

Matthew G. Stanard. *European Overseas Empire 1879-1999: A Short History*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2018. 248 pp. \$31.25, paper, ISBN 978-1-119-13011-6.

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For reasons of price, interchangeability, and, likely, students' attention spans, short histories are all the rage. Where they succeed they are Herculean feats, synthesizing an enormous amount of information into an interpretive frame in accessible prose that assumes little background knowledge. Presently writing one myself, I approach these works with both tremendous awe and tremendous trepidation. Having assigned a number of them, I know that students often find them overwhelming, offering both too much and too little; only those really dedicated to learning the subject will consult Wikipedia or other sources to probe deeper. Yet probe deeper they must because authors of short histories invariably ignore the advice that less is more, me included.

So in Matthew G. Stanard's *European Overseas Empire, 1879-1999*, readers will find 221 pages chock full of familiar and unfamiliar places and people intermingled in a thematic structure, loosely sorted by chronology and geography. While relating a standard political narrative, Stanard occasionally incorporates cultural and social history, clearly one of his fortes, especially when he draws from his field of expertise. He opens chapter 7, for example, with an explication of a 1952 Belgian documentary of the Congo, *Bakouba*, gently guiding readers to see how seemingly neutral representations perpetuated stereo-

types in mass media. His monograph on the subject, *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* (2011), traces the intersection of cultural and political history through memorialization. Reading films, statues, memorabilia, and currency to show the persistence of colonial obsessions, Stanard shows how central were the ideologies and practices of white supremacy to imperialism without ever naming it as such. This light touch is student-friendly but sometimes makes it easy to misunderstand his approach. In the *American Historical Review*, David Ciarlo describes *Selling* as workmanlike and readable, but notes the thereby inadvertent recourse to potentially inflammatory clichés and shorthands, such as describing King Leopold as a “mastermind” and “genius.”[1] The same is true of this book: clichés detract from the important critical perspective Stanard weaves throughout. For example, he describes the American Revolution as a “fight for freedom” against a “colonial overlord” that led to “colonial horse trading” with the Louisiana Purchase (p. 17). He notes the irony of this outcome with the persistence of slavery, but there remains a disconnect between the medium and the message. A discerning instructor can use this to guide students to read against the grain, and to question

their own recourse to clichés and the implicit biases behind them.

Stanard might have used the introduction to better explain his approach such that we would have known what he meant by “horse trading.” Instead, clichés undermine the power of his analysis. For example, he describes the sources of renewed interest in European imperialism, including “government apologies for colonial misdeeds” (p. 2). While he does not shy away from describing atrocities throughout the book, the term “misdeeds” suggests his approach will be dismissive if not apologist. Furthermore, simplifying subalternity as “local buy-in” (p. 9) while emphasizing “agency” risks masking the brutality of European imperialism and misses an opportunity to highlight the many ways it functioned, something Stanard actually does throughout, without signaling intent in the introduction. Other sharp insights are buried in the book; placing them in the introduction would have helped students, readers, and this reviewer see its strengths and use it appropriately. When Stanard offers an overview of current trends in scholarship, he notes how scholars have “uncovered subtler aspects of empire including gender, race, culture, and colonial knowledge” (p. 2). None of these, least of all race, could be described as “subtler aspects.” When he does discuss these new directions, for a couple of pages midway through the book, he rightly describes the intersections between race, class, and gender, arguing how “implicated gender [is] in presuppositions of racial or ethnic difference” (p. 81) and how these “intersected with social class distinctions” (p. 82). By way of illustration, he mentions the ubiquity of the Western-style men’s suit worn by elites everywhere. More such tidbits from material culture would be welcome, alongside more in-depth commentary.

But Stanard is pressed for time. Per the title, the book includes the later nineteenth century and then spans the entirety of the twentieth century. Including decolonization and the postcolonial

period necessarily crowds too much information into too small a book, but it also supports courses that cover the duration of the twentieth century and finishes the story, as it were. Each of the nine chapters is twenty to thirty pages long and covers one to two decades. Each includes heads and subheads so that no chunk of text is more than two pages. Sometimes the text is thereby too chopped up and sustained consideration of any one subject is precluded. Each chapter opens with an interesting vignette and includes a sprinkling of quotations, cited at the end of the chapter and followed by ten or so suggested titles for further reading, many of them dated. The quotes from fiction enliven the political narrative, but these are rarely contextualized and mostly authored by canonical white men: lots of Rudyard Kipling and Joseph Conrad for example. Often, the opening quote not only has no relationship to the text that follows but is hilariously misleading. Conrad’s description of “black shapes” at the start of chapter 3 is followed by a summary of the great rat massacre in Hanoi; even I had to do a double take, trying to recall whether rats featured in *Heart of Darkness*. I don’t know if this was simply editorial oversight or a strategy, but this use of fiction detracted more than it added.

