

BOOK REVIEW

Surveying the Archives of the Congo Free State

The Congo Free State: What Could the Archives Tell Us? New Light and Research Perspective

Edited by Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi.
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In the summer heat of 1908, streams of smoke were rising from the chimneys of the Royal Palace in Brussels. King Leopold II was burning the administrative papers of the Congo Free State, a colonial entity in the heart of Africa that he ruled as his personal domain, because the Belgian Parliament was moving to take the colony away from him. “They will have my Congo,” Leopold reportedly said, “but they will never know what I did there.”¹ Despite the king’s efforts, a scattering of official reports, administrative documents, company records, missionary narratives, and private papers have survived, often hidden in a variety of government archives and private collections. Patricia Van Schuylenbergh and Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi, curators at the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, have compiled and edited a valuable collection of twelve essays that survey documentary sources for the history of the Congo Free State (referred to as “CFS”) found mostly in Belgium.

Two of the essays look at the major archival collections of CFS documents in Belgium. Luis Angel Bernardo y Garcia surveys the Belgian State Archives related to the CFS. Referring to the archives as a “Labyrinth,” he traces the history of changing government policies toward the different archival collections and reveals that CFS documents were often transferred from one archive to another. In a parallel essay, Tom Morren surveys the archives of the Royal Museum for Central Africa, which hold many private letters and journals of soldiers, administrators, missionaries, and other persons active in the Congo Free State.

Other essays deal with more focused collections. Olivier Defrance tells the amazing story of the Goffinet Archives, which were discovered in 1983 in a walled-in cellar in an old chateau that was scheduled for demolition. They contain personal papers of King Leopold II which were believed to have been lost. Mathilde Leduc-Grimaldi surveys the Stanley Archives at the Royal Museum for Central Africa and traces how Stanley’s mission in the Congo expanded from signing treaties of friendship with local chiefs to signing treaties of cession and building stations with the trappings of a colonial state. Giacomina Macola examines the personal papers of Lt. Clément Brasseur,

¹As quoted on the back cover of Daniel Vangroenweghe, *Du Sang sur les Laines: Léopold II et son Congo* (Brussels: Didier Hatier, 1986).

who was the head of a CFS post in Katanga from 1893 to 1897. He shows how the CFS incorporated preexisting warlord polities and personnel into its structure and argues that examining the system of indirect rule provides a more nuanced explanation for the violence than does King Leopold's greed.

Some chapters trace research across multiple archives. David Gordon examines the archival underpinnings of two colonial archetypes: the evil "Kurtz type" (colonial soldiers) and the heroic "Prospero figures" (Christian missionaries). Xavier Luffin examines correspondence in Kiswahili and Arabic from the eastern Congo that is found in various archives in Belgium and sorts out the confusing identity terminology related to words such as "Arab, Swahili, Wangwana, and Muslim." Mathieu Zana Etambala explores relations between Leopold and the English Catholic Church, using various archives in Belgium and the Westminster Diocesan Archives in London. He shows that the Church's support for King Leopold remained strong until 1906, when it began to shift in favor of a Belgian takeover.

The final section of the book contains four case studies, each focused on a single character. Gert de Wolf looks at the correspondence of Lt. Edward Tilkins, a CFS official facing a prison sentence for crimes against local villagers, who tried to sell a trove of scandalous CFS documents to E. D. Morel, the head of the Congo Reform Association in Britain. Guy Vanthemsche uses the case of Gustav Rabinek, an Austrian-Hungarian trader in rubber and ivory who was convicted of illegal trading, to explore how trade was organized, how disputes were settled, and how competing authorities worked in concert. Patricia Van Schuylenbergh's essay follows the career of Adrien van den Hove, who worked as a rubber collecting agent for the *Compagnie du Kasai*. She employs a microhistory approach to shed light on the operations of the company and its impact on the local populations. Jean-Luc Vellut looks at R. E. Dennett's short-lived newsletter called *The Congo Mirror*, which exposed and critiqued crimes perpetrated by the CFS. Two issues, each composed of four folio-sized pages, were produced in 1891, only one of which has survived. Vellut skillfully uses that issue as the centerpiece of a wider discussion of the CFS and its critics.

This book is essential reading for anyone doing research on the history of the Congo Free State. The essays clearly demonstrate that there remains much archival material to be mined by historians. As with other colonial-era documents, they focus mainly on the colonizers, but historians of Africa can use them to make informed inferences about the consequences for the colonized as well.