



• ARWEN P. MOHUN •

# AMERICAN IMPERIALIST

CRUELTY AND CONSEQUENCE IN THE  
SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA



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Arwen P. Mohun

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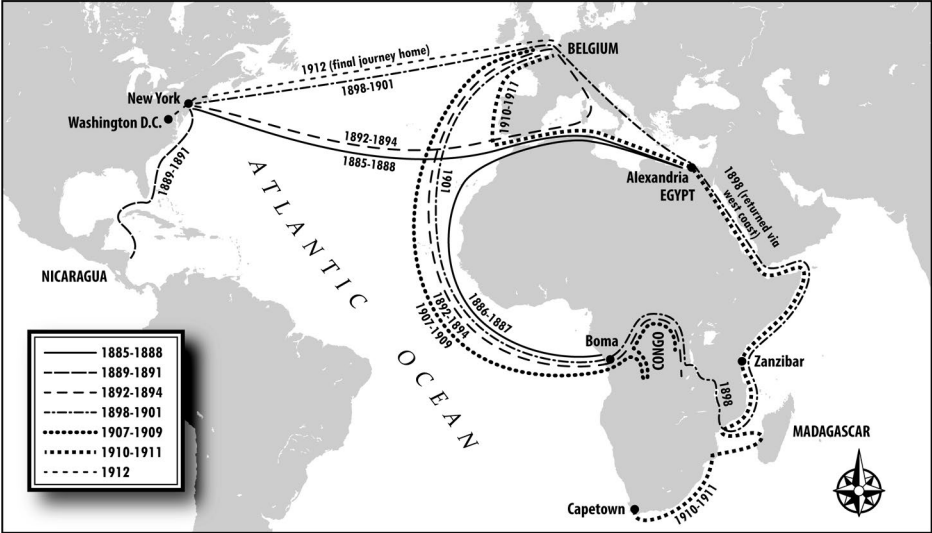


Figure 1. Map of R. Dorsey Mohun’s international travels, 1886–1912

# PROLOGUE

He'd never intended to work for the Belgian king. But intentions aren't actions. Still, a few years earlier, he had turned down Leopold II's first job offer. The accusatory voices of journalists, friends, and reformers reinforced his reluctance. He recognized the truths in their dark stories. The king's eloquent promises of free trade and an end to slavery amounted to a clever ploy, strategies designed to appease his European and American critics. Leopold's real goals were profit and control. The king's priorities mirrored those of many of the men who found their way into his private African colony, the Congo Free State.

During a stint as the US Trade Agent in Congo, he'd seen with his own eyes unfettered greed and cruelty as Europeans scrambled to enrich themselves. More than seen, really. He'd done things that he now preferred to keep quiet: burned villages, brutalized men in his employ, stood by while innocent people were killed for acts they had not committed.

Since then, he'd married, become a father, gained some prudence. He had not, however, mustered the courage to completely cut ties with Leopold. Now he was a breadwinner with what felt like limited options. The financial security of a multiyear contract would be a relief. Surely, family responsibilities mattered more than taking a vaguely humanitarian stand by avoiding any more involvement with the Congo Free State, as his friend Roger Casement had done. If he was honest with himself, he also itched for a challenge. Perhaps he thought he could do better

than the other men in the king's employ. The decision was made: work for Leopold in Africa.

This is how I imagine my great-grandfather, Richard Dorsey Mohun, known as Dorsey, in the spring of 1897: a tall, narrow-shouldered man hunched over his desk, weighing his options. His sweat-soaked white shirt hangs limply beneath his stiff collar. The steady pounding of monsoon rains unleashes a torrent down the street outside. He doesn't notice. By now the discomforts of tropical places seem all too familiar. He has spent the past few years in this job, which he now disdains, sitting in the US consular office in Zanzibar's Stone Town, writing reports and dealing with the problems of stranded sailors and dwindling American trade. Rich lunches and rounds of drinks at the English Club have softened the boredom but widened his girth. Multiple bouts of malaria bloat his features. He is weary. In photographs from the time, he looks older than his thirty-three years.

He is not alone in the consular office. Noho bin Omari is there. Dorsey does not understand Swahili or Gujarati or most of the dozen or so languages that echo through Stone Town. He relies on Noho to translate, not just words but meanings. Like many of the Africans with whom Mohun worked, Noho's voice is elusive. Perhaps his descendants continue to tell Noho's story. Perhaps the American consul doesn't matter at all in how they remember their ancestor's life.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Noho bin Omari's name survives in US records because Dorsey's successor initially suspected Noho was a fiction. He believed Dorsey pocketed the money provided by the State Department for translation and invented Noho to cover his tracks. That was before Noho presented himself to the new consul with two years of receipts in hand.<sup>2</sup>

If you dig into the past, you'd better be prepared for what you find there. Initially, I was ill prepared to contend with an ancestor who incontrovertibly and knowingly chose a path along the wrong side of history. I also did not imagine that poking around in family history would yield an extraordinary story of one man's involvement in one of the most notorious episodes in the European scramble for Africa: the short and brutal tenure of the Congo Free State, an enormous private colony in the center of the continent. Or that his story would reveal the remarkable influence of American money and expertise in the "new

imperialism” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it did. As a result, this book is a history of how several generations of Americans shoved their way around Africa, sometimes meaning well but too often leaving a trail of destruction behind them.

My understanding of who Richard Dorsey Mohun was, and what he did in Africa, now differs significantly from what I’d gathered from family stories. Growing up I’d heard vague mentions of a relative who was an “African explorer.” When questioned, my father offered a slim folder of newspaper clippings that seemingly confirmed that description. “African Explorer Dead” trumpeted a *New York Times* obituary that was almost certainly written by a close relative.<sup>3</sup> The idea of an explorer ancestor appealed to a family that eagerly consumed the contents of *National Geographic* and took the biographies of mountaineers and leaders of polar expeditions as exemplary. For us, the label *explorer* evoked heroic willingness to suffer physical hardship in pursuit of new knowledge. It was exciting—and self-flattering—to contemplate an explorer in the family.

