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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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A generation ago a book with this title would have connoted the adventures of five “dead white men” with little relevance to issues of race, gender, or popular culture. But in the hands of Edward Berenson, the lives of these heroes tap deeply into and reflect widespread fin-de-siècle *mentalitiés* that underlay colonial expansion. First and foremost, *Heroes of Empire* challenges the long-held though clearly outdated notion that ordinary citizens in Great Britain and France (especially the latter) did not care about or give much thought to the imperial conquest of Africa. Indeed, as Berenson deftly shows in this engaging and important work, these charismatic men not only increased the popular appeal of colonialism, but at times turned it into a frenzy.

How these individuals came to have so much power over the public imagination is the primary subject of this multi-layered book. Berenson convincingly demonstrates that the new journalism of the 1880s in the form of the “penny press” spread the popular culture of imperialism by informing millions of readers about the heroic exploits of individual adventurers. Following an introductory chapter that establishes a theoretical context for the book, each of the seven subsequent chapters is devoted to one of the five “heroes,” their treatment by the press, and the impact of the press on popular imagination and government policy.

The book begins with Henry Morton Stanley, not only because he was the first to achieve fame, but also because he helped create the new journalism that fostered celebrity. Stanley’s account of his own experience represented a new emotional and sensationalist reportage style that developed in the United States and was then rapidly adopted in France and Britain. The *New York Herald*, which employed Stanley and was a pioneer in this new journalism, along with the *London Daily Telegraph*, financed Stanley’s three-year adventure down the Congo River and regularly published the vivid accounts of his adventures.

While the traditional press across the Atlantic found Stanley’s journalistic style suspect, it gained wide appeal among the middle and lower classes in both cities and the countryside as a result of, Berenson argues, the democratic processes by which the public increasingly participated in schooling, the army, politics, and national culture. Through the new type of press, journalists such as Stanley created “heroes of empire” that captured the imaginations of millions and garnered mass support for colonial projects, particularly under the rubric of the “civilizing mission.” But the receptivity of the public to narratives about African exploration and the appeal of colonialism in both Great Britain and France also largely had to do with the respective national sentiments of decline and degeneration, particularly in the form of a “crisis of masculinity.” Berenson further grounds his argument in social and psychological theories regarding charisma.

The early years of the French Third Republic, particularly in the wake of military defeat, left France in want of “great men and great deeds”(p. 51). Henry Morton Stanley’s narratives “dazzled” French journalists and inspired them to provide France with a much-needed charismatic figure who could unify the diverse political elements in French society. Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza filled that role through his explorations of central Africa. French journalists represented Brazza as the opposite of Stanley. The latter had become known for his arrogance, ignorance of native culture, mercenary motivations, and brutal methods of conquest. Brazza used a much more peaceful approach. He sought to extend French colonial power for the benefit of the nation and, particularly, to restore national prestige. Brazza also hoped that colonial expansion would at once challenge British hegemony in Africa and demonstrate French superiority, especially in its mission to civilize rather than merely to conquer. Unlike Stanley, Brazza used a humanitarian approach to extend French influence, and he acquired knowledge of local language and culture.

By the 1880s, the entire French press supported Brazza, making him into a hero, martyr, and “secular saint.” He was first celebrated for managing to get the Makoko to sign a document relinquishing hereditary rights and implicitly ceding territory to France and then as a martyr for having suffered illnesses and injuries on France’s behalf. Engravings, woodcuts, and photographs of Brazza were central elements to the media creation of his persona, which Berenson analyzes in some detail. Some of the images portrayed him as a Christ-like figure, barefoot and dressed in rags. Clearly intending to be erotic, one drawing published in *L’Illustration* showed Brazza with bare-breasted native women bowing before him; a photograph had him flanked by two African boys wearing naval uniforms. In addition, thousands of people viewed his wax figure with a young boy in a pacific native setting at the Musée Grevin. The press made Brazza into such a charismatic figure that 10,000 people attended his speech at the Sorbonne in 1882, and when he was planning his third expedition in 1883, he received fifteen thousand applications from men wanting to join him. Berenson’s evidence brings him to the important conclusion that Brazza’s “personal qualities formed the core of what attracted his compatriots to Africa. His charisma outweighed the lure of any particular imperial project defined in traditional political and economic terms.” And more importantly, “France’s political leaders had to take Brazza’s image and popularity into account in policy discussions and negotiations over African lands”(p. 81).

