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Introduction by Robert Aldrich, The University of Sydney

The study of European overseas expansion has boomed in recent years with both scholarly and popular works, and some that have crossed the boundary between academic and general audiences. Though the history of British and French imperialism is now well known to most readers, as is the early history of Spanish and Portuguese expansion, that of other powers - Belgium, Italy, Germany, Denmark, the United States, and Russia – is less familiar. Even those who know quite a lot about Britain’s Robert Clive, Cecil Rhodes, or Frederick Lugard will hardly recognise the names of such Belgian colonialists as Albert Thys, Charles Lemaire, Pierre Rykmans, and Francis Dhanis. Adam Hochschild’s incisive and controversial *King Leopold’s Ghost* introduced Belgium’s central-African empire to many English readers,¹ and a further study of Belgian colonialism is especially welcome. Matthew G. Stanard makes a good argument for studying the Belgian empire not just to fill in gaps in the historiography of imperialism, but also to weigh the similarities and differences with other cases that it reveals.²

Belgian expansion began with the formation of the International African Association by King Leopold II in 1876 and the takeover, largely at the hands of foreign explorers and troops, of a huge area of central Africa – an area equal to seventy or eighty times the size of Belgium – that from 1885 to 1908 was the private domain of Leopold, the Congo Free State. The ruthless exploitation of the country and its people by concessionary mining companies created such a scandal, especially in Britain, that the King was forced to cede his dominion to the Belgian state, and the Congo from 1908 until 1960 was ruled as a Belgian colony. Unlike the Spanish or the British, the Belgians thus did not have a centuries-long history of overseas colonisation (and Belgium as an independent state had only come into being in 1830). The conquest of the Congo reflected the ambitions of one particular ruler, and the Belgian state essentially was given a colony intact. Other differences are also apparent. Whereas the British settled far and wide in the empire, and Algeria became a French settler society, few Belgians moved to the Congo. Several other European states had empires that spanned the globe or were dispersed around several continents, but Belgium’s was restricted to one region, the Congo (and, after 1920, next-door Ruanda-Urundi). While the British and French made some efforts to accommodate the indigenous populations, bringing a few subjects to Europe for education, incorporating native regiments into their armed forces (especially during the First World War), and allowing representation by non-Europeans (a black Senegalese was elected to the French parliament in 1914 and there were black ministers in the French government in the 1950s), this did not occur in the


Belgian empire. Only a handful of Congolese soldiers served in the Great War, almost no Congolese (except for a few seminarians) studied in Europe, and the government tried to keep Africans from moving to Belgium. What is also striking is the largely unreconstructed nature of Belgian colonialism, as exemplified by the triumphalist presentation of Belgian rule in the Congo at the Brussels world fair of 1958, only twenty months before Congo became independent.

In charting these particularities of the Belgian empire, Stanard focuses on propaganda, which he sensibly defines in a broad fashion. He examines five conduits through which the empire was sold to the Belgians: imperial expositions, museums, education, monuments, and film. He does a fine job of chronicling imperial propaganda in all of these media, and concludes that the Belgians were not the reluctant imperialists they were often imagined to be. There existed a solid core of support for Belgium’s African endeavours, though many remained indifferent to it; there was, he adds, almost no overt opposition to colonialism. Propaganda was necessary to create and nurture active support, and exhibitions and monuments perhaps proved the most crucial strategy in the development of a “significant if limited colonial culture” (15) in the country. Colonial expositions offered the bread and circuses that, organisers hoped, would convince the population of the value of empire, from the first major exhibition in 1897 to that final one sixty-one years later. Some fairs and displays turned into permanent installations, such as the grand Musée royal du Congo belge, which opened in Tervuren in 1910, one year after King Leopold’s death. Its vast halls housed stereotypically picturesque statues of Africans and rolls of honour of Belgians killed in colonisation; its display cases were crammed with apparel, weaponry, and the artefacts of ‘traditional’ life of the Congolese. In the middle stood a statue of Leopold, one of many monuments to the roi-bâtisseur, a king unloved before his death but quickly rehabilitated as the father of the empire.

The state, big business and the Catholic church provided the three pillars of Belgian colonialism, but Stanard shows how many other institutions were proudly complicit in the colonial enterprise, including numerous associations set up specifically to promote the Belgian African empire. He intriguingly suggests that empire indeed provided some of the glue that held together the divisive Walloon/French and Flemish/Dutch parts of the Belgian state.

However, Stanard expresses reservations about the now popular view that imperialism seeped into all areas of European life. One of the major debates in colonial history in the past years has been whether colonialism was omnipresent, touching the lives of almost all the citizens of, say, Britain or France, or conversely whether imperial fervour was limited to a smaller group of people and its effects on daily life in the metropole remained more restricted. Stanard cautiously veers towards the latter view. Some other scholars have opted for a more widespread insinuation of colonial imports into Belgian culture. Deborah
Silverman, for instance, has argued dazzlingly and persuasively that the Congo provided a key inspiration for motifs in Belgium’s *art nouveau* style, a veritable ‘imperial modernism’.

In his review here of Stanard’s book, John Kent sees imperial propaganda as the “icing on the cake” of the economic interests that formed the basis of Leopold’s interest in conquering central Africa, an attempt at sweetening the bitter record of the Belgian treatment of Africans. For Nathalie Tousignant – and, one suspects, for Stanard himself – propaganda had a more powerful connection “with the *making* [my emphasis] of Belgian imperialism.” Lise Namikas underlines the way in which propaganda formed the perspectives through which Belgium “chose to understand and accept its colonial past” and through which it “re-wrote history.” These nuances highlight the challenges, which Stanard himself regularly evokes, of judging the reception and influence of exhibitions, schoolbooks, films, and other types of propaganda, and they point as well to the question of how great a role culture played in imperial undertakings. The cultural turn in history since the late 1970s has moved the debate on empire away from older arguments about the ‘economic taproots of imperialism’ (in John Hobson’s famous phrase), the geopolitical imperatives of empire, and even the social dimensions of European expansion. Although the reviewers shade Stanard’s conclusions, all three agree, and I concur, on propaganda as an essential component of European colonialism. Imperialism was an ever-present (if perhaps, arguably, not omnipresent) aspect of European culture down until the decolonisation of the post-Second World War period because the propaganda-makers worked to make it so.

