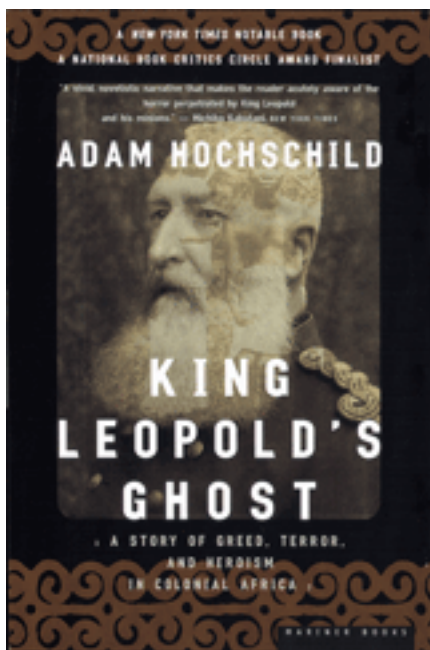


A Reader's Guide



King Leopold's Ghost

by Adam Hochschild

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- Finalist, 1998 National Book Critics Circle Award for General Nonfiction
- Winner, 1998 J. Anthony Lukas Prize

"An enthralling story, full of fascinating characters, intense drama, high adventure, deceitful manipulations, courageous truth-telling, and splendid moral fervor . . . A work of history that reads like a novel." —*Christian Science Monitor*

"Carefully researched and vigorously told, *King Leopold's Ghost* does what good history always does —expands the memory of the human race." —*Houston Chronicle*

Adam Hochschild's award-winning, hearthaunting account of the brutal plunder of the Congo by Leopold II of Belgium presents a megalomaniac of monstrous proportions, a royal figure as cunning, charming, and cruel as any of Shakespeare's great villains. It is also the deeply moving portrait of those who fought Leopold: a brave, committed handful of idealists, missionaries, travelers, diplomats, and African villagers who found themselves witnesses to and, in too many instances, victims of a holocaust.

In the late 1890s, Edmund Dene Morel, a young British shipping company agent, noticed something strange about the cargoes of his company's ships as they arrived from and departed for the Congo, Leopold II's vast new African colony. Incoming ships were crammed with valuable ivory and rubber. Outbound ships carried little more than soldiers and firearms. Correctly concluding that only slave labor on a vast scale could account for these cargoes, Morel resigned from his company and almost singlehandedly made Leopold's slavelabor regime the premier humanrights story in the world. Thousands of people packed hundreds of meetings throughout the United States and Europe to learn about Congo atrocities. Two courageous black Americans—George Washington Williams and William Sheppard—risked much to bring evidence to the outside world. Roger Casement, later hanged by Britain as a traitor, conducted an eye-opening investigation of the Congo River stations. Sailing into the middle of the story was a young steamboat officer named Joseph Conrad. And looming over all was Leopold II, King of the Belgians, sole owner of the only private colony in the world.

Questions for Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *King Leopold's Ghost* for every reader.

