

## THE OBSERVER OBSERVED

*Colonial Kenya Observed: British Rule, Mau Mau and the Wind of Change.*

By S. H. Fazan. Edited by John Lonsdale.

London: I. B. Tauris, 2015. Pp. xliii + 358. £35.00/\$65.00, hardback (ISBN 978-1-78076-865-6).

doi:10.1017/S0021853716000797

**Key Words:** Kenya, colonial administration, land, memoirs, sources, text editions, violence.

I first came across the name S. H. Fazan in a time now nearly lost from memory, my first year in graduate school. I was researching the history of Mumboism, a millennial movement in southwest Kenya and read a 1915 report on Mumbo by a 27-year-old Fazan, then a junior district officer. It took me some months to fathom the nuances of Fazan's report and the acuity of his observations. John Lonsdale points out that all historians of Kenya perk up when we come across a document with Fazan's name attached (ix). It is not simply Fazan's intellect and close powers of observation that force us to take note, but his involvement in so many critical moments in Kenya's colonial history, having served from 1911 to 1943, only to be called out of his retirement during Mau Mau. *Colonial Kenya Observed*, Fazan's reminiscences written in the late 1960s but only now published, is a welcome book, and one that can be read in at least three ways.

First, it is a helpful source for some of the minutia of colonial life. The book begins with several forgettable chapters on the precolonial history of East Africa, which do little more than summarize the standard, Eurocentric vision of Fazan's generation. The following chapters contain some frustratingly general overviews, such as Chapter Ten, 'African Authorities', which is mostly a broad overview of chiefs, local councils, and courts. Unfortunately for scholars of western and northern portions of Kenya, he skips over his time in these areas quite rapidly. Although there are some standard apologetics for the benefits of colonial rule and the easy relations across racial lines, Fazan lays down some latter-day critiques of colonialism: during the First World War, 'Africans were being enlisted in large numbers to fight in a campaign far more deadly than any of their tribal wars and in a quarrel with which they had nothing to do'. Because of poor planning on the British side, Africans suffered 'grave and avoidable hardship' (54, 56). Chapter Eight, 'Changes', reveals the dramatic alterations in African and administrative life between the wars. Time and again, the reader is treated to observations that make this the best of the numerous editions of administrator reminiscences.

Yet this book is more than just another boma-eye view of colonial Kenya, as helpful as those are to scholars. For Fazan had his thumbprints on two devastatingly important episodes in colonial Kenya: he served as secretary for the Carter Land Commission (1932–3), which was to have been the government's final decision in terms of land rights, alienation, and compensation, and authored *Kikuyu Guards*, a largely celebratory work of Africans who stood in the front lines of counter-insurgency measures during Mau Mau. In this book, we have an elderly man, apparently fully at ease living in African-ruled Kenya, reflecting on his role in matters that shape the lives of his fellow citizens. It is at this point that one so deeply appreciates Lonsdale's foreword and extensive footnotes. If scholars of Kenya perk up at a Fazan document, we do the same at a work by Lonsdale. Here,

the second reading of the book: Lonsdale reveals the multiple layers of Fazan's history, its subtle references, silences, and muted critiques, in a way that, I think, no other scholar could have done. We cannot understand the Land Commission without *Colonial Kenya Observed*, which we cannot fully appreciate without Lonsdale's notes. This will be a critical text for scholars of colonial Kenya.

There is, I venture, a third aspect to this book. Now, this may simply be the idiosyncratic reading of a scholar whose recent work is unlikely to be accused of excessive subtlety, and who imagines Lonsdale raising a disapproving eyebrow at his writings. Nevertheless, in the foreword Lonsdale reflects on how his 'own perspective . . . shaped [his] attempt to understand' Fazan (xxxvi). He recalls that he, too, served in colonial Kenya (as commander of a King's African Rifles platoon), a few years younger than Fazan was when he stepped ashore at Mