

Belgium and the Colonial Experience

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*You have committed fornication,
But that was in another country
And, besides, the wench is dead.*

Christopher Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*

The Belgians have always been reluctant colonialists. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, their neutrality secured by international guarantees, preoccupied by their internal divisions and confident of their industrial and commercial skills, their horizons stretched no further than Europe. When they had separated from the Dutch, the latter had taken their colonies with them. If the Belgians thought of colonial ventures at all, these, they believed, would merely soak up resources that would be better used for social purposes at home. Had it not been for the zeal of their first two monarchs, Leopold I and Leopold II, they might well have remained uninvolved. Both men, however, were enthused by the idea of empire. Leopold I is reckoned to have considered some fifty colonial ventures in the course of his reign. Some existed only on paper, others were frustrated by his ministers, one, a colony in Guatemala, was a resounding disaster and served only to confirm his subjects in their determination to have nothing to do with such activities. As far as colonies went, Leopold I died a disappointed man.

The Leopoldian era

Leopold II did rather better. From his youth, he was convinced that if Belgium was to count for anything in the world, it had to have a colonial empire. He also had the curious belief that colonies were inherently profitable and could do nothing but contribute to the wealth, as well as the standing, of the mother country. His problem was that as the century advanced, so the vacant spaces around the globe were becoming increasingly limited. He made overtures to others, the British, the Spanish, the Dutch, to see if they might be willing to give him a share of their spoils, but none were willing to accommodate him. Then,

in 1875, he spotted an immense tract of central Africa, the Congo basin, in which nobody else seemed much interested. How was he to acquire 'a slice of this magnificent African cake'¹?

Nothing if not a realist, Leopold knew that it would be useless to try to enlist his subjects' interest. Indeed, the less they knew of his plans the better. So, in great secrecy, he sent the explorer Henry Morton Stanley up the Congo to establish a presence on the ground and sign up local chiefs. At the same time, he plotted to secure international acquiescence in his designs, cloaking them in a smokescreen of humanitarian ideals and adherence to free trade principles. The methods by which he outmanoeuvred his much more powerful rivals provide a lesson in self-seeking diplomacy to every exponent of the art. More than once he was close to disaster. Eventually, however, in the margins of the Berlin Conference of 1885, he gained international recognition of his possession, in his personal capacity, of an area of Africa some eighty times the size of Belgium and occupying about a fifth of the continent. There he established what, ironically, was to be known as the Congo Free State.

Belgium now had to be won over. The lack of enthusiasm, both in Parliament and more widely, was deafening. But the Belgians could hardly humiliate their sovereign by repudiating the agreements he had made with the international community. The arrangement that was arrived at was that Leopold should act in two entirely separate capacities. In Belgium, he would continue to be a constitutional monarch. In the Congo, he would be his own autocrat. There would be no connection, constitutional, financial or other, between the two, except the person of the King. Only one Deputy was realistic enough to comment on the implausibility of this being a lasting arrangement.

In his efforts to acquire the Congo, Leopold had well nigh exhausted his personal fortune and had borrowed heavily. The costs of opening up the territory, establishing an administration, forming an army and defeating the Arab slavers, who controlled much of the region, were soon to prove insurmountable. Before many years were out, he was forced to go to Belgium for financial support. Even then, the territory reached the brink of bankruptcy and he was compelled to consider its surrender. At the critical moment, however, a certain Mr. Dunlop invented the pneumatic tyre. A demand for natural rubber quickly escalated and Leopold suddenly found himself sitting on a source of very considerable wealth.

Leopold's exploitation of the territory and its peoples that ensued was merciless to the point of genocide. Large tracts were declared to be 'vacant lands' and the inhabitants were debarred from profiting from them. Concessions were granted to a small number of companies, which were given a free hand in procuring rubber by whatever means they chose. Leopold himself created a *Domaine de la Couronne* from which the profits of the rubber regime went to him personally. The local inhabitants were forced to collect rubber for minimal returns, and were

¹ Leopold II to Baron Solvyns, 17 November 1877. Archives du Palais Royal, Brussels, Fonds Congo 100/1.

subjected to a variety of compulsions if they failed to deliver the quotas demanded. Hostages were taken against deliveries, chiefs killed or intimidated, individuals slaughtered and whole villages razed. A potentially lethal whip of dried hippopotamus hide, the *chicotte*, was widely used, and the regime's soldiers were ordered to produce severed hands, to prove that they had used their weapons effectively. The populations of the rubber producing areas were decimated, partly as a result of these practices, partly through flight, and partly as a result of the malnutrition and disease that followed.