Writing this book has forced me to confront the implications of that seemingly harmless descriptor: why it felt so appealing and what it disguised. So I’ve chosen to describe Dorsey not as an explorer but as an imperialist to call attention to the ways he and other US citizens participated in and profited from imperialism and late nineteenth-century global capitalism. Many white Americans have begun to face similar questions about how we describe our forebearers: enslaver or founding father? Heroic confederate soldier or traitor to the Republic? Such labels matter.

Another part of my family’s mythmaking about Dorsey involved hazy stories about once-valuable stock in African mining companies. Looking back, I’m embarrassed about the subtext of entitlement underlying laments about a possible lost fortune. Dorsey did pursue his imperialist career in large part to help his family financially. And while he never grew appallingly rich, he made enough to set up his sons for very comfortable lives. He also helped some of the biggest names of the Gilded Age, including Guggenheim and Aldrich, become even richer. Creating this intergenerational wealth and the cultural capital that went with it cost hundreds if not thousands of African lives and contributed to the immiseration of many more people.

In the beginning, when all I had was Dorsey's obituary and family stories, I believed that his entire career had been spent working for the Congo Free State. As I researched, I learned that the Congo held just part of his story. Dorsey's decision to work for Leopold came midway through a nearly thirty-year career abroad. For most of that time, he worked either for the US government or for wealthy and ambitious American investors. His employment took him not only to Africa but also to Nicaragua and various parts of Europe. He was a particularly well-connected member of what historian Maya Jasanoff has called the "vanguard" of a "globally interrelated world." He both traveled through and helped create the emerging global systems of transportation, communication, trade, and imperialism.<sup>4</sup> Wherever Dorsey went, his commitment to family kept drawing him back to the United States. Thus his "globally interrelated" way of life had intimate, personal consequences as well as larger political and social ones.

Few if any of his American contemporaries could claim a résumé of equivalent variety and duration. But my great-grandfather was not unique. He belonged to the first large cohort of people born in the United States who sought employment and adventure abroad.<sup>5</sup>

The participation of Americans in late nineteenth-century globalization, particularly in relation to European imperialism, is one of the great untold stories of United States history. Some of the same currents that carried unprecedented numbers of immigrants *into* the United States—economic opportunity, a sense of adventure, a desire to escape—also inspired men and women of every background, race, ethnicity, and social class to leave the US either temporarily or permanently. The pace of this expanding diaspora rapidly increased between the end of the Civil War and World War I, though we can't know exact numbers. Still, by 1910, nearly three hundred thousand returnees a year disembarked from commercial ocean liners in American ports. Many more, ignored by census takers, crossed over the Mexican and Canadian borders.<sup>6</sup>

These diasporic Americans were most visible in the places where the United States practiced a kind of formal empire—particularly Panama, Cuba, and the Philippines.<sup>7</sup> The artists and writers among them also float through popular culture, mingling with the European avant-garde.<sup>8</sup>

But Americans could also be found in the most remote corners of the globe, steaming in on the tides of imperialism, industrial capitalism, and the Christian missionary movement. Like Dorsey, more than a few chose Africa as a destination. Their ranks included Confederates-turned-mercenaries, zoologists, and prospectors.<sup>9</sup> Notable figures such as William Sheppard, the missionary descendant of enslaved Virginians, journeyed some of the same Congo waterways as the most famous American adventurer of all, Henry Morton Stanley.<sup>10</sup>

Dorsey belonged to a subcategory of these outgoers—people (most, if not all of them, white men) who facilitated the extraction of raw materials out of tropical places, provided the engineering and managerial expertise to build infrastructure, and opened up markets for European and North American products.<sup>11</sup> Many of these American imperialists were hired guns (sometimes literally) who took contracts with the highest bidder: sometimes private companies, sometimes foreign governments. Others worked for the US government or on government-sponsored projects.<sup>12</sup> Many clustered in places where they could profit from European imperialism without directly investing American dollars—and thus not seem like imperialists, or like figures worthy of historical study. Dorsey's story reveals just how important these midlevel bureaucrats and technical experts were to the business of empire. It also connects that work to domestic society, particularly the construction and maintenance of the white middle class.

While sailors and hired laborers often went out into the world with little more than the clothes on their backs, Dorsey and his fellow middle-class travelers carefully equipped themselves with the tools of empire: firearms, scientific equipment, ledger books and printed forms, quinine, and many, many tins of sardines. They also came laden with ideas: preconceptions about other cultures and ideological beliefs about their own special destiny as citizens of the United States. Characteristically, they often made sense of the unfamiliar through dichotomies and hierarchies, none more important than savage versus civilized.<sup>13</sup>

Nineteenth-century America was awash in information about the non-European world, some of it accurate but much of it misleading. Many literate Americans thought they knew a lot about the world and were eager to learn more. Schoolteachers drilled their charges in

geography. Publishers churned out travel narratives. Missionaries and adventurers lectured to rapt audiences about their experiences and opinions.<sup>14</sup> The mass media celebrated the violence used by men like Henry Stanley against “natives” while also offering highbrow paeans on the importance of civilizing and Christianizing. Well-intentioned efforts to learn about other cultures, often in the form of collecting objects, mixed with sensationalizing forms of display, including now-notorious “human zoos.”<sup>15</sup> In these encounters, a genuine desire to understand and learn mingled with one of the era’s most destructive habits: justifying race-based cultural superiority.

