

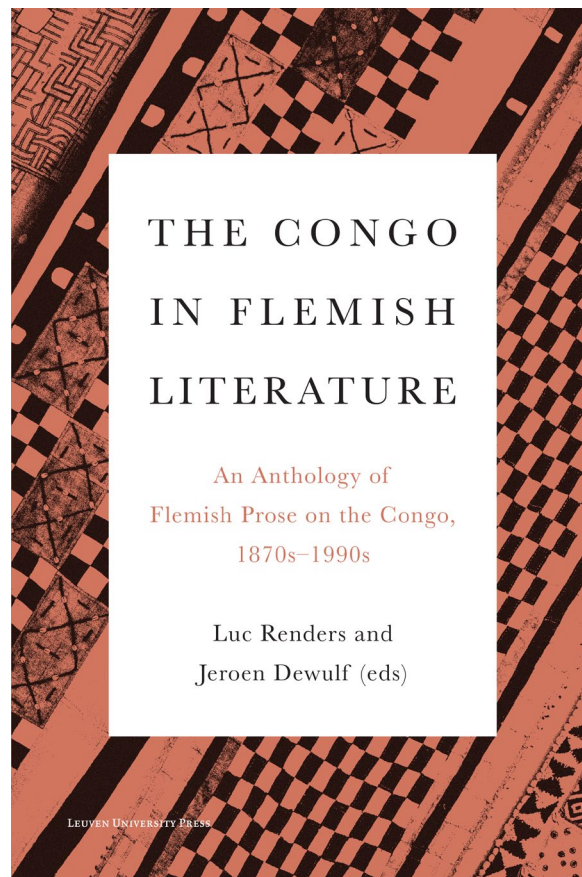
## Review

**Luc Renders and Jeroen Dewulf (eds):  
*The Congo in Flemish literature: An anthology of Flemish  
prose on the Congo, 1870s–1990s***

Grady Tarplee (trans.)

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*Reviewed by Matthew G. Stanard*



Scholarly interest in recent overseas empire and European literature dates back at least to Edward Said's *Culture and imperialism* (1993). Most of this attention has been directed toward writing that emerged from British and French colonies and their respective metropolises, with less focus on literature arising from the "lesser" European colonizing powers, including Belgium. Although recent years have witnessed significant research into francophone Belgian colonial writing, little has appeared regarding Flemish "colonial" literature, even though most Belgians who went to the Congo were Dutch speakers. It is this lacuna that *The Congo in Flemish literature* seeks to redress.

Luc Renders and Jeroen Dewulf have pulled together twenty-four brief selections from Flemish prose that emerged from the Belgian colonial experience. These anthologized texts extend over a broad chronological range, from before Leopold II's 1885 declaration of the Congo Free State (CFS), through the CFS (1885-1908) and Belgian state rule (1908-60) eras, on through the colony's independence and the Congo crisis, into the post-colonial era and to the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the most recent publication having appeared in 2001. Renders and Dewulf's concise introduction provides a thumbnail sketch of Belgian colonial history and identifies characteristics of Flemish prose inspired by the Congo, and each brief excerpt is preceded by a short discussion of its author and their work. Most of the anthology's authors traveled to the Congo, but not all. All excerpts derive from novels, short stories, memoirs, or travelogues; none are from *bandes dessinées* ('Franco-Belgian comic strips'), which have been a frequent topic of analyses of "colonial" literature. The editors admit that while the anthologized texts represent historically important literature, few would count as great, even if several are by acclaimed authors like Lieve Joris and Jef Geeraerts.

Naturally, Dewulf and Renders chose which works to include in what is a short, selective anthology. One finds only passing mention of authors like André Claeys, who wrote *Zonen van Cham* ('Sons of Cham', 1964), or Guido Tireliren, author of (among others) *Uit stenen geboren* ('Born of stones', 1979). Others, including Henriette Claessens, are omitted entirely. This reviewer remains curious about certain decisions, such as the inclusion of an excerpt from *Dans van de luipaard* ('The leopard's dance', 2001) rather than one from Lieve Joris's better-known *Terug naar Congo* ('Back to the Congo', 1987); or one from *Schroot* ('Scrap', 1963) instead of a passage from one of the well-known novels in Jef Geeraerts's "Gangreen" cycle.

One thread running through the book is support for evangelizing activity in colonial Congo tempered by respect for what Dutch speakers believed were more "authentic" African cultures. Not only were some of the authors missionaries themselves – most of those who went to the colony were Flemish – but on the whole the writings imply a confidence in the "civilizing mission,"

including a belief in the goodness of missionary action. Accompanying this self-confidence was a fundamental belief in European preeminence and the inferiority of Africans. Many authors openly conveyed support for foreign white rule over backwards Congolese, and a nostalgia for a “lost Congo” is found in many texts created at the end of colonial rule or in the first months of Congo’s independence. Some writers criticized the methods of Belgian rule, but rare were those who questioned colonial control as such.

Although the book brings to light authors and works heretofore difficult to find in English translation and never before assembled in one publication, the editors could have provided more analysis regarding their larger significance. *The Congo in Flemish literature* reveals how prose writing reflected Flemish conceptualizations and convictions about colonial rule, but the editors say nothing about the reception of this literature or the degree to which it reshaped Dutch speakers’ ideas about central Africa and colonialism. The question is significant, especially considering Belgium’s unique position as an imperial power, bordered by two others, France and the Netherlands; the country shares a common language with each, and both represent large book markets. Is it possible that Flemish views of overseas empire were more influenced by other European writers of empire than their Flemish counterparts?