Overwhelmingly, Belgium chose not to know about what was going on. Strict secrecy was in any case imposed on those who worked in the Congo, and it was a simple matter to deal with any who stepped out of line. For a long time, even the missionaries who worked in the Congo said little or nothing publicly, fearing that they might prejudice their evangelical activities. It was left almost completely to outsiders to expose the nature of the 'Rubber Regime'—indeed virtually to a single man, E. D. Morel, who in 1900, from his position as a shipping agent in a Liverpool firm, hit almost by chance on the fact that large quantities of rubber were arriving in Antwerp from the Congo, without any commensurate flow of goods the other way. The main exports to the Free State appeared to be arms and ammunition, hardly likely to be destined for its inhabitants. The Congo, he concluded, was being 'systematically robbed'.² He managed to prevail on missionaries and others to reveal what was going on, and, within only three years, his campaigning resulted in the passage of a strong resolution in the British Parliament.³ This in turn led to a revealing report⁴ by the British Consul in the Congo, Roger Casement (who was later to be executed for treason in the First World War) and to matters coming to a head.

The Belgian reaction to the growing criticism in Britain, which soon extended to the United States, was one of resentment and repudiation. It was put about that the campaign was the work of a small coterie of Liverpool traders, who envied Belgium's success in exploiting the Congo and wished to take it over for themselves. Leopold himself conducted an astute propaganda campaign, not hesitating to suborn journalists and others. Morel was nevertheless joined by a few Belgians who were prepared to stand up and be counted. Among them were two Deputies, Emile Vanderveld and Georges Lorand, and a constitutional lawyer, Flicien Cattier, who in 1906 published a trenchant criticism of the Congo regime.⁵ It was, he insisted, no more than a 'financial enterprise', the proceeds of which went to Leopold himself or to his grandiose building programmes in Belgium. Cattier was also strongly critical of the Belgian missionaries in the Congo, who knew well what was going on, but who did nothing but praise Leopold for his civilising activities, so that 'never did the Catholic church betray more openly its own mission and the morality of its founder'. Even more telling,

² R. Louis and J. Stengers, *E. D. Morel's History of the Congo Reform Movement*, (Oxford, 1968), p. 28–9.

³ *Hansard*, 20 May 1903. 4th Series, cxxii, col 1289.

⁴ Parliamentary Papers Vol. 848. Cd. 1933. Africa No. 1 (1904), 3, 11, December 1903.

⁵ *Etude sur la Situation de l'Etat Indépendant du Congo*. Brussels, 1906.

because it came from the pen of a Catholic priest, was a book written by a Father Vermeersche.⁶ Eventually Leopold was compelled to institute his own investigation⁷ and, when this proved damning, found his position untenable. Sentiment in Belgium turned against him, partly on constitutional grounds, partly as a result of his long absences in the south of France and his relationship, which became notorious, with a French prostitute. International pressures on his ministers finally induced them to take the Congo from him.

Belgian amnesia

Belgium then went into a state of denial about Leopold's record in the Congo. When giving up the territory, he destroyed the bulk of its records, and those that were left were kept closed, even to serious researchers and state officials, for most of the following century. The simple message taught to Belgian schoolchildren was one of patriotic fervour, that their country, in the persons of brave and self-sacrificing individuals, had brought the light of Christianity and civilisation to a savage and heathen continent. According to Guido Gryseels, the Director of the Royal Museum of Central Africa at Tervuren, 'My generation was brought up with the view that Belgium had brought civilisation to the Congo, that we did nothing but good out there ... I don't think that in my entire education I ever heard a critical word about our colonial past'.⁸ The Museum itself, which was founded by Leopold, continues to exemplify the general attitude—'a place of false memories', as a member of its staff has termed it.⁹ While it houses one of the finest of all collections of Africana, it has changed little since its foundation and contains virtually nothing to indicate that all might not have been sweetness and light in the Free State. In it are memorials to Belgians who died in the Congo, but there is no hint that there might have been Congolese victims. Prominently displayed are groups of statues portraying the Arab slave trade and the cult of 'leopard men', testifying to the supposed achievement of bringing civilisation to a land where oppression and savagery reigned. The message is, indeed, explicitly conveyed by other groups of statuary depicting Africans kneeling before white figures under such captions as 'Belgium grants civilisation to the Congo'. The Museum has been described as an 'ageing anachronism', 'an acute symbol of the failure of the Belgian people to come to terms with the horrifying details of their country's colonial domination of black Africa'.¹⁰ Following the traumatic events surrounding Congo's independence, there was a similar state of denial over the period between 1908 and 1960, of Belgium's direct rule over the Congo. As the eminent scholar, Jan Vatsina, has put it, 'After 1960, people in Belgium didn't want to hear any more about the colony and the