Enduring beliefs about the United States’ special place as the cradle of liberty also took up space in the crowded mental baggage of Dorsey and his fellow travelers. Raised on didactic tales about heroic founding fathers, many American imperialists imagined themselves as ambassadors of liberal democratic values more humane and committed to uplift than their European counterparts.<sup>16</sup> Like those founding fathers, they accepted and used the privileges their gender and race conferred, usually without a second thought. The post–Civil War emergence of the United States as a global power seemed to reify their status. These self-described white, Anglo-Saxon children of America’s first Gilded Age believed they belonged on the right side of history by virtue of their ancestry and the time and place into which they had been born.<sup>17</sup> They also believed themselves capable of doing well while doing good.

For the thoughtful or reflective, those beliefs could be sorely tested by global realities. It took a great deal of moral courage to avoid being ensnared in the toxic amalgam of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism. In time a few came to regret or repent of their former ideas and ways. Others broke apart from disappointment, hardship, and the impossibility of reconciling ideals and realities. In the course of his career, Dorsey knew people who reacted in all these ways. He represented yet another type—men who put one foot in front of the other, getting the job done, while trying to shake off a dawning awareness of the larger implications.

It is easy to vilify Dorsey and people like him. For more than one hundred years, the history of the Congo Free State has most often been told as a morality tale about heroes and villains. That approach helped

end Leopold's reign and with it at least some of the cruelties that made the Congo particularly reprehensible among European colonies. But vilification without explanation courts what historian E. P. Thompson described as "the enormous condescension of posterity."<sup>18</sup> Just as often, professional historians have chosen to avoid biographical analysis of the motives and world views of these imperialist actors in favor of focusing on more admirable characters. The ironic result is that their stories continue to be told by hagiographic biographical dictionaries and anonymously authored Wikipedia entries.<sup>19</sup>

Historians' neglect of figures like Dorsey and the American imperialism he embodied also has present-day implications. The conviction that Americans are uniquely equipped to successfully help others while simultaneously serving their own self-interests continues to powerfully influence individual behavior, business decisions, and national policy. What historian Patricia Limerick called "the idea of innocence" has thrived as well: the belief that innocence of intention excuses injuries caused to Indigenous people, whether in the American West or around the globe.<sup>20</sup>

It is the historian's obligation to try to understand how people in the past understood themselves without condescension and without making excuses for their behavior—a fine line indeed, but one I have tried to walk in writing this book. How did this intelligent, well-intentioned man entangle himself with Leopold and the Congo Free State? How did he rationalize those decisions? His trajectory began with his own birth family's celebratory stories of ancestors they called abolitionists and humanitarians—people who thought they understood what was best for both formerly enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples. He took jobs that tied him to the business of empire because his idea of being a good man prioritized loyalty to his employers and success as a breadwinner over any larger sense of humanitarianism.<sup>21</sup> Those decisions were reinforced by the expectations of the family members he loved best, intelligent people of good will who saw themselves as fully capable of making ethical and moral decisions—not only for themselves but also for others. His sense of himself as a man and a breadwinner ensured the financial well-being of his family. But it also drove the fateful decisions that eventually darkened his heart, led to his early demise, and caused great suffering to countless others.



Born in the nation's capital, then known as Washington City, Dorsey came into the world during the last throes of the Civil War. His world view took shape amid the contentious racial politics of emancipation and Reconstruction. But it was the Gilded Age that defined him. If family was his cause, the era's outward looking ambition, its worship of self-invention and entrepreneurial money making, was his compass.

This is his story. But it's also the story of many other men much like him, of the society that made them, and how they helped to irreparably change the world.

# AFRICAN CONNECTIONS

Across the District of Columbia, the hopeful green of spring began to work its magic. New leaves unfurled from trees that had escaped the wood gatherers' axes. A fresh carpet of grass softened the edges of muddy roads cut to deep ruts by the Union Army's supply wagons, artillery caissons, and ambulances. Three years into the Civil War, the nation's capital had become a place of refuge, a place where life might start anew. No one felt this more than those seeking freedom from slavery. Even before Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, they'd been hurrying across the wooden bridge from Virginia into Union territory. Tucked amid their meager possessions were tiny pieces of blue sky: glass trade beads strung on thread, their special color offering protection against misfortune. So tiny, so taken for granted; these small objects whispered of a time before the Middle Passage. Or, depending on who was listening, the promise of global commerce and the ambitions of empire.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the new arrivals found shelter in the Swampdoodle neighborhood, competing with Irish immigrants for shanties and damp basements in a low-lying area north of the Capitol. Nearby, a family of white newcomers waited out the war in greater comfort.<sup>2</sup> It's unlikely any of them carried blue beads—they preferred the magic conferred by rosaries and crosses. But like their refugee neighbors, slavery and trade connected them to Africa. The address 392 L Street was the home of Anna Hanson Dorsey, a well-known author of popular Catholic literature. Recently widowed, she gathered remaining family together for the duration: her youngest, Ella, and her adult daughters, Angie and

Clare. Clare's husband, Richard, had recently joined the household. On April 12, 1864, he and Clare welcomed their first child, Richard Dorsey Mohun, into the world.