The same process of celebrity-building and hero worship occurred in Great Britain with the “Imperial Saint” Charles Gordon; in this case, the power of the press in shaping perceived reality is even clearer because Gordon was reclusive and tried to avoid press attention. Also embracing a civilizing mission, he too was portrayed as Christ-like, especially since genuine religious zeal and a desire to block the slave trade motivated him. But Gordon came up against the Mahdist movement that sought to instate a pure form of Islam and create an independent Islamic state. Mahdists took over territory Gordon had governed and threatened British rule in Egypt and the Sudan. The British government initially refused to intervene. But as Berenson shows, the press waged a campaign to make Gordon the “savior” of the Sudan. The government’s ultimate decision to send him to Africa is “incomprehensible” given the odds against his success and can best be explained by “the mass enthusiasm of hero worship of and magical thinking about Gordon” (p. 105) that affected government officials just as it had millions of ordinary people. In the wake of his 1885 murder by the Mahdists, the “hero industry” produced biographies (more than 70), statues, paintings, and panoramic scenes in Madame Tussaud’s Wax Museum, all making him, like Brazza, into a martyr and secular saint. Eulogies and visual imagery emphasized Gordon’s spiritual, pacific, and religious qualities in the face of Islamic violence. His death and the British defeat in the Sudan had two other important consequences. First, they changed the imperial project from one of peaceful, civilizing conquest into a struggle between “civilization” and “barbarism” that required violence on the part of the “civilized.” Second, they justified British re-conquest of the Sudan, which the French, in the meantime, considered unclaimed territory.

Growing tensions between France and Britain might explain the somewhat paradoxical response to the most famous mission that followed Gordon’s death: the 1886-89 Emin Pasha Relief Expedition led by

Henry Morton Stanley. Although the expedition was a complete failure, and the enormous human toll from acts of violence and cruelty received plenty of press attention, it nonetheless bolstered Stanley's charisma. The press condemned his brutality, but British commentators made him out to be a hero precisely because, Berenson argues, the country had a collective psychological need for such heroism. The more the press covered Stanley and the crowds he drew, the more popular he became. The 1890 publication of his book, *In Darkest Africa*, contributed much to the "Stanley Craze" and to the extension of his persona as "hero" into one of "celebrity." The latter, Berenson points out, is "an invention of the modern world, and in particular, of the press," and it "diverts attention away from [individuals'] accomplishments and toward their personalities and personal lives" (p. 161). So great was Stanley's celebrity that it withstood the scandal resulting from the publication of two books denouncing the accuracy of his own account of the expedition and blaming him for the loss of hundreds of lives. The scandal that ensued did not prevent him from getting elected to Parliament and knighted by the Queen. Berenson concludes that Victorians were "far more drawn to him than repelled by his violent methods and disregard for African lives" (p. 164).