⁶ *La Question Congolaise*. Brussels, 1906.

⁷ *Etat Indépendant du Congo*. Official Bulletin, 9–10, September and October, 1905.

⁸ *The Guardian*. Special Report, 22 September 2002.

⁹ Boris Wastiau in *Questions aux écrivains*. Retrieved from: www.cobelco.org/Interviews/inter_bw.htm/us, 1 August 2003.

¹⁰ Retrieved from: users.1st.net/jimlane/2001arch/3-4-01.html1, 1 August 2003.

colonials'.¹¹ Very little has therefore appeared in print about those years, a notable exception being Auguste Maurel's *Le Congo de la colonisation belge à l'indépendance*, first written in 1962 under the pseudonym Michel Merlier. (As the preface to the 1992 edition points out, to be seen to have written anything critical at the earlier time would have meant death to a university career or to promotion whether in the public or private sector). As Maurel makes clear, the record of those years is reprehensible enough, despite an end to the atrocities of the Leopoldian era. Even before the Belgian take-over, supplies of natural rubber had become exhausted and there was little difficulty in scaling down the rubber companies and introducing cash payments for work done. Within a few years, therefore, the seal of international approval was given to the new colony. However the reality remained that the economy of the Belgian Congo was based on forced labour.

The exploitation of the Congo

Before handing over the Congo, Leopold created a number of companies, as a means of ensuring that he would continue to derive profits from the territory. In doing so, he was careful to arrange participation by influential Belgian, French, British or American interests, so that the resulting conglomerates would be too powerful to be upset by any Belgian government. His two principal companies, Union Minière (copper and other metals) and Forminière (diamonds), were supplemented in 1911 by a further company, owned by the Lever multinational, which was allowed to expropriate large tracts of oil palms and to force the local population to harvest them for the company's benefit. It was in the interests of these and similar companies that the Belgian Congo was essentially run. They found that they had a desperate need for labour in a country that was by now considerably under-populated, and draconian measures were taken to satisfy them. A poll tax was introduced, compelling the inhabitants to work for pay, and recruitment was enforced with the help of chiefs. The growth of a migrant labour force cumulatively disrupted traditional society, while the resulting exploitation was massive—it was reckoned that a worker in the Union Minière might be worth some Fr. 50,000 a year to the company, while earning Fr. 27 – 30 a day.¹² Forced labour was also introduced in the agricultural sector, with workers being compelled to spend 60 days a year on paid or unpaid work, increased to 120 days during the Second World War. By 1938, some three million Congolese were engaged in compulsory agricultural labour, at similar levels of exploitation.¹³ In 1959, a peasant was being paid Fr. 4–6 a kilo for cotton which was fetching Fr. 46 a kilo f.o.b. at the port of Matadi.¹⁴ Throughout, the African was, in the words of the future King Leopold III, treated as no more than a 'factor

¹¹ H-Africa. *History facing the Present: An interview with Jan Vansina*, 1 November 2001. Retrieved from: www2.h-net.msu.edu/~africa/africaforum/VansinsInterview.htm, accessed 31 July 2003.

¹² G. Moulaert, *Problèmes coloniaux d'hier et d'aujourd'hui*. Brussels, 1939.