As the seat of government for a nation with global aspirations, Washington provided an unsurprising birthplace for an American who would become an imperialist with bureaucratic skills. But it was Richard Dorsey Mohun's upbringing and early work experiences that influenced *how* he would exercise those skills. Clare and Richard's son came of age in a place and time that filled his head with ideas about Africa and Africans long before he set foot on that continent.<sup>3</sup>

From his family and the white, middle-class culture that surrounded him, Mohun also constructed a theory of why Africa needed him and a set of precepts for how he might behave as a white American interacting with Africans. Those ideas found early roots in his grandmother's insistence that the family had already fully and heroically redressed its slaveholding past, ignoring both how recent it was and how thoroughly the family had embraced the status that had once come with slaveholding. The name Clare and Richard chose for their eldest son told part of the story. Richard, of course, was for his father, but in adulthood he chose to be known as Dorsey to his family and R. Dorsey Mohun professionally. For the family, Dorsey signaled ancestral connections to Maryland's history and its Catholic elite. Dorsey's namesake was Edward Dorsey (or Darcy), an early and very successful Catholic immigrant who, in 1650, received a patent for a large plantation known as Hockley-in-the Hole near Annapolis, Maryland.<sup>4</sup> Edward Dorsey and his descendants had been large-scale enslavers.<sup>5</sup> There is no evidence that the family ever talked about the systematic cruelty and exploitation that had earned this first Dorsey his fortune. Nor did they acknowledge the fact that, given the nature of American slaveholding practices, the many African Americans who had Dorsey as a surname were probably descendants of Edward Dorsey and his kin—and thus cousins, if not siblings, of the white Dorseys.

The family did talk and write about their efforts to protect the Republic from slaveholding's corrosive effects. Anna was exceedingly proud of her father, William McKenney, who, after a crisis of conscience, manumitted the people he owned.<sup>6</sup> But he did not simply free them; he urged

them and everyone like them to leave the country. Inspired by conversations with many leading figures of the day, including James Madison and Henry Clay, he came to believe that people of different races could not successfully live together in a republic. The best solution for the United States was racial separation, preferably by an ocean. McKenney, like many white southerners who considered themselves progressive thinkers, strongly believed that free Black Americans should colonize the new West African state of Liberia.<sup>7</sup> Unlike most enthusiasts for colonization, who confined themselves to armchair philosophizing and the occasional financial contribution toward the cost of ships and supplies, McKenney became an active recruitment agent for the Maryland Colonization Society.

McKenney excelled at the job. His glowing descriptions of a new start in Africa convinced hundreds of Black men and women to abandon their lives in Maryland. Many of them subsequently died from the ocean voyage, endemic disease, and poor agricultural conditions.<sup>8</sup> McKenney became a controversial figure even in his own time, loathed by William Lloyd Garrison and other more egalitarian antislavery activists.<sup>9</sup> But in the family stories, Anna portrayed her father as an unambiguously heroic figure who helped forge a solution to white America's great dilemma: how to end slavery without creating a multiracial society. His ideas, predicated on the racialized theory that American Blacks were displaced Africans, threaded through family attitudes about the formerly enslaved people who made Washington their home.

McKenney's connections to Liberia—including his travels there—not only gave Dorsey and other descendants a sense of Africa as a real place, but also emboldened them to impose their values on the “dark continent.”<sup>10</sup> Dorsey was not, in fact, the first Mohun sibling to consider going to the Congo. His sister, Lee, took steps to become a Dominican missionary before their grandmother Anna put a stop to Lee's plans. If she felt called to help Africans, Anna lectured, Lee could come home to Washington, DC. “We have Africa at our doors, seventy thousand negroes in and around this one city.”<sup>11</sup>

In Dorsey's childhood, debates about colonization and Liberia remained heated. Some Black leaders and their allies decried “expatriation” of Americans of African heritage, asking why, for example, the

Irish had not also been asked to return to the homeland of their ancestors.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the difference was the color of their skin. For Frederick Douglass, Africa had no place in his future or the future of his people.<sup>13</sup> Yet other newly free people considered emigration a plausible option.<sup>14</sup> Rather than disband after the 14th Amendment extended citizenship to formerly enslaved people, colonization societies focused their energies on Christianizing Africa.<sup>15</sup> Secretary of the Navy R. W. Thompson neatly summarized the thinking of many advocates of colonization. “Colored people” he opined, “can never reach social equality with their white brethren” in the United States. But in Liberia, they would not only help themselves but also help spread American-style democracy. “We should do all we can to Americanize Africa” he trumpeted.<sup>16</sup> Liberian colonization could be a win-win for everyone.

Much of the family history that Anna told her children and grandchildren, not to mention her continued enthusiasm for expatriation, fit comfortably within the emerging racial logic of Jim Crow segregation and the practices of racial discrimination in white settler societies around the globe.<sup>17</sup> Like many of her contemporaries, she believed unapologetically in white racial superiority but found slaveholders and their Reconstruction-era successors loathsome. She was not unusual among white, native-born Americans of her generation and social class in believing that the future of the nation should lie first in the hands of the descendants of colonial-era “heroes and statesmen”—as she like to describe her ancestors—and second with northern European immigrants who could be assimilated into the dominant white, Anglo-Saxon culture.<sup>18</sup> Everyone else needed to know their place.<sup>19</sup>

And then there was the Mohun side of the family. Dorsey’s other grandfather, Francis Mohun, was a scrappy Irish immigrant who’d grown rich in the Washington building trade, first as a carpenter and later as a contractor and lumber dealer.<sup>20</sup> Francis eventually cofounded a successful construction company that made him rich.<sup>21</sup> His wealth gave him leverage in Washington. He used it not only to enrich himself further but also to enter local politics, serving on the city council throughout the 1850s before passing the seat to another family member.<sup>22</sup> Resentment of the way native-born Protestants looked down on both Roman Catholics and Irish immigrants fueled Francis’s ambitions. His sense

of victimhood may also have shaped his attitudes toward slavery. He almost certainly used slave labor on construction projects before the Civil War. Even more tellingly, he was himself an enslaver, holding on to one domestic bondswoman, Mary Marlow, until 1862, when Congress bought the freedom of the District of Columbia's remaining slaves.<sup>23</sup> One wonders what the conversation between the in-laws on the subject of slavery might have sounded like. Or perhaps they avoided the topic, as polite people of their social standing often did.