The account of the rat massacre is an example of one of the book’s strengths: occasional but sustained forays into cultural history that leave readers with something specific to unpack and remember. Predictably, rat abatement was prioritized in elite white districts. Stanard uses the story to illustrate segregation in imperial cities and how “racism and the management of difference was central to empire” (p. 68). But his coverage of Indochina prior to WWII is otherwise scant and scattered, so we are left with few clues as to how this came about. Some examples get more sustained treatment, such as the Congo—appropriately, as Stanard’s field of expertise. Even then the thematic approach, and the sometimes artificial chronological breaks, means he interrupts his focus to parachute in other cases, like the Herero,

before readers learn how the Congo genocide ended. Some of the worst atrocities, including the massacres accompanying the partition of India, are appropriately described as horrific, but with little context or explanation beyond the “inability among the British to understand political divisions among the Indians” (p. 157). While Stanard narrates events leading up to partition over five paragraphs (one of the longer case studies), the scattering of prior Indian content leaves the reader baffled at this outcome, especially when he overrelies on E. M. Forster and George Orwell for insights about India and downplays religious divisions in the century-long freedom struggle that preceded the partition. Other case studies are reduced to clichés, such as Muhammed Ali bringing Egypt into the nineteenth century “kicking and screaming” (p. 24). In the later chapters, Stanard mixes in perspectives from colonized people like Egyptian Naguib Mafouz; this goes some way to balance out the short-shrift treatment in the earlier chapters. But it is arguably too little, too late. Especially compelling are the smattering of quotes by African authors on the colonization of the mind in chapter 6. Mixing them in with quotes from Tintin, Stanard subtly draws our attention to the prevalence, depth, and pain of white supremacy in metropole and colony, before and after independence. These too come late in the book, perhaps a reflection of the relative paucity of colonized voices before the mid-twentieth century. But for the earlier period one can do better than Conrad and Kipling, even if only to convey a diversity of white perspectives.

In addition to standard political and economic history, Stanard incorporates, even if only cursorily, other topics such as gender, and material and popular culture. Strikingly absent is ideology—we never meet Islam as the banner of anti-imperialism, nor really at all, beyond as a demographic marker. He mentions jihads wracking parts of West Africa (p. 24) but does not define them, nor explain why they emerged. Likewise readers will

not understand why anticolonialists appropriated tenets of Marxist-Leninism, which is dismissed as a Eurocentric master narrative (p. 215). Such omissions reveal Stanard’s own interpretation of world history—we all have them—but more disclosure is warranted. Instead we are left to infer it from suggestive but also confusing phrases such as imperialism’s “quasi-positive legacies” (p. 209). Stanard is correct that “history writing empowered certain forms of knowledge and knowledge production and discounted or even excluded others” (p. 214). Admitting that this applies to his own work, as we all must, would model intellectual humility and invite students to query and debate his selection and framing of evidence, and the fraught work of authoring short histories. Most flaws in this otherwise commendable book derive from the short history genre where pressures on time and word count lead to a proliferation of shorthand phrases and omissions of context that confuse or lead readers to misunderstand the author’s intent.

Competing titles such as Heather Streets-Salter and Trevor R. Getz’s *Empires and Colonies in the Modern World: A Global Perspective* (2015) are either simply too long at 600 pages, or too short in the case of Stephen Howe’s *Empire: A Very Short Introduction* (2002) at 160 pages and inclusive of the ancient world. Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper’s magisterial *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (2011) may be too expansive, but the latter chapters at the very least will give advanced readers more current and contextualized interpretations and case studies. Thus, despite the proliferation of empire surveys, Stanard’s *European Overseas Empire, 1879-1999* could be useful in twentieth-century world history survey courses and more specialized courses in European and imperial history if appropriately supported with better maps and at least one time line, and supplemented with longer, more focused readings and lectures.

Note

[1]. David Ciarlo, review of *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism* by Matthew G. Stanard, *American Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (October 2013): 1,263.

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