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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.

Review by Robert Nye

In this very readable study of the principal “heroes” of late nineteenth-century French and British imperialism, Edward Berenson seeks to move beyond the usual ways historians have written about European imperial expansion. He does not neglect the economic, politico-military, or powerful cultural motives that inspired the “scramble for Africa,” but he also examines afresh the process by which French and British colonial explorers and military men came to both create and embody the expectations of popular and official opinion and, therefore, to transcend the political conflicts that had produced stalemate in both countries on a range of domestic issues, of which the wisdom of imperial adventures was one among many. The five men he has chosen to study were not the only “heroes” of empire from this period, but their careers as leaders and explorers were so well-publicized that their personal qualities and characters became inseparable from their accomplishments (and failures) and thus seemed to represent the nature of the imperial mission itself.

His five paladins of empire are Henry Morton Stanley, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, Charles “Chinese” Gordon, Jean-Baptiste Marchand, and Hubert Lyautey. Their imperial triumphs were accomplished in the era of relative continental peace when European rivalries were played out in unconventional forms of conquest and domination in Africa where what was at stake often seemed more symbolic than a direct expression of national interest. But it is Berenson’s point that the symbolism of these heroic exploits performed important cultural work in unifying national publics otherwise split between capital and labor, individual rights and the state, and, in France, the turmoil of church-state relations and the Dreyfus Affair. None of this could have been accomplished, however, without the popular press with its growing power to influence and echo opinion in an era when literacy was finally nearing universality. The true heroes of this book are the mass market (penny) newspaper and the new journalistic style invented in the United States in which putatively “objective” narrative accounts of the events of the day drew from techniques of contemporary fiction and put the journalist himself at the center of the drama. One of the first practitioners of this form of journalism was none other than Henry Morton Stanley, whose daring 1870-71 trip to “find” the Scottish explorer David Livingstone on the shores of Lake Tanganyika in the service of the *New York Herald* produced the immortal, if possibly apocryphal, words “Dr. Livingstone, I presume.”

Stanley was the only journalist of the five, but, with the possible exception of Marchand, they all proved to be canny in matters of publicity, permitting themselves to be stage-managed by their respective colonial lobbies or writing and speaking on behalf of their visions of the imperial cause. Berenson tracks each man through his African ordeals with equal attention to both the hardships of the treks and the geo-political stakes of their success or failure. He then reconstructs the way that the story and meaning of each expedition was related to the general public through contemporary press dispatches, letters, official reports, or memoirs. These accounts invariably reached the public well after the events they described, but what they may have lacked in immediacy, they gained in power from the persistent focus

of the mass press, which kept the stories alive in the absence of new information, and from the self-serving accounts of the explorers or their acolytes, who shamelessly dramatized the expeditions.

What Berenson found in these adulatory discourses was a quasi-religious celebration of the extraordinary personal qualities of these men, their courage and endurance to be sure, but also their willingness to sacrifice themselves for a higher goal, variously portrayed as humane quest, *mission civilatrice*, exploration, pacification, or some other noble motive. Stanley's two best-publicized expeditions, for example, were officially "rescue" operations, the first of David Livingstone, who didn't need rescuing, and the second the so-called Emin Pasha Relief Expedition (1887-89), which had far grander imperial motives than saving an essentially powerless potentate. Despite his widespread use of force and threat, the huge casualties suffered by the expedition, and his well-known mercenary connections to the brutal colonial regime of King Leopold II of Belgium, Stanley was feted as a hero on his return to Britain, honored by royalty, and praised as a superhuman exemplar of the Anglo-Saxon race. In a similar fashion, the British press so lionized the career army officer Charles George "Chinese" Gordon for his earlier exploits helping to suppress the Taiping Rebellion that they were able to convince a reluctant Prime Minister Gladstone to send him to Khartoum in 1884 to "defend" it against an attack on British interests in the Sudan by the Islamic "Mahdi" and his followers. When Gordon perished in the effort in 1885, his self-effacing and deeply religious nature was magnified to a kind of Christian martyrdom in the service of the Queen by the British penny press, which had by that point happily discovered the great appeal of the imperial quest and its fallen heroes.