Stanard has excluded some manifestations of colonial culture from his analysis, such as fictional literature and radio, and Tintin does not make it into his brief. He has worked his way thoroughly through the “maze” (in Tousignant’s word) of archives in his selected areas of study; his discussions are clear and accessible, though with an occasional repetition of points that a more stringent editing could have avoided. He gives much insight into Belgian history, for instance, the ways in which the Saxe-Coburg dynasty remained closely tied to colonialism down until the reign of King Baudouin (1951-1993). He also ably relates Belgian colonial history to that of other countries. Some readers may wish for further background about the Congo, which remains unfamiliar despite newspaper articles about the warfare and other problems of that troubled country. If Stanard says little about Congolese perspectives on Belgian propaganda and colonialism, that is because, he suggests, the African voice was almost never heard in Belgium.

Colonialism left many legacies, and Stanard opens his volume with the scene of a group of people gathering at the colonial monument in the Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels in 2000 to pay tribute to Leopold II and his imperial undertakings. He also mentions, however, incidents in which monuments to colonialism have been attacked or vandalised in Belgium, showing that memories of the colonial epoch are still restive and sensitive. Visitors to the

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Africa museum in Tervuren were, for decades after the Congo became independent, somewhat puzzled – some pleased, some outraged – at the way the Belgian enterprise in equatorial Africa was presented. The curators, to be sure, were faced with difficult questions of multiple audiences, a heritage building intentionally constructed to glorify colonialism, and lingering questions about the Belgian colonial record. A retrospective on the Belgian Congo held at Tervuren in 2005 created much controversy, with impassioned debates about whether it whitewashed Leopold’s and Belgium’s exactions. The museum made several efforts to update some of its exhibitions, for instance, by introducing modern Congolese artworks and display panels with quotations from members of the Congolese diaspora in Belgium, and by setting up displays with competing appraisals of Henry Morton Stanley (who reconnoitred Africa for Leopold and whose archives were purchased by the museum). In December 2013, however, the museum closed for two years of renovation, its master plan suggesting a complete overhaul of the exhibitions, with the transformation of the institution into a showcase of African culture. Readers of Stanard’s fine book will be eagerly waiting to see how the history of Belgian colonialism is resold to the Belgians.

Participants:

**Matthew G. Stanard** is Associate Professor of History at Berry College and recipient of the 2014 Mary S. and Samuel Poe Carden Award for outstanding teaching, scholarship and service to Berry College. Stanard has authored a number of works on European overseas empire including the forthcoming “Interwar Crises and Europe’s Unfinished Empires” in *The Oxford Handbook of Europe 1914-1945*. University of Nebraska Press will issue *Selling the Congo* in paperback in 2015.

**Robert Aldrich** is Professor of European History at the University of Sydney. An updated French version of his book on colonial sites of memory in France was published as *Les Traces coloniales dans le paysage français* (Paris, 2011). He is also the editor of *The Age of Empires* (London, 2007). He is currently researching the history of the banishment of indigenous rulers by British and French colonial authorities.

**John Kent** is a Reader in International Relations at the London School of Economics. He was an editor of three parts of the Series B Middle Eastern volumes of the British Documents on the End of Empire project and has written monographs on British and French and American relations with Africa in the 1950s and 1960s as well as on British imperial strategy and the origins of the Cold War. He is currently working on the relationship between British foreign policy and defence strategy from the efforts to create a third world power to the retreat from East of Suez.

**Lise Namikas**, Ph.D., is an independent scholar and adjunct instructor in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Her book Battleground Africa: Cold War in the Congo (Wilson Center and Stanford University Press) was published in 2013. She is currently working on an article about the Ford administration and Mobutu and a book length project, "Banging the Shoe, Breaking the Gavel" about the UN General Assembly of September 1960.
Born Canadian and living in Belgium for more than twenty-five years, Nathalie Tousignant is Professor of Contemporary History at Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles (former Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis), Head of History unit, Co-director of Centre d’histoire du droit et des institutions (www.crhidi.be) and local coordinator of IAP (VII) BeJust 2.0 (www.bejust.be). She is a specialist of the colonial imaginary, especially on film, and her research focuses on the development of new methods of image analysis, combining historian methodology, semiopragmatics and visual anthropology. She did her Ph.D. under the supervision of Bogumil Jewsiewicki (Université Laval, 1995).
In many respects this is a welcome book, but one dealing with the Congo and European Empires by focussing on the icing of the imperial cake. The icing is well constructed in essentially Belgian imperial terms and carefully sculpted with excellent research going beyond the Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. The substance of the imperial cake, especially (and once again) the economic elements, is not central to the way Empire in the Congo was portrayed and justified, and strangely there are some useful, insightful, and fascinating glimpses revealed on the Belgian imperial cake underneath the icing. Thus while the important links between King Leopold II’s personal fiefdom and its transformation into a possession of the Belgian state in 1908 are not significantly featured in the analysis, the differences between the two are portrayed here as often blurred or fudged together partly because the role of Empire propaganda was instrumental in that. The implications of this for the way that the metropolitan capital in Brussels and the other European empires, particularly London, operated in the Congo, are very significant, especially for the process which produced the end of colonial rule. However, in this book the focus is on imperial propaganda and the way in which attempts to broaden the Empire’s appeal were extended – important as this is.

