**KING LEOPOLD DEBATE WITH ALDWIN ROES 2012**

Roes, Aldwin, ''Towards a History of Mass Violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo,

1885-1908'' <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/74340/2/roesAW2.pd>

Centre or periphery? The colonial administration and the valorization of Congolese natural resources, 1885-1914

<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/economicHistory/seminars/AfricanWorkshops/papers0910/Roes.pdf>

Date: Sun, 11 Nov 2012 12:14:48 +0000
From: a.roes@sheffield.ac.uk
To: jeffreydudgeon@hotmail.com
Subject: Towards a History of Mass Violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo, 1885-1908

Dear Jeff,
I haven't much time, and your questions are very wide-ranging, so I'll just write some notes in between your message.

Op 5/11/2012 12:37, Jeff Dudgeon schreef:

Dear Aldwin,

Thanks for the full article which I have now read. It was very rich and illuminating, wide and deep, and the first time I have read a modern view that provided perspective and rigour on the question of the Congo under Leopold and Belgium. That, along with a critical view of the reformers and discussion of their near commanding and dominant position in the discourse to date, was most refreshing.

It is certainly a well-written and well-researched piece. Plainly more people have had doubts about the conventional wisdom than have surfaced for the lay reader in newspapers or electronic media.

I sent a copy to Séamas O'Siochain a very sensible anthropologist and historian.

I could put it on my website jeffdudgeon.com which has a Casement Gallery and document pages, if you did not mind.

Thanks for your compliments. I believe it is common practice to link to the archived paper (the final, published version and/or the open access version which I sent you) rather than to put another copy on your site. Not that I particularly mind either way, but it avoids duplication of the same material, and the university/journal sites like to have the traffic.

You plainly want, as you wrote, the “dragging of the EIC from under Leopold’s shadow.”  However I would say that is impossible unless and until Leopold is first undemonised. Only then, or during that process, can the real aspects of the state be addressed.

I don't think I agree with you on this one. My main point is that the explanatory power of Leopold's character is very limited - I don't find Leopold's motives or personality a particularly interesting or relevant issue, and I think enough has been written about it already. It may be true, as Stengers liked to say, that Hochschild did not understand Leopold very well. But that's not the area in which I'd want to enter into a polemic - it would further divert attention away from the real issues.

Reorienting the Hochschild focus is, I admit, something of a challenge. I am more of a politician, anti-conspiracist and controversialist than an academic so it is my line of country and I will thus tend to major on those aspects but academics can advance their theses in public. Wikipedia seems an obvious point of entry, at least by adding more references to the various recent articles. I might install yours.

That's fine. Just keep it factual - the Wikipedia editors will be quick to undo your changes if you become too polemical.

Somebody has to undo exaggeration and mindless repetition of doubtful facts. This is especially so since Hochschild continues to major on the issue and the Belgians seem too nervous to offer alternative views, certainly with any strength or noise. There were promises of a response out of Tervuren to the growing controversy after Hochschild but, am I right, nothing happened?

In fact, the Belgian establishment has spent quite a bit of effort in trying to diminish the impact of Hochschild's work. I think most of this activity was misguided - I don't see why, for example, the Belgian embassy in London needed to put a paper defending Leopold's record on its website. Tervuren did also organize a comprehensive exhibition about Belgian colonialism (I believe this was in 2002). In this exhibition doubts were raised about Hochschild's narrative. My issue with the Belgian response is not that it has been feeble, but that they (or at least, some of them) have attacked the Hochschild narrative without fully acknowledging the extent of atrocities which did take place in the EIC. Maybe you'll find the **enclosed** papers by Vanthemsche and Castryck useful to better understand the Belgian response (as an aside: there have been plenty of Belgian critics of Leopold's rule too).

I'd also like to point out I don't have any particular problems with Hochschild's book. It does offer some nuance here and there, and I think it was probably a book that needed to be written. What I don't like is the caricature produced and reproduced in the popular media and, most of all, the fact that Hochschild's story is the only game in town.