The apparent desensitization to colonial violence is, I think, an important thread in this book, and one to which I will return below. The significant focus in Berenson's analysis of Stanley is the assertion that his journalistic-driven fame, like that of Gordon, had a direct effect on British colonial policy by focusing attention on competition with France, which in turn set the stage for the Fashoda Incident and the emergence of its hero, Jean-Baptiste Marchand. Marchand had first earned renown in the early 1890s for a successful exploratory mission to the Ivory Coast, and by the end of the decade, images of his particularly masculine face with its strong chin "would be everywhere" (p. 174). Marchand's celebrity coincided with the Dreyfus Affair. So great was his popularity, Berenson argues, it at once counter-acted the Affair's divisiveness and diverted attention from it. As in the cases of Gordon and Stanley, Marchand's popularity also lent unwarranted credibility to his unrealistic plan to challenge Britain's supremacy in Egypt. With Britain's extension of economic control over Egypt in 1882, Anglophobia gradually replaced Germanophobia among the French, and by the 1890s even the left wing, under the "civilizing mission" rubric, supported anti-British colonial policy. The Chamber of Deputies' decision to finance Marchand's expedition to secure the area around Fashoda was based not on practical or strategic grounds, but on a set of "cultural representations that seemed to shield France from the prospect of defeat" (p. 178). When the British threatened war over their claim to the upper Nile, the French had to back down.

As the first significant European crisis to be covered by the mass press, the Fashoda Incident is of particular relevance to the argument of this book. Berenson stresses the extent to which officials in both France and Great Britain feared that the press "resembled a force of nature beyond their control" and that it had the power to "push them into an unnecessary war" (p. 182). The tone of these newspapers also changed; they personalized complex issues and presented them in simplistic terms. The French press also succeeded in converting Marchand's failure into a "victory" by focusing on his heroism, thereby garnering support for colonial expansion from across the political spectrum.

As in Great Britain, the profound commitment to African colonization in France weathered reports of abuses and violence, some of which were as serious as King Leopold II's notorious atrocities in the Congo.[1] Berenson devotes a chapter to an investigation of abuses that was led by Brazza, one of the few heroes who had a genuine moral sense about colonial conquest. Brazza extensively documented atrocities in the French colonial system, but politicians ironically used his heroic image as a self-sacrificing explorer and patriot to downplay the reports. Most journalists did the same, by portraying the colonial project as "noble and good" (p. 227). According to their narrative, the French had sacrificed themselves in order to liberate natives, but the latter, impervious to the civilizing mission, received blame for the documented cruelties.

Public support for French colonialism continued, moreover, to depend on the perception of a “peaceful” and “civilized conquest,” as demonstrated through Hubert Lyautey’s extension of French rule over Morocco. Lyautey believed that military intervention should be limited; the army would provide the basis for economic development and for a civilized infrastructure (telegraph, roads, medical care), which would in turn extend French rule gradually. His vision of conquest consisted of using the indigenous ruling class to maintain in the colonies the traditional social hierarchy French republicanism had overthrown at home. Although Berenson does not emphasize the point, it is noteworthy that Lyautey’s goals, formulated in the context of his “own royalist and aristocratic culture” (p. 231) present a clear case in which “civilizing” the colonized deliberately excluded the fundamental human rights upon which French universalism depended. His system justified violence by requiring “that indigenous people act in what he understood to be their best interests. When they behaved otherwise, the French were morally obliged to prepare them for civilized life . . . forcing people at gunpoint to accept the ‘benign protectorate’ he would have preferred to impose in peace”(p. 236-7).

Initially successful in gaining “peaceful” penetration into Morocco, Lyautey’s vision could not work in the long term given the complex divisions among Moroccans and native resentment against increasing numbers of French settlers. Several vicious attacks occurred against the latter, the most brutal of which was the widely-publicized murder of medical missionary Emile Mauchamp. This incident fueled press descriptions of Muslim barbarity that included imagery of armed savages attacking a helpless white man, similar to the portrayals of Gordon’s 1885 murder at Khartoum. Once again the lack of gratitude on the part of the colonized justified not only further intervention, but the violent conquest that ensued. Berenson uses poignant quotations and images to show how the press made Lyautey into a hero who avenged Mauchamp and used the military for “wholly pacific pursuits” (p. 246). These portrayals not only assured widespread support for the colonial project, but as renewed tension with Germany grew, the tales of Lyautey’s and his soldiers’ bravery helped mentally prepare the public for the much larger conflict that would come in 1914.