In a way this reinforces one of the key themes of the book, which creates the idea of the Belgian colony in the Congo embodying a number of special features when compared to other European possessions in Africa. Propaganda was particularly important, as in comparative settler terms the number of white settlers in the colony was very small under Leopold, and even if their numbers grew after 1908 to 17,700, by 1930 they were already in decline. The government’s ten-year post-World War II economic development plan did increase their numbers, with important consequences, to 89,000 at the highest point of settlement in 1959. Yet these numbers were small in comparison to the million French settlers in Algeria by the mid-1950s and the 200,000 in Southern Rhodesia. Even Libya on the eve of the Second World War had 90,000 settlers.

The introduction does refer to the main imperial cake by sketching some of the substantive economic elements of the Congo situation, including the Société Générale de Belgique and its dominant role in the industrial and banking sectors. It includes important explanations of the process by which the almost accidental gaining of an African territory was similar to the way in which the Portuguese possessions in East Africa came into their hands --- because this was more preferable to the bigger African colonial powers than the Germans acquiring them. In the Congo’s case, the element of fear that others could obtain the Congo became an important means of strengthening the colonial propaganda’s appeal in Belgium and a defining element in Belgium’s colonial thinking and presentation of Empire.

The book argues that the impact of Empire on Belgium affected more than Belgian elites because in an era of European universal primary education, greater literacy, and mass entertainment, the awareness of the Empire was thus much greater. Consequently what is often referred to in the literature as Belgium’s ‘reluctant imperialists’ is a significantly misleading term. The role of Empires in the everyday lives of the metropole’s lower orders
has always been somewhat controversial, and for many has produced divergent memories of its impact on their schooldays. As to the way the British Empire was effectively sold, or not, to the public, the author refers to the historian Bernard Porter, who argued for the lack of a “widespread imperial mentality” (22) in Britain.¹ The crucial years may well be those after 1945 when enthusiasm for the Belgian Empire appeared by some measures to be growing. The possible reasons for this are demonstrated here not simply through the lasting statues and other monuments to Belgium’s and Leopold’s rule but much more in the rise of more effective means through which to present propaganda and a distorted or inaccurate depiction of Empire.

Another reason is that selling the Empire centered on what is defined by the author as the three main pillars of Belgian society (7). The leaders of the Catholic Church in Belgium were given special privileges, at least in as much as the colonial government discriminated against foreign missions; the Belgian state was dominated in more than linguistic terms by the French-speaking middle classes who found it even easier to secure special privileges through the Empire in addition to the national prestige and status it offered; and colonial industry was dominated by the leading businesses involved in the extraction of Congo’s mineral resources. But their combined impact was much broader and deeper. Because of the way Leopold’s territory had operated before his domain was superseded by the colonial state, the three most important colonial enterprises were intertwined with the colonial state through ownership of shares and management. This assumed enormous importance and affected the transfer of power in 1960.

How this influenced the Empire’s portrayal and justification in a “deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior” (3) forms the crux of the story. Radio is excluded from the mechanisms which were used to spread this propaganda, but the visual artefacts that could be used to display and justify imperial and colonial practices are well explored here. The covering of such elements inevitably lends a high degree of description to the book, but for those interested there are important conclusions analysed here. Learning about the Congo through colonial expositions which began after 1885 is one way the fudging or merging of Leopold’s État Indépendant du Congo (EIC) with the colonial state after 1908 became more acceptable. And of course in this and other mediums through which the selling of the Empire was accomplished, it was necessary (as with other Empires), significantly to sideline Africans and their history. As part of justifying the mission civilisatrice, Africans had to be portrayed in visual and non-visual ways as backward, primitive, barbaric, and lacking in any history before the arrival of the Belgians.

The many contemporary monuments to Leopold in Belgium and its former territories are witness to the King’s rehabilitation for some, as well as indicating, to a greater or lesser extent, the effectiveness of pro-Empire propaganda. Imperial monuments in Belgium celebrate victory over inferior people and we learn there are many more in Wallonia than

in Flanders -- largely because of the role of the three pillars at the heart of colonial rule that were driven by veterans, interest groups, and local governments. As in France, these often local initiatives were designed to display a national culture. Museums effectively under colonial state control are also featured here as means of selling the Empire through emphasising the Belgian role in significantly contributing to a range of positive developments. The state used a mix of promoting the values of objective science and its artefacts with the ideology of imperialism. Education, especially in schools, was another crucial way of selling the Congo through myths and distortions that produced something of which the Walloons and the Flemish could equally be proud. Hence the Empire as a unifying force in a somewhat divided metropole is indicated – especially given the linkage between the monarchy and the Empire.

One of the two real virtues providing significant additional value to this work is that the icing does allow brief but interesting and important glimpses of not just the imperial cake baked by the Belgian Empire enthusiasts but those baked by French and English imperial enthusiasts, which were also iced with decorative techniques that partially concealed what was emerging from the twentieth century imperial ovens. In the Belgian case the icing joined up the horrors and exploitative nature of Leopold’s Empire with that imperial cake overseen and decorated by the Belgian state. The fascinating ways by which this effectively exonerated the many sordid acts of a rehabilitated Leopold, while making the Empire more appealing to consumers, is one intriguing aspect of this book.

All this despite the fact that the attempts to integrate the Belgian economy with the Congo largely failed. This was perhaps influenced by the inheritance from the EIC of free trade policies preventing any system of imperial preference. Thus the general development of economic ties between Belgium and the Congo was not assisted by the economic importance of the Union Minière du Haut Katanga (UMHK) and the Comité Spécial du Katanga. With the important exception of foreign exchange earnings, the companies were primarily useful for the profits of their Belgian and British shareholders. Thanks to Leopold’s arrangements, after 1908 these also significantly included the colonial state. Similarly, the economic divorce between the metropole and the UMHK, apart from the benefits of controlling foreign exchange earnings through the colonial state, was mirrored in the way in which the metropole kept Africans from the Congo very much at arm’s length. Only controlled visits to Belgium were permitted, while the numbers of Belgian settlers in Central Africa prior to the post-World War II expansion were limited.