Complaining about colonialism has to be put in the context of its time, alongside some alternatives. Was it inevitable in Africa in the late 19th century?

I was recently shocked to read that the British executed, judicially, 1,000 Africans in Kenya in the 1950s. That rather puts Leopold in the shade.

Atrocities happened in most colonies - no single colonizer should claim the moral high ground (it is quite a common belief in Britain that colonialism was perhaps a bad thing, but at least the British were the best of a bad lot. I think that view is misguided). Each of the colonial atrocities was horrendous in its own right. This does not, however, diminish the importance of what happened in the Congo: the fact that colonial violence was also widespread elsewhere is no excuse, but further damns the whole enterprise.

I became fascinated more by Casement's uncle Edward Bannister, a merchant trader from Liverpool, who preceded him as consul and suffered for his outspoken disputes with the Congo authorities. I wrote up something of his career in my book on his nephew and could send you the extract.

Roger Louis and I corresponded a decade ago and he told me had nearly finished a book on Casement before he abandoned the project.

I have been to the Sanford Museum in Florida where many of the American diplomat’s papers are kept. The catalogue is attached in case you have not seen it.

Was Leopold more “unscrupulous and rapacious” and devilish than the Kaiser or London in its totality or just more hands-on, given it was Belgium’s only colony? He did have a system of courts.

Just one line of Leopold. I don't think he was terribly unique in his views, character, or motives. He was an ultra-imperialist of the same kind found in Britain, Germany and France. I find, for example, many parallels between Leopold and Rhodes. The difference between Leopold and his counterparts elsewhere lay in the context in which they operated. While the ultras were merely a faction amongst the colonizing elites of the other powers, restrained by contravening tendencies, Leopold was able to put his vision into practice with very little opposition.

I noticed your description of the attitude of the European colonialists was not unlike that of Lenin and Stalin who also pointed out that eggs needed broken when making an omelette.

Correct. There was a utopian, idealistic element to colonialism, but it is worth remembering that idealists can sometimes commit the worst atrocities. Europeans thought they knew what Africa's future should look like - African views could be dismissed, and their opposition crushed/ignored.

Casement was, as you indicated, a key player in Leopold’s undoing but far from a crude reformer – or he wasn’t until later. Interestingly, he pointed out that the behaviour of the Peruvians in the Amazon was very much worse than what he had seen in the Congo.

I noticed a couple of typos 'alledgedly' (twice), 'who's' in one footnote and some (not British English anyway) in others, 'piramids', 'punative' 'eufimistically'. By the way what got you into the Congo? Are you part Belgian?

Let's hope the typos didn't make it to the published version. I am Belgian with an interest in colonial and African history - so I couldn't really avoid - the Congo.

Casement was not unaware of African on African violence, as below, although he began to feel the Arabs, despite the “violent Afro-Arab system of resource extraction,” were better for the Congolese than the Europeans: “For the native I believe the change has been for the worst as they certainly haven’t the same respect for a dirty native chief as they had for the powerful Arab always clean, and even the worst of them with the manners of gentlemen.”

Not an uncommon view amongst contemporaries, but this says more of the particular perspectives of Europeans: an Arab who dressed well, could write and served a good cup of coffee was by definition more civilized than the locals. Even if he mercilessly butchered his way through the country.

“2 August 1903   F.O. Africa 29…Wrote to F.O. on Cranbourne’s speech on 20 May. Ibrahim Jacob x [The next day Casement wrote to Francis Cowper in Lisbon “from a small steam launch”, replying to a letter received on 17 July: “The people round here are all cannibals. You never saw such a weird looking lot in your life. There are also dwarfs (called Batwas) in the forest who are even worse cannibals than the taller human environment. They eat man flesh raw! It’s a fact.” These dwarfs or pygmies, now known as Twa, were largely eradicated during the Rwandan genocide of the 1990s. Casement then described, somewhat enthusiastically, how the taller peoples would, by arrow, “bring down a dwarf on the way home, for the marital cooking pot…The Dwarfs, as I say, dispense with cooking pots and eat and drink their human prey fresh cut on the battlefield while the blood is still warm and running. These are not fairy tales my dear Cowper but actual gruesome reality in the heart of this poor, benighted savage land.”] Wrote Howell about Bolobo boys returning.”