Collectively, the stories of how these heroes were made demonstrate not simply the power of the press, but the willingness of the reading populations and governments to support colonial conquest even when it was based on delusion and resulted in violence. The explanation for how and why these heroes rose and were embraced by crowds across the political spectrum is based on several analytical frameworks. Berenson begins his book with an analysis of Weber’s concept of charisma, which failed to explain the emotional connection ordinary people feel with those they deem extraordinary. To deepen our understanding of why Europeans would be attracted to colonial adventurers, Berenson uses the theories of cognitive psychologist Stephen Turner and neuroscientist Jaak Panseep to suggest that courageous individuals appealed to the “seeking emotions” component of four “command systems” common to all mammals.[2] Because “seeking” inhibits fear, the heroic feats of these five heroes and the ability to identify with them vicariously had a particular emotional appeal at a time when the French and British harbored deep fears of national decline and degeneration; the “need to seek” coincided with the ability of the mass press to offer vivid narratives of heroic adventures. Berenson agrees that the theory is unprovable in this particular context, but it makes a great deal of sense in his overall framework and is very suggestive.

A component of the prevailing sense of national decline in both countries was a “crisis of masculinity” that serves as a subtext and analytical framework throughout the book, and which helps explain why adventurers would become heroes. A large number of works from which Berenson draws has given this crisis an almost canon-like status in the way historians have understood the *fin de siècle*. [3] Urbanization, the decline of physical labor, the rise of consumer culture, the expansion of bureaucracy, a general absence of war after 1815 depriving men the opportunity to demonstrate acts of bravery, and the emancipation of women all “conspired” to compromise virility. Berenson’s charismatic men “embodied the era’s ideal of manliness, defined as the ability to persist against all odds, to confront physical danger and the perils of the unknown, and to combine strength and fortitude with kindness

toward women, 'natives,' and others needing gentle guidance backed by a firm, steady hand" (p. 10). Each chapter returns to this theme with explicit examples.

The crisis of masculinity, as Berenson points out, existed in the cultural imaginary. His purpose here is not to problematize this phenomenon, but rather to use it as an explanatory device, and he does so convincingly. At the same time, his use of the crisis points to some ironies and paradoxes worthy of further scrutiny. Many of these figures, in their life stories and in media portrayals, appear to be rather "unmanly"—unless the concept of masculinity did not necessarily include heterosexual relations. Henry Morton Stanley appeared uninterested in and even fearful women, but manifested "ample indications of his interest in men and especially boys" (p. 153). Brazza's charisma depended not on any particular bravery, but rather on a Christ-like pacifism, particularly in the images that portrayed him. Similarly, Gordon's power was "magical" rather than masculine—he purportedly used only a cane as a weapon; the *London News* presented him as "simple-minded, God-fearing man, who combines dauntless courage with womanly tenderness . . ." (p. 103). In France, Lyautey, who followed Marchand in the French colonial imagination, drew "incessant attention" of a positive nature to his more effeminate body, "tall, sharp, svelte," and Berenson devotes several paragraphs to evidence from biographers who claimed that Lyautey had a sexual preference for men and that he apparently never slept with the woman he married at age fifty-five. Indeed, his particular version of manliness reverted back to its aristocratic definition, one that enhanced an unaggressive form of virility, which, Berenson suggests, better served France's delicate relations with Germany at the time. He interprets the "incessant attention" to Lyautey's body as an effort on the part of the press "to understand manhood in new and reassuring ways, to feature men both powerful and unthreatening all at once" (p. 246). Whether in crisis or not, the masculinities presented here appear nuanced and multiple; the heroic men celebrated for their apparent ability to bring their respective nations out of decline seem to be escaping the bourgeois definition of masculinity that required domesticity and reproduction, as well as escaping the other by-product of nineteenth-century domesticity, the "real woman" (the unemancipated bourgeois wife and mother).