The editors’ spare introduction leaves it to readers to tease out what these anthologized works reveal about the history of Belgian colonialism. The excerpts are presented chronologically, from which one might draw conclusions as to the intensity of Flemish interest in the colony over time, but from which one can also infer certain characteristics of Belgian colonial rule. The first anthologized work appeared in 1877, six appeared during the CFS era, only one from 1908-1930, four from 1931-35, none from 1936-48, and eight from 1949-63. Perhaps few appeared between 1908 and 1930 because those years followed the era of scandal and anti-Leopoldian attacks that led to the 1908 turnover of the Congo to Belgium, not to mention the devastating experience of World War I, a conflict that separated metropole from colony. That no selected texts were drawn from the period 1936-48 is likewise unsurprising given the drop in the white population in the Congo during the Great Depression (25,679 to 18,683 from 1930-36) and because of World War II, which severed metropole-colony connections. The proliferation of creative works in the last decade of the colonial era – which spilled over into the years immediately following Congo’s sudden independence in 1960 – seems to reflect the height of Belgian presence and control: the number of Belgians in the Congo grew from 23,643 in 1945 to 88,913 by 1959.

Only two excerpts are set in the post-1960 Congo even though the book’s chronological reach embraces the first four decades of Congo’s independence. That Flemish novels and stories appearing after 1960 are set in colonial Congo

suggests two things: first, the centrality of the colonial experience to Belgians' understanding of central Africa; and second, how nearly all Belgians left the former colony. Some 38,000 fled the country in the first weeks after independence and most others left within a few years. One example is Daisy Ver Boven, whose family departed for Ruanda-Urundi before returning to Belgium in 1961, and whose excerpted work *De rode aarde die aan onze harten kleeft* ('The red earth which clings to our hearts', 1962) captures a Flemish view of the refugee experience at the time of decolonization. Of the twenty-four texts assembled here, only two are based in post-independence Congo: Markus Leroy's *Afrika retour* ('Africa retour', 1993), which is set in Mobutu's Zaïre, and Joris's *Dans van de luipaard*, which is based on her travels in the Congo following Mobutu's 1997 fall from power.

To mention Joris raises another characteristic of Belgian colonial rule revealed in this collection: men dominated the colonial experience. Before 1885 almost no European women went to the Congo, very few traveled there before 1908, and European men outnumbered white women in the colony throughout the Belgian state rule period. Joris and Ver Boven are the only female authors among the twenty-four in *The Congo in Flemish literature*.

The editors are largely silent on yet another important trait that emerges across the anthology: aside from one Dutchman (Henri van Booven), all the authors are native Belgians. Renders and Dewulf make plain that the book's focus is on how literature reflected Flemish speakers' views of the Congo, noting that although the reader will encounter Congolese characters and viewpoints, there is an absence of the colonial "Other" in Flemish literature on the subject. But is it to be presumed that only "'oorspronkelijke' Belgen" ("native" Belgians) can produce Flemish literature written in Dutch? There exists a robust literature in French by Africans and Black Europeans. The editors note a colonial-era aversion to Dutch among Congolese, who, if they learned any European language, learned French, the official language of the colony. Many perceived unintelligible (to them) Flemish "as a language used to keep things secret" (16). Yet even if few Congolese learned Dutch during the colonial era, there has been a growing number of Flemish speakers of African descent in Belgium in the post-colonial era. Considering the long, intertwined history that Belgium and the Congo share, it is remarkable not to find a single African voice among the works collected here.

This anthology raises several questions, one being how Flemish colonial literature changed over time. There were seismic shifts in central Africa's political situation from the 1870s to the 1990s. Local autonomy suffered Leopoldian intervention from the late 1870s, and the king's rule gave way to Belgian state control, which was in turn upended by Congolese independence. The editors identify a key element of constancy, namely a "song of praise for the mammoth

civilizing task” that sounded “uninterrupted and vociferous throughout the entire colonial period” (15). Were there changes over time in terms of the trajectory of Flemish literature on the Congo? What do these anthologized texts say about Dutch-language literature in Belgium more generally? How do these authors and what they wrote tell us about European colonial literature more generally, if anything? That this anthology raises as many questions as it answers is a compliment. Renders and Dewulf have not merely provided Dutch-language texts on the Congo in one place in English, they also have assembled an anthology that unveils much about the nature of Belgium’s colonial experience and how it reverberated in the metropole, all while raising questions as to what this literature means.

### **About the reviewer**

Matthew G. Stanard is professor of history at Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia (U.S.), where he teaches courses on world history, modern Europe, modern Africa, and imperialism and decolonization. Stanard’s most recent books are *Decolonising Europe? Popular responses to the end of empire* (Routledge, 2020, coedited with Berny Sèbe) and *The leopard, the lion, and the cock: Colonial memories and monuments in Belgium* (Leuven University Press, 2019). Stanard has been a Wolfsonian Fellow at the Wolfsonian-FIU in Miami Beach, Florida, a Belgian American Educational Foundation Fellow in Brussels, a Chancellor’s Fellow at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana, and a participant in the National History Center’s Decolonization Seminar in Washington, D.C.

