

Documents and Debates

THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA



Robin Brooke-Smith

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General Editor's Preface

This book forms part of a series entitled *Documents and Debates*, which is aimed primarily at sixth formers. The earlier volumes in the series each covered approximately one century of history, using material both from original documents and from modern historians. The more recent volumes, however, are designed in response to the changing trends in history examinations at 18 plus, most of which now demand the study of documentary sources and the testing of historical skills. Each volume therefore concentrates on a particular topic within a narrower span of time. It consists of eight sections, each dealing with a major theme in depth, illustrated by extracts drawn from primary sources. The series intends partly to provide experience for those pupils who are required to answer questions on documentary material at A-level, and partly to provide pupils of all abilities with a digestible and interesting collection of source material, which will extend the normal textbook approach.

This book is designed essentially for the pupil's own personal use. The author's introduction will put the period as a whole into perspective, highlighting the central issues, main controversies, available source material and recent developments. Although it is clearly not our intention to replace the traditional textbook, each section will carry its own brief introduction, which will set the documents into context. A wide variety of source material has been used in order to give the pupils the maximum amount of experience – letters, speeches, newspapers, memoirs, diaries, official papers, Acts of Parliament, Minute Books, accounts, local documents, family papers, etc. The questions vary in difficulty, but aim throughout to compel the pupil to think in depth by the use of unfamiliar material. Historical knowledge and understanding will be tested, as well as basic comprehension. Pupils will also be encouraged by the questions to assess the reliability of evidence, to recognise bias and emotional prejudice, to reconcile conflicting accounts and to extract the essential from the irrelevant. Some questions, *marked with an asterisk*, require knowledge outside the immediate extract and are intended for further research or discussion, based on the pupil's general knowledge of the period. Finally, we hope that students using this material will learn something of the nature of historical inquiry and the role of the historian.

John Wroughton

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The Scramble for Africa

The 'scramble for Africa' is a metaphor applied by historians to the period of very rapid annexation of the African continent by the European Powers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. It is a much debated historical process upon which strong opinions and diverse views are held. The scramble was indeed a truly remarkable episode representing, perhaps, the most rapid period of imperial expansion in history and the pinnacle of European power and self-confidence; yet hardly more than twenty years later Europe suffered the disastrous calamity of World War I followed shortly by World War II. These two global conflicts were to precipitate the European powers into an equally rapid period of decolonisation.

The causes of imperial expansion, especially of the scramble, remain very much a matter of debate. In 1883 Sir John Seeley, Professor of History at Cambridge, referring to imperialism in the widest context, made the disingenuous comment, 'we seem, as it were, to have conquered and peopled half the world in a fit of absence of mind'. Well, the phenomenon of the scramble, which of course Seeley could not as yet have been referring to, was so rapid and sudden and often brutal that we are obliged to look for explicit motivations which some of the evidence to be studied in this book suggests were both potent and conscious.

The causes of the scramble include a mixture of economic, industrial, strategic, cultural and domestic. Bismarck explained his reluctant indulgence in colonial acquisition as resulting from the fear that his opponents would capitalise in the polls on the wave of enthusiasm for empire. He did also make his celebrated remark that his map of Africa lay in Europe. Britain occupied Egypt to protect the Suez canal in the face of the rising tide of an indigenous and zealous nationalist movement and of a deteriorating financial situation in Egypt. On the one hand, therefore, domestic considerations appear uppermost, on the other developments in Africa precipitated occupation. It is, however, necessary for the historian to eschew simplistic conclusions and acknowledge that different combinations of motives may have been at work in different parts of Africa and for different European Powers. In Rhodesia commercial factors were strong as in parts of West Africa; in

Egypt and South Africa strategic factors were more important, though how important is a matter of debate. Overarching all these considerations is the stark fact of European military, economic and technological superiority which enabled European powers to achieve an easy hegemony.

A useful starting point is the 'Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Africa (West Coast)' 1865 (Chapter 2), which recommended a halt to Britain's colonial expansion and the beginning of a withdrawal. Many questions arise from this (which you should be better able to answer when you have worked through the book); how and why was this policy so comprehensively reversed during the following 30 years? How important were the actions of other powers? How important were commercial considerations? Given the very poor showing of most of tropical Africa economically from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth century, why was so much money and effort invested in the panoply and machinery of empire when the returns appear so meagre? Was the Parliamentary Committee Report perhaps right and Britain had little to gain from a continent with such bleak economic prospects?

The book ends (Chapter 8) with a collection of writings and statistics on the historiography of the scramble, considering the works of Lenin, Hobson, Ferry, Lord Cromer, Robinson and Gallagher, Frankel and others. These interpretations range from the contemporary belief that European rule was a great benefit willingly and consciously transferred, bringing civilisation and good government to inferior peoples, to the Marxist view that imperialism was an inevitable and rapacious outcome of capitalist greed and expansionism leading inevitably to communist revolution. A major controversy has surrounded the more recent work of Robinson and Gallagher who identify strategic imperatives as the main determinants of British colonial policy. Thus they emphasise the importance of the Cape and Egypt; other British acquisitions were primarily to secure these vital military/commercial seaways. The 'mid-Victorians', to use their term, had maintained control of these areas through 'influence' and 'pressure'. The growth of French and German rivalry forced British decision makers into formal imperial control; and thus the argument is developed. Ranged against this view are those who see a more complex picture of commercial, cultural, psychological, domestic as well as strategic forces.

