

REVIEW ARTICLE

‘BLUNDERING AND PLUNDERING’: THE SCRAMBLE  
FOR AFRICA RELIVED

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*The Scramble for Africa, 1876–1912.* By THOMAS PAKENHAM. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991. Pp. xix + 738. £22.

The success of Thomas Pakenham's *The Scramble for Africa* is already beyond question.<sup>1</sup> The book was widely and favourably reviewed when it first appeared in December 1991; it has subsequently been translated as well as reprinted; and in 1992 it received both the Alan Paton Award and W. H. Smith's Annual Literary Award.<sup>2</sup> The author spent ten years studying his chosen subject and visited no fewer than twenty-two countries in Africa as well as undertaking archival research in Britain, France, Belgium and Germany. The result is a massive work of over 700 pages enlivened by numerous illustrations and presented in user-friendly print. Here, in the publisher's words, 'is a historical narrative on the grand scale, cross-cut between Europe at the height of its power and Africa in its political infancy, covering a vast terrain and including a huge cast of characters, yet as vivid and fast-moving as a novel'.<sup>3</sup> The author himself claims to have written the first narrative account of the scramble in one volume since Scott Keltie published his study of partition a century ago.<sup>4</sup> Well might self-styled professional historians catch their breath at the audacity of the undertaking and furrow their brows to see what they might learn from Pakenham's achievement. This is a book that seems to have everything: comprehensive research, extensive field work, and lively prose – all brought to bear by an established author on one of the classic problems of modern African and imperial history. It sounds too good to be true; it is.

It is not that the claims are false: the book is evidently the product of a serious commitment, and it undoubtedly provides a full and detailed narrative account of the scramble. It is the inference that is misleading. Despite the large scale of his study and the sustained labour that went into producing it, Pakenham has written a book that contributes nothing of significance to our understanding of the scramble. More damagingly, the work perpetuates and popularizes an outdated view of both African and imperial history. This outcome, however unintended, is particularly unfortunate in view of the achievements of the last generation of historians working in these fields of study, and it is a considerable setback to the efforts made by writers such as Basil Davidson to present a more informed view of Africa to the wider world. Given that the author's integrity and good intentions are

<sup>1</sup> The quotation in the title is taken from J. Scott Keltie, *The Partition of Africa* (2nd edn, London, 1895), 514: 'Without pretending to treat the African as the equal of the white man in any way, let us, for our own sakes and his, deal with him humanely; let us give him fairplay; let us not sink ourselves to his level of brutality. There has been far too much blundering and plundering in the European treatment of Africa hitherto.'

<sup>2</sup> The W. H. Smith Award, worth £10,000, is for 'the Commonwealth author whose book makes... the most outstanding contribution to literature'.

<sup>3</sup> Publisher's statement on the dust jacket. <sup>4</sup> Pakenham, *The Scramble*, xvii.

not in question,<sup>5</sup> it is worth considering how this result has come about. Is 'popular' history by definition unable to add significantly or at all to the world of specialised research, or have specialists removed themselves so far from the public domain that they no longer think of entering it, and would be incapable of doing so if they made the attempt?

We can begin to answer this question by examining Pakenham's conception of the past and how to recreate it. For Pakenham, history is essentially the story of individuals, and of Top People in particular. Explaining the impulses that move events forward is largely a matter of comprehending the mental and physical state of the leading decision-makers. This view of the world contains a degree of self-evident truth, but it is a long way from representing the whole truth and for this reason it greatly limits Pakenham's understanding of history. The heavy, at times almost exclusive, emphasis on the attributes and disposition of individual personalities at particular moments places undue reliance on a subjective and speculative type of 'mentalism', which is sometimes extended to include the nation state.<sup>6</sup> It also commits the author to a form of reductionism that is reminiscent of Pascal's thesis that, had Cleopatra's nose been shorter, the face of the world would have been changed. This cast of argument has an easy accessibility that, in the eyes of many reviewers, makes interesting reading, but it makes unsatisfactory history because it infers far too much from far too little. It also commits Pakenham to the view that the reasons given for actions are the causes of those actions. Accordingly, historical explanation becomes largely a matter of reporting what the participants said. Pakenham depends heavily on documentation produced by the 'blunderers and plunderers' themselves, and he has worked assiduously on their memoirs, reports and private papers, but he presents their testimony as if it were unproblematic. There is no explicit discussion of how the source material he cites was generated, what purpose it was intended to achieve, or what questions of interpretation it raises. As Pakenham absorbed his material so it absorbed him. The resulting text achieves a sense of immediacy by portraying Africa and the scramble 'as told to' the author by the men on the spot. The pace of the narrative is maintained at least partly because the author never pauses to interrogate his sources. The thought that such evidence might be inaccurate, incomplete or self-serving is not allowed to interrupt the flow of events, and it never becomes the starting point for an alternative account based upon the interpretation rather than merely the citation of texts.

