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Robert Aldrich, *Banished Potentates: Dethroning and Exiling Indigenous Monarchs Under British and French Colonial Rule, 1815-1955*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. 329 pp. Figures, bibliography, index. £ 66.67 (hb). ISBN 9780719099731.

Review by Berny Sèbe, University of Birmingham.

Empires hardly ever expanded into completely empty spaces: human beings lived in most territories annexed by the powers of the moment, and with these indigenous populations came versions of local political organisation demonstrating varying levels of sophistication. Pre-existing forms of power had to be absorbed, re-shaped or overcome to create the conditions that would be propitious to the graft of the colonial state. This was a crucial moment in the development of any new colony, as it posed the basis on which the future polity would grow. Yet, the existing historiography has scarcely paid any attention to the actual processes that led to the demise of existing forms of indigenous power, and their replacement with authority imported from the colonial metropole.

With *Banished Potentates*, Robert Aldrich addresses this blind spot: through a series of carefully selected case-studies involving the British and French empires in Africa, Madagascar and Asia, he documents the strategies implemented by Western European powers when they sought to decapitate local power. The perspective is deliberately *longue durée*, covering almost a century and a half, which allows the volume to cover the period from the Napoleonic wars up until decolonisation.

Because of the sheer number of indigenous leaders deposed over these 150 years, the book offers its readers a sort of whistle-stop, round-the-world tour of the British and French empires. After an introductory chapter where the author sets out very convincingly the intellectual ambitions of the project, and the traditions it draws upon (from the “new imperial history” to the historiography around the study of royalty), the opening case-study examines the removal of the King of Ceylon, Sri Vikrama Rajasinha, by the British authorities in 1815. The next two chapters stay in Asia, with cases of “royal exile in British Asia” examined in chapter three, and several examples drawn from the French conquest of Indochina in the subsequent chapter. The part of the book on the British in Asia is remarkably wide-ranging, both chronologically and geographically: it encompasses not only India (where the long survival of the princely states increased the chances of princely removals being undertaken), but also Burma and Malaysia; and it covers the period of the East India Company as well as that of direct administration from London by the India Office following the 1858 Government of India Act. The book subsequently moves to Africa, where British and French relations with African monarchs are studied together,

in the only entirely comparative chapter of the volume, giving rise to the thought-provoking concept of “African Napoléons,” which probably found a perfect embodiment in the figure of the heir to the Zulu kingdom, Dinuzulu kaCetshwayo, who was exiled to St Helena between 1888 and 1897. The last two chapters of the book focus on the French empire. The case-study of the deposition and exile of the Malagasy queen Ranaivalona III in 1897 offers an opportunity to analyse in some depth the politics of colonial annexation. The final chapter reads almost as a pre-conclusion, as it jumps in time and examines mostly the removal of leaders in North Africa during the Second World War and in the decolonisation period, on the basis of the examples of the deposition of Moncef Bey of Tunisia in 1943, and of the temporary exile of the Sultan of Morocco (future Mohammed V, the grandfather of the current monarch of Morocco) to Corsica and Madagascar between 1953 and 1955. The inclusion of the exile of the Algerian leader Abd el Kader in the opening section of this last chapter delineates a thread “from colonialism to decolonisation,” showing how tactics around deposition that worked in the nineteenth century, or even still in 1943, proved ineffectual in the Morocco of the early 1950s, committed to achieving political emancipation.

Whilst the overarching reflection on the modalities of the imposition of “a certain form of statecraft” [i.e. colonialism] (as the author puts it on p. 280) remains evident throughout the book, each chapter offers lively accounts of the processes that led to the actual deposition of local potentates, but also the long-term legacy of these actions. Thanks to a variety of sources such as personal papers (diaries), official records and printed material (press coverage and biographical or hagiographical works), each chapter (bar the last one) provides depth and width to the analysis offered. This allows Aldrich to present in detail the lives and experiences of indigenous monarchs under the tutelage of imperial powers: the reader often follows the rise and fall of a local potentate, as is the case (for instance) of the Vietnamese Emperor Thanh Tai, first propelled to power by the French (who believed he was an ideal candidate for the job, the author tells us on p. 133, “largely because he was young, unknown and unprepared for the throne”) but who subsequently fell out of favour as a result mostly of his violent sexual inclinations, which led the colonial authorities to depose him and send him first to the up-market resort of Cap Saint-Jacques, before opting for the even more radical measure of exile on Réunion island. The long-term approach adopted in the volume allows the author to consider not only the way in which indigenous monarchs could be replaced by the metropolitan monarchy (at least in the British case), but also the legacy that such changes left on local societies, as is examined in the opening chapter on the removal of King Vikrama from the “Kandyan throne,” which concludes with a discussion of its effects on Ceylonese society. Further east, the discussion of how Thanh Tai, presented by the French as a “mad emperor,” has also been portrayed by post-colonial Vietnamese historians as “one of three ‘patriotic’ emperors” (p. 143) demonstrates how sanctity lies mostly in the eyes of the beholder. Thanks to its very strong empirical basis over a prolonged period, *Banished Potentates* offers a solid and remarkably-documented analysis of a hitherto under-studied collateral phenomenon of late-modern European imperialisms, tracing it almost from the start to the present day.