At the Berlin West Africa Conference 1884-85 (Chapter 3) the European Powers laid down rules and procedures for the annexation of territory in Africa. This was, in effect, a way of ensuring that the partition of the continent should be carried out without serious conflict between the powers. The very fact of laying down rules and procedures under which powers could 'legitimately' lay claim to African territory by means of effective occupation lent a dynamic and rationale to European

expansion. There was now nothing 'absent minded' – in Seeley's words – about European imperialism. The conference was also a forum in which Bismarck played out his diplomatic manoeuvres, in this case seeking a *rapprochement* – abortive as it turned out – with France.

In West Africa (Chapter 2) we are confronted by the commercial pressures behind the forming of the Royal Niger Company and the government's use of it as an agent of control. There was also a great increase in interest in the area from France in the late 1870s partly for military and partly for commercial reasons. In East Africa (Chapter 4) the greater proximity to India, the importance of the East coast ports, the Nile Headwaters and the so-called 'Egyptian lever' gave strategic considerations a greater importance. Here also the new Germany pressed for her 'place in the sun' with colonial adventurers Carl Peters, Hans Meyer and others leading the way.

South Africa (Chapter 5) is different again and in many ways unique. A good climate, long-standing European settlement by Dutch and British, mounting commercial pressure as its fabulous mineral wealth was revealed, the well-organised military and expansionist nation of the Zulus all combined to create a special mix of circumstances. And over all this South Africa was dominated at this time by the larger-than-life figure of Cecil Rhodes and his special brand of private enterprise colonialism. The astonishing events of the Zulu War of 1879 were to send shock waves through the Empire. Throughout South Africa in the late 1870s and early 1880s there were threatened and actual uprisings of Africans against the white intruders. In this atmosphere Britain decided to pre-empt such risings by taking the war to the Zulus and after an obviously incompetent campaign in which the British camp at Isandhlwana was destroyed, the Zulus were finally decimated at Ulundi.

The Fashoda incident (Chapter 6) with the clash of Britain and France over claims in the lower Sudan illuminates the relations between the two countries as they came to the brink of war. It also highlights the impact of domestic politics on the policies of European governments towards Africa. It is the nearest that two powers came to blows over colonial issues in Africa.

The effects of the scramble upon the continent itself, though not within the scope of this book, should not be forgotten. The national boundaries of modern African states are the legacy of this period, often dissecting tribes and nations with imperial disdain. The economies and cultures of Africa experienced the trauma of rapid and enforced change which often tied Africa with inescapable bonds of dependence. The scramble, therefore, completed the bondage of the continent begun 200 years before with the brutal and savage Atlantic slave trade.

The main sources used fall into the following broad categories:

Official documents, e.g. Public Record Office, Commonwealth

Office, Parliamentary Papers, Hansard, Ministères des Colonies Afrique – Paris, Weissbuch – Berlin.

Newspapers, e.g. *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Le Temps*, *Hereford Times*, *South Wales Daily Telegram*, *Punch*, *Illustrated London News*.

Constitutional documents, e.g. various from S. Africa, E. Africa, Gooch and Temperley's British Foreign Office documents on origins of World War I.

Memoirs and monographs.

Letters, speeches, statistics, diaries, e.g. Cecil Rhodes' speeches.

Papers of famous men, e.g. Salisbury papers, Milner papers.

1 Egypt

Some historians have asserted that the British military occupation of Egypt in August 1882, resulting from a complex series of events, was in some way a trigger or signal for the chain reaction that we have called the scramble for Africa. Indeed Robinson and Gallagher assert, 'From start to finish the partition of tropical Africa was driven by the persistent crisis in Egypt. When the British entered Egypt on their own the Scramble began; and as long as they stayed in Cairo, it continued until there was no more of Africa left to divide'. After the occupation, Britain speedily brought to an end the Dual-Control that she and France had exercised. The ending of Anglo-French understanding in Egypt began a long period of friction and open animosity between the two which was only resolved by the Anglo-French agreements of 1904. It is for this reason that we shall be taking the events in Egypt as our starting point.

Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire, though with some degree of autonomy, and by geographical location was inextricably tied up with the politics of the 'eastern question'. France established herself as the predominant power in the region during the Napoleonic Wars. This in turn alerted Britain to a possible threat to her links with India. Together with the need to preserve stability in the European states system this led Britain to a commitment to prop up the ailing Ottoman Empire. The building of the Suez canal in 1869 by the Frenchman Ferdinand de Lesseps was from the very first opposed by Britain; but once the canal was completed a whole new quantity was introduced into the middle eastern equation. The canal had huge commercial as well as strategic importance. Indeed by 1882 the canal was carrying 5 074 809 tons of shipping per year.