1. Between 1880 and 1920, the population of the Congo was slashed in half: some ten million people were victims of murder, starvation, exhaustion, exposure, disease and a plummeting birth rate. Why do you think this massive carnage has remained virtually unknown in the United States and Europe?
2. Hochschild writes of Joseph Conrad that he “was so horrified by the greed and brutality among white men he saw in the Congo that his view of human nature was permanently changed.” Judging from Hochschild’s account and from *Heart of Darkness*, in what way was Conrad’s view changed? How is this true of other individuals about whom Hochschild writes? In what way has this book affected your view of human nature?
3. The death toll in King Leopold’s Congo was on a scale comparable to the Holocaust and Stalin’s purges. Can Leopold II be viewed as a precursor to the masterminds behind the Nazi death camps and the Gulag? Did these three and other twentieth-century mass killings arise from similar psychological, social, political, economic, and cultural sources?
4. Those who plundered the Congo and other parts of Africa (and Asia) did so in the name of progress, civilization, and Christianity. Was this hypocritical and if so, how? What justifications for colonial imperialism and exploitation have been put forward over the past five centuries?
5. Morel, Sheppard, Williams, Casement, and others boldly spoke out against the Congo atrocities, often at great danger to themselves. Many others rationalized those same atrocities or said nothing. How do you account for Leopold’s, Stanley’s, and others’ murderous rapaciousness, on the one hand, and Morel’s, Casement’s, and others’ outrage and committed activism, on the other?
6. The European conquest and plunder of the Congo and the rest of Africa was brutal, but so was the European settlement of North America and, long before that, the conquest of most of Europe by the Romans. Hasn’t history always proceeded in this way?
7. Hochschild begins his book with what he calls Edmund Morel’s “flash of moral recognition” on the Antwerp docks. What other flashes of moral recognition does Hochschild identify, and what were their consequences? In what ways may Hochschild’s book itself be seen as a flash of moral recognition? What more recent flashes of moral recognition and indignation can you identify?
8. Hochschild quotes the Swedish missionary, C. N. Börrisson: “It is strange that people who claim to be civilized think they can treat their fellow man — even though he is of a different color — any which way.” How may we explain the disregard of “civilized” individuals and groups for the humanity and life of others because of skin color, nationality, religion, ethnic background, or other factors? Why do this disregard and resulting cruelties persist?

9. What are the similarities between the colonial and imperial aspirations of pre- and early twentieth-century nations and the corporate and market aspirations of today's multinational companies? Whether rapacious or beneficent, most actors in the Congo, and in Africa at large, seem to have been motivated principally by profit. In what ways do business objectives continue to shape the policies and actions of national governments and international organizations?

10. Hochschild writes that Leopold "found a number of tools at his disposal that had not been available to empire builders of earlier times." What new technologies and technological advances contributed to Leopold's exploitation of the Congo? What impact have these tools had on both the advancement and degradation of colonial or subject peoples?

11. The "burgeoning hierarchy of imperial rule" in the Congo Free State was, Hochschild writes, reflected in "the plethora of medals" and attendant grades and ranks. What were the reasons for this extensive hierarchy and for the bureaucracy it reflected and maintained? Are there any contemporary parallels? Of what historical examples can we say that the more heinous the political or governmental crimes, the larger and more frequently rewarded the bureaucracy?

12. How does Hochschild answer his own question, "What made it possible for the functionaries in the Congo to so blithely watch the chicotte in action and . . . to deal out pain and death in other ways as well"? How would you answer this question, in regard to Leopold's Congo and to other officially sanctioned atrocities?

13. Hochschild quotes Roger Casement as insisting to Edmund Morel, "I do not agree with you that England and America are the two great humanitarian powers. . . . [They are] materialistic first and humanitarian only a century after." What evidence supports or refutes Casement's judgment? Would Casement be justified in making the same statement today?

14. After stating that several other mass murders "went largely unnoticed," Hochschild asks, "why, in England and the United States, was there such a storm of righteous protest about the Congo?" Do you find his explanation sufficient? Why do some atrocities (the mass murders in Rwanda, for example) prompt little response from the United States and other western nations, while others (the "ethnic cleansing" of Kosovo, for example) prompt military action against the perpetrators?

Looking Back: A Personal Afterword

IT IS NEARLY a decade since this book was first published. When I began working on it, it was surprisingly hard to get anyone interested. Of the ten New York publishers who saw a detailed outline of the book, nine turned it down. One suggested the story might work better as a magazine article. The others said there was no market for books on African history or simply felt Americans would not care about these events so long ago, in a place few could find on a map. Happily, the tenth publisher, Houghton Mifflin, had more faith in readers' ability to see connections between Leopold's Congo and today. Macmillan, in Britain, felt the same way. In English and eleven other languages, more than 350,000 copies are now in print. The book has given rise to several films (most notably Pippa Scott's documentary *King Leopold's Ghost*), Web sites on Congolese history in English and

French, a rap song, an avant-garde off-Broadway play, and a remarkable sculpture by the California artist Ron Garrigues: a bristling assemblage of ivory, rubber, gun parts, spent ammunition, bones, Bakongo carvings, and medals once awarded by Leopold himself.