The final and perhaps most important and interesting section of the book for this reviewer deals with film and propaganda, particularly in the 1950s when the Cold-War propaganda value of Hollywood to the American 'empire' was waning and about to be eclipsed as a propaganda tool by television. Again the book supports the argument that colonial films promoting the Empire acted as a unifying, not a divisive, force in Belgium. The book also divides films by their target audiences -- European or Africans, with Brussels primarily interested in using inaccurate propaganda for domestic audiences and the Leopoldville government being more concerned with Congolese audiences. The control over film enabled the administration successfully to portray the colony as stable and conflict free and thus far from reality. And while, as the author notes, it is difficult to understand the impact
of these films on the colonial perceptions of their audiences, it was not entirely coincidental that the independence celebrations on the day power was transferred revealed conflicting views of the results of Belgian colonialism as evidenced in the speeches of King Baudouin and newly elected Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba. The use of films in schools, and the way in which the achievements of the Belgians were portrayed, contrasts with the failure to present the harsher realities of colonialism and the costs in money and lives that Africans paid for such European achievements in the Congo, which were never indicated in the propaganda films.

The book effectively provides a valuable addition to the discourses on the way empire has been depicted in the relationship between European metropoles and their colonies with a valuable focus on the somewhat neglected role of the Belgians in the Congo. As the author acknowledges, the African reaction to how their roles were depicted still needs research. The important impact of European propaganda films on the end of African Empires may also benefit from additional research. This is not a criticism of the work under review, but something which would be appropriate given the dominant role of ideology, spin, and distortion in the late twentieth and early twenty first century world.

The contemporary distortion of African experiences and traditions may be unsurprising, and the extent of the support for Edward Said's *Orientalism* is well noted (245). African societies were at best neglected, or at worst villified, in order to assist the portrayal and preservation of positive European contributions to the Congo. Overall, the conclusion is that support for Belgium’s African Empire was sought through similar means as in France and Britain, including education in schools. There may have been a more valid concern about the Congo being desired by other European powers even though trade links between the Congo and the metropole were always overstated, just as the colonial economic benefits accruing to individual Europeans were understated. Hence the importance of selling the Empire in processes which are well illuminated here in a very readable book but in ways which provide much more for those interested in an important component of Central Africa during its years of domination by Belgium.

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“Every empire,” the eminent scholar Edward Said wrote, “tells itself and the world that it is unlike other empires, that its mission is not to plunder and control but to educate and liberate.”¹ Matthew Stanard’s book Selling the Congo illustrates how Belgium sold itself on the idea of empire. Stanard skillfully describes the pro-imperialist messages that accompanied the Belgian colonial era. The author navigates the reader through the myriad expositions, museums, education plans, and films that presented Congo belge to the public. What is so interesting, suggests Stanard, is how the few pro-empire advocates generated a widespread if low-key interest among the ordinary Belgians-in-the-street for the imperial cause.

Every story about Belgian involvement in the Congo begins with King Leopold II, and this one is no different. Leopold’s plunder and cruelty is a tale well told in Adam Hochschild’s King Leopold’s Ghost.² Stanard argues there has been a “preoccupation” (9) with the crimes of Leopold, a sensationalizing of this extraordinary episode in the history of Western imperialism. The long period of Belgian rule, from 1908 to 1960 is “lazily lumped together” with the era of Leopold and decried as one of the worst of modern European imperialisms (9). After the painful days of decolonization in 1960, the Belgians claimed to be ‘reluctant imperialists’, viewing their empire as having been foisted upon them by Leopold, and preferred to forget their colonial past. At least that is the traditional version.

Stanard’s Selling the Congo shows how Belgium, quite to the contrary, chose to understand and accept its colonial past. It is a fascinating story of how Belgian propaganda re-wrote history. Leopold became an “ingenious” and “generous” colonial ruler (15). The King, or rather his pro-colonial lobby, claimed to want nothing but to foster the moral regeneration of the Congo after Arab slavery and bring it into the civilization of nations. With the talent of travelers such as Andre Van Iseghem, Leopold very early on began preparing the Belgians to take over his colony. There were dozens of expositions after 1885, and here Stanard’s account is at its best. He traces the history of how fair-goers encounter the ‘village congolais’ in displays at the World’s Fair at Antwerp (the Wereldtentoonstelling) in 1894 and three years later at Brussels (the Exposition internationale). The exhibits were not unusual for their time, but they were part of the human zoological garden followed later by museum dioramas and films in the same tradition of animalizing Africans and reducing their humanity. For the Belgian public, Stanard suggests, the mostly degrading images of the Congolese confirmed their role of a paternalistic ‘other’ over which the white colonizers viewed themselves as superior (17).

With little variation, the theme of Belgian superiority and paternalism continued at the 1935 Brussels Exposition and 1958 Brussels World’s Fair. The reconstructed Congolese


villages now became ‘villages indigènes’ (indigenous villages), spectacles organized by the Ministry of Colonies (and its Office colonial). Oddly, they seemed more throwbacks to pre-Leopoldian days. Missionaries comprised an important group in the Congo, but they were not major contributors to propaganda until their post-1945 involvement in film production to popularize their activities in Africa. Budget restrictions caused officials to rely on business interests and initiatives in order to help them build their propaganda messages. Stanard’s descriptions of the displays are intriguing, and he shows how they promised a bright future of mining and agriculture, justified by a civilizing mission, moral accomplishments, and health care. It is interesting then to read about the scramble for raw materials, including coffee (86), and Professor Charles ‘Papa’ Lemaire who rejected the use of quinine (146). The power of film was immediate and tended to show Belgian accomplishments contrasted by black workers and natives who were managed and policed. All of this chronicles what is the strong point of this book, its history of how Belgians imagined their empire. The pro-empire propaganda was, in fact, belgicain, or Belgian, not divided between Flemish or Walloon and made “an imagined Belgian community” (15) a reality. The very idea of the empire created the chance, for a divided Belgium, to share something.

