

## REVIEW ESSAY

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### THE ESSENTIAL AFRICA READER

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- Morris, Donald R. *The Washing of the Spears: The Rise and Fall of the Zulu Nation*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965. 650pp. \$25.15
- Moorehead, Alan. *The White Nile*. New York: Harper and Row, 1960. 448pp. \$14.95
- Pakenham, Thomas. *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876–1912*. New York: Random House, 1994. 738pp. \$23.95
- Hochschild, Adam. *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa*. Boston: Mariner's Books, 1998. 400pp. \$15
- Shaxson, Nicholas. *Poisoned Wells: The Dirty Politics of African Oil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 288pp. \$18.95
- Horne, Alistair. *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962*. New York: Macmillan, 2006. 624pp. \$19.95
- Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk to Freedom*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1994. 558pp. \$19.85
- Nugent, Paul. *Africa since Independence: A Comparative History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. 624pp. \$75
- Schraeder, Peter. *African Politics and Society: A Mosaic in Transformation*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2004. 378pp. \$41.95
- Chan, Stephen. *Grasping Africa: A Tale of Tragedy and Achievement*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2007. 224pp. \$32
- Ayittey, George. *Africa Unchained: The Blueprint for Africa's Future*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 512pp. \$19.95

Events in Africa, from the killing fields of eastern Congo and Darfur to the remote reaches of the Niger Delta and the slums of Nairobi, are increasingly capturing the limelight. Africa matters now more than ever to the United States. Given this new reality, escalating American involvement on the continent will undoubtedly be a defining hallmark in future decades for both the United States and African countries. Whether or not this engagement is ultimately successful, however, will largely depend on how well the United States understands the continent and its people.

To that end, I am frequently asked to recommend the one magical book that “explains Africa.” Since no such book exists, the next best thing is to provide a short list of essential works addressing key trends and themes that have helped shape the continent of today.<sup>1</sup> The challenge here is to identify books that provide a balanced picture of Africa’s triumphs and tragedies; highlight the continent’s diversity, while recognizing common interests and challenges; and capture the heart and soul of the land, its people, and the African spirit—that unique and often unfathomable resilience and optimism that has shown itself in the face of enormous adversity. That is the quest I have undertaken here.

There are a number of excellent, meticulous studies of African history.<sup>2</sup> *The Washing of the Spears*, by Donald R. Morris, looks at the rise to prominence of the Zulu kingdom in the early nineteenth century and its inevitable confrontation in southern Africa with imperial Britain. It is a must-read for many reasons. That a seemingly “primitive” people could defeat on the field of battle at Isandhlwana in 1879 the most powerful and professional military of its day speaks to the resourcefulness and innovativeness that would come to define African resistance to European colonialism. Just as important, Zulu nation-building, beginning in 1817, set in motion a series of incidents (the *mfecane*, or crushing) that has been called “one of the great formative events in African history.”<sup>3</sup> The *mfecane* would dramatically transform the demographic, political, and social terrains of southern and eastern Africa and have repercussions that still linger nearly two hundred years later.

Another classic, Alan Moorehead’s *The White Nile*, examines early European fascination with the “dark continent” in the run-up to the scramble for Africa through the eyes of such famous explorers as Richard Burton, John Hanning Speke, and Samuel Baker. It also contrasts the motivations of the humanist David Livingstone with those of the American adventurer Henry Morton Stanley. Ostensibly an account of the exploration of the Nile, it is much more, providing as it does the rich historical context of many of today’s pressing and intertwined challenges in Sudan, Chad, Egypt, and Uganda. Reading the chapters on Charles Gordon, the rise of Mahdism, the Muslim revolt, and the reconquest of Sudan in 1898 will reveal a direct, bright line to the current issues of Islamic extremism, the southern Sudan question, and Darfur.

Thomas Pakenham's *The Scramble for Africa* retraces the "great game" in Africa in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the continent became—and not for the last time—a venue for great-power competition and conflict. The potent imperial cocktail of "God, glory, and gold" fueled a colonial onslaught that would bring the nations of Europe to the brink of war on more than one occasion and reshape Africa forever. Pakenham's behind-the-scenes look at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85 examines the personal and geopolitical factors driving the partition of the continent. The result of these machinations would be an enduring legacy of ill-conceived colonial borders and artificial African states that still exist today.