During the Khedivate of Ismail 1863-1879 the Egyptian government had recklessly raised vast sums of money in European markets often at crippling high rates of interest. When finally bankruptcy faced Ismail, France and Britain jointly took a controlling hand in running Egypt's finances. In the process of 'straightening out' the finances in the interests partly of the creditors, the mass of the Egyptian population suffered great hardship and the added burden of poor rains and failed harvests led to a dangerously unstable political situation and the emergence of a genuine nationalist movement under Arabi Pasha.

This complex situation in Egypt eventually proved sufficient to push Gladstone's liberal government into occupation. 'It is a nasty business, and we have been much out of luck', said the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Granville in June 1882. Sir Charles Dilke who defends the occupation (extract c) was a radical, liberal and friend of Joseph Chamberlain who wanted a forthright policy on Egypt. Randolph Churchill who belittles the importance of the Suez canal (extract e) was a brilliant young member of the conservative opposition. The liberal government had been elected to power on a policy of reversing the 'forward' foreign policy of Disraeli's conservatives and it is safe to say that military intervention is the last thing that Gladstone wanted. It is not surprising, therefore, that historians have taken the Egyptian case and extrapolated theories and patterns to explain the forthcoming partition of the continent. Some emphasise the financial interests which they argue the government could not but defend; others develop the strategic motivations; and yet others see the growth of Anglo-French animosity as important in the subsequent race for territory.

Riots eventually broke out in Alexandria in June 1882, in which a number of Europeans were killed. On 11 July the British fleet bombarded Alexandria, after which Arabi Pasha's army blockaded the city, cutting off water supplies. Military intervention became inevitable as it became apparent that the canal was in danger.

Why was the liberal government drawn into a military occupation of Egypt? What vested interests were at stake? What were the international considerations involved? What would France's reaction be? How long would Britain remain in control? These and other questions are important for a full understanding of this topic.

1 Britain 'acquires' the Suez canal and views on the growing crisis

(a) Disraeli informs Queen Victoria of the purchase

... It is just settled; you have it, Madam. The French Government has been out-generaled. They try too much, offering loans at an usurious rate, and with conditions which would have virtually given them the government of Egypt.

- 5 The Khedive, in despair and disgust, offered your Majesty's Government to purchase his shares outright . . .

Four millions sterling! and almost immediately. There was only one firm that could do it – Rothschilds. They behaved admirably; advanced the money at a low rate, and the entire interest of the Khedive is now

- 10 yours, Madam.

W. F. Money Penny and G. E. Buckle, *The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield* vol v, pp 448–9

(b) *Punch* cartoon of Disraeli and the Sphinx



**(c) Sir Charles Dilke's speech in the House of Commons,
25 July 1882**

Our position seems to arise from necessity . . . because Egypt forms our highway to India and to the East generally As regards the Suez canal, England has a double interest; it has a predominant commercial interest caused by the fact that the canal is the principle highway to

- 15 India, Ceylon, the Straits and British Burmah . . . also to China.
Hansard, 3rd ser, vol 272, 1720

(d) William Gladstone in August 1887

. . . I turn then to the military question and ask how much Russia will have gained [if she got control of the canal]? The answer is, that she will have introduced an average delay of about three weeks in our military communication with Bombay and less with Calcutta. It seems

- 20 to be forgotten by many, that there is a route to India round the Cape of Good Hope

The Nineteenth Century, ii (1877), p 155–6, quoted in
M. E. Chamberlain, *The Scramble for Africa* (Longman, 1974)

**(e) Lord Randolph Churchill's speech at Edinburgh,
18 Dec. 1883**

Egypt is not the high road to India. The Suez canal is a commercial route to India, and a good route too, in time of peace: but it never was and never could be, a military route for Great Britain in time

- 25 of war.
L. J. Jennings (ed.), *Speeches of the Rt. Hon. Randolph Churchill, 1880–88* (Longman, 1889) vol i, p 747

(f) J. C. M'Coan (Liberal MP for Co. Wicklow)

He again asked the committee what were our interests in connection with Egypt? . . . They were first, the Suez Canal; secondly, our trade with Egypt; and, thirdly, the subordinate but still important interest of the bondholders to whom Egypt was indebted. Now as regarded the

- 30 Canal . . . so vital was it, and so inseparably was it bound up with our interests in our Indian Empire, that if we had in Egypt no other interest, that alone would justify the Government for having taken military action. As he had observed, our interest in the Canal was not merely one of enormous military weight, but there was also the minor, but still
- 35 considerable interest, of the proprietary shares in that Canal. That interest was now of the market value of about £9,000,000; and upon that point he ventured to express his approval of the original purchase of the shares, which cost the country £4,000,000 four years ago . . . But