And the story continues to stay alive. Overlooking the beach at Leopold's favorite resort at Ostend, Belgium, has long stood a grand equestrian statue of the king in bronze, surrounded by smaller figures of grateful Africans and local fishermen. One night in 2004, some anarchists sawed the hand off one of the Africans — to make the statue better represent, they said in an anonymous fax, Leopold's real impact on the Congo. For a writer who at one point thought he might never get his book published, it's been an interesting ride.

I've sometimes wondered why those publishers said no. It may have had to do with the way most of us have been brought up to think that the tyrannies of our time worth writing about are communism and fascism. Unconsciously, we feel closer to the victims of Stalin and Hitler because they were almost all European. Consciously, we think that communism and fascism represented something new in history because they caused tens of millions of deaths and had totalitarian ideologies that censored all dissent. We forget that tens of millions of Africans had already died under colonial rule. Colonialism could also be totalitarian — what, after all, was more so than a forced labor system? Censorship was tight: an African in the Belgian Congo had no more chance of advocating freedom in the local press than a dissident in Stalin's Soviet Union. Colonialism was also justified by an elaborate ideology, embodied in everything from Kipling's poetry and Stanley's lectures to sermons and books about the shapes of skulls, lazy natives, and the genius of European civilization. And to speak, as Leopold's officials did, of forced laborers as *libérés*, or "liberated men," was to use language as perverted as that above the gate at Auschwitz, *Arbeit Macht Frei*. Communism, fascism, and European colonialism each asserted the right to totally control its subjects' lives. In all three cases, the impact lingered long after the system itself officially died.

I knew that many people had been affected by the colonial regime in the Congo, but I did not anticipate how the appearance of this book would open up to me a whole world of their descendants. I got a call one day from an American great-grandson of the notorious Léon Rom. E. D. Morel's granddaughter, who had been raised largely by her grandmother, Morel's widow, wrote a long letter. I found a hidden diaspora of Congolese in the United States; almost everywhere I spoke, a few lingered afterward, then came up to talk. Through some of them I was able to send copies of the book's French-language edition to schools and libraries in the Congo. In one California bookstore there appeared a multiracial group of people who seemed to know everything about William Sheppard; it turned out they were from a nearby Presbyterian congregation that was a sister church to his old mission station. I joined Swedish Baptists in Stockholm as they celebrated the life of the missionary E. V. Sjöblom, one of Leopold's earliest and most courageous critics. At a talk I gave in New York City, an elderly white woman came up, leaned across the book-signing table, and said forcefully in a heavy accent, "I lived in the Congo for many years, and what you say is all true!" She disappeared before I could ask more. One day I came home to find an African voice on my answering machine: "I need to talk to you. My grandfather was worked to death as a porter by the Belgians."

Most interesting of all was to see the reaction to the book in Belgium, where it appeared in the country's two main languages, French and Dutch. When I went to Antwerp at the time, the historian Jules Marchal (see pages 296–299) and I found the spot on the city's wharves where E. D. Morel had stood a hundred years earlier as he tallied cargoes of ivory and rubber arriving from the Congo, and I had the stunning realization that he was seeing the products of slave labor. Sadly, Marchal has since died of cancer, but not before beginning to get some of the recognition denied him for so long.

In both Antwerp and Brussels, I found audiences friendly, concerned about human rights, and uniformly apologetic that they had learned nothing in school about their country's bloody past in Africa. The newspaper reviews were positive. And then the reaction set in.

