

Review

Matthew G. Stanard:

The leopard, the lion, and the cock: Colonial memories and monuments in Belgium

Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2023. 338 p.

ISBN 978 94 6270 179 3 (2019) / eISBN 978 94 6166 280 4 (ePDF,

2019) / eISBN 978 94 6166 521 8 (ePDF, 2023) /

<https://doi.org/10.11116/9789461665218>

Reviewed by Gregg French

MATTHEW G. STANARD

**THE LEOPARD,
THE LION,
AND THE COCK**

*Colonial Memories
and Monuments
in Belgium*

LEUVEN UNIVERSITY PRESS



During the latter portion of the 19th century, European imperialists sought to expand their influence throughout the Global South. This expansion led to the so-called Scramble for Africa, which resulted in European empires claiming nearly ninety percent of the continent's landmass by the second decade of the 20th century. Colonial administrations were eventually established to maximize the extraction of resources from the region and to control the local inhabitants through conversions to Christianity and repressive forced labour regimes. European representatives implemented these administrations and undertook these imperialistic actions in an attempt to demonstrate their power, influence, unity, and perceived greatness to individuals living in both the metropole and periphery of their growing empires.

In *The leopard, the lion, and the cock: Colonial memories and monuments in Belgium*, Matthew G. Stanard explores how the history of Belgium's colonization of the Congo (the leopard) influenced historical memory, nation branding, and identity formation within the metropole in the decades following the establishment of Congolese independence in 1960. More specifically, the work considers the various ways in which the Dutch-speaking inhabitants of Flanders (the lion) in the north of the country and the French-speaking individuals who reside in Wallonia (the cock) in the south were unified by the Belgian colonial experience up until 1960, only to "diverge in their memories" in the decades that followed (Stanard 2023, 22). Stanard undertakes this initiative by examining a diverse range of imperial projections throughout Belgium, as well as everyday reminders of the country's empire, such as world's fairs, art installations, monuments, classroom textbooks, popular literature, plays, films, and the influence of immigration from Central Africa. Ultimately, Stanard claims that the enduring images of empire that were normalized throughout Belgian society during the second half of the 20th century inundated the Belgian people with "a positive view of their colonial history" (Stanard 2023, 35). However, at the turn of the 21st century, as individuals began to critically engage with the history of Belgium's imperial project in the Congo and the horrors associated with European colonization, a division emerged between francophone Belgians who seemed more willing than their Dutch-speaking countrymen to continue to embrace their nation's imperial past.

The leopard, the lion, and the cock exists at the intersection of the studies associated with imperial history, decolonization, collective memory, and identity formation. In the introductory chapter of his work, Stanard contends that the study of Belgium's imperial history and the country's colonial culture has often been overshadowed by works that tend to focus more on those of Britain and France. To a certain degree, this is an accurate statement, particularly in English-language sources. However, it should be noted that chapters that focus on

Belgium's colonial empire hold prominent positions in several seminal edited volumes in the field of imperial history, such as Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler's (1997) *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in the bourgeois world* and Robert Aldrich's (2007) *The age of empires*.¹ Stanard goes on to accurately articulate the intra-imperial influences that events in the periphery (Congo) had on the metropole (Belgium). He also effectively positions his work at the forefront of the fields of study associated with Belgian colonial culture and the country's collective memory by recognizing that the relative dearth of academic works on the topic empowered both non-historians and public displays, such as monuments, to fill the gap in the perceived knowledge and understanding of the topic. This enabled a romanticized view of Belgian colonialism to continue into the 21st century.

The book is chronologically organized and divided into an introduction, six chapters, and an epilogue. To a certain degree, each chapter documents trials and tribulations in the Congo (the Republic of Zaire from 1971 to 1997 and later the Democratic Republic of the Congo) but more so, the work considers the evolution of domestic movements in Belgium and the country's geopolitical position in the wider world. This is undertaken by Stanard to identify how the country's colonial history was remembered as a result of the convergence of the domestic and the foreign.

Chapter 1 explores the Belgian colonial experience prior to 1960 with a particular focus on King Baudouin's royal tour of the Congo in 1955 and the 1958 Brussels World's Fair. Stanard posits that it was during this decade that Belgians developed the belief that they were doing "an exceptional job in Africa" (Stanard 2023, 63-64) and as a result they possessed a "widespread pride in the colony" (Stanard 2023, 64), which would carry over into the post-colonial era. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 document the remaining decades of the 20th century. Stanard asserts that it was during this period that despite being "imperialists without an empire" (Stanard 2023, 75), Belgians claimed to be experts on the history, culture, and art of the Congo; colonial monuments continued to dot the landscape, and colonial-era films from the 1950s began to be rebroadcasted on Belgian television channels throughout the 1980s. These influences contributed to an attempt to appropriate the memory of the colonial experience in the Congo with the ultimate goal of creating a common nation-building project in Belgium, particularly as the influence of the Catholic Church continued to wane in popularity. Chapters 5 and 6, as well as the epilogue, begin by documenting the publication of Adam

¹ *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in the bourgeois world*, for instance, features Nancy Rose Hunt's contribution entitled 'Le bébé en brousse: European women, African birth spacing and colonial intervention in breast feeding in the Belgian Congo', while Jean-Luc Vellut's *Belgium: The single-colony empire* can be read in *The age of empires*.