### CAPITAL LESSONS

A few days short of Dorsey's first birthday, pealing church bells and celebratory artillery fire from the district's ring of defensive forts stirred the city awake. Robert E. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox. It was the "end of the rebellion," as the family's favorite newspaper, the *Evening Star*, put it.<sup>24</sup> As staunch unionists who had lost relatives in the war, they joined the celebrations. Eight months later, the ratification of the 13th Amendment outlawing slavery provided additional welcome news—a potential step toward William McKenney's vision of America's future.

But like many residents of the District of Columbia, the Mohuns and the Dorseys were unprepared for what came next. Antebellum Washington had been a southern city where relations between Blacks and whites were governed not only by strict racial etiquette backed up by the threat of violence but also by "black codes"—legal statutes restricting Blacks from gathering in large groups, owning firearms, and being out after ten o'clock at night.<sup>25</sup> The war years shook up this status quo, as did the forty thousand or so formerly enslaved people who came to the city searching for refuge and opportunity.<sup>26</sup> There, they mingled with white newcomers, the small prewar Black community, and "old residents"—as Francis and his contemporaries sometimes styled themselves. By the end of the war, nearly half of white residents and two-thirds of Black residents of the district heralded from somewhere else. The population nearly doubled in this period, straining a city government that had struggled with basic matters such as sanitation and water supply even before the war.<sup>27</sup>

During the conflict, Black refugees had provided a much-needed workforce. As the war began to wind down, they found it more and

more difficult to find work because of competition from white laborers and fewer war-related jobs.<sup>28</sup> Now tattered, hungry, desperate people huddled in tent camps or hastily constructed shacks at night and took to the streets by day. Unbound from slavery and from oppressive regulations, they gathered in large numbers to celebrate the benefits of freedom. On the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1866, an estimated crowd of six thousand joined with Washington's Black elite for a day of speeches and parading through the streets.<sup>29</sup> For the "old timers" on L Street, the presence of these incomers would have been hard to miss. Public expressions of joy from these "sons of Africa" as they were sometimes referred to by the press, made many white residents uncomfortable.

Political efforts to aid newly freed people also competed with the Washington business community's big plans to turn this sleepy, dusty, southern town with a seasonal population of politicians into a modern commercial hub.<sup>30</sup> At war's end, Dorsey's grandfather Francis Mohun along with Francis's adult sons positioned themselves to take advantage of postwar rebuilding needs. They cannily switched their political affiliation from Democratic to Republican to better work the patronage system, and they joined a newly formed board of trade—effectively a chamber of commerce—to increase their political leverage.<sup>31</sup> Even Dorsey's father, whose primary business was a bookstore, joined in the excitement. He helped lobby Congress for a new railroad line connecting Washington and Richmond, Virginia—the former capital of the Confederacy.<sup>32</sup>

The businessmen's biggest plans would have to wait, for Congressional Radical Republicans glimpsed an opportunity for a very different kind of rebuilding. They would use their direct governing power to test, on a small scale, some of their ideas about how to implement Black suffrage and integration of the schools, both key to full citizenship. The Freedmen's Bureau and volunteers, Black and white, would help. Thus, the district became for a few short years what Radical Republican Charles Sumner described "an example for all the land" of how to implement new measures for racial equality.<sup>33</sup>

It's impossible to say whether the temporary triumph of the Radical Republican agenda contributed to the Dorsey-Mohun household's

decision to move out of the city. On L Street, family members would have found it hard to ignore violent clashes between Irish-born and Black laborers over scarce jobs and housing.<sup>34</sup> They might also have shared their white neighbors' concerns about property values as African Americans moved into Swampoodle.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the reasons, move they did—to rural Prince George's County in Maryland, on a small plantation estate called Woodreve.<sup>36</sup>

But within two years, the family moved back to a transformed capital.<sup>37</sup> Both the idealism and the chaos of the immediate postwar era began to give way to the mores of the Gilded Age. The influence of the Radicals had begun to fade and with it, the Freedmen's Bureau, which shut down its district activities for good in 1872. On Capitol Hill, Congress had also changed, as the nation's attention turned away from the plight of formerly enslaved people to other matters: industrialization, western expansion, and the United States' place in the world.

The family's wealth had reached a high point—although no one knew it.<sup>38</sup> Richard's bookstore prospered thanks to government stationery and publishing contracts. Financially comfortable, Anna, Clare, Richard, and a growing number of children moved to a townhouse in the fashionable Second Ward, only a few blocks from the White House and Lafayette Square, the most prestigious neighborhood in the city. Here they could surround themselves with the kind of neighbors they thought befitted their social status: a Superior Court Judge, an architect, two grocers, and numerous civil servants.<sup>39</sup> Every homeowner on the block was white. Most were native born. Washington had a significant population of middle-class Black intellectuals, but you would not know it around Lafayette Square.

The households in the Lafayette Square area reflected the aspirations and values of the post-Civil War white middle class. These were families with male breadwinners who had to work for a living but who earned enough to support their wives and extended families—and their domestic servants, who were often Black. For children growing up in such households, adults' interactions with household employees offered formative lessons in the exercise of white racial privilege. Because servants typically lived with families fulltime, often in tiny rooms high in a house, those lessons could be particularly intimate. They gave



white, middle-class people the feeling that they understood the mentalities and behaviors of the people they often referred to as “colored.”