I have a number of other questions, some of which in areas you alluded to. Just how much (roughly) of the Congo was occupied, let alone colonised by whites and how many Europeans were actually present around 1900? I know you spoke of the penetration being 'arterial' rather than 'capillary'.

Statistics are easy to find: have a look at Gann & Duignan 'Rulers of Belgian Africa'. The question 'how much was occupied': it's not as simple as a binary occupied/not occupied division. There were varying degrees of influence depending on local political alliances, distance from state/missionary posts, etc. This could also change over time. One possible measure is: how many people were taxed? What percentage of the population was that? Here statistics are problematic, but even by 1908 the number of actual taxpayers was only about 1 million (or thereabouts, I'd have to look it up). The EIC administration weighed very heavily upon the population it could reach, but this was certainly not the entire population of the Congo basin.

Were the Belgians so vastly different from say the French in their Congo or the Germans in S.W. Africa? I recall Andre Gide's critical report while Morel, a Francophobe where Casement was an Anglophobe, never missing the chance of slagging off French speakers, as I wrote around a Casement diary entry:

16 September 1903: “I returned to B’zville with “Reed” at 8 a.m. Captain Shaw navigator. Stayed at Dutch House with Cooper. Shocking stories of the mutilation & illtreatment of natives in French Congo [a country to which Casement was also accredited as British consul although his investigation was restricted to Leopold’s Congo. Oddly, given E.D. Morel’s virulent Francophobia, these stories were either not told to him by Casement, or Morel felt restrained in the matter. He had already published a denunciation of the French Congo for its use of the concessionary system, forced labour and atrocities against Africans. Much later, in a 1909 letter, Morel complained to Casement that the French “introduced the detestable theories and practices prevailing in the Congo State into French Congo,” and that conditions in certain areas there were still “as bad as the conditions of the Belgian Congo.” In 1905 the French had sent their explorer hero (and Casement look‑alike) Pierre de Brazza out on an earlier and similar mission of enquiry to investigate the scandal of cruel murder by French officials. He died en route home and his report was buried with him. In 1925, André Gide’s report for the French Colonial Ministry was actually published, despite accusing the regime there of a system of shameless exploitation]”

The EIC concession model was exported to the French Congo. One of the points I am making in my paper is that some of the causes of violence in the EIC were intrinsic to colonisation itself, and therefore present in other colonies as well. I would certainly agree with you that the exceptionalism of the EIC is overplayed a bit. To put it another way: it wasn't just the Congo administration that was rotten.

That is a startling statistic you quote that, “only 0.4 per cent of the estimated 5.4 million [recent] casualties is directly attributable to violence.” For someone who does not “want to be dragged into macabre death toll discussions,” so as not to deflect from the brutality, then and now, you do actually cast much interesting light on the interesting demographic questions and the 'maximalist' and 'minimalist' positions.

These numbers are all a bit tricky, and you need to be careful with them. If I say 'directly attributable to violence' I mean: the number of people physically killed in combat, or civilians slaughtered, is only a tiny percentage of the demographic deficit. That doesn't mean that the huge demographic loss not a consequence of the war: malnutrition amongst refugees, epidemics, falling fertility rates, all those things are as real and consequential as a bullet through the head, and they would not have happened without the war. The Congo crisis resulted in a huge number of permanently displaced persons: refugees with limited access to food, medicine, water, etc. having to fend for themselves in hostile environments over extended periods of time. These people are not technically killed, but they still die in vast numbers.

I am attaching a couple of photographs that tell of more benign European attitudes than are normally recognised. One is of African sculptures (some in the Smithsonian) by Casement’s great friend Herbert Ward (whose daughter married the son of Ambassador Constantine Phipps), and the other of Casement with local Africans at an event of some sort in Boma in 1902.