It came from some of the tens of thousands of Belgians who had had to leave the Congo in a hurry, their world collapsed, when the colony won independence in 1960. There are some two dozen organizations of Belgian "old colonials," with names like the Fraternal Society of Former Cadets of the Center for Military Training of Europeans at Luluabourg. A coalition of those groups¹ opened a Web site containing a long diatribe against the book: "sensationalist . . . an amalgam . . . of facts, extrapolations and imaginary situations." Another attack on the book's "mendacious stupidities" began with a mournful aside addressed to Leopold: "You who believed, after a very full life, that you'd be able to finally enjoy eternal rest, you were mistaken."² A provincial old-colonial newsletter said, "The dogs of Hell have been unleashed again against the great king."³

The British newspaper the *Guardian*⁴ published a lengthy article about how "a new book has ignited a furious row in a country coming to grips with its colonial legacy." It quoted Professor Jean Stengers, a conservative Africa scholar, denouncing the book: "In two or three years' time, it will be forgotten." The Belgian prime minister clearly wanted the row to end. "The colonial past is completely past," he told the paper. "There is really no strong emotional link any more. . . . It's history."

But the history wouldn't go away. At a United Nations conference on racism in Durban, South Africa, in 2001, a journalist noted⁵ that many delegates had read the book; one of them asked Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel if his country took responsibility for Leopold's "crimes against humanity." The same year, Michel sent a confidential memorandum to Belgian diplomatic missions throughout the world on how to answer embarrassing questions coming from readers of *King Leopold's Ghost* and *Heart of Darkness*. (His instructions: a proactive public relations effort would be futile; instead, change the subject to Belgium's work for peace in Africa today.)

Other events have also helped put the colonial past on the agenda in Belgium. The year after this book appeared, a Belgian writer, Ludo De Witte, published *The Assassination of Lumumba*, which disclosed a wealth of new, incriminating material about Belgian complicity in the death of the Congo's first democratically chosen prime minister. The next year, a feature film by the director Raoul Peck brought the story of Lumumba's short life and martyr's end to a wider audience. In 2001, a Belgian parliamentary investigation verified many of De Witte's findings, and the government issued an official apology. The U. S. government, however, which also pushed hard for the prime minister's assassination, has never apologized.

All of this raised uncomfortable questions for the institution that I described on pages 292–293, the Royal Museum for Central Africa. The museum was under conflicting pressures: from the old-colonial lobby, determined to continue celebrating Belgium's period of rule over the Congo; from many Belgians, including younger members of the museum's own staff, who thought it was time for drastic changes; from government officials worried about the country's image; and, it was rumored, from the royal family. In 1999, a museum official acknowledged that possible changes in its exhibits were under study, "but absolutely not because of the recent disreputable book by an American."⁶ Two years later, the government appointed a new director. In a long stream of newspaper interviews he promised a complete revamping.

In 2005, with much fanfare, the museum mounted a large temporary exhibit, "Memory of the Congo: The Colonial Era," simultaneously publishing a lavishly illustrated book of the same name. Both exhibit and book were examples of how to pretend to acknowledge something without really doing so. Among the hundreds of photographs the museum displayed, for instance, were four of the famous atrocity pictures from Morel's slide show. But these were shown small, and more than a dozen other photos — almost all of innocuous subjects, like Congolese musicians — were blown up to life size. Another picture showed a hearing by Leopold's 1904–1905 Commission of Inquiry, which a caption praised as "a pioneering initiative in the history of human rights in Central Africa." But there was nothing about the king's duplicitous efforts (see pages 251–252) to sabotage the release of the commission's findings. The museum's book had a half-page photo of Captain Léon Rom — but made no mention of his collection of severed African heads, the gallows he erected in his front yard, or his role as a possible model for Conrad's murderous Mr. Kurtz. Exhibit and book justly celebrated William Sheppard as a pioneer lay anthropologist, but said nothing about his role as a target of the legal case I've described on pages 259–265. The book contained more than three dozen scholarly articles about everything from the bus system of Leopoldville to the Congo's national parks. But not a single article — nor a single display case in the museum — was devoted to the foundation of the territory's colonial economy, the forced labor system. Nowhere in either book or exhibit could you find the word "hostage." This does not leave me optimistic about seeing the Congo's history fully portrayed by the Royal Museum in the future.⁷ But colonialism seldom is, anywhere. Where in the United States can you find a museum exhibit dealing honestly with our own imperial adventures in the Philippines or Latin America?