The only relative exception is the chapter on exile in North Africa, which, quite surprisingly given the wealth of information used in the rest of the book, does not include any archival material. Whilst it is up to date (one is pleased to see Jacques Frémeaux’s excellent study of Abd el Kader, published in 2016, used in the opening section),<sup>[1]</sup> it does not tap into any of the colonial, military or diplomatic repositories held at the *Archives nationales d’Outre-Mer* in Aix-en-Provence, the *Service historique de la Défense* in Vincennes and the diplomatic archives now held

in La Courneuve, which all could have offered fascinating, if perhaps partial and fragmentary, insights into the intricacies of managing the reputations, egos and political aspirations of indigenous monarchs at the time of decolonisation.[2] Given the author's excellent use of such sources for past projects, one might wonder if this relatively "light touch" approach in this particular chapter is not actually paving the way for a stand-alone volume on the subject.

As could be expected, the book illuminates the power difference which meant that the colonial administration almost always had the last word in case of political conflict with local leaders (whose survival relied on their ability to facilitate, or at least not to obstruct, colonial rule): the deposition and subsequent exile of so many indigenous leaders, well documented here, attests this ineluctable power relation. Yet, at the same time, it reveals elements of agency which had been ignored in overly theoretical appraisals of colonial rule: the persisting influence of councils of elders (when applicable, as was the case, for instance, of the royal family council in Hué), the sense of importance that deposed leaders still felt, or the educational opportunities offered to their offspring, often in the hope of producing a future leader who would be sympathetic to the interests of the colonial power.

Readers with long-standing interests in the subject of imperial expansion will note in passing some recurring aspects of the question under study, which seem to overcome the barriers of tradition or national preference: thus, for instance, the role of navies in implementing the physical removal of the potentates and their court, and the subsequent intra-imperial networks that were created as a result, or the prejudice of representatives of colonial authorities regarding the practice of polygamy among these monarchs. But the fine-grain approach adopted also reveals the human side of what might have been highly unpleasant episodes to live through: for instance, the human rapport that developed between Vikrama and the twenty-seven-year-old British civil servant (and future Treasurer of Ceylon) who was in charge of supervising his banishment, or how Queen Victoria could reflect in her journal how much she felt "for these poor deposed Indian Princes" (p. 76). The combination of cases and practices in the two largest late modern empires contributes usefully to a growing trend of comparative imperial studies, an area of investigation which has counted some recent useful additions and has demonstrated, beyond doubt, its relevance to provide a full-rounded appraisal of ideas and practices among European empires, and their impact on the world we live in.[3]

*Banished Potentates* provides an invaluable contribution to our understanding of how empires worked on the ground, combining uniquely the political, military and human processes at play in any imperial conquest. The episode of the deposition of the indigenous ruler offers a kaleidoscopic view of the modalities through which imperial rule was imposed—at least, from the perspective of state apparatuses. The general appeal in the historical discipline in recent years of grand narratives has often given greater prestige to theoretical takes on imperialism, insisting on movements, fluxes and large-scale phenomena. Whilst such approaches are intellectually stimulating, they often overlook the "nuts and bolts" of the imperial machinery: how the replacement of one form of authority with another was undertaken, who were the actors involved on the spot, what it meant for some individuals—from petty officials to high commissioners and local leaders. *Banished potentate* offers a rich insight into this specific aspect of the colonial experience: although it is not an example of "history from below," it does shed light on hitherto neglected aspects of the actual transition into a colonial relationship, giving this process an unprecedented sense of reality and a form of human depth which bird's eye views often lose.

## NOTES

[1] Jacques Frémeaux, *La Conquête de l'Algérie: la dernière campagne d'Abd-el-Kader* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2016).

[2] Whilst some sources might still be under restricted access, some have become available. See for instance the use that can be made of such sources in Adria Lawrence, "Driven to Arms? The Escalation to Violence in Nationalist Conflicts," in Erica Chenoweth, Adria Lawrence (eds.), *Rethinking Violence: States and Non-state Actors in Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 143-172.

[3] For examples of comparative Franco-British approaches, see (in the historiographical domain) Robert Gildea and Anne Simonin (eds.), *Writing Contemporary History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008) or (in colonial history) Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing about Empire, Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For a reflection on the merits of comparative approaches to the colonial past, see Berny Sèbe, "Towards cosmopolitan perspectives on empires and their echoes? The case for a European framework," in Kalypso Nicolaïdis, Berny Sèbe and Gabi Maas (eds.), *Echoes of Empire: Memory, Identity and the Legacy of Imperialism* (London: IB Tauris Publishers, 2015), pp. 123-40.

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