¹³ A. Maurel, *Le Congo de la colonisation belge à l'indépendance*. Paris, 1992. p. 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100. F. o. b. ('forwarded on board') means that the buyer pays all the shipping costs.

of production'.¹⁵ The whole system also still rested on the use of the *chicotte*—as the author Jules Marchal, himself a colonial civil servant, has put it, 'I now realise that the prestige of the territorial service, of which I and my colleagues were so proud at the time, rested principally on the fear of the *chicotte* which the administrator could inflict on the African, in condemning him to prison, where its use was regulatory'.¹⁶

For almost all the colonial era, education was in the hands of the missions. It was universally at the primary level, where a mere two years were the norm, much of it spent tending mission land. Instruction was often in the local language, thus depriving the pupils of an essential means of advancement, a knowledge of French. Only a negligible fraction of pupils proceeded further and education abroad was banned. Looking at other African territories, the Belgians concluded that educated Africans created nothing but trouble for the colonial power. Even as independence approached, the catch phrase was 'pas d'élites, pas d'ennuis'. Only in the 1950s were secular secondary and tertiary institutions created. At independence, there were a mere seventeen African graduates, and not a single qualified African doctor, lawyer or engineer.

The catastrophe at independence

Belgium was totally unprepared for the tidal wave of colonial emancipation that overwhelmed Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. As progress to self-rule and independence proceeded elsewhere, the Belgians congratulated themselves on the docility of 'their' Africans and assumed that their paternalistic style of rule would continue indefinitely. As late as 1955, a study undertaken by a Belgian academic caused consternation by suggesting that thirty years might be a reasonable period over which political emancipation might take place.¹⁷ Indeed, it was not until the mid-1950s that the Congolese gave any sign that they were less than resigned to the status quo. A sharp recession in the economy then coincided with the beginnings of political organisation, and a combination of frustration and discontent eventually erupted in severe rioting in Leopoldville at the beginning of 1959. The results were a loss of confidence by the Belgians on the one hand and, on the other, an explosion of political consciousness and organisation on the part of the Congolese. By the end of the year, the Belgians had been forced to draw two conclusions. One was that, faced with an increasingly self-confident independence movement, particularly in the strategically critical Lower Congo, suppression could not be the answer: with the French experience in Algeria and Indo-China fresh in their minds, the use of Belgian troops was out of the question. The other conclusion was that there might be a

¹⁵ *Annales Parlementaires* (Sénat), 1932–3, col. 586.

¹⁶ *Questions aux écrivains*. Interview with Jules Marchal. Retrieved from: www.cobelco.org/Interviews/interviewjm.htm/us 1 August 2003.

¹⁷ A. A. J. van Bilsen, *Un plan de trente ans pour l'émancipation de l'Afrique belge*. Les Dossiers de l'Action Sociale Catholique. Brussels, 1950.

good deal to be gained from a rapid progress to independence, on the reckoning that a neo-colonial state of tutelage, in which Belgium might retain control of the economy and, in particular, the big extractive companies, would be likely to be easier to achieve, the less experienced and less hostile the emerging African leadership. At the beginning of 1960, therefore, it was agreed that the country should become independent on 30 June of that year.

The events of independence and its tragic aftermath will be reviewed in a different context later in this essay. One of the root causes can, however, be mentioned at this point. It is that the Belgian calculation that the newly independent state would be critically short of Congolese to run it was all too well founded. There were no Africans in the senior judiciary and not a single army officer, while in the senior administrative ranks, out of a total of nearly 5,000, the numbers of Africans barely ran into double figures. There were no experienced political leaders, no educated citizenry, no indigenous administrators, no professional, commercial or military elite, no established middle class with a stake in the stability and well-being of the country.