The uncertain reality Pakenham so vividly creates from the documentation produced by the participants is made even more ambiguous by the unfettered way in which he allows his imagination to embellish his evidence. What we are offered is not a form of Weberian empathy disciplined by rules of evidence and placed within a firm historical context, but rather an exercise in artistic licence that transports the reader into a world somewhere between probable realities and make believe. It should be said that these infusions, though numerous, are most evident in elaborating points of detail. It may not matter very much whether Hewitt 'peered through the heat haze and then rubbed his eyes' as HMS Flirt steamed into Bell Town harbour on 19 July 1884,<sup>7</sup> or whether it is true that Berzati Bey, Gordon's secretary, 'greeted him with a grin, a splash of ivory across his shiny black face' on the morning of 20 February 1879, as Pakenham claims.<sup>8</sup> The trouble is that the reader cannot be sure where these flights of imagination begin and end, and this uncertainty inevitably raises doubts about the reliability of the text as a

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Pakenham is the son of Lord Longford, the Labour peer. The family's left-liberal leanings are well known and long established.

<sup>6</sup> Nations readily acquire personalities, which then explain their actions: 'France, jealous of Britain's pretensions, had her eye on a new African empire...' Pakenham, *Scramble*, 71. See also, 111, 158. <sup>7</sup> Pakenham, *Scramble*, 200. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

whole. Pakenham's essentially unreflective procedures have done a disservice to his research by failing to make clear the basis on which his claims can be judged, while his use of imagination has told a story about the past that goes beyond history.

Pakenham's almost exclusive focus on individual participants means that he is unable to link his narrative to issues that stand outside the immediate perceptions of the actors concerned. On the few occasions where he does venture a general historical statement it tends to be an unreflective summary of a stereotype. Reference to the balance of power in Europe, for example, is only the briefest of gestures, and is used mainly as an illustration of the personal ambitions of the protagonists.<sup>9</sup> Mention of informal empire shows only that the author accepts Robinson and Gallagher's thesis in its pristine form.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in 1881 'informal empire – meaning invisible empire, the effortless way that Britain had been able to exploit Africa without bothering to govern it – still seemed to have many years to run'.<sup>11</sup> Britain was 'the imperial top dog' with 'exclusive rights to most of Africa' when, 'out of the blue', came the 'challenge from the pack'.<sup>12</sup> Gladstone's much-publicised 'bondage' in Egypt then follows, as does the familiar strategic justification for amending Britain's traditional policy of non-intervention. All of these arguments have their adherents and can still be supported. But after ten years' research they ought not to be served as if they were fresh from the page and untroubled by contrary opinion.

The general orientation of Pakenham's study should now be clear. What we have is a dense and detailed narrative giving the blunderers and plunderers starring roles and bringing in, though still at a distance, a supporting cast of thousands, most of whom are spear-carrying African extras. The narrative places the leading actors in regional settings and moves forward by means of a series of shifting chronological scenes. The result is an extended safari that begins with 'Leopold's crusade' in 1876 and ends with his 'Last throw' in 1906. In between there are excursions, advertised by eye-catching chapter headings, to suit all tastes. Travellers with ghoulish interests can halt at 'Gordon's head' and 'The severed hands', athletes can enter 'The race to the middle of nowhere', nature lovers can view 'The crouching lion', culture vultures can inspect 'The Mahdi's tomb', and those who enjoy games of chance can try their luck in 'Calling Hanotaux's bluff'. The result is a stirring tale of adventure, folly and triumph animated by heroes who are as intrepid as they are also on occasion unpleasant. It is hard to summarize such a large work in one phrase, but for those who have not yet read the book the overall impression of the text is of G. A. Henty updated by Jeffrey Archer.