Looking back on this book after an interval of some years has reminded me of where I wish I could have done more. My greatest frustration lay in how hard it was to portray individual Africans as full-fledged actors in this story. Historians often face such difficulties, since the written record from colonizers, the rich, and the powerful is always more plentiful than it is from the colonized, the poor, and the powerless. Again and again it felt unfair to me that we know so much about the character and daily life of Leopold and so little about those of Congolese indigenous rulers at the time, and even less about the lives of villagers who died gathering rubber. Or that so much is on the record about Stanley and so little about those who were perhaps his nearest African counterparts: the coastal merchants already leading caravans of porters with trading goods into the interior when he first began staking out the Congo for Leopold. Of those who worked against the regime, we know the entire life stories of Europeans or Americans like Morel, Casement,

and Sheppard, but almost nothing of resistance leaders like Kandolo or Mulume Niama who lost their lives as rebels. This skews the story in a way that, unintentionally, almost seems to diminish the centrality of the Congolese themselves.

I wrestled with this problem repeatedly while writing the book and have no better solution to it now. There are fine anthropological studies of various Congolese peoples, but the biographical record on individual Africans from this era is scanty. A history based on characters must be mainly the story of King Leopold and those of his supporters or opponents who were European or American. If we are to enter deeply into the personal lives of individual Congolese in this period, it may have to be done in fiction, as novelists like Chinua Achebe have done for the colonial era elsewhere in Africa, or as Toni Morrison has done for the life experience of American slaves.

One set of African voices remembering the Leopold era, however, is now available in a form that it was not when I wrote the book. The quotation on page 166 comes from an article based on interviews, in the 1950s, with dozens of Africans who survived the rubber terror of half a century earlier. A Belgian missionary, Edmond Boelaert, conducted these conversations and then translated them along with another missionary, Gustaaf Hulstaert, and a Congolese colleague, Charles Lonkama. The two priests were anticolonialists of a sort, frequently in trouble with Catholic authorities. The Centre Aequatoria, at a mission station near Mbandaka, Congo, and its Belgian supporters have now placed on the Internet the full French text of these interviews, which run to some two hundred pages. All are, unfortunately, far too short to give us a full picture of someone's life, but they still offer rare firsthand African testimony.

For the book I wrote after *King Leopold's Ghost*, I spent several years living, intellectually, in the company of the Protestant evangelicals who played a crucial role in the British antislavery movement of 1787–1833. That experience made me think I had understated, in this book, the importance of the evangelical tradition in the appeal of Congo reform to the British public. A recent study by Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slavery in Africa, 1884–1926*, reinforced this impression. Grant shows how virtually everyone who has written about Morel, myself included, has overlooked the way Baptist missionaries had already started to draw large crowds in Scotland to "magic lantern" slide shows about Congo atrocities two months before Morel founded the Congo Reform Association. He has also unearthed some disturbing material about how Morel's single-minded focus on his Congo campaign led him to whitewash the plight of forced laborers in Portuguese Africa who harvested the cocoa beans used by his friend and benefactor, the chocolate manufacturer William Cadbury. By contrast, Grant's account of Morel during the First World War makes one admire the man's courage even more. Not only did he suffer prison for his antiwar beliefs while his former missionary allies got shamelessly swept up by patriotic fever, but he was almost alone, during the war and after, in advocating for Africans' rights to their own land.

Thanks to letters from sharp-eyed readers, for this new edition of *King Leopold's Ghost* I've corrected some misspellings and other minor errors from earlier printings. But one place where there has been no need for any changes is the account of the death toll in chapter 15. Acknowledging this huge loss has always been the hardest thing for Leopold's defenders to face. Without accurate census data, assessing it will always be a matter of estimates. But both at the time and today, the most knowledgeable estimates are high. In addition to those that I cited, I could have mentioned many more.⁸ Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, a Congolese scholar whose *Histoire général du Congo* was published the same

year as *King Leopold's Ghost*, put the death toll at roughly thirteen million,⁹ a higher figure than I've suggested. Defensive Belgians sometimes point out that there were catastrophic death rates in other colonies in central Africa, and an even larger toll among American Indians. Both points are true. But this does not negate or excuse the enormous human loss in Leopold's Congo.