The Mobutu kleptocracy

In 1965, following the post-independence traumas, General (formerly Staff Sergeant) Joseph Désiré Mobutu staged a coup and took over the country. This was welcome to those in the West who saw him as a useful ally in the Cold War struggle that was seen to be taking place in Africa. It was also welcome to the Belgian interests with a stake in the country's immense mineral and other wealth. It did not take long, however, for the regime to be recognised for what it was, a murderous dictatorship and a kleptocracy on a heroic scale. As is now well known, while his subjects lived in abject poverty, Mobutu accumulated huge sums in Swiss bank accounts, invested in luxurious properties around Europe and built a grotesque 'Versailles-in-the-jungle' in his home town, Gbadolite. Other large sums went on buying support and suborning opposition. His lifestyle was such that he 'chartered Boeings like most people use supermarket trolleys'.¹⁸ During the 1960s and 1970s, it worked well enough, on the proceeds of the country's natural resources. But the endless syphoning off of hard cash eventually brought a day of reckoning, and at the end of 1982 the IMF had to be called in. The medicine prescribed weighed heavily on the hapless Congolese, but did create conditions in which foreign investment could remain profitable. Belgian enterprises took full advantage and, to enhance the climate for their investments, the government bent its efforts towards maintaining a close relationship with Mobutu. In 1984 he paid an official visit to Belgium which brought him much prestige back home, and the following year he invited some one hundred members of the Belgian establishment, led by the King and Queen, to the ceremonies marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the country's indepen-

¹⁸ Pierre Janssen, quoted by Michele Wrong in *In the Footsteps of Mr Kurtz*. Harper Collins, 2000.

dence. The invitation was accepted and the visit took place to the accompaniment of sumptuous hospitality on the one hand and gross sycophancy on the other. After twenty years of grim misrule, and the subjection, massacre and pillage of the nation, all well documented, this ‘celebration of Belgian-Zairean friendship’ demonstrates the extent to which the Belgian establishment were prepared to go in maintaining a grip on the profits that were still to be made there. While it is true that others, in particular France and the USA, also propped up Mobutu and tried, on a grander scale, to manipulate and profit from his rule, there is no doubt that Belgium was up there with them.

The Belgian awakening

1.1. The Truth about Lumumba

To summarise, therefore, there were three main periods covering Belgium’s colonial and post-colonial (or neo-colonial) history. The first, the Leopoldian era, was marked by unremitting exploitation and grave human rights abuses. In the second, the Belgian era, human rights abuses continued, if on a less extreme scale, but the interests of the inhabitants were overwhelmingly neglected in favour of economic exploitation. In the third, the Mobutu era, locally generated human rights abuses and exploitation were condoned by the former colonial power in its own economic interests. At no stage did Belgium engage in any sort of reflection or admit to what had happened: on the contrary, criticism was taboo and the record suppressed. In 1999, however, all was to change.

The first instrument of change was Ludo de Witte’s *De Moord op Lumumba* (later translated as *The Assassination of Lumumba*). At independence, the Congo was within days engulfed in chaos. The army mutinied against its white officers, the Belgian community fled and Belgian troops intervened, followed by a United Nations force. Mineral-rich Katanga seceded. Patrice Lumumba, the duly elected Premier of the independent Congo, lasted in office for a bare ten weeks. Within little more than six months, he and two of his ministers had been murdered. Over the ensuing three or more decades, it was far from clear where the responsibility for the murders lay. One supposition was that they had been engineered by the CIA, acting on the orders of President Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. Another was that the responsibility was wholly local, that it was a ‘Bantu affair’. This indeed was the thesis of a book by Jaques Brassine, *Qui a tué Patrice Lumumba?*, published in 1991. On the basis of seven years’ painstaking research, however, de Witte was able to establish a quite different story. His book starts with the scene at the independence ceremony where King Baudouin delivered a highly paternalistic speech, in which he praised Leopold II for his role in bringing civilisation to that part of Africa. This prompted Lumumba to deliver not a polite response, but a diatribe in which he accused the Belgians of racism, oppression and exploitation. King Baudouin was gravely affronted, Lumumba’s white audience dumbfounded and his African audience, who had never heard one of their number address whites in that fashion, ecstatic.

When, shortly afterwards, Lumumba sided with the soldiers who had mutinied against their white officers and demanded their removal, he showed that he was prepared to back words with deeds. From that moment, de Witte reckoned, his days were numbered. Far from being the complaisant puppet of the neo-colonial regime that the Belgians had intended, he had shown that he was a nationalist who was going to reform the country in what he saw as its people's best interests.

In dealing with Lumumba's murder, de Witte started by dismantling the theory that the CIA had been responsible. In the United States, Lumumba was certainly seen as an incipient Fidel Castro and the CIA did hatch a plot. However, this was abandoned some time before he was killed. De Witte then went on to consider the role of the United Nations. Having been called in by Lumumba to maintain the integrity of the country, he showed that, on the contrary, it protected breakaway Katanga, prevented Lumumba from re-establishing his authority over it, supported President Kasavubu's (illegal) coup against Lumumba, and finally failed to protect the latter when he was taken and subsequently killed, even though it had every opportunity to do so.