This is an achievement in its own right: Henty at his best told a rattling good yarn, and he took great care with his facts.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Henty was also an imperialist and a racist and Pakenham is neither. It is therefore especially regrettable that he should depict Africa in terms that all too frequently bypass a whole generation of scholarly endeavour. No attempt is made to portray African societies on the eve of or during the scramble in the light of the abundant evidence now available. When they do figure in the narrative, Africans are drawn in stereotypes that faithfully reflect Pakenham's uncritical representation of his nineteenth-century European sources. Thus the Maasai are 'ferocious',<sup>14</sup> while the Batetela, 'like most of their neighbours... were inveterate cannibals', though their

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 203–5, for example on the Bismarckian system.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London, 1961; 2nd edn 1981).

<sup>11</sup> Pakenham, *Scramble*, 111.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Henty was a widely-read and much-travelled war correspondent who knew many of the great figures of the day (such as Wolsely and Stanley) personally. See Guy Arnold, *Held Fast for England: G. A. Henty, Imperialist Boys' Writer* (London, 1980).

<sup>14</sup> Pakenham, *Scramble*, 298, 352.

warlord, 'the dashing young' Gongo Lutete, 'himself seemed almost civilised'.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere the emphasis on cannibalism and orgies of human sacrifice is taken directly from nineteenth-century axe-grinders;<sup>16</sup> it never seems to occur to Pakenham that he has a responsibility to his very considerable public to analyse his material and to present it in the light of knowledge now available on the societies in question. He appears to be curiously devoid both of scepticism regarding his sources and sensitivity towards the societies they purport to describe. No serious scholar today is going to try to whitewash the darker side of African history, but it is surely possible, after ten years' study, to offer a more subtle and accurate summary of the Baganda than this: 'Paganism – with witchcraft, polygamy and hashish – was the traditional prop of Bugandan society, of its autocratic monarchy and its courtly rituals', the monarch in question being Mwanga, 'the erratic tyrant', who 'was traditionally free to torture or kill his subjects at his own whim'.<sup>17</sup> If, on the Niger Coast, Ja Ja receives more lenient treatment, being referred to merely as the 'chief troublemaker' whose 'pernicious influence' hampered the development of trade,<sup>18</sup> his neighbour, the King of Brass, is portrayed as 'a lapsed Christian who had exchanged his European suit for the loin cloth, holy water and monkey skulls of West African *ju ju*' – in preparation for deeds of a far less civilized nature.<sup>19</sup>

It is fair to say that Pakenham acknowledges acts of brutality and devastation perpetrated by Europeans in the course of the scramble; it is not his intention to be one-sided, or to justify the prelude to colonial rule. The scandal of Leopold's Congo, the repression of German South-West and East Africa, the exploitation of French Equatorial Africa are all noted. The problem, however, lies with his sources and his uncritical use of them. Africans tend to receive an unfavourable press simply because it was in the interest of the blunderers and plunderers to depict them as being primitive and barbaric; the best that they can hope for is to be treated as luckless victims. The Europeans, on the other hand, stand a better chance of receiving a word of commendation, if only for qualities of character displayed under self-imposed duress, because they were writing the script.

Had Pakenham taken care to assimilate the available secondary material during his long period of research most, if not all, of these problems could have been avoided. But then, of course, he would have written an entirely different book, and probably a far less popular one. This criticism has to be expressed carefully: the author provides only a select bibliography of not quite 400 items, and he has evidently read more widely than this. The selected items cover a commendable range of contemporary sources, but the list also exposes some large gaps in the modern scholarly literature,<sup>20</sup> and the text does not suggest that the unlisted reading has been used to good effect.

At the European end of the story, for example, there is little indication that the author is familiar with recent research on the metropolitan basis of British imperialism, with the literature on the *parti colonial* in France, with the debate on social imperialism in Germany, or with the discussion of the relationship between developments within Belgium and Leopold's colonial venture. What we are offered instead is a very old-fashioned type of imperial history, presented without the justification it now surely needs, which will suggest to the general reader that the subject is still dominated by the sound of drums and trumpets orchestrated by a

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 439. By unfortunate coincidence, this is reminiscent of a technique frequently used by Henty, who often condemned the general run of 'native peoples' while allowing individual exceptions whose presence offered hope for the ultimate success of the civilizing mission and, meanwhile, justified foreign domination.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, for example, 447, 463. <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 414–15. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 192–3. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 463.