Berenson points out that it was only in the 1890s that "military strength and manly virtues became dominant themes on both sides of the Channel" (p. 204). Beyond the increased connection between military force and masculinity, it would be hard to think of colonial violence as manifesting "manly virtue." This point leads to a related issue worthy of further reflection: the acceptance of atrocities against native populations despite the moral outrage on the part of some who protested. Because of the recurrent emphasis on public support for colonialism depending on a pacific civilizing mission, the apparent de-sensitization among the French and British to violence in the colonies is not among the explicit unifying themes of this book—but it is one that clearly emerges.

One obvious explanation for Europeans' ability to turn a blind eye to atrocities is the degree to which native populations had been objectified. On this point I would like to suggest that Berenson might have taken his argument about the power of media, and in particular, imagery, even further. As noted in the book's introduction, imagery of empire "saturated" Britain and France. How can we understand images from the perspective of both producers' intentions and viewers' interpretations of them? One of the most powerful images in the book, "Congolese women bowing before Brazza" (p. 67), portrays native men clad in sailor garb as well as women with prominently bare female breasts. What precisely did the artist and Brazza wish to convey? Did images in various media stand alone? Did commentary accompany them, or did they simply serve to illustrate narratives? What was the intent behind the images of Brazza with young boys, and was there any indication of who they were and the nature of Brazza's relationship with them? Were portraits such as these taken in authentic natural settings or taken in studios with props and costumes?

Most of the imagery presented in this book that included indigenous people appears to fall into two categories: pacific scenes of docile natives with European men, or out-of-control armed native men attacking innocent Europeans. The former include children, eroticized women, and compliant (if not

effeminate) adult men. Certainly the images in the pacific category, such as portraits of the heroes with young boys, did little to convey anything authentic about natives; indeed many were probably photos (or images based on photos) taken in studios with artificial settings.[4] A wide distribution of these images (in addition to similar portrayals in wax museums and exhibits at international expositions) conveying a fictionalized version of indigenous culture helped mask the realities that lay beneath simplistic narratives. The inauthentic and self-serving portrayals of natives probably helped make subsequent “ingratitude” and visual portrayals of violence on their part all the more shocking as well as confusing to Europeans—as though the pet-like creatures they were civilizing inexplicably became vicious.

Among the great strengths of this book in its argument, methodology, and evidence is the comparison between France and Britain. Their similarities implicitly raise a host of questions about Germany, an empire that in so many ways was on a trajectory opposite that of France and Britain. Did German masculinity, imagined or real, differ markedly from the British and French versions? Did German imperialism serve a different function in national identity? Isabel Hull’s work on German military culture from 1870-1918 suggests stark differences that are worth exploring along the lines that Berenson has set out here.[5]

These are only a few of the issues that *Heroes of Empire* raises for further reflection. Apart from its insightful contribution to our understanding of the mentalities behind the colonizing process, this book clearly establishes the power that the mass press developed in the late nineteenth century to respond to collective psychological needs and to influence important policy decisions—in short, to shape reality for readers and influence the course of history in unprecedented ways. The implications for mass media in our own day, as well as for the current imperialistic “civilizing” mission that persists in new manifestations, are provocative and should inspire rich discussion and further research. This beautifully written book is a compelling read that will find a wide audience.

NOTES

[1] Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold’s Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

[2] Stephan Turner, “Charisma and Obedience: A Risk Cognition Approach,” *Leadership Quarterly* 4, nos. 3-4 (1993) 237-40; Turner, “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).

[3] Among the works Berenson cites are Annelise Mauge, *L’identité masculine en crise au tournant du siècle, 1871-1914* (Paris: Editions Rivages, 1987); Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990); Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[4] Many of Stanley’s self-promotional photos appear to have been taken in studios. See, for example, http://libweb5.princeton.edu/visual_materials/maps/websites/africa/stanley/stanley-portrait2.jpg The young boy in several photos with Stanley was a slave he adopted who accompanied him to the U.S. where the photos were apparently taken in New York. See <http://www.picturehistory.com/product/id/24347> For a poignant example of inauthentic, eroticized, and misleading photographs of Algerian women in the early twentieth century, see Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

[5] Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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