Regards

Jeff.



1889

Date: Wed, 31 Oct 2012 12:50:05 +0000
From: a.roes@sheffield.ac.uk
To: jeffreydudgeon@hotmail.com
Subject: Re: Irish Times article on Congo

Dear Jeff,

Thanks for your message. You mention the abstract to my paper, but I can't tell from what you write whether you were able to access the whole thing. In case you didn't: an open access version is available here: <http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/74340/> (the text is identical to the published version, but for copyright reasons I could not make the formatted, published version public).

The whole issue of Belgian and Leopoldian colonialism in the Congo is a very complex one. It is true that its treatment in the press - whether in the UK, Ireland, or Belgium - is annoyingly simplistic and one-dimensional. Historians like Jean-Luc Vellut have tried to add some 'nuance' to the story of the Leopoldian gulags/holocaust/..., but have, I believe been largely unsuccessful. In part this is because any argument levelled against the view that the EIC was a genocidal plundering machine is construed as somehow constituting a defence of Leopold or the colonialism he stood for, and it is very difficult to construct a 'third way' argument in this polarized debate. Personally I think that the EIC's regime was vile and brutal, and I have no interest in defending it against attack (what difference would it make anyway?). I also think, however, that the popularized version of Congolese colonial history (genre Paedar King) is based on a very flawed understanding of how the EIC functioned and how it came to be the scene of so much violence. For this, I believe that you need to move away from this obsession with King Leopold, and look at the multiple interactions taking place in Central Africa during and just before its colonization. Leopoldian colonialism led to an escalation of violence - and brought with it deadly germs and increased mobility - but to base the whole story on the greed of one man doesn't do much justice to reality. This is where my article comes in - and it makes the point as clearly as I could make it at the time.

On the demographics of Leopoldian colonialism, there is a section in Vansina's book 'Being Colonized' which may be of interest. For the recent conflict, the numbers are also estimates, and - if I am correct - these are estimates of the 'demographic deficit' - that is the difference between the population one would expect to find had the region not been affected by war, and the population actually encountered (based on an extrapolation from areas sampled). These are not firm numbers, and the great majority of deaths are and were not due to casualties from fighting. But no matter what the figure is: in Leopold's time as well as now, there have been an unacceptably high number of people who died directly and indirectly as a result of despicable brutality. To me that's the crucial point, and I don't want to be dragged into macabre death toll discussions which deflect from this.

Anyway, thanks for sending me these articles. I'm always glad to hear someone has picked up my little contribution - by making it publicly available online I have at least given interested laypersons (and journalists!) an opportunity to consider the complexities, though I will admit the article's visibility is not all that great. But then again, I'm also just a junior researcher.

All the best,

Aldwin

On 30/10/2012 10:39, Jeff Dudgeon schreef:

Dear Aldwin,

After reading the attached article I went searching on the internet for other views on Leopold etc and found your abstract.

I saw that it was saying something different, not unlike the earlier work of Roger Louis and Stengers.

I wrote a book on Casement and increasingly found I was doubting, if not the veracity, certainly the interpretation of the regime made by ED Morel and to a lesser degree Casement. He wrote up meetings with Leopold in 1900 (attached) which are quite restrained and sensible and non-histrionic.

Obviously Hochschild whose facts are both gripping and convincing will remain dominant but I was pleased that other views exist. Not that they surface much on Wikipedia despite my discreet efforts to add a little more context and remove contradictions.

The Congo population estimates for Leopold's time are just so grotesque there has to be something wrong, but I am no expert or demographer, just someone who doubts certainties unless there is good evidence.

The Peadar King article and presumably his TV programme which should be available on the RTE website - I don't pick it up in Belfast - seem to be conventional, albeit hinting the Congolese (and Rwandans) since 1960 bear some responsibility for the later carnage.

His figure of five million dead seems more possible given the higher population, and plausible, in that there have been censuses since and the weaponry is more deadly, but I am a little sceptical none the less.

Perhaps it all needs a conference. However the Belgians who have a dog in the fight seem incapable of putting pen to paper.

