

broader themes with biographic sketches while at the same time proceeding in a roughly chronological order. Occasionally, this approach fails to do justice to all three aims: there is no strict chronological narration of events, information on the protagonists remains fragmented, and identical themes (notably those that permeate the whole story, such as censorship or the perception of the Burmese nationalists) pop up on several occasions. Chapter 4 (“Organizing the war correspondents”), for instance, discusses the problems of censorship and “embedded reporting” (as we may call it now) but ends with a section on the two female reporters who briefly worked in Burma. The second, Clare Booth Luce – wife of the American publisher – gets only a single sentence at the very end, but re-appears in the following chapter, which is, according to its heading, supposed to deal with the photo-journalist George Rodger. That Rodger worked almost exclusively for Luce’s *Life* magazine can hardly justify the inclusion of Luce’s wife here. Another case is chapter 7 (“Reporting the battles”), which starts with a section on the Battle of Yenangyaung (strictly speaking, this would have been an instance of scorched-earth policy rather than a battle), continues with the issue of collateral damage, and finally talks about the sometimes difficult relationship between the Burmese nationalists and the British. This latter topic, which split opinions (p. 132), appears for the first time in chapter 1 and pops up throughout the book, would surely have deserved a more systematic and focussed treatment in a chapter of its own. The same could be said of another persistent theme in the book, censorship, references to which are also scattered across several chapters.

However, such suggestions on how to improve the structure of the work have the positive implication that there is more thematic depth than Woods is ready to tell. In bringing to light an amazing array of data concerning the journalists reporting from one of the crucial theatres of war in the East, Woods has gone beyond the published works of the day, examining diaries, letters and later writings as well. This comprehensive look at the people who made the news and provided the home front in the UK and the USA with information and analyses, indeed breaks new ground. The book not only forms an important addition to the literature on the situation in Burma in 1942, but is also a major contribution to our understanding of the ways in which news – in letters, picture or reel – was produced and transmitted to the home fronts. Woods’ study opens up an important and much-neglected aspect of the Second World War in the Far East, and it will hopefully trigger further investigations which could for instance look beyond Burma to allow for comparative approaches.

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## AFRICA

MATTEO SALVADORE:

*The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian–European Relations, 1402–1555.*

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In a monograph that reads like a novel, Salvatore describes one-and-a-half centuries of Ethiopian–European encounters by following a dazzling number of characters –

pilgrims, scholars, clerics, diplomats, military commanders, rulers – across three continents. Written in captivating style, rich in detail, *The African Prester John* paints a multilingual world of exchanges, travel, cross-cultural literary and historiographical collaborations, and transnational politics. The encounter was initiated by the Ethiopians, who, using their sophisticated understanding of regional and trans-regional dynamics, solicited alliances and technological transfer from fellow Christian powers in Europe. Salvadore stresses over and over again the undisputed agency of the Ethiopians, not only in forging diplomatic networks, but also in producing a body of “transcultural knowledge and identities” (p. 8). Ethiopian actors actively contributed to the creation in Europe of an “Ethiopianist library” (p. 4), and cunningly played with European fantasies about distant Christians, such as the myth of the Black Magus, the myth of Solomon and Sheba and, of course, the myth of Prester John. As a testament to their discursive power, they often exploited their interlocutors’ expectations and co-opted the discourse on the Prester for their own benefit, confirming aspects of the myth to gain more personal and diplomatic leverage in Europe.