French explorer-soldiers benefited from similar treatment by a mass market press that had built its circulation on crime, sex, and scandal and boasted circulations in the 1880s that dwarfed those of British tabloids. Copies of *Petit Parisien* sent by fast train in the late evening could be read by the citizens of Bordeaux with their morning coffee. The tabloids were less politically partisan, more unabashedly nationalistic, and more interested in stories of everyday life than the political broadsheets that had preceded them. Berenson argues that the French press was particularly fascinated by imperial missions that appeared to favor pacific methods, whose leaders opposed the slave trade, engaged in negotiations in preference to armed force (though violence was always an option), and who seemed to be spreading the fruits of French civilization to benighted Africans. Chastened by the defeat of 1870, and occasionally appalled by the rougher methods of their imperial rival Britain, the French only gradually warmed to the benefits of an empire that could restore some of its tarnished glory and bring welcome profits from trade. But when they did there was a remarkable consensus, which Berenson exhaustively documents, that colonies be obtained on the "dark continent" honorably and as bloodlessly as possible.

Enter Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, an Italian-born French naval officer, who in the course of two expeditions in the Congo between 1877 and 1882 laid the foundations for France's equatorial empire by means of relatively peaceful, if somewhat duplicitous, negotiations with native chiefs. Informal in dress, modest in manner, and by all accounts kind and gracious to the Africans he encountered, de Brazza was characterized in the press as the anti-Stanley, a tough but spiritual "pacific conqueror" who embodied the virile courage of the explorer and the feminine graces of France's refined civilization. Contemporary iconography of de Brazza represented him as a kind of "apostle of empire," and Berenson has unearthed "fan" letters to him written by ordinary French men and women that confirm this image of the explorer. This publicity essentially readied de Brazza for imperial martyrdom in 1905 when he died while on a fact-finding commission to Congo to determine if colonial authorities there were treating natives in ways that belied France's peaceful civilizing mission, a simply astonishing episode that Berenson describes with sympathy and verve.

Captain Jean-Baptiste Marchand's ill-fated expedition to the headwaters of the Nile in 1898 ended with his withdrawal in the face of a superior British force, but as in his earlier examples, Berenson carefully follows the publicity given to the Fashoda incident that turned defeat into a moral victory and Marchand into a "martyr-hero" whose masculine appearance and resolve later made him attractive to

anti-Dreyfusards hoping for a bolder, more virile General Boulanger. Indeed, a piece in *La Libre Parole* suggested that Marchand represented, in Berenson's paraphrase, the "real France" "martyred to a false France" [the Republic] (p. 191). As in the portrayal of de Brazza, Marchand's "peaceful" expedition was contrasted with Britain's more violent defense of Egyptian territory. The chapter on Hubert Lyautey makes similar points. By the turn of the century, the preference of France for the "peaceful method" in colonial affairs had become axiomatic in political and journalistic discourse, if not in reality, and in the course of helping establish a French Protectorate in Morocco, Lyautey's frequent resort to military force was read as exceptional rather than the norm. In countless letters to a host of correspondents, Lyautey promoted himself as a cultivated man of letters, an aristocrat in the service of his nation, if not the Republic, but also as a resolute man of action. Berenson notes the practically fanatical attention paid by journalists to Lyautey's physical person, usually described as a mixture of graceful yet tautly masculine features, the preferred combination of gendered qualities in a peaceful conqueror.

Berenson's attention to the details of the canonization of imperial heroes pays great dividends. He likens this process to the attribution of charismatic power to individuals who have accomplished something that appears, if not miraculous, at least extraordinary by common measure. By the standards of the late nineteenth century, the harrowing ordeals and iron will of the men who explored unknown Africa qualified them for such attributions, and this power gave them in turn some influence over subsequent events. However, I think Berenson's use of Max Weber's concept of charisma, which Weber developed in the same era that these colonial exploits took place, is at least debatable in these cases, with due acknowledgement of the term's imprecision. Berenson is right to point out that none of these men were mere celebrities in our modern sense of media-created fame; they earned their hard-won reputations by enduring hardship and conducting themselves with grace in exotic and extreme circumstances. But for all the adulation they received, they do not seem to have been regarded as embodying the divine qualities for which Weber's example of the leaders of the early Christian church is the classic instantiation and which ought to have fitted our heroes for a kind of revolutionary leadership that none of them, in the event, chose to exercise. Stanley alone meets Weber's criterion that charismatic leaders do not possess an office or an occupation and have not acquired "expert knowledge" or "serve for remuneration" but are "natural leaders" who respond to "distress."<sup>[1]</sup> The others were career military men, and even Stanley had the official imprimatur of government in his last expedition.