Best wishes

Jeff Dudgeon

[[i]](https://dub112.mail.live.com/mail/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ednref1%22%20%5Co%20%22) NLI Acc 4902 Folder 6 (now in MSS. 36199-36212)

**South African Historical Journal**

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 **Centre or periphery? The colonial administration and the valorization of Congolese natural resources, 1885-1914\***

*Aldwin Roes*

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

The disintegration of the Congolese state over a period of decades, and its reduction to a position of near-irrelevance to the lives of the greater part of its citizens has left those state-centred approaches to economic development and natural resource extraction which once dominated the international development agenda in shatters. Increasingly, the idea of a Congolese state which would be a powerful and progressive force in the social and economic progress of its citizens has been dismissed as wishful thinking informed by a faint (and mostly distorted) memory of the capacities of the Belgian colonial administration. Recently, however, renewed interest and, potentially, investment in the country’s mineral resources has rekindled at least modest hopes that the revenues which a revitalised extractive industry would generate could allow the state to slowly re-establish its sovereignty and perform the disinterested functions of a modern, developmentalist state. Until this materializes, however, analyses of the Congolese political economy and projections of its future development will pay limited attention to declarations from Kinshasa and focus instead on a combination of local and international structures and dynamics.

**Towards a History of Mass Violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo, 1885–1908**

[Aldwin Roes](http://www.tandfonline.com/action/doSearch?action=runSearch&type=advanced&result=true&prevSearch=%2Bauthorsfield%3A%28Roes%2C+Aldwin%29)a\* a.roes@sheffield.ac.uk

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**Abstract**

The present article provides an up-to-date scholarly introduction to mass violence in the Etat Indépendant du Congo (Congo Free State, EIC). Its aims are twofold: to offer a point of access to the extensive literature and historical debates on the subject, and to make the case for exchanging the currently prevalent top-down narrative, with its excessive focus on King Leopold's character and motives, for one which considers the EIC's culture of violence as a multicausal, broadly based and deeply engrained social phenomenon.

The argument is divided into five sections. Following a general outline of the EIC's violent system of administration, I discuss its social and demographic impact (and the controversy which surrounds it) to bring out the need for more regionally focused and context sensitive studies. The dispute surrounding demographics demonstrates that what is fundamentally at stake is the place the EIC's extreme violence should occupy in the history of European ‘modernity’. Since approaches which hinge on Leopoldian exceptionalism are particularly unhelpful in clarifying this issue, I pause to reflect on how such approaches came to dominate the distinct historiographical traditions which emerged in Belgium and abroad before moving on to a more detailed exploration of a selection of causes underlying the EIC's violent nature. While state actors remain in the limelight, I shift the focus from the state as a singular, normative agent, towards the existence of an extremely violent society in which various individuals and social groups within and outside of the state apparatus committed violent acts for multiple reasons. As this argument is pitched at a high level of abstraction, I conclude with a discussion of available source material with which it can be further refined and updated.

UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD By the end of his 23-year rule he had become one of the richest men in Europe, and the Congo had lost half of its population, as many as 10 million people. One of the few voices to publicise Leopold’s genocide was Roger Casement, the Irish nationalist, in one of the first human-rights reports. His Majesty referred to the reported outrages on the Congo which had provoked in England, as also in Belgium, hostile comment upon the Congo Administration - comments that were sometimes, he feared, well founded, since it was impossible to have always the best men in Africa; and indeed the African climate seemed to frequently cause deterioration in the character of the men previously deemed of the highest standing; he instanced the case of the Prince d'Arenberg in German East Africa as supporting this view.

There was complete equality in trade, he declared, upon the Congo, save only that the Congo Government reserved under the name of "Domaine Privé" certain districts of the country whence a revenue for public purposes was derived.

This revenue did not at all - as was sometimes most unthoughtfully asserted - enter into His Majesty's pocket, but was essentially devoted to the public service.

By this means, the King said, the Congo country was governed without resort to direct taxation of the natives.