Hochschild's *King Leopold's ghost: A story of greed, terror, and heroism in colonial Africa* in 1998. Stanard argues that the hyperbolic language associated with the text promoted a reconceptualization of how individuals remembered Belgium's colonial history.² For example, since the turn of the century, the *Africa Museum* in Tervuren³ has begun to openly identify the country's colonial past; public debates have emerged surrounding the issue of reparations; educational textbooks are no longer selectively ignoring Belgian imperialism; and there is a growing sense of optimism regarding the future of relations between Belgium and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Stanard goes on to explain that young individuals, recent immigrants, and members of the political left are to be credited for this transition. While, as is to be expected, others throughout the nation, particularly those with past connections to the colonial enterprise in the Congo, have pushed back against these changes.

The leopard, the lion, and the cock effectively examines how the commemoration of Belgium's colonial history influenced nation branding and various forms of identity formation throughout the country in the decades following Congolese independence. This ambitious work undeniably attempts to tackle a complex subject and may have benefited from a thematically organized body section, rather than a chronological approach to the topic. Furthermore, although the numerous insets that exist throughout the work provide a great deal of information about various Belgian colonial monuments, they tend to break up the flow of the text and may have been more appropriately positioned at the conclusion of the work. With that being said, *The leopard, the lion, and the cock* is still an important contribution to the study of Belgian colonial, cultural, as well as imperial history, and of decolonization, collective memory, and identity formation in a more general sense. The work is written in a straightforward, approachable manner, and in turn, is an excellent resource for both academics and members of

² In Belgium, and particularly in Flanders, another book also greatly contributed to the reconceptualization of Belgium's colonial past: David van Reybrouck's (2010) epic history of the Congo, *Congo: Een geschiedenis*, published in English translation by Harper Collins in 2014 as *Congo: The epic history of a people*.

³ The Tervuren Museum has changed names numerous times since its creation in 1898 by King Leopold II as a propaganda tool. The many name changes mirror Belgium's evolving relationship with the Congo, through the colonial era to the post-colonial and now decolonial present. "From **Museum of the Congo**, it became the **Museum of the Belgian Congo** when the Congo Free State became the Belgian Congo. In 1952, by Royal Decree, the museum became the **Royal Museum of the Belgian Congo**. It finally became the **Royal Museum for Central Africa** at the time of Congo's independence." In 2018, the museum reopened as the **Africa Museum** after a 5-year renovation. The museum's current aim is to "present a **contemporary and decolonised vision of Africa**" (Africa Museum 2024).

the general public who may be interested in learning more about how memories of Belgium's colonial past continue to shape the nation in the living present.

References

- Africa Museum. 2024. Geschiedenis en renovatie / History and renovation. https://www.africamuseum.be/en/about_us/history_renovation. Accessed February 16, 2024.
- Aldrich, Robert, ed. 2007. *The age of empires*. New York: Thames and Hudson Incorporated.
- Cooper, Frederick & Ann Laura Stoler, eds. 1997. *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in the bourgeois world*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Hochschild, Adam. 1998. *King Leopold's ghost: A story of greed, terror, and heroism in colonial Africa*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Hunt, Nancy Rose. 1997. 'Le bébé en brousse:' European women, African birth spacing and colonial intervention in breast feeding in the Belgian Congo. In *Tensions of empire: Colonial cultures in the bourgeois world*, edited by Frederick Cooper & Ann Laura Stoler, 287-321. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Van Reybrouck, David. 2010. *Congo: Een geschiedenis*. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- Vellut, Jean-Luc. 2007. Belgium: The single-colony empire. In *The age of empires*, edited by Robert Aldrich, 220-237. New York: Thames and Hudson Incorporated.

About the reviewer

Gregg French is an Assistant Professor in the Department of History at the University of Windsor (Windsor, Ontario, Canada). He will also be serving as the University of Windsor's Humanities Research Group Fellow for the 2024-2025 academic year. His research explores race-based identity formation and projections of imperial power in colonial spaces with a particular focus on U.S.-Spanish relations in North America, the Caribbean Basin, and the Philippines. He is also interested in how collective memory in the United States has promoted beliefs associated with American exceptionalism and is currently offering a graduate-level course that critically analyzes how these understandings of the past manifest themselves at the intersection of identity, memory, power, and memorialization.