But this is to quibble. Berenson duly notes the ways contemporaries obsessed about the personas of these men, and he faithfully quotes their fulsome panegyrics, but he is chiefly concerned with providing an explanation for the psychic needs that were fulfilled by their exploits. As Weber's biographer Fritz Ringer has written, "Thus it may be as important to understand the 'extraordinary situation' to which the charismatic leader responds--and the psychology of those in need--as it is to comprehend the extraordinary qualities they recognize in him."<sup>[2]</sup> The explorer hero was a new kind of man whose exotic exploits encouraged emotional identification in men (and women) for whom the conventional male had become a thoroughly domesticated family man, devoted to consumption, made secure, if not docile, by the diminution of violence in modern life, and further softened by the long period of European peace. For men also threatened by the political and legal demands of suffragettes and feminists, the explorer-hero served as a compensatory ideal in which they could see men as they once were and men as they might become under the tonic effects of imperial competition. However, as Berenson argues, these men also performed a symbolic function that stimulated the formation of collective identifications, transforming the image of the nation itself into a synthesis of its heroic past (Roland, Jeanne d'Arc, Vercingétorix, Napoléon) and its adventuresome present.<sup>[3]</sup>

In this connection, Berenson notes the musings of the social psychologist Gabriel Tarde on the power of newspapers to create ideas that could be simultaneously held by readers of a mass press speaking with one voice on issues of national interest. Tarde was not alone in speculating on the nature of public opinion. Gustave LeBon and many other social scientists of the era considered the ways that a collective or crowd mind could be produced by the concentrated force of information. Many employed the

metaphor of hypnosis and tried to explain instances of collective behavior by reference to notions like “suggestion,” “imitation,” or “prestige.” On the whole these men were deeply wary of such phenomena, fearing the submersion of individual reason within the collective will, but they made regular exception for declarations of national and patriotic zeal, to which imperial hero worship inevitably gave rise.[4]

Berenson ends his book with a poignant “where are they now?” epilogue that traces the fortunes, charismatic and otherwise, of the historical reputations of these five men. One wishes all histories ended this way, instead of relegating historiographical observations to the endnotes. The celebrity of these imperial heroes waxed and waned with the fortunes of empire itself, but in our post-colonial world, critical treatments of explorers have prevailed over positive ones, since we now assess the human and environmental toll of their actions by wholly different standards. The only one of the five whose name has not been erased from the modern maps of Africa, indeed, for whom monuments are still being raised and not dismantled, is de Brazza. Berenson convincingly explains how the memory of his deeds and character has allowed him to be recalled by Africans themselves with gratitude and affection, notwithstanding the fact that these memories are largely reworked versions of the tales of de Brazza’s heroism and African martyrdom constructed in the years after his death.

Edward Berenson has provided in this fascinating book a model for thinking about how heroic reputations were made by the modern mass press with the willing collaboration of the heroes themselves, and how the images and narratives that emerged from this process attained the power to influence events by moving the individual and collective feelings of those who consumed them. This model perfectly fits the period between 1870 and 1914. By the 1920s and through the first half of the twentieth-century, the celebrity-making magic of the new media of film and radio and illustrated magazines altered the landscape for the creation of reputations, though the mass press still dominated the flow of information. All that is finished. Now, a virtual celebrity is open to us all, and there is no need to endure malaria, dysentery, hostile natives, or steamy jungles.

## NOTES

[1] S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Max Weber: On Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 18-19.

[2] Fritz Ringer, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 187.

[3] See on this matter and heroism generally, Venita Datta, *Heroes and Legends of Fin-de-Siècle France: Gender, Politics and National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[4] See Jaap van Ginneken, *Crowds, Psychology, and Politics, 1871-1899* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

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