The main thrust of de Witte's book was, however, directed against Belgium. The key document which he cited was a telegram dated 6 October 1960 from Count d'Asprement Lynden, the Minister for African Affairs in Eyskens' government, in which he called for Lumumba's 'élimination définitive'. The meaning of this has been disputed, some maintaining that it meant no more than his political elimination. Clearly, however, as long as Lumumba was alive, he would remain a political threat. Effective 'élimination', de Witte argued, could only be physical.

However this may be, de Witte went on to show that at every stage leading to Lumumba's murder, Belgium was implicated. Early in 1961, with Lumumba in detention, unrest broke out in the army and it seemed as if troops loyal to Lumumba might gain the upper hand. Brussels was clear that he had to be removed to Katanga—an inevitable death sentence—and put pressure on Tshombe, the head of the breakaway province, to receive him. He was flown to Katanga on 17 January and murdered the following night. Belgian officials and officers were implicated at every stage. De Witte's conclusion, summarising a meticulously detailed narrative, was that 'It was Belgian advice, Belgian orders and finally Belgian hands that killed Lumumba on the 17 January 1961'.

The appearance of the book caused a political and media storm in Belgium. However the government did not find it unduly difficult to respond. As a new Socialist/Liberal/Green coalition, it was committed to openness and accountability in public life. Its political opponents, the Social-Christian Party, whom it had recently replaced, had been those in power in 1960–61. Mobutu having departed the scene, it was concerned to cultivate his successor, Laurent Kabila, earlier in his career a supporter of Lumumba. The Foreign Minister, Louis Michel, also wished to strike a pose on the African stage. Its response, therefore, was to establish a Parliamentary Commission to investigate what had happened.

The Commission's report, published in November 2001, broadly accepted

de Witte's thesis and made a number of clear judgements.¹⁹ It found that Belgium had shown little respect for the sovereign status of the Congolese government and that it had not hesitated in interfering in its internal affairs. Belgian ministers had been pressurised by the Belgian financial groups with a stake in the Congo, and the Union Minière had itself funded the secession of Katanga. Fr. 50 million had been spent from secret funds. King Baudouin himself had known that Lumumba's life was in danger, but had done nothing. The Belgian government had 'insisted upon' Lumumba's arrest. They had shown no concern for his safety and had never pushed for his trial. They had supported his transfer to Katanga and Belgian advisers had collaborated in it, although they had known that his life would be in danger there. After his murder, they had 'spread lies' about it. The Commission's overall conclusion was that 'certain members of the Belgian government and other Belgian participants were morally responsible for Lumumba's death'. When the report was debated in the Belgian Parliament, Louis Michel extended to 'the family of Patrice Lumumba ... and to the Congolese people its profound and sincere regrets and its apologies for the pain inflicted on them'. A Patrice Lumumba Foundation would be set up, financed by €3.75 million and a yearly subvention of € $\frac{1}{2}$ million for the 'democratic development' of the Congo.

1.2 The Truth about Leopold

The other defining event of 1999 was the publication in Belgium of a translation of Adam Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost, A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa*, an exposé of Leopold's record in the Congo. As Hochschild himself freely concedes, this was not a pioneering book: in 1996 Jules Marchal had published a two-volume work on the subject, *E. D. Morel contre Léopold II. L'histoire du Congo 1900–1910*, which, on the basis of unprecedented access to the archives, had examined the record in some detail. Perhaps because it was so meticulous, however, it received very little attention in Belgium or elsewhere. Two other critical books had also appeared at an earlier stage. In 1985, *Du Sang sur les lianes*, by Daniel Vangroenweghe, had attracted some hostile attention by denouncing Leopold's activities, but there had been no subsequent repercussions. In 1989, *Le Congo de Léopold II*, by Michel Massoz, had also appeared, but similarly without making any significant waves. In contrast to these predecessors, Hochschild's book, perhaps through an accident of timing or because it was originally published in English, proved sensational. It omitted much of the Leopold saga, ignoring in particular many of the Belgians who had a hand in his downfall, including Cattier and Vermeersche, as well as those who collaborated with him. That said, however, in revealing a historical episode that had been forgotten ever since Morel had exposed it a century

¹⁹ Available at: www.africawithin.com/lumumba/conclusions.htm, accessed 22 July 2003.

earlier, Hochschild broke all barriers. The Leopoldian era of Belgium's colonial history was now also one that could no longer be ignored.