Just exactly who fashioned the message and why is an important component of the book and of understanding Belgian colonialism. The Musée du Congo Belge at Tervuren may have been unchanging in its representations of the Congo and colonialism, but, Stanard argues, these messages also formed a “steady, permanent backdrop” to empire (121). The Ministry of Colonies was highly protective of its message, and when smaller institutes tried to arrogate for themselves the role of representing the colony, they were quickly chastised by the tireless advocate of empire, Office colonial chief Frans Janssens. The UMHK (Union Minière du Haut Katanga) supported these museum displays, Stanard suggests, as a “willingness to assist” (123) in their creation despite the fact that the Ministry of Colonies emphasized the primacy of official administration (56, 63). Some of the largest colonial firms, the author also notes, often seemed “uninterested” or at best preferred to work “indirectly” with groups promoting empire (84) by providing items to display. This seems to be an understatement of the relationship between the evolution of propaganda and colonial businesses (which are often too vaguely grouped by the author). Stanard argues that business interests were so strong in the Congo that no government “wished to overthrow this system” (8). It would seem then that the three dominant firms: the UMHK, the railway company BCK (Compagnie du chemin de fer du Bas-Congo au Katanga), and Forminière (Société internationale forestière et minière du Congo) had a great stake in making sure that the nationalist messages at expos, and in dioramas and in film, remained in the service of their special interests. And in this they seemed to hide behind the message of a limited civilizing mission.

Stanard’s task is challenging, and at times the reader, whether novice and expert, wishes for greater context. The author makes a strong case that the Belgians were not the reluctant imperialists they made themselves out to be after 1960, but rather were active in creating an imperial mindset. The very success of the propaganda can be seen in the widespread belief that Leopold’s empire was part of a noble past (15). While at once claiming to civilize, Belgians, unlike the French and British, were not so imbued with empire as to lose
themselves in it. Stanard quantifies the visitors at the fairs and museums, but how this translates into an imperial sensibility is less clear. At times, Belgians could be glaring in their indifference towards their empire, as Stanard notes, especially during the 1930s and again in the late 1940s after World War II. It is important to note that the indifference came at critical times in the Congo, when strikes and riots in the 1930s threatened production, and again in the years after the Congo made impressive raw material and mineral contributions to the war effort. How Belgians ignored these developments in their propaganda is an important part of how they deceived themselves about empire. Greater context could help enrich this awareness and understanding.

These points aside, Selling the Congo is a fascinating work. Stanard situates himself very well in the post-revisionist school. He is nicely attentive to the work of past historians, and follows in the footsteps of John MacKenzie’s Propaganda and Empire and Thomas August’s The Selling of the Empire in applying new thinking about propaganda to Belgium. Stanard nimbly informs his analysis with orthodox and revisionist insights, at times showing how both traditions can enrich our understanding of imperialism and propaganda. He has offered a strong contribution to this growing literature that is well worth the read.

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Here are many ways to approach a book such as Matthew Stanard’s *Selling the Congo* and to integrate it into the rich historiography on the Belgian colonial experience. Belgian historians are sometimes reluctant to have outsiders analyse ‘their’ Congo, due to its complexity and impact on Belgian society. However, the community welcomes external analysis to challenge what could be taken for granted and to connect local production to global trends, especially the English-speaking one.

In these aspects, the main arguments put forward by Stanard rely on a close look at pro-Empire propaganda from 1908 to 1960, which is limited to expositions, museums, education, monuments, and colonial cinema. This material concerns mainly the Congo, as Ruanda-Urundi is left aside. The book’s originality is to document a connection with the making of Belgian imperialism, which was testified to by a growing number of supporters in the metropolis and by the development of a specific colonial culture. The book opens with a relevant discussion of the colonial experience and the place of propaganda, and offers a deflation of some clichés about Belgium and King Leopold II.

Stanard has written a highly readable book that is unconvincing in its failure to include nuances. First, a basic formal remark on the presentation of the bibliography. Archives in Brussels, especially those related to the Belgian presence in Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, are disseminated following the ‘legacy of the pillars.’ During the Belgian colonial presence, three networks (the Church, private capital, and the Colonial administration) collaborated to control African territory and populations. Their activities left huge collections of public and private archives. Quite frankly, these archives are a maze. However, thanks to the hard work of a younger generation of Ph.D. students, a more accurate knowledge of the collections is being built. The author presents ‘Archives and Librairies’, as general resources, with no specific references, e.g. the *Bibliothèque royale de Belgique* (limited to general services) or the *Cinémathèque royale de Belgique*. Anyone who has worked in those institutions knows the wide range of their collections (333-334). Under ‘Published Sources,’ Stanard mixes up a wide range of material that, at first glance, should have been treated differently: texts and books contemporary to exhibitions, movies and education actions, typically second-hand material that is primarily related to propaganda, with articles and books, written by (non) academic authors, to document the Belgian colonial experience and to offer a comparative European perspective (334-378). Different traditions can of course co-exist, but for the clarity of the corpus that is delimited and analysed, periodical articles and books contemporary to the events analyzed, such as Brussels 1958, (the propaganda *per se* and bits of its reception/consumption, the second and supplementary branch to archival material) should have been considered separately. Post-1960 academic production brings in a perspective comparison within different chronological periods (diachronic) and within different colonial experiences (synchronic).

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Norms differ from one academic environment to another, but in this case, the presentation brings confusion as to what are actually the limits of the corpus. The object of research is organized to document colonial propaganda in five media, but the selection criteria and constraints for each medium are not perceptible. As a result, Stanard blends unpublished and published material, from various backgrounds and time periods, without a clear-cut hierarchy. The patchwork effect, partially due to the dissemination of the material, diminishes the impact of the demonstration.

