

**TALES FROM THE DARK CONTINENT:  
IMAGES OF BRITISH COLONIAL AFRICA IN THE 20TH CENTURY**  
edited by Charles Allen

(St. Martin's Press: xvii + 166 pp.; \$11.95)

**THE FRENCH ENCOUNTER WITH AFRICANS**

by William B. Cohen

(Indiana University Press; xix + 360 pp.; \$22.50)

Martin Green

These two books are quite different in character—the British one essentially a collection of anecdotes, the American a scholarly treatise—but they are alike in their subject matter and in the subject's potential political function. Both bear upon that long imperialism which has brought the nations of the West to where they stand now and which still shapes their behavior and the behavior of others toward them. The two books are unequally serious in intentions, but which one should we take seriously? Serious intentions do not always deserve serious responses, nor does professed frivolity exempt one from judgment. In this case it seems to me that the crucial criteria for both books derive from the fact that they *are* books—messages written by bookmen for other bookmen. We must judge the message with one eye on the medium.

*Tales From the Dark Continent* might perhaps claim that it is not really a book, since it originated in England as a series of radio programs in which some fifty men and women talked about their experiences as administrators of the British Empire in Africa. But it arrives in our hands as a book, its chapters all conceptually oriented, and introduced by an Oxford don. There are some excellent photographs and some even more interesting old advertisements by firms based in Africa or serving the men and women who went out there. One might say that the illustrations alone are worth, if not the price of the book, at least the effort of borrowing it from a public library. But one would have to add that "they alone" is operative in both its meanings.

The anecdotes aim only to entertain an audience just like the people who are speaking—upper middle class and upper middle-aged. The speakers are not overtly Blimpish in political or racial attitudes; indeed, the social tone is ironic, or at least self-deprecating. It

would certainly be excessive to work up any indignation against these people for being who they are or for presenting themselves as they do. Nevertheless, the appeal and range of reference could not be more limited and determined.

The people who put together these radio programs and this book have produced something trivial on one of those few topics which are in England today of the greatest sensitivity, on which every word is important. England is living through the end of empire, and its ex-imperial subjects are crowding its towns and city streets; anger and resentment, injustice and riot are ready to explode at a dozen places. It is a situation which has to be talked about, in all the best ways that books can talk. Many of those best ways are indirect, but not one of them is trivial. The end of empire is not a matter for private jokes between upper-class retirees. Yet that is essentially what Charles Allen gives us—not only in this book but in his other two publications, *Plain Tales From the Raj* and *Raj: A Scrapbook of British India*.

There is a book-buying and book-reading public for such stories now in England. I am not saying that every book on this subject should be charged with moral indignation, much less political radicalism. But the range of options of acceptable treatment is not wide enough to include that which is both socially exclusive and morally trivial. Books like this can only do harm.

*The French Encounter With Africans*, on the other hand, is an academic book. It is not a good read, being essentially a compilation of note cards; and, as acknowledged in a final chapter, it is remote from the social-political function of its subject. On the other hand, it is a genuinely useful book for scholars in other fields. It proceeds chronologi-

cally, giving an account of what was written about Africa by Frenchmen, both with an eye to the famous names and with a more statistical eye to citation-counts. Moreover, alongside the chronological organization runs something more conceptual and discursive that organizes the material in parallel. Of the nine chapters, three have to do with slavery, two with imperialism, and two more with racist theory—or perhaps three, since the chapter on the *Philosophes* is essentially about that, although the title does not display the fact.

The book, then, is well organized, and all the facts you want to refer to later are to be found in appropriate pigeonholes. It is essentially a work of intellectual history, however, and suffers from the biases of such work. Cohen tends to assume that an idea derives from some earlier idea and determines subsequent behavior. In fact, it seems to me, ideas often derive from behavior and only feebly influence, or merely decorate, other behavior. We are talking, of course, of ideas like those expressed by whites in general about blacks in general. Cohen is implicitly severe upon every idea about racial identity because it can license pride or prejudice, suspicion or revulsion. He thinks that if we had all been taught the right idea—that everyone is the same as everyone else—there would be no such thing as racial conflict. This seems to me an illusion, calling for a curative dose of Marxism or simple common sense. It is the power relations, the property relations, the production relations within which groups meet that determine what they feel and think about each other. Their *ideas* become significant only when those relations are strained, and then they are significant in the strict sense—as the signs of something else.