The consequences

What are the consequences for Belgium? It has been argued that the conclusion of the Commission's report into Lumumba's murder was inadequate, given that, apparently as a compromise between its members, it used the phrase 'morally responsible' when the evidence showed that Belgium was directly responsible, perhaps not wholly, but at least in good measure. On the other hand, public apologies have been made and amends offered, even if the lapse of time has weakened their effect, and Lumumba's family seem to have accepted them. The findings of the Commission have attracted little attention outside political and media circles, and it is unlikely that there will be further repercussions.

The colonial record more generally is currently a subject of discussion. In October 1999, a conference was held at the University of Ghent under the title 'Belgium's Africa Conference. Assessing the Belgian legacy in and on Africa: the social sciences'.²⁰ In part, its agenda included somewhat abstruse topics of linguistics, ethnography and Africanist research. However ground-breaking sessions were also devoted to 'Colonisation', 'The Economics of Conflict' and 'Memory and Imagination', the latter looking specifically at the question of Belgium's view of her colonial past. In it, Ludo de Witte was one of the speakers. Also in 1999 and 2000, Joris Capenberghs, the Secretary of the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography (ICOM) spent a year at the Museum for Central Africa, with a brief to consider its 'museological modernisation'.²¹ As a first step, he inspired an exhibition 'Exit Congo Museum, A Century of Art with/without Papers', with three main themes. The first (Exit Congo) was to show from archival documents how the Museum's ethnographic collection had found its way to Belgium, the second (ex-Congo Museum) dealt with the way it had been presented in the Museum, and the third (Exit Museum) tried to suggest, with the help of contemporary artists, what the present and future relevance of the collection might be. No secret was made of the fact that all the 125 African masterpieces exhibited had been in one way or another looted from the Congo, and that rarely had there been any record either of the artists who had created them or of the purposes for which they had been used. Whereas in Western society, artists were valued both for themselves and in the context of the society to which they belonged, in this case the artist had been seen merely as integral with society, and society itself not worth considering, so that the art pieces had been robbed of both their personal and their

²⁰ Accessed 20 July 2003 at: www.africana.rug.ac.be/texts/Belgiumsafrica/Programme2.htm

²¹ Joris Capenberghs. *Re-turning the Shadow. Museological reflections on the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium*. Retrieved from www.museumsnett.no/icme/icme2001/capenberghs.html, accessed 3 July 2003.

ethnographic significance. The object of the third part of the exhibition was to choose works of art which challenged the views accepted in Europe not only of Africa but also of Europe itself and its colonial history.

The exhibition succeeded in attracting interest and discussion, on which Capenberghs hoped to build for his proposals for the future of the Museum. These were that the present Museum should be retained as a 'national monument' and a 'place of memory', a monument to the colonial regime and its mind-set. A new museum should then be created as a 'focus and forum of interpretation and communication for, about and with Africa'. It should be a centre for study and research, for congresses and cultural events, and a meeting place for those concerned with North-South issues. To it should be added a 'virtual museum' linked to a worldwide network and in particular to African universities and colleges, to provide access to, and consultation about, relevant knowledge and expertise. Capenberghs did not succeed in gaining immediate acceptance of his proposals, but in November 2002, Guido Gryseels was able, with financial backing from the government, to present a plan by which the Museum would be progressively renovated, integrating a 'new' museum into the historical building. External specialists were participating in the programme, as well as the Museum's own staff, and the whole process would be completed by 2010.

African studies in Belgium have had a chequered history. In 1960, the loss of confidence was such that they virtually lapsed, at the very time when elsewhere, particularly in America but also to a lesser extent in Britain and France, they were mushrooming under the incentives of what seemed at the time to be the dawning of a new African era. Nor were matters improved by developments in the Congo itself. The *Institut de Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale* (IRSAC) at Astrida (now Butare) was closed in 1964, while from the 1970s onwards, Mobutu's ongoing persecution of the universities in Zaire was eventually to lead to their wholesale collapse. This deprived Belgian academics of opportunities for research and a cross-fertilisation of ideas. It was not until the 1980s that a new focus on Africa began to be achieved, and even then, the influence of the unregenerate Museum of Central Africa was to remain stultifying.