Second, recent works suggest that Belgium was neither reluctant nor indifferent to the colonial adventure. This depends on what is understood by ‘Belgium.’ The most visible actor was the monarch. Leopold I attempted to acquire an overseas territory for the prosperous industrial country he was in charge of. Albert I, nephew of Leopold II, disagreed with him, and traveled to Congo in 1908 to observe and to understand Congolese realities in order to develop a colonial project, under the banner of science, ‘mise en valeur (development),’ and the moralization and belgicization of the Congo. Leopold III maintained the same line between 1934 and 1940. During World War II, the government-in-exile in London, with the assistance of the Governor General, Pierre Ryckmans, managed to keep Congo resources in the Allies’ camp. Baudouin, King of the Belgians (1951-1993) was confronted by the modernization of the Congo and the aspiration of Congolese people for emancipation. Propaganda during his 1955 official visit to the African territories under Belgian administration (Congo and Ruanda-Urundi) referred to Congo as the tenth province of Belgium and promoted the idea of a Belgian-Congolese community. Both Ryckmans and Baudouin interpreted the responsibility of Belgium in Africa, according to specific constraints, and contributed to a paternalistic vision of Congo.

The king’s powers were limited by the Constitution. Thus, any royal initiatives had to be approved by the Parliament. Few debates took place, with the notable exception of the takeover in 1908, following the international anti-Leopoldian campaign. There was no colonial party in Belgium, as supporters came from various backgrounds, mainly from industry and business circles. Moreover, the Colonial Charter of 1908 clearly stated the autonomy of the colonial budget, which meant that the colony had to be self-sufficient, and that the metropolis would not pay for the colony. This constraint imposed a strict management of public spending in Congo and fuelled a rather imaginative set of solutions, such as placing education and health services in the hands of missions. Figures from annual

2 Stanard’s bibliography (334-378) is limited to literature available by summer 2010. It includes Marc Poncelet, L’invention des sciences coloniales belges (365), but not the findings on the concentric circles of advisers and investors close to Leopold II. The Dictionnaire des patrons en Belgique: les hommes, les entreprises, les réseaux edited by Ginette Kurgan and Serge Jumain (Brussels, De Boeck, 1996), the catalogue of the exhibition La mémoire du Congo : Le temps colonial directed by Jean-Luc Vellut (Gent, Snoeck-Ducaju, 2005), Michel Dumoulin, Léopold II, un roi génocidaire?, Bruxelles, Académie royale de Belgique, 2005 and the proceedings Léopold II entre gêne et génie: politique étrangère et colonisation, Bruxelles, Racine, 2009 provide useful insights for documenting the domestic dynamics fuelling the royal initiatives from 1876 to 1908. The take-over of Congo by Belgium divided elites, e.g. the editorial board of Journal des Tribunaux, a renowned legal weekly journal based in Brussels, as Léon Hennebicq testified ("Léopold II," Journal des Tribunaux, 1935, 297). I extend my thanks to Sebastiaan Vandenbogaerde (Universiteit Gent) for providing the reference. On the Belgian Congo period, less literature is easily available, if we exclude unpublished final history Masters’ essays.
budgets show that the major part of them was devoted to the *Force publique*, which combined a colonial police, which mainly secured domestic order, and a colonial army, which especially controlled borders and military operations. The agents of each of the three pillars progressively built a network to take over the territory and the population. It was then vital to document the progress of ‘civilization’ to keep the interest of the metropole and to show the world the great achievements of ‘little Belgium’. Finally, as in any colonial experience, going to the colony was an opportunity to find a job, a good salary, and social status for few generations of young male Belgians. In this sense, they were the first audiences and the heroes of the propaganda that is analysed by Stanard.

Third, the author attempts to explain univocal propaganda as a way to fuel national identity and pride. Here, one should be careful when using Belgian fault-lines as explaining factors. Before 1961 (or even 1970 and 1980), Belgium was a unitary state. 1961, the year of the last census that included questions on language use (which are now forbidden) and the implementation of a linguistic frontier, launched the federalization of Belgium. Thus, even though there were at least two linguistic communities during the twentieth century, it would be more appropriate to talk about Dutch-speaking and French-speaking Belgians, as the words ‘Flemish’ and ‘Walloon’ refer to a regionalist aspiration that was in the making before 1961. Moreover, ‘Flemish’ and ‘Walloon’, as ‘languages’ are not acknowledged. Flemings speak Dutch, although there is a huge difference in vocabulary, tone, etc. from that of the Dutch in the Netherlands, and Walloons speak French and dialects related to standard French. The second half of the twentieth century was marked by the rise of non-violent conflicts between the Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians that were fuelled by cultural differences on the one hand and an asymmetrical economic evolution on the other. These conflicts caused far-reaching reforms of the formerly unitary Belgian State, which was transformed into a federal State from 1970 onwards (although the Constitution was amended only in 1994). One should not forget that the linguistic questions originally were only a matter of recognition by the authorities, who, during the nineteenth century, used only French for historical reasons (the Habsburgs, French domination, an aversion to the Dutch regime, etc.).

In the Congo context, French is the dominant language, even if recruitment in the three pillars differs. When Congo was annexed, Belgium’s authorities were still using French, hence the dominance of the language there. History repeated itself half a century later in Congo where equality between Dutch and French in public matters (education, administration, and the judiciary) was demanded. In educational matters there was not only the problem of the matter of language, but also an ideological one (Catholic ‘free’ education versus ‘state’ education). The roots of this division lay also in the nineteenth century, where a Liberal party (1847-1884) struggled for power with a Catholic party (1884-1914). Linguistic and education questions were imported from metropolis to Congo after World War II and the massive arrival of the ‘relève,’ a new generation of colonial agents who were looking for the equivalent of 1950s Belgium: two equal linguistic regimes (Dutch and French on the same foot) and two complete teaching networks (confessional and non-confessional) for their children.

Finally, if one may consider the above discussion as essentially limited to details, this last
remark will focus on propaganda. Although Stanard provides a nice operational definition of it, propaganda can be considered as remaining of a process, a chain from emission to reception and consumption, that is difficult to document as a witness and almost impossible to document as a historian, due to the lack of appropriate direct testimonies and archives (12-25). In the chapter devoted to colonial film, the footnotes suggest that the author primarily relied on the pioneering work of Guido Convents and Francis Ramirez and Christian Rolot. One may question whether Stanard had the opportunity to screen some of the material and to get new insights from it. It is a pity, since the collection is partly digitalized. Therefore, the historical analysis is limited to a superficial one of ideas and values in action, stuck into representations and rhetoric, with very little access to the concrete implementation of colonial policies. There is a huge gap between the construction of myths about the colonial experience and daily life in Africa, from both sides. As Crawford Young argues in his review of this book in The Historian, documenting the nature of propaganda does not tell much about its reception or its effects.