This was certainly the case in the Dorsey-Mohun house. Thanks to Richard’s much-increased earnings, the family now employed at least four servants, three of whom were Black. Together, they took care of cooking, cleaning, childcare, and other requests. At sixty-eight, William Williams was by far the oldest person in the household, followed by Emeline Clark. The family also employed Richardson Herbert, age 31. None of the Black servants in this bookish household could read or write. It is likely that at least some of them had been born into slavery. All were old enough to have known people born in Africa and brought to the United States against their will.<sup>40</sup>

What did this mean for Dorsey’s later encounters with Africans in Congo, Zanzibar, and Africa? Like many white Americans, he felt most comfortable dealing with dark-skinned people as subordinates and servants. He took for granted that they should do his bidding and gave little thought to what they might have sacrificed to work for him. From his youthful experiences in Washington and in his own household, he absorbed an informal code of conduct that he willfully violated in his twenties and then tried to return to in later years: always pay for services rendered and avoid corporal punishment. Failing to pay wages and resorting to physical violence were the hallmarks of slaveholding. His family was proudly not like southern slaveholders and their Reconstruction-era successors. In the beginning, he thought he was too.



Dorsey and his family didn’t get their ideas about Africa and Africans just from family history and their interactions with people of African descent. Plenty of other information and misinformation circulated around Washington. A steady trickle of missionaries and reformers “full of Africa,” returning from Liberia and elsewhere, testified about their experiences in newspaper articles and public lectures. They emphasized the day-to-day challenges of missionizing and the successes of their missions.<sup>41</sup> By the 1880s the State Department had more than a dozen consular posts in Africa staffed with agents tasked with collecting

information. Their reports analyzed commercial opportunities for American businesses. Navy ships cruised the African coastlines and made occasional upriver explorations that were eagerly reported on by the press and talked about in government receptions and parlor chats.<sup>42</sup> The Smithsonian Institution had also begun collecting and interpreting African cultural objects.<sup>43</sup>

Avid readers, especially ones with a bookshop-owning family member, could easily feed their curiosity with a growing list of titles by European and American writers. Travel, adventure, and geography books about Africa were very popular. Bayard Taylor, America's most famous travel writer, came out with *The Lake Regions of Central Africa* in 1873, when Dorsey was nine. Taylor unapologetically cribbed from the accounts of other travelers to describe a region Dorsey would come to know well.<sup>44</sup> A few years later, Anna sent a copy of the best-selling novel *King Solomon's Mines*, which described English explorers' search for a legendary African source of diamonds, to Lee as consolation for her thwarted plans to missionize the Congo.<sup>45</sup> Catering to a mass audience, these writers employed a series of tropes, some of which Dorsey would later recycle in his own accounts of Africa. They portrayed white explorers as civilizing, justice-dispensing heroes, admired by the "natives" who recognized their natural superiority. Africans, in contrast, were superstitious, exotic savages with strange customs and a propensity for irrationality and violence. Aware that stories about ritual cannibalism and seemingly unprovoked attacks on expeditions were particularly exciting to American and European readers, popular writers highlighted them—a habit that Dorsey would pick up.

In Dorsey's youth, no one had a bigger impact on Americans' perception of Africa than Henry Morton Stanley, the Anglo-American adventurer. Stanley was so famous that his encounter with the British missionary Dr. David Livingstone near Lake Tanganyika spawned a well-known catch phrase: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume." Beginning in the mid-1870s, the *Evening Star* published detailed accounts of Stanley's explorations of the Congo River basin.<sup>46</sup> According to his grandmother, Dorsey kept an album of newspaper clippings, though it has not survived. It is easy to imagine how those stories might have inflamed the imagination of a teenager just as they excited tens of thousands of adults.

Stanley's well-publicized travels also had a powerful effect on the geographical imagination of middle-class armchair travelers like the Mohuns and the Dorseys. "In the old school maps there was a blank space in the center of the African continent labeled 'unexplored regions,'" an article in the *Star* began. No longer. Thanks to Henry Stanley, the "'unexplored' region of the old maps of Africa had become the 'Congo basin' of the new."<sup>47</sup> In this era of progress and constant accumulation of knowledge, it seemed possible to truly know Africa.



In 1879 Dorsey's father died of congestive heart failure. The family was already having trouble making ends meet. Richard's business suffered during his prolonged illness. An economic depression contributed to their financial woes. Their social connections and proud family history did not ensure financial security. Washington offered plenty of examples of genteel poverty—a status the family was determined to avoid. All the women had taken on additional work writing for magazines and newspapers or processing information in government "bureaus," as they called them. Dorsey's mother Clare wrote a weekly gossip column for a Cincinnati, Ohio, newspaper and had taken on some secretarial duties for Lucy Hayes, the president's wife, whom she'd met while covering the White House.<sup>48</sup> With the death of the family's only male breadwinner, financial disaster seemed imminent. The women decided that fifteen-year-old Dorsey needed to get a job. As the eldest he would forgo further schooling to support his mother and siblings.

Like a growing number of middle-class American families, the Mohun-Dorsey clan concluded that their boys' best career opportunities lay in the United States' emerging status as a global economic and military power. Thus began Dorsey's apprenticeship as an American imperialist. His mother and grandmother initially fantasized that he could be a marine—fighting his country's battles "from the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" in the words of the service's hymn, which summarized its antebellum interventions in Mexico and North Africa. But he was far too young. Instead, Clare and Anna worked their connections to secure a civilian clerical position in the United States Department of

the Navy. Thus Dorsey dutifully took on the role of male breadwinner. For the next six years, he donned a dark suit and starched white collar and walked a few blocks to the mansard-roofed edifice next to the White House, then known as the State, War, and Navy Building. Inside its sumptuous, overdecorated rooms, he did what was asked of him and waited for an opportunity.