The first section of the book consists of four chapters, focusing on the four politico-geographical locations of the encounter in the fifteenth century: Venice (chapter 1), the territories under the Crown of Aragon (chapter 2), Rome (chapter 3) and Portugal (chapter 4). In this first phase of the encounter, communication had to go through the Mediterranean, and was severely limited by the Mamluks in Egypt, weary of a European–African Christian alliance. Connections were nevertheless forged between Ethiopia and European powers. These encounters gradually dragged Prester John out of the realm of fantasy, confirming to Europeans that a Christian African sovereign did indeed exist. The peculiarities of the Ethiopian faith started to come to light, and if the non-conformity of Ethiopian doctrines raised concerns, these were cast aside by the dominant ecumenism of the time (p. 70). This was “a Christian world that had yet to witness the trauma of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations”, in which understanding, mutuality and transcultural openness were the norm (p. 55). Ethiopian travellers to Europe were, for the most part, “a welcomed lot – supported in spite of their theological idiosyncrasies” (p. 55). Initially, in the Ethiopianist library, accurate information based on eye-witness accounts co-existed with medieval legends, exotic fantasies and what Salvadore calls “traditional geographical knowledge” (p. 28). The influence of this lore was far-reaching. Salvadore shows that while the search for gold and slaves was obviously the main expansionist motor, the Prester’s myth was for the Portuguese another essential “catalyst for exploration” of the Atlantic coast first, and the Indian Ocean afterwards (p. 91).

The second section describes the Ethio-Portuguese exchange of embassies along the newly established *carreira da Índia* in the early sixteenth century (ch. 5) culminating in the famous Portuguese embassy that, after almost a century of attempts, finally reached Ethiopia in 1520 (ch. 6), the return of the embassy to Lisbon (ch. 7) and the events leading up to the Portuguese military expedition in Ethiopia (ch. 8). The epochal arrival of the Portuguese embassy in Ethiopia in 1520 led to an inevitable reassessment of the myth of Prester John. For the Portuguese travellers, “the Ethiopian reality chipped away at the realm of European imagination as unicorns, supra-centennial men, and the Fountain of Youth were nowhere to be found” (p. 147). Ethiopia’s military power, in particular, was much more modest than the legends narrated, making the Prester a much less desirable ally against Muslim powers. At the court of the Ethiopian king there was a thriving community of Europeans who had lived in Ethiopia for years, often intermarrying with local women. Salvadore leverages this evidence against the isolationist thesis that has long dominated Ethiopian studies. Far from being, in Edward Gibbon’s infamous words, “forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten”, the Ethiopians formed “an integral part of the Red Sea

world” and welcomed foreigners (p. 147). The encounter, though, was about to become more fraught. With the rise in Europe of a militant discourse on Christianity “that had little patience with anything that did not conform to an increasingly strict notion of Catholic orthodoxy” (p. 155), it became impossible to postpone the thorny issues of theological discrepancy and ecclesiastical relations. The Prester was not “as Christian as Europeans had imagined” (p. 184). The mid-sixteenth century marked the fading of the encounter and onset of an era of unequal relations and antagonistic confrontations. In the wake of the Counter-Reformation, the “reciprocal curiosity, intercultural understanding and transcultural identities” gave way to a new and markedly dogmatic “discourse of difference and proselytism” (p. 184). This would quickly “dovetail with colour prejudice” (p. 208) – a stark change from the world of the encounter, where skin colour, Salvadore argues, had limited relevance. Europeans sporadically commented on the “unsightliness of Ethiopians” (p. 148), but faith consistently trumped colour. In the encounter world, Ethiopians were shown respect and treated as “exotic equals” (p. 206).

Despite its richness, the argument is skewed towards European accounts, and the Ethiopian perspective on the narrated events emerges only occasionally and tentatively – an imbalance in sources that could have been more extensively acknowledged and problematized. The book is otherwise an important contribution to many recent debates in history and African studies, first and foremost disproving blanket notions of African mimicry and discursive subordination. For scholars of Ethiopian history, reading how fifteenth-century Ethiopian rulers were, like their nineteenth- and twentieth-century counterparts, suspicious of foreign clerics, protective of their own religious traditions, and mostly only interested in “technological transfer, much of which was focused on war-making” (p. 145) speaks to the longevity of the country’s political culture. Against models of global intellectual history presenting non-European thought as passive and derivative in the face of Western hegemony, Salvadore emphasizes Ethiopia’s long tradition and ability to “borrow, appropriate, and indigenize artistic techniques and tropes imported from Europe” (p. 147).

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