3 The PIC (Projet interuniversitaire ciblé) project, financed by the Commission universitaire pour le développement (CUD), between 2008 and 2011, called Valorisation de la mémoire filmée de la période coloniale: renforcement des capacités pédagogiques en sciences humaines; mise en place d’un réseau interuniversitaire sur la mémoire de l’Afrique centrale, brought together six university partners: Valérie Piette, Université libre de Bruxelles; Nathalie Tousignant, Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis; Jan De Meyer, KADOC – Katholieke Universiteit Leuven ; Kiangu Sindani, Université de Kinshasa; Alexandre Hatungimana, Université du Burundi; Déo Byanafashe, Université Nationale du Rwanda. A selection of 180 films was digitalized and transferred to African University libraries. Several attempts were made to document the production and the reception of colonial films. Due to archive destruction, however, very little documentation is left.


6 Crawford Young, review of Selling the Congo in The Historian, vol. 75: 3 (Fall 2013): 635-636.
It is a thrill to have such accomplished and expert scholars read and respond to my work. My thanks to John Kent, Lise Namikas, and Nathalie Tousignant for participating in this roundtable, Robert Aldrich for introducing it, and Tom Maddux and the H-Diplo team for organizing it.

Let me begin with a contradiction in Tousignant’s review that brings up key questions at the center of my book. She asserts a couple things about Belgian empire in Africa that might remain unremarkable if they were not in proximity, as they are in her essay.

Tousignant writes that the Belgian Congo “had to be self-sufficient” because Belgium was not going to pay for the colony. She adds that the three ‘pillars’ underpinning the colonial enterprise—the colonial administration, private capital, and the Catholic Church—“built a network to take over the territory and the population” of the Congo after Belgium became a colonial power in 1908. Tousignant continues: “It was then vital to document the progress of ‘civilization’ to keep the interest of the metropole.” Herein lies the contradiction. If the Belgian taxpayer did not pay for the Congo, and if it was the three pillars and not colonial settlers that established control over this far-off land—and considering that mass support did not contribute to the takeover of the colony in the first place—it was anything but vital to document what was going on in the Congo for Belgians back home.

And yet, as Tousignant recognizes, it was believed to be imperative to show Belgians that things were going well in the colony. The result was a steady stream of pro-empire propaganda. It is unsurprising that colonial propaganda was produced during the Leopoldian era (1885-1908) considering the campaign against his rule that called out for some kind of response as well as Leopold II’s cunning, tenacity, and obstreperousness in the face of opposition. What is stunning is the scale of pro-empire propaganda that endured for decades after Leopold II’s death in late 1909, barely one year after his handover of the colony to Belgium. What does this long-lasting pro-empire propaganda throughout the state rule period (1908-1960) say about the nature of Belgian imperialism? Who produced it and why? How did it alter the course of Belgian colonialism? How did such pro-empire propaganda affect those toward whom it was directed, among them Belgians ‘back home’ in the metropole?

As John Kent points out, Belgian settlers were never numerous, thus propaganda in the metropole is where the ‘colonial imaginary’ of most Belgians was shaped. *Selling the Congo* examines several media that reached the masses and helped shape this imaginary: expositions, film, museums, monuments, and education. Kent signals one major result of all this information production, namely the blurring of the Leopoldian and Belgian state rule periods in people’s minds. He also notes a key factor that spurred on and shaped this propaganda, namely fears that some other
state would seize the Congo. All three reviewers indicate the disconnect between colonial realities and propaganda promoting the colony, such as when Namikas points out that Belgians ignored or never knew basic realities like the Congo’s contributions during World War II. Guy Vanthemsche recently made clear the vital role the colony played in maintaining Belgium’s sovereignty during that conflict, a topic that calls out for more research and that ought to become a subject of popular attention in Belgium and the Congo.¹

As all three reviewers suggest, whether we can determine that pro-empire propaganda contributed to an imperialistic mindset—in short, whether propaganda worked—is a key question. I am more optimistic than Tousignant on this score. Some scholars of colonial culture point to propaganda as evidence of the popularity of empire, oftentimes presuming colonies greatly affected European cultures.² Others, like Bernard Porter, take the opposite view, namely that colonies affected Europe little, and that enduring, widespread propaganda is proof (if of anything) that empire was not popular; if something is, states do not need to promote it so much.³ Many studies of empire and colonial culture hew to either of these extremes, which I avoided. This made sense both in terms of sidestepping perilous presumptions and because of the Belgian case, which seems split toward both ends of the spectrum: imperialistic propaganda is widespread in the historical record yet Belgians claimed to be merely reluctant imperialists.

What I found is that pro-empire messages did not affect Belgians as much as it would appear on the face of it, yet they shaped Belgian attitudes in significant ways. I am happy that Namikas brings up one of the book’s main findings, namely “a widespread if low-key interest among the ordinary Belgians-in-the-street for the imperial cause.” I am glad that, as Tousignant points out, recent work confirms my argument that Belgians were not hesitant imperialists who took over and ruled the Congo disinterestedly until it abruptly broke away, even if this remains the view of many today. Propaganda failed to create any kind of widespread visceral attachment to either the Congo or the ‘colonial idea,’ but it did foster nationalism, a development that cries out for more research considering the coincidence between the loss of the Congo in 1960 and the beginning of the dissolution of the Belgian unitary state around that same time. Messages in favor of empire also created a limited if significant colonial culture, which included the paradoxical rehabilitation of Leopold II and the denigration of African culture, the latter seen in the ‘African village’ at the 1958 World’s Fair whose Congolese inhabitants left early because of


their poor treatment at the hands of fair goers.