<sup>20</sup> There are only about half a dozen references to modern academic journals, for example, and only one of these is to the *Journal of African History*.

handful of diverse, often conflicting, but above all charismatic figures. This limitation also applies to case studies of the invasion of Africa. The discussion of the occupation of Egypt appears not to be based on research available at the time of writing; the chapters on tropical Africa are deficient in a number of important respects and offer little evidence, for example, that the extensive and accessible literature on trade and politics has been assimilated; the assessment of southern Africa is equally out of touch with historiographical developments during the last decade.<sup>21</sup>

The result may be a good read but it is also bad history. In failing to interrogate his sources, the author has broken a basic rule of historical research; in assuming that reasons are also causes, he has denied himself the possibility of explaining the subject of his study. Indeed, in the end no explicit explanation of the scramble is offered: the author's assumption appears to be that, by describing how something happened, it will eventually become clear why it happened. The 680 pages of text are without analytical purpose; detail is piled upon detail in a mind-numbing procession that finally comes to an end without a conclusion. Instead, the author adds an epilogue, entitled 'Scrambling out', which merely offers a brief, narrative account of the end of colonial rule. This blockbuster, like its predecessor,<sup>22</sup> will make its impression on the market rather than on the subject. The best study of the scramble, by a long way, remains Robinson and Gallagher's *Africa and the Victorians*,<sup>23</sup> a model of narrative and analysis overflowing with originality and glinting with memorable phrases. This book won no prizes, but it has transformed the study of the subject, and it continues to set standards of historical scholarship that remind the rest of us what we should be aiming at. Here, indeed, is a masterpiece that commands the enduring respect of everyone who has tried his hand at unscrambling the scramble.

Pakenham nevertheless offers an indirect challenge to the professionals who regard themselves as being custodians of the tablets: do not they have an obligation to help carry the word to the wider world instead of keeping it to themselves? The message can be spread, as Basil Davidson's work clearly demonstrates; but it is also very difficult to distil the results of detailed research in a form that can be imbibed easily and with pleasure, as the fact that there are not many Basil Davidsons also shows. There is undoubtedly both a gap to be filled and a dilemma about how to fill it.<sup>24</sup> The problem is an old one, but its shape may be changing. Perhaps the fastest-growing division between the two cultures today is not between science and the arts but between scholars and the general public, and this is cause enough for reviewing the lines of communication that are supposed to join them. The scholarly journals and other organizations that represent African and imperial

<sup>21</sup> For a development of the last point see Ian Phimister's valuable review essay, 'Unscrambling the scramble for Southern Africa', *Journal of Southern African Studies* (forthcoming). Pakenham's account relies heavily on his previous, highly successful book, *The Boer War* (London, 1979), an equally large and detailed narrative which laid heavy emphasis on particular personalities, above all Milner. This study was also greeted with acclaim when it appeared, but it has had little influence on the development of the subject in the decade or so since it was published. <sup>22</sup> Pakenham, *The Boer War*.

<sup>23</sup> The full reference is given in n. 11.

<sup>24</sup> This problem is not confined to Britain, of course, but it may have features (derived partly from the elitist structure of higher education) that are found less prominently in continental Europe, for example, where there are identifiable groups of 'intellectuals' and associated interpreters linking academics and the general public, and where, at least in some of the smaller countries, scholars themselves seem to be more ready to accept the idea that it is part of their function to translate (sometimes literally) important ideas and make them more widely known, whether in summary publications of their own or in the serious press.

history might consider how to give this question an airing.<sup>25</sup> If we really are composing the best tunes, should not we play them too, and maybe with a little more rhythm?

<sup>25</sup> It is encouraging to see that the President of the African Studies Association (U.K.) has noted the existence of the problem in his recent presidential address: John McCracken, 'African history in British universities: past, present and future', *African Affairs*, XCII (1993), 251–2.