

The Scramble for Africa

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In 1880 the continent of Africa was largely unexplored by Europeans. Less than thirty years later, only Liberia and Ethiopia remained unconquered by them. The rest - 10 million square miles with 110 million bewildered new subjects - had been carved up by five European powers (and one extraordinary individual) in the name of Commerce, Christianity, 'Civilization' and Conquest. The Scramble for Africa is the first full-scale study of that extraordinary episode in history.

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Chapter One

Leopold's Crusade

Brussels

7 January-15 September 1876

'The current is with us.'

Leopold II, King of the Belgians, at the Geographical Conference in Brussels, 12 September 1876

'He [King Leopold] first explained his views to me when I was his guest in Brussels some years ago . . . his designs are most philanthropic and are amongst the few schemes of the kind . . . free from any selfish commercial or political object.'

-- Sir Bartle Frere, 1883

The Times was delivered at the palace of Laeken on 7 January 1876, as usual, in time for His Majesty's breakfast. Leopold II had been up since five. Normally he took a walk through the palace gardens, a tall bearded figure, tramping along the gravelled paths with a barely noticeable limp, or, if it was wet, inspecting the hothouses. He read The Times each day. It was the early edition, the one that caught the night mails to the Continent. His own copy was packed in a special cylindrical container, hurried by the South-Eastern Railway from Blackfriars to Dover, then by the steam ferry to Ostend, then thrown from the guard's van as the Brussels express clanged past the royal palace at Laeken where a footman was waiting to retrieve it. Leopold read the paper with the same earnestness he displayed when performing other royal tasks, brushing the front of his blue tunic with his right hand when something caught his eye.

That morning, 7 January, tucked away at the bottom of page six, was a brief note from The Times's correspondent in Loanda, capital of the half-derelect Portuguese colony of Angola, dated nearly seven weeks earlier. Lieutenant Cameron, the British explorer, had

reached the west coast after a three-year journey across Africa. He was too ill (half-dead from scurvy) to return to England before the spring. Meanwhile, he was sending some notes from his travels to be read at a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society on Monday next.

Four days later, under the heading 'African Exploration', The Times splashed Monday's meeting of the RGS across the first three columns of the home news page. The President, Sir Henry Rawlinson, called Cameron's journey 'one of the most arduous and successful journeys which have ever been performed into the interior of the African continent'. That seemed no exaggeration to those who read Cameron's own letters, given to the public at the meeting. Of course Cameron was the first to point out there might be 'diplomatic difficulties' ahead, although no European power yet claimed the land either as a colony or a protectorate. This was because of the huge wealth at stake.

The interior is mostly a magnificent and healthy country of unspeakable richness. I have a small specimen of good coal; other minerals such as gold, copper, iron and silver are abundant, and I am confident that with a wise and liberal (not lavish) expenditure of capital, one of the greatest systems of inland navigation in the world might be utilized, and from 30 months to 36 months begin to repay any enterprising capitalist that might take the matter in hand . . . 1

A country of 'unspeakable richness' waiting for an 'enterprising capitalist'. What were Leopold's own views about young Cameron and his sensational discoveries? Cameron's story certainly caught his eye. Within a few days he had promised the RGS that he would pay, if needed, the princely sum of 100,000 francs (≈ 4000) to cover the expenses Cameron had incurred on the journey.

In public, however, Leopold showed no flicker of interest. In the Senate he would stand like a Roman emperor, tall, bearded, his nose like the prow of a trireme. In his slow booming voice, he spoke the required generalities. He had learnt the craft of monarchy in a hard school. His father, Leopold I, was the son of an impoverished German princeling, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. He had had his eye on the good solid throne of England where he would have been consort, through his marriage to Princess Charlotte, George IV's heir presumptive. Charlotte had died in childbirth in 1817. In 1831 Leopold I had picked up a throne in Belgium--but a throne perched on a tightrope. Inside Belgium were two warring peoples, Flemish and Walloon, and two warring sects, Liberals and Catholics. Outside Belgium, hemming it in, were two warring Powers, France and Germany. The King of the Belgians was thus doubly vulnerable. His own survival depended on the goodwill of a bitterly divided people. Belgium's survival depended on the goodwill of two greedy neighbours. To preserve both throne and nation, the King must remain aloof from controversy. Aloofness seemed to come naturally to Leopold II. He seemed to have a natural coolness of heart--or at any rate a temperament chilled by the rebuffs of fortune. His father, Queen Victoria's 'dearest uncle', had shown scant affection for any of his three children. He found Leo gauche and self-willed. Leopold's gentle mother Louise, daughter of

Louis-Philippe of France, was devoted to her children, though it was clear Leopold was not her favourite. She had died when Leopold was twelve. And his own son, on whom he doted, died tragically young, leaving Leopold without a direct male heir. At the funeral the King had, for once, lost control. To the alarm of onlookers, he broke down and sobbed aloud by the coffin.

Still, since his accession in 1865, he had hardly put a foot wrong in public. If he was known at all in the world outside Belgium it was as a model, if somewhat pedestrian, ruler. He was admirably free from those delusions of grandeur that so often seemed to fill the crowned heads of petty states.

To his own staff and the handful of politicians who dealt with him regularly, Leopold presented a more complicated character . . .

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