As Kent notes, one of Selling the Congo's features is a comparative approach providing a broader view of colonial culture. The book is about the Belgian case, but at moments it deliberately draws in other European states (Portugal, Italy, etc.), their empires, pro-colonial propaganda, and colonial culture, especially the cases of France and Britain. Many works on French colonial culture focus exclusively on France and its empire, such as the recently-translated Colonial Culture in France since the Revolution, readers of which would be forgiven for thinking that France was unique in being influenced by its empire.4 Students of British history have explored the role colonies played in 'making' Britain with few side glances at experiences in competing empires, and only somewhat recently have historians of the Netherlands, Portugal, Italy and Germany moved into this realm. Still today, for countless reasons—many of them structural and intractable—historians of whatever empires (British, Spanish, U.S., German, etc.) tend to be 'inward-looking,' concentrating on the historiography of 'their' nation and its colonies. To be clear, I am not claiming any exceptional multi-national competence, merely that a goal of mine was to examine this aspect of Belgian colonial history in light of the histories of other empires to hopefully contribute to more interchange across national histories.

Belgian scholars are not immune to this inward-looking tendency. As Tousignant notes, “Belgian historians are sometimes reluctant to have outsiders analyse ‘their’ Congo.” In this context it is interesting to note the varied reactions to Selling the Congo among Belgian and non-Belgian scholars, at least to judge by the reviews of the book, of which there have been some dozen so far. Most reviews have been by non-Belgians, and most of these have been quite positive, as has at least one review by a Belgian scholar. Other reviews by Belgians have tended toward being mixed or negative. One of the latter explained my interest in the subject by pointing to the time I lived in Belgium during my middle school and early high school years, as if the book were the work of a hobbyist.5

Tousignant criticizes the omission of a few works she believes ought to have been included in the book's bibliography. In certain cases the exigencies of the publication timeline prevented the inclusion and discussion of some works. That said, I aimed to write a wider-ranging book, and one result is that the bibliography does not contain every work related to the several topics it addresses. When reviewing my research plan some ten years ago now, one well-established Belgian scholar of African and Belgian colonial history told me that someone could write an

4 See note 2.

entire book on each of my proposed chapters; as whole books have, including Ramirez and Rolot’s landmark study of colonial cinema. Although naturally I have benefitted immensely from more narrowly-focused monographs, I aimed for a broader, more accessible interpretation. Of course I should not exaggerate. On those occasions when I have mentioned to my students that I published a book on pro-empire propaganda in Belgium from 1885 to 1960, their eyes have widened, not, I think, because of the accomplishment, but rather out of incredulity that someone could have written (or chosen to write?) an entire book on such an obscure topic.

A number of other problems are identified or implied in Tousignant’s review, including the bibliography’s classification scheme. It bears noting that the book provides customary, detailed references to specific collections in numerous archives. The division between contemporary primary sources and later secondary works that Tousignant would like to see is not as neatly drawn as she suggests. Take the example of a book she references, Patrimoine d’Afrique Centrale. Archives Films. This wonderful book on colonial films comprises several interpretive essays as well as DVDs of original (digitized) propaganda films from the late colonial period. Such a work is both a contemporary source (the films) and a secondary source (the essays) that defies easy categorization. In any case, any reader wanting to know which specific works are referenced or quoted at any particular moment in Selling the Congo can consult the book’s extensive endnotes.

Tousignant also discusses the King’s power in relation to the colony. (It is unclear whether she is critiquing some aspect of my book or making a general point.) To say that “any royal initiatives had to be approved by the Parliament” is to oversimplify. After 1908 Belgian kings could and did act beyond the juridical bounds set by the Charte coloniale, which circumscribed the monarch’s role in colonial affairs in reaction to Leopold II’s absolutist rule in the Congo. For example, Belgian monarchs developed personal relationships with various colonial ministers. Every letter, utterance, or suggestion by a king, in which ‘initiatives’ might have been broached, was hardly pre-approved by Parliament. Or consider the

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galvanizing moment when King Baudouin took to the airwaves soon after the January 1959 riots in Leopoldville and uttered the word ‘independence’ on the radio to general astonishment in both Congo and Belgium, including in Parliament. Unsurprisingly, such extrajudicial maneuverings, if they can be called that, continued in the post-independence era, seen in Baudouin and Mobutu Sese Seko’s personal ties after 1965 that comprised at times a kind of backroom diplomacy between Belgium and Zaire.

Finally, Tousignant takes issue with use of the terms Flemish and Walloon, unfortunately once again without identifying any specifics in my book. National identity in Belgium is a complex subject, and to refer to Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians is common if not the norm. This does not change the fact that in the context of the late 1800s and first half of the 1900s, the English-language terms Flemish and Walloon and their variants are neither anachronisms nor misnomers. Moreover, Dutch- and French-speaking Belgians, including academics, have used the Dutch (or Flemish) and French words for these terms to refer to the respective regions of the country, their peoples, and their languages. Charles Grandgagnage’s *Dictionnaire étymologique de la Langue wallonne* was published in Liege in 1845, for example. Five years later, King Leopold I, when meeting with Dutch-speaking pro-Flemish supporters, was at pains to emphasize, “J’ai toujours aimé notre bon vieux flamand; c’est la langue d’une grande partie du pays.” (“I’ve always loved our good old Flemish; it’s the language of a big part of the country.”)\(^\text{10}\) Suffice it to say that these terms have been in use in English for centuries to refer both to the people, regions, and languages of northern and southern Belgium respectively.

It is a privilege to have had an H-Diplo roundtable organized in response to my book. To conclude I can only restate my gratitude to those fine scholars who made it possible.

\(^{10}\) Quoted in Paul Frédéricq, *Schets eener Geschiedenis der Vlaamsche Beweging* vol. 1 (Ghent: J. Vuylsteke, 1906), 62.