## ON THE EDGE OF AFRICA

The year was 1885. Dorsey was on his way to Egypt. Thanks to the intervention of a family friend, he'd been freed from his desk.<sup>49</sup> His new appointment as assistant paymaster did not sound glamorous. But it would allow him to spend the next three years cruising the Mediterranean and the west coast of Africa on the USS *Quinnebaug*. Later, he would let people believe he'd joined the Marine Corps. In truth he was never more than a civilian employee tasked with keeping the ship's books and doling out gold coin to sailors and suppliers.<sup>50</sup>

Traveling along the edges of Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, imagination and experience began to converge for the inexperienced twenty-one-year-old. Dorsey was making direct contact with people and places he'd only read about. He translated cultural attitudes he'd absorbed in Washington into the persona of an American in the world. In the company of the officers and crew of *Quinnebaug*, he also received a tutorial in the tricky dance of informal empire. The US Navy was charged with protecting American interests while maintaining good relations with European powers and the peoples they strove to subjugate. Ships like the *Quinnebaug* publicly asserted the potential for military engagement while carefully avoiding actual conflict (most of the time).<sup>51</sup>

On a Thursday morning early in June, Dorsey made his way to the crowded waterfront of Alexandria, Egypt, where he was to report for work. He'd been traveling for nearly a month, working his way down through Europe and making an obligatory stop in Jerusalem and Mt. Carmel to visit spots described in the Bible.<sup>52</sup> How to reach his ship in this huge, crowded harbor? Shoals of boats and boatmen eagerly offered to ferry travelers to and from the large ships, including the *Quinnebaug*.<sup>53</sup> These entrepreneurs would have had no trouble spotting this

potential passenger on the quayside. Well over six feet tall, dressed in Western attire, he stood out among the sailors, stevedores, and hawkers. But neither his presence nor the sight of an American ship would have struck Alexandrians as unusual. Ships from the US Navy's European Squadron regularly dropped anchor there, and a growing number of American tourists and missionaries passed through Alexandria. After the Civil War, there had even been an influx of former confederate officers hired to reform the Egyptian military, sweating in their blue and gray wool uniforms, medals flashing in the bright Mediterranean sun.<sup>54</sup>

Thanks to the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 and its importance as a cotton growing region, Egypt was a significant nexus in the emerging global network of transportation, trade, and empire. Alexandria was its crucial coastal gateway. Eager to promote trade in the East, the United States joined dozens of other nations in asserting a presence in the Alexandrian harbor.

The ship buzzed with activity. Officers from the British Navy had just paid a visit to request the Americans "dress" the *Quinnebaug* for a celebration of Queen Victoria's birthday. On the deck, the boatswain instructed apprentices to splice flags into decorative pennants. The carpenter carefully repaired caulking on the forecastle while the gunners and other crewmembers painted exposed surfaces. On Saturday, as the day of celebration dawned, the American crew hoisted an Egyptian flag in honor of the Khedive of Egypt, Tawfik, who arrived at his palace to the sound of a twenty-one-gun salute from Egyptian and French warships.<sup>55</sup>

Dorsey had arrived just in time to witness a complicated, if not convoluted, symbolic ritual constructed around the workings of European imperialism and the United States' relationship to it. Thanks to his family's connection with the Ottoman Empire, Tawfik was the hereditary ruler of Egypt. But in practice, he was a political puppet controlled by the British government, part of an evolving system of "indirect rule." So it came to be that an American ship flew the Egyptian flag at the request of the British government to honor an Egyptian ruler who, in turn, was celebrating the birthday of the British queen, who had the power to dictate how he governed.

Once aboard the ship, Dorsey could also see evidence of Egypt's place in global trade, in which the United States was still only an aspiring player. A forest of masts and the stump-like profiles of smokestacks from hundreds of ships interrupted the flat landscape. Some ships had come from as far away as China. Others flew the flags of Europe and the Americas. During the US Civil War, the harbor had been dredged and improved to better support the export of Egyptian cotton that replaced American supplies in the mills of Manchester, England. Under British control, that trade continued. However, some of that cotton returned to Egypt in the form of cloth and then, when worn out, was sent to the United States in the form of rags used to make paper in Philadelphia and Boston. The US government employed a rag inspector to check for signs of cholera and other diseases before the rags were loaded for export.<sup>56</sup> At the moment of Dorsey's arrival, the US Consul in Cairo was hoping for trade in more than dirty rags. A southerner, he regretted the high tariffs that made the import of US cotton-processing machinery uneconomical for Egyptians.<sup>57</sup> The presence of the British added another frustrating layer of complexity in his efforts to find more trade opportunities for US firms.

American commercial and political engagement with Egypt would continue. But both American capitalists and the Gilded Age politicians who served them increasingly believed that the most promising financial opportunities were in West Africa. Dorsey arrived in Alexandria at a pivotal moment in the European scramble to seize territory in Africa. A few months earlier, at the Berlin Conference, diplomats congratulated themselves on an agreement they believed would open the continent to free trade and European colonization while promising the right of self-determination for Indigenous people.<sup>58</sup> Leopold had secured personal control over a vast swath of the continent's center, which he named the *État indépendant du Congo* (or Congo Free State, in the anglophone world) as a gesture toward the ideals he'd expressed at the conference. His agents in Washington were busy working to obtain official recognition of his claims to sovereignty. They promised the United States unfettered access to new markets and raw materials. On September 11, 1885, President Grover Cleveland became the first head of state to officially recognize Leopold as the ruler of this vast African colony.

Five months later the *Quinnebaug* set sail for the Gates of Gibraltar and a cruise down the African coast. Other ships in the European Squadron had been visiting West Africa for a long time, typically stopping in Liberia, and venturing as far south as Angola.<sup>59</sup> The *Quinnebaug* made similar stops, but its ultimate destination was the mouth of the Congo.<sup>60</sup> Dorsey was curious enough to leave the ship, traveling upstream against the huge, muddy current of the Congo to Boma, where Leopold's agents had just begun to turn a former slave-trading entrepôt of crumbling eighteenth-century buildings and palm-roofed shacks into the headquarters of the newly established Congo Free State. The American visitor was not impressed.<sup>61</sup> The place seemed so inconsequential.