This book first appeared just after the longtime dictator Mobutu fell from power. During his time in office, most public services had ceased and government had become, as it was under Leopold, merely a mechanism for the leader and his entourage to enrich themselves. In health, life expectancy, schooling, and income the Congolese people were far worse off at the end of Mobutu's reign than they had been at the end of eighty years of colonialism in 1960. His soldiers had supported themselves by collecting tolls at roadblocks, generals had sold off jet fighters for profit, and during the Tokyo real estate boom, the Congo's ambassador to Japan sold the embassy and apparently pocketed the money.¹⁰ Surely, it seemed, any new regime would be better than this.

At the time Mobutu's rule ended, in 1997, many hoped his long-suffering people would at last be able to reap some of the benefits of the country's natural riches. But this was not to be. News from the misnamed Democratic Republic of Congo in the past few years has been so grim as to make one want to turn the page or change the TV channel in despair: mass rapes by HIV-infected troops, schools and hospitals looted, ten-year-old soldiers brandishing AK-47s. For years after Mobutu's fall, the country was ravaged by a bewilderingly complicated civil war. Across the land have ranged troops from seven nearby African countries, the ruthless militias of local warlords, and rebel groups from other nations using this vast and lawless territory as a refuge, such as the Hutu militia responsible for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The Rwandan army later pursued these soldiers into the Congo, carried out something of a counter-genocide of their own, and then helped themselves to more than \$250 million worth of the Congo's natural resources in one two-year stretch alone. Various of these forces, plus the Congo's nominal government and several opposition groups, have been connected or riven by a constantly changing array of alliances.

Multinational corporations have also been in on the take. What protects their interests now is no longer the old Force Publique but rather under-the-table agreements with the different national armies and Congolese factions. Just as ivory and rubber drove the search for profits in the old days, today these companies have been eagerly extracting Congo's diamonds, gold, timber, copper, cobalt, and columbium-tantalum, or coltan, which is used in computer chips and cell phones. Coltan has at times rivaled gold in price per ounce; eastern Congo has more than half the world's supply. The fighting has been over riches, not ideology; the worst combat sometimes shifted location with the rise and fall of relative commodity prices.

By 2004, human rights organizations reported, the war's death toll was almost four million, and more than two million people were refugees. Few of the dead have been soldiers. Most are ordinary men, women, and children, caught in crossfire, unlucky enough to have stumbled onto land mines, or forced to flee their homes for forests or for crowded refugee camps that turn into fields of mud in the rainy season. Just as in Leopold's time, by far the greatest toll has been taken by the diseases that ravage a traumatized, half-starving population, some of it in flight. As I write this in 2005, the toll

has been the largest concentration of war-related fatalities anywhere on earth since the end of World War II. Despite periodic truces and power-sharing agreements, the deaths seem likely to continue.

The rebel militias, the Congo's African neighbors, and many of their corporate allies have little interest in ending the country's Balkanization. They prefer a cash-in-suitcases economy to a taxed and regulated one that would give all citizens a real share of the profits from natural resources. For the Congo, the combination of being a great mineral treasure house and in effect having no working government has been catastrophic. When there is no money in the public till, armies become self-financing networks of miners and smugglers. When there are few schools or jobs, they can easily recruit children. When the millions of small arms circulating in Africa can be bought at street bazaars or from policemen who've received no pay, there are guns for all.