However, these objections do not apply to Cohen's treatment of groups with a substantial intellectual identity. He has some interesting things to tell us, for instance, about the socialists. All the many varieties of socialists in France in the first half of the nineteenth century seem to have urged France to acquire an African empire. They thought, reasonably enough, that Frenchmen would have a better chance of developing a democratic society away from the entanglements of the caste-ridden past; but they might have considered the Africans—those who

were already living in those innocent open spaces they planned to improve. The missionaries too seem to have taken to imperialism with a zest. The Société de la Propagation de la Foi was founded in 1832, and its journal soon came out in editions of 100,000. Father (later cardinal) Lavigerie in his first pastoral from Algeria in 1867 declared that "in His providence God has chosen France to make Algeria the cradle of a great and Christian nation," and he envisaged spreading French Christianity to all Africa.

The liberal men of letters were no more cautious. In 1849, Victor Hugo's paper, *L'Événement*, urged the conquest of Madagascar, so that from that island and Algeria the French could launch a two-pronged attack on the whole continent. And Lamartine even earlier recommended colonialism to discharge the excess of Europe's energies upon the wild shores of Asia and Africa. But the most important figure in this history was no doubt Jules Verne. When Hubert Lyautey spoke to a superior in the Colonial Service about an expansive scheme in Indochina, he was told, "But that is pure Jules Verne." Lyautey replied, "Good Lord, yes, sir, of course it is Jules Verne. For twenty years the people who march forward have been doing nothing else but Jules Verne."

In his Afterword, Cohen gives some interesting results of a survey on racial attitudes in contemporary France that tend to call into question the traditional French complacency about their superiority to racism. Apparently, France today has a racial problem like England's, deriving from its similar imperialist past. As an American scholar, Cohen is of course not writing a book that acts upon or within that situation as Allen's book acts within the English situation. But just because he does bring in the social problem, and because of the implicit messages to other bookmen about racist ideas, we are bound to reflect that this kind of book too does a kind of harm. There is no intellectual orthodoxy, no right way to think about race that can be taught to everyone and will resolve racial problems, to try to enforce such an orthodoxy merely makes for primness and cant. There are no educational solutions to political problems. Books have a dialectic responsibility, a complex fate. They must steer their course between the giggling triviality of the first of these books and the stiff solemnity of the second. ▼▼

## GOOD WORK

by E. F. Schumacher

(Harper & Row; xi + 223 pp.; \$9.95)

Sudhir Sen

All human work, according to E. F. Schumacher, has or should have a threefold purpose: to produce necessary and useful goods and services, to enable each of us to use and perfect his or her gifts and skills, and to serve and collaborate with other people so as to "liberate ourselves" from "our inborn egocentricity." Work, to be really good, must satisfy all three conditions, but as organized today it rarely does so.

What the work does to the worker is a vital question, a precondition for sound development and self-fulfillment of every individual; but it is seldom asked. The real task, as Schumacher sees it, is to adapt the work to the needs of the worker; but in the real world this relationship is almost always perverted, and the worker is required to adapt himself to the needs of the work—which means, above all, the needs of the machine. This Schumacher looks upon as the besetting weakness, or sin, of modern industrialism, since it violates the injunction of I Peter: "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." Or, as he puts it even more pointedly, citing Albert Camus, "Without work all life goes rotten, but when work is soulless, life stifles and dies."

Schumacher, in the best tradition of his native Germany, treats life as an indivisible whole. And so, in his thinking, many disciplines—economics, politics, sociology, biology, ecology, and agriculture—are blended with ethics, religion, and philosophy to produce his own brand of *Weltanschauung*. This explains why he can roam freely over a wide field with a reflective mind and quote with impressive ease such heterogeneous sources of inspiration as the Bible, Buddha and Gandhi, Marx and Engels, along with classical and Keynesian economists. As a result, the ideas he propounds may strike social scientists as a strange, if not a crazy, amalgam. Yet it would be an error to dismiss them simply because they are presented in an unconventional guise. For the fact is that quite often they reveal unusual insights, many of them, even when stripped of their spiritual or religious trappings, would stand the



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