Twenty-three years old with his life in front of him, he could not have imagined his future would be so closely tied to this tiny town and the great river that flowed past it. Circumstance, not choice, had led him to this brief encounter in 1887. He hadn't signed on to the *Quinnebaug* because he imagined it as a first step toward a career in Africa. He'd simply gone where opportunity seemed to beckon. Like other budding American imperialists, he was confident in his own ability to rapidly master virtually any setting. Thus, he treated his time with the Navy as an apprenticeship in skills that he could use elsewhere: how to comport himself as a representative of the US government and where the boundaries were between self-interest and dutiful performance, and how to do practical things like keep accounts, discipline subordinates, and comport himself like a military man.

The African cruise was brief. Back in the Mediterranean, Dorsey's employment on the *Quinnebaug* was ending. As the United States' global ambitions ratcheted up, the Department of the Navy deemed the aging warship, with its vestigial sails, leaky wooden hull, and slow and unreliable engine, obsolete. The commander and crew received their orders: return the ship to the Brooklyn Naval Yard to be scrapped. Only the name would survive, passed on to a more modern vessel.<sup>62</sup>

Dorsey set his sights on one last task. He had not yet traveled up the Nile to see the Pyramids and other wonders of ancient Egypt. He needed to close the gap between the imaginative and experiential, not just for himself but because his family and friends at home expected it. He would have plenty of company from his fellow countrymen and



women. As steamships and railroads made travel easier, Egypt attracted a growing number of American tourists eager to see the Pyramids and “Bible lands” for themselves.

Of all the places on the African continent Dorsey would come to know, Egypt was the most familiar and alluring to Americans. Over the course of the nineteenth century, waves of Egyptomania swept the country. The half-completed Washington Monument, modeled after Egyptian obelisks, loomed over the national mall of Dorsey’s childhood, drawing a parallel in stone between the founders and the ancient Pharaohs. Enslaved people compared their bondage to the Biblical captivity of the Israelites in Egypt, while their enslavers held up Egypt as the first great civilization built on slaveholding. A wide range of people followed the discoveries of archaeologists and flocked to displays of mummies and other artifacts. They followed debates among ethnologists over the racial identity of ancient Egyptians.<sup>63</sup> Among the things the archaeologists uncovered were ancient blue beads buried with the dead for luck.<sup>64</sup> For a few piastres, replicas could be had from sellers outside the tourist hotels.

Most Americans didn’t think of Egypt as part of Africa at all. Ancient Egypt figured in schoolbooks and popular literature most prominently as one of the wellsprings of Western civilization—an exotic part of the classical world and the dramatic historical setting for scenes from the Old Testament. If pressed, American travelers might have assigned contemporary Egypt to the “Orient” or Near East—in the sphere of the Ottoman Empire and therefore host to titillating cultural practices such as the maintenance of harems.<sup>65</sup>

Some of the biggest celebrities of the era visited Egypt. Lincoln’s secretary of state, William Seward, toured the Pyramids on his seventieth birthday. Ulysses S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman also made pilgrimages to Giza.<sup>66</sup> So did Mark Twain. Frederick Douglass’s visit in 1887 fulfilled a longtime dream. Unlike many of his fellow travelers, he concluded that the ancient Egyptians were Africans and that their accomplishments should be a source of pride for Black Americans.<sup>67</sup>

Extensive newspaper coverage, fueled by telegraphic communication, made heavily filtered versions of contemporary Egypt visible even to those who stayed at home. Contrasts between the poverty of present-day Egypt



and the imagined glories of the Pharaonic age was a common theme. But readers also gobbled up coverage of the efforts of the Khedive, Ismaïl Pasha, to modernize his country. They produced gushing reports, such as “Egypt’s Khedive: How Modern Pharaoh Acts and Looks,” published in the *Boston Globe*.<sup>68</sup> “I know more about Thotmes [*sic*] III than Ismail Pasha, Viceroy of Egypt,” one atypically honest reporter admitted, before providing detailed analysis anyway.<sup>69</sup> Largely ignorant of the enormous human cost of khedival rule, others looked for parallels and connections with the United States’ struggle for liberty.<sup>70</sup>

“We had a long delightful letter from Dorsey last evening,” his grandmother wrote Lee, now an initiate in an Ohio nunnery. “He has been in Egypt again and this time went to the Pyramids, explored them inside, and scrambled by the help of a Bedouin to the top.” He also visited the ruins of Memphis, “once the seat of so much splendor and power.” For an extra thrill, his guide directed him to slide head-first into what he described as funeral or burial caves. The adventure plunged him “into Egyptian darkness,” dramatically playing on the double meaning of race and the unknown. Anna, who had never traveled farther than a few hundred miles from Washington, was thrilled that her grandson had made contact with a world she knew only from books.<sup>71</sup>

Dorsey’s reference to the Bedouin is the only hint that he had not conducted this journey on his own. It is likely that the man who helped him to the top of a pyramid as well as whoever urged him to slide into a cave were subcontractors of a professional guide or dragoman. Most American tourists who could afford it hired a dragoman to translate, interpret and describe, and generally smooth the way. But, like the many guides and interpreters who would help Dorsey and people like him, very few are named and even fewer speak for themselves through surviving sources.<sup>72</sup>

After this brief adventure, Dorsey returned to Washington, hoping to parlay his résumé into a diplomatic posting. He applied to become the US consul to Belfast, Ireland—perhaps reasoning that his father’s Irish roots would give him an advantage. His mother and grandmother set about lobbying on his behalf.<sup>73</sup>

The plan failed. Dorsey’s glancing encounter with Africa and ink-stained accounting for the Navy best qualified him for a different kind