Tragically, no powerful outside constituency, like Morel's Congo reformers, exists to lobby for measures that would help. Nor, to be sure, is it clear what the most effective help would be. But some things should still be tried. One would be to stop pouring arms into Africa so thoughtlessly. During the 1990s alone, the United States gave more than \$200 million worth of equipment and training to African armies, including six of the seven that have had troops in the Congo's civil war. Another step forward would be to remove incentives for looting by criminalizing the illegal trade in minerals. More than sixty countries, including the United States, have signed a somewhat toothless agreement to stop trading in "conflict diamonds." But if conflict diamonds can be outlawed, why not conflict gold and conflict coltan? Such pacts would be difficult to enforce, but so, for many years, was the ultimately successful ban on the Atlantic slave trade. A sufficiently large and empowered United Nations peacekeeping force could also make a huge difference.

We should have no illusions that such a force would solve the Congo's vast problem of having no functioning central government. International intervention in the country is like asking security guards to patrol a bank in mid-robbery. The guards may end up robbing or running the bank, whether at the level of a sergeant smuggling diamonds or a major power contributing troops while demanding favors for its mining companies. But the alternatives are worse. A strong intervention force could ultimately save lives, millions of them. And finally, for all of Africa, ending the subsidies and trade barriers that make it so difficult for farmers in the world's South to sell crops to Europe or North America would be one step in leveling an international economic playing field that remains tilted against the poor.

One reason I wrote this book was to show how profoundly European colonialism has shaped the world we live in. And, remembering how the United States and Europe have protected their investments by supporting disastrous African dictators like Mobutu, we must speak of neocolonialism as well. But I want to end on a note of caution. Despite the thievery of Leopold and his successors, it is wrong to blame the problems of today's Africa entirely on colonialism. Much of history consists of peoples conquering or colonizing each other. Yet, from Ireland to South Korea, countries that were once ruthlessly colonized have nonetheless managed to build reasonably just and democratic societies.

The reasons most of Africa has not done so go far beyond the colonial heritage. One factor is the abysmal position of women and all of the violence, repression, and prejudices that go with that. Another is the deep-seated cultural tolerance and even hero-worship of strongmen like Mobutu, for whom politics is largely a matter of enriching themselves and their extended clan or ethnic group. Finally, perhaps above all, is the way the long history of indigenous slavery is still deeply and disastrously woven into the African social fabric. These same handicaps exist elsewhere. Discrimination against women retards social and economic progress in many countries. Many societies, from the Balkans to Afghanistan, have had trouble building nation-states when power-hungry demagogues inflame ethnic chauvinism. And Africa is not alone in its heritage of slavery: Chekhov, knowing the weight of his own country's history of serfdom, spoke of how Russians must squeeze the slave out of themselves, drop by drop. Russia's continuing troubles show how long and hard a task this is.

Even without the problems of being colonized, the birth of a viable, truly democratic civil society is usually a slow and difficult business. For western Europe to move from the Holy Roman Empire and the panoply of duchies and principalities and mini-kingdoms to its current patchwork of nations took centuries of bloodshed, including the deadly Thirty Years' War, whose anarchic multisidedness and array of plundering outsiders remind one of the Congo today. Africa cannot afford those centuries. Its path will not be an easy one, and nowhere will it be harder than in the Congo.

September 2005

Notes

1. *coalition of these groups*: Union Royale Belge pour les Pays d'Outre-Mer.
2. *"you were mistaken"*: *Congorudi*, Oct. 2001.
3. *"the great king"*: *Bulletin du Cercle Royal Naumurois des Anciens d'Afrique*, no. 4, 1998.
4. *the Guardian*: 13 May 1999.
5. *a journalist noted*: Colette Braeckman, *Les Nouveaux Prédateurs: Politique des puissances en Afrique centrale* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), p. 35.
6. *"book by an American"*: *Guardian*, 13 May 1999.
7. *the Royal Museum in the future*: For more detail on the evasions and denial of the 2005 exhibit, see my article "In the Heart of Darkness," in the *New York Review of Books*, 22 Sept. 2005.
8. *mentioned many more*: For example, R. P. Van Wing, *Études Bakongo: Histoire et Sociologie* (Brussels: Goemaere, 1920), p. 115; or Léon de St. Moulin, "What Is Known of the Demographic History of Zaire Since 1885?" in Bruce Fetter, ed., *Demography from Scanty Evidence: Central Africa in the Colonial Era* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1990), p. 303.

