

## ROGUE EMPIRES AND EUROPE'S SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

*Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa.*

By Steven Press.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. Pp. 371. \$39.95, hardback (ISBN: 9780674971851).

doi:10.1017/S0021853719000173

**Key Words:** colonialism, law, diplomacy, imperialism.

*Rogue Empires: Contracts and Conmen in Europe's Scramble for Africa* contributes to a familiar subject, the partition of Africa in the 1880s and 1890s, by focussing on the role of private entrepreneurs and adventurers in establishing claims to sovereignty over large parts of the continent. They did so by exploiting an ambiguity in international law that enabled individuals to establish rights over foreign territory. This initiative, in turn, was assisted by the fact that the terms 'sovereignty' and its alternative, 'suzerainty', remained vague and malleable. The result was a massive increase in private contracts and treaties that provided European states with entry points into Africa. Private companies, however, often ran into financial difficulties when exercising sovereignty over African states. Moreover, they created diplomatic complications as well as opportunities, and their activities frequently generated a bad press for imperialism. Consequently, national governments attempted to control their activities, first by converting private claims into official charters, and then by assimilating chartered companies into formal colonial rule. By the end of partition, the anomalies in international law had been resolved and the era of private sovereignty had come to an end.

This book, which is a revised doctoral dissertation, makes an important contribution to this topic. Press's research is exceptionally wide: it includes seven national archives and three languages, and results in a much-needed comparative account of a subject that is usually treated within the boundaries of a single national interest. His core argument, which is set out in Chapter One, is that the flurry of private claims to African territory derives from a precedent set by James Brooke, who became Rajah of Sarawak in Borneo in 1841, following a private agreement, and continued to rule there until 1868. Chapter Two shows how the idea of private sovereignty evolved into the chartered companies that appeared in Africa in the 1880s. Chapters Three and Four explore how private contracts and treaties were harnessed to the ambitions of Leopold in the Congo and Bismarck in South-West Africa and the West and East Coasts. Chapter Five follows the story to its culmination in the Berlin Conference, which Leopold treated as a device for securing international approval of the machinations of the International African Association, and Bismarck used for comparable colonial schemes involving the transfer of African sovereignty to various Hanseatic companies. In both cases, the example of Sarawak was cited to justify expansion and to establish legitimacy. The Epilogue explores how free trade in sovereignty was curtailed and offers some counterfactual speculations about the likely course of partition had the Borneo precedent not been set.

This is a book with some sterling qualities, apart from the depth of the research. Although specialists have long been aware of the Borneo example and the flurry of private and chartered companies that made inroads into Africa in the late nineteenth century, Press

provides a degree of emphasis and detail that exceeds what is currently available. Admittedly, this study deals primarily with diplomatic and legal issues and leaves business history and African perspectives aside, but that should not be taken as a criticism. Press is fully occupied with the themes he has chosen and has wisely decided not to range beyond his sources. The highlight of the book is probably the chapter on the Berlin Conference. Although the subject has long been a standard entry in diplomatic history and studies of partition, it has been some time since it was the subject of a substantial review. Press provides a balanced assessment of established interpretations, one holding that it impelled partition, the other that it made little difference to a movement that was already under way, and concludes that the Conference, though not decisive, did hasten the expansion of Europe into Africa.

The limits of the book are those shared by many revised dissertations. The forest is not always discernible among the trees. Short concluding sections at the end of each chapter would have helped readers to stay on track; a general conclusion at the end of the book would have removed uncertainties and underlined the message. The historiography of partition needed more than the one page allocated to it in the Introduction. The acute brevity of the summary offered there raises questions about the robustness of the author's own claim that a fresh answer lies 'not just in Europe, or even in Africa itself, but in Southeast Asia' (9). The Epilogue contains a more modest claim: 'Without Borneo the partition would not have accelerated dramatically in 1884–1855' (248). Even so, this conclusion depends on a series of counterfactuals that open the way to interpretations other than the one advanced here. Borneo was a precedent, not a cause. It was set long before partition and was seized upon in the 1880s and 1890s because it was regarded as a means of realising new ambitions in circumstances that had changed greatly since the 1840s and made partition feasible. These comments are not intended to detract from Press's achievement in illuminating the process of partition. Rather, they are meant to oblige historians to reconsider established interpretations of the Berlin Conference, and direct attention to the evolving legal framework that helped individuals to carry Europe into Africa.

A. G. HOPKINS  
*University of Cambridge*

## ISLAM, POWER, AND DEPENDENCY IN THE GAMBIA RIVER BASIN

*Islam, Power, and Dependency in the Gambia River Basin: The Politics of Land Control, 1790–1940.*  
 By Assan Sarr.

Rochester NY and Suffolk, UK: University of Rochester Press and Boydell and Brewer Limited, 2016. Pp. xiii + 244. \$49.95, hardback (ISBN: 9781580465694).

doi:10.1017/S0021853719000185

**Key Words:** land, Gambia, oral sources, West Africa.

This book is a very important one. Assan Sarr addresses critical issues and offers valuable, new insights from a well-researched base. His case is the middle and lower Gambia River