No one benefited more from the Berlin Conference than Belgium's King Leopold II. Adam Hochschild's vividly descriptive *King Leopold's Ghost* recounts Leopold's ruthless quest from 1885 to 1908 to exploit the riches of the Congo. The result, according to the novelist Joseph Conrad, was "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of the human conscience" (p. 4). Leopold became a very rich man (with a fortune of, conservatively, \$1.1 billion in today's dollars), but at enormous human cost—about half the territory's population was killed or died as a result of starvation, exposure, or disease during his rape of the Congo. Independence from Belgium in 1960 brought little relief. The Congo's colonial masters were simply replaced by a succession of African kleptocrats who (often with Western support) continued to plunder the country and produce massive human suffering. The horror continues. The smoldering ten-year-old conflict for power and control of natural resources in the eastern Congo has left up to five million people dead in what has become Africa's forgotten war.

Unfortunately, the Congo is not alone. The global rush to tap Africa's resources, which increasingly fuel the economies of the world, has been a critical source of conflict and instability across the continent. The ivory, gold, slaves, and rubber of old have been replaced with cobalt, coltan, diamonds, timber, and, most of all, oil. Oil, Africa's blessing and curse, has become an American addiction: African oil imports to the United States now top 20 percent, surpassing Middle Eastern imports in 2007. Nicholas Shaxson's *Poisoned Wells: The Dirty Politics of African Oil* is an unflattering inside look at the impact of oil as a divider of African society.<sup>4</sup> Using a journalistic style, Shaxson takes the reader on a remarkable journey from the wood-paneled boardrooms of Houston, London, Paris, and Geneva to the sweltering heat of the Gulf of Guinea. Along the way one encounters a vast array of corrupt Western and African officials, manipulative businessmen and politicians, and the economics of dirty money. What is astounding is not that the oil business in Africa is, and has long been, an insider's game, shrouded in secrecy, fueled by personal ambitions, and riddled with

corruption, but the sheer magnitude of the corruption and the cost to African societies. By some estimates Nigeria has lost through corruption and mismanagement over half the \$600 billion it has earned since it first started pumping oil in 1956, and for all the nation's wealth the average citizen survives on less than a dollar a day.<sup>5</sup> Rather than the exception, this seems to be the rule. Nigeria and other major oil producers Angola and Sudan rank in the bottom fifth of the UN Development Index.

Although first published over thirty years ago, Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954–1962* remains a must-read on multiple levels for those grappling with today's security challenges in Africa. It provides, first and foremost, an insightful analysis of the bloody Algerian anticolonial struggle that was to become the prototype for wars of liberation in Africa. The conflict took over a million lives, permanently displaced another million, and shook the French Republic to its core. The book remains relevant today because of its implications for the current war on terror. It is highly popular in official Washington circles, although many misguided inferences appear to have been drawn from it, including the rationalization that ends justify the means. In the revised 1996 edition, Horne perceptively links the war and its aftermath to the rise of Algerian international jihadists, by demonstrating the globalized nature of domestic and international security challenges.

If Horne's work is a tale of woe and gloom for the future of independent Africa, Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, provides rays of inspiration and hope for what Africa could be. Begun clandestinely in 1974 while Mandela was imprisoned on Robben Island (the apartheid regime's Alcatraz for hard-core political prisoners), the book paints a detailed picture of his life and the events that would transform him into South Africa's first majority-rule president in 1994. From his birth in rural Transkei in 1918, of royal Xhosa lineage, and through a typical African childhood on the veldt, one accompanies Mandela on his journey of political awakening in the South Africa of the 1940s and 1950s. Through this introspective portrait, the reader gains a greater appreciation of the values and events that shaped his life and personal philosophy. In his deeply held respect for rural traditions and customs, his sense of duty and loyalty, and his growing frustration with a political system that denied fundamental rights to the majority of its citizens, one sees a man transformed into a powerful political figure and inspirational leader in the fight against apartheid. The reader is also introduced to the statesman who, as president, was committed to reconciliation and looking to the future: "I would not mince words about the horrors of apartheid, but I said, over and over, that we should forget the past and concentrate on building a better future for all" (p. 535).