Now, however, the need for a new approach and a new attitude seems to be generally accepted, by Belgian academics as well as at the Museum. This, however, to the accompaniment of a degree of disquiet in the Belgian academic community over the manner and content of the representations of Belgium's colonial history that have recently appeared. It has been suggested that 'popular' historians like Marchal and Hochschild have lacked professionalism and methodology, particularly in delivering moral judgements on what occurred in the Free State. While violence had been chronicled, explanations of it had been significantly lacking. An era should be judged, if at all, by the standards prevalent at the time—thus the use of the *chicotte* should be seen against a background in which children of six or seven years of age were working in Belgian factories for as much as seventeen hours a day. Least of all should

parallels be drawn with the Holocaust or other more recent atrocities.²² Allied to this criticism has been a certain resentment at suggestions that professional historians dealing with the Belgian colonial record had followed the popular mood of ignoring the moral aspects of their subject matter. None of this has passed unchallenged. On the one hand, the riposte has been that what had happened in the Congo had indeed been judged by contemporaries and by the standards of the time, and had been condemned as immoral, and, on the other, that much of the evidence had featured in the works of professional historians. However this may be, de Witte and Hochschild have combined to ensure that a debate is taking place, the outcome of which, particularly insofar as it may be represented in the new format of the Congo museum, will be of some importance. Professor Jean-Luc Vellut, Professor Emeritus of the Department of History at the Catholic University of Louvain, has suggested an interesting perspective within which the debate might be conducted:

... the African-European connection through the centuries is a complex story where the West is at once a source of enslavement but also a source of enfranchisement, but always in interaction with African forces. The time has come perhaps for a mutual assessment of the complex history of the colonial era, to abandon the fascination for a 'uniqueness' of the Leopoldian model, and to put African and European actors, benefactors and perpetrators, squarely on one scene where they acted and interacted, side by side.²³

In Belgium at large, there is a mixed picture. There is first of all the dwindling band of former colonial servants, who resent what they see as the denigration of their work in the Congo, which they believe to have been responsible and constructive. Then there is the Congolese community resident in Belgium. Among the thousands of Congolese living in Matonge, their vibrant quarter in the centre of Brussels, as well as elsewhere, life largely consists of a struggle, of trying to find and keep work, of obtaining social security and a residence permit, of finding means to support families back home. There is scant energy or inclination left for a concern with a history that has no relevance to the exigencies of everyday life. For Belgians in general, the most common perception seems also to be of a lack of relevance—it all took place long ago and in a far country. Further than this, there seems to be a positive sense in some quarters that Belgium should henceforth 'ratchet down' its concern with Central Africa and pursue policies of disengagement. Partly this seems to stem from a simple reluctance to face up to the implications of the recent disclosures, partly from the feeling that it is now time that the process of 'mental decolonisation' should come to an end, and partly from the view that Western concepts of development may be inappropriate for Africa and that that continent should be

²² Sven Lindquist. *Exterminate All the Brutes. One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*. (London, 1997).

²³ H-Africa. A Reply to 'History Facing the Present: An Interview with Jan Vansina'. Retrieved from: www2.h-net.msu.edu/~africa/africaforum/Vellut.htm, accessed 1 August 2003.

allowed to work out its own salvation.²⁴ Whether this will lead to a renewed state of amnesia remains to be seen. What is certain is that if Belgium is to adopt a realistic view of her colonial history, this is something that will, in the longer term, be decided in the country's schools. In the Congo, missionaries concentrated on providing education for young children because they realised that adults who had grown up in their own culture were minimally susceptible to conversion to a new creed and way of life. In Belgium, all will depend on how far the new perceptions that are spreading among the specialists will extend to the educational system at large.

²⁴ For a discussion of these issues, see G. de Villiers, '*La Belgique et l'Afrique centrale: le savant et le politique*', retrieved from www.africana.rug.ac.be/belgiumsafrica/index.htm, accessed 4 September 2003.

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