Risk Cognition Approach,” *Leadership Quarterly* 4, nos. 3-4 (1993): 237-40 and “Charisma Reconsidered,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 3, no. 1 (2003), 6; Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

[2] On this point, see Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)

[3] Randolph Roth, *American Homicide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 22.

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