Taken together, Paul Nugent's *Africa since Independence: A Comparative History* and Peter Schraeder's *African Politics and Society: A Mosaic in Transformation* represent a sweeping yet thoughtful look at the key factors underpinning the political, social, and economic development of modern Africa. Moreover, although taking very different epistemological approaches to the task, both do highly effective jobs, building solid historical contexts for their critical explorations of the challenges facing Africa today. Whether in Nugent's critical analysis of democratic trends or Schraeder's examination of the role of ethnicity and class, the reader sees that history, culture, and societal context matter. (One wishes that many of those reporting on the 2007 postelection violence in Kenya had taken the time to read Schraeder's analysis of ethnicity and class in Africa.)

So, what is to be done? Stephen Chan's readable yet profound *Grasping Africa: A Tale of Tragedy and Achievement* does a powerful job of portraying the human side of African problems and offers a bottom-up approach to improving the condition of Africa. That approach envisions "more than distribution tables and aid requirements. It is about something very great in the face of tragedy" (p. xi). To Chan and many others, addressing the continent's problems, which are fundamentally rooted in the lack of economic development and individual empowerment, requires solutions that speak to improving the condition of ordinary Africans. Although espousing largely an African-centric approach, Chan believes the world can help give Africa a fighting chance by lifting restrictive and detrimental trade policies.

Reaching largely the same conclusion, the distinguished if controversial Ghanaian economist George Ayittey in *Africa Unchained: The Blueprint for Africa's Future* meticulously walks the reader through the numbers and leadership failures that underlie the continent's malaise. For Ayittey the remedy is simple—it is the little guy. It is to be found in African indigenous economic institutions that have long existed: "All that is required is to take what is there, build or improve upon the existing institutions, and unleash the creative and entrepreneurial energies of the African people" (p. 398). Ayittey, however, readily acknowledges that even this straightforward task will be difficult to accomplish without significant reforms in the international system and the donor community. Also, he warns, entrenched domestic interests of the "hippo generation" of old-line African leaders will be resistant to change.

Taken together, this collection of books paints a stark portrait of a continent that has suffered much, not only at the hands of outsiders but of its own doing as well. The Africa of today, for better or worse, is a manifestation of this historical legacy, but its future certainly is not bound by it. While these books tell a tale of violence, despair, and man's inhumanity to man, they also show resilience and persistence in the face of often insurmountable odds. They show an Africa

increasingly willing to accept responsibility for its future while acknowledging the need for a helping hand and understanding from the rest of the world. A new generation of African leaders and average citizens is fighting to achieve life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Perhaps we as Americans have more in common with our African brethren than we realize after all.

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#### NOTES

1. My self-imposed parameters for selecting these “essential works” were: nonfiction only (while acknowledging that many excellent works of fiction address important African issues and themes), no textbook-style books (as a group they provide a continental perspective), enduring themes and major trends, relevance to today, and a maximum of ten books. Although the bulk of these criteria is admittedly subjective, I believe they provided effective guidance in the selection process. Only on the last point did I fail—there are eleven books on the list.
2. See, for example, Basil Davidson, *A History of Africa*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1974); John Reader, *Africa: A Biography of the Continent* (New York: Knopf, 1988); or the multi-volume work A. E. Afigbo et al., *The Making of Modern Africa* (New York: Longman, 1986) as historical reference works.
3. In the words of famed southern African historian J. D. Omer-Cooper, as cited in T. R. H. Davenport, *South Africa: A Modern History* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 10.
4. See also John Ghazvinian, *Untapped: The Scramble for Africa’s Oil* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2007), reviewed in *Naval War College Review* 60, no. 4 (Autumn 2007), pp. 142–43, for a similar analysis.
5. “Documenting the Paradox of Oil, Poverty in Nigeria,” Weekend Edition Sunday, NPR, 6 July 2008. See also [www.publishwhatyoupay.org](http://www.publishwhatyoupay.org) for a look at efforts to promote transparency in the oil sector.