9. *roughly thirteen million*: Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo: De l'héritage ancien à la République Démocratique* (Paris: Duculot, 1998), p. 344. Professor Ndaywel è Nziem informs me that further research for the next edition of his book has made him lower his estimate to ten million. But that would still imply a 50 percent loss of population.

10. *pocketed the money*: See Michela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu's Congo* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), for this and much more.

About the Author

Adam Hochschild was born in New York City in 1942. His first book, *Half the Way Home: A Memoir of Father and Son*, was published in 1986. It was followed by *The Mirror at Midnight: A South African Journey* (1990) and *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin* (1994). *Finding the Trapdoor: Essays, Portraits, Travels* won the 1998 PEN/ Spielvogel-Diamonstein Award for the Art of the Essay. Hochschild's books have been translated into five languages and have won prizes from the Overseas Press Club of America, the World Affairs Council, the Eugene V. Debs Foundation, and the Society of American Travel Writers. Three of his books—including *King Leopold's Ghost*—have been named Notable Books of the Year by *The New York Times Book Review* and *Library Journal*. *King Leopold's Ghost* was also awarded the 1998 California Book Awards gold medal for nonfiction.

Hochschild has also written for *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Mother Jones* (which he co-founded), *The Nation*, and many other magazines and newspapers. A former commentator on National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," he teaches writing at the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. In 1997-98 he was a Fulbright Lecturer in India. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, Arlie, the sociologist and author. They have two sons.

A Conversation with Adam Hochschild

Q) What result of your research for this book surprised you the most?

A) In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the villain, Mr. Kurtz, has topped his fenceposts with severed African heads. Critics most frequently talk about that book in terms of the evil in us all, rather than the evil of a specific time and place. I found three different officers in King Leopold's private army who collected African heads and whose paths crossed Conrad's. Furthermore, the swashbuckling Captain Léon Rom—like Kurtz—wrote for publication, painted, and was an amateur scientist. How could Conrad's many biographers have missed all this?

Q) If so little had been written about the Congo, how were you able to reconstruct what happened there?

A) Scholars have, in fact, published quite a lot on this period, but usually in obscure places. More important, visitors and officials in the Congo seem to have spent every evening writing letters home. King Leopold himself wrote thousands of letters and memoranda that reveal his lust for colonies and profits. Missionaries and other eyewitnesses kept diaries. A few brave whistle blowers in the Congo administration smuggled key documents to Europe. Conrad kept a journal. Several officers of Leopold's private army bragged in their notebooks about how many Africans their men killed each day. Old newspapers were also very revealing. Sadly, there are virtually no documents from this period left in the Congo itself.

Q) What links do you see between the Congo's history and the troubles there today?

A) Even before the Europeans arrived, central Africa's indigenous societies were not democratic. And then the experience of several hundred years of little but plunder — first by slavers, then by King Leopold's murderous forced-labor system, then by the more orderly Belgian administration—was a terrible foundation for democracy. On top of all that, since 1965 the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who took power with strong U.S. support, robbed his own country even more thoroughly than Leopold had.

Q) How do you decide what subjects to write about?

A) What most of my works, long and short, have in common is an enduring fascination with good and evil, and with the vagaries of fate, social pressure and political systems, and with the mysteries of character that make a person behave one way or the other. Why did a provincial Belgian book-keeper become a marauder in the Congo? How did an idealistic young Hungarian doctor become a feared secret police chieftain in Siberia? Why, on the other hand, did the son of a former governor general of South Africa turn anti-apartheid crusader? What made a neo-Nazi activist in America become a human rights crusader? And why did a rising young British shipping executive leave his job to become the greatest muckraker of his day? Every time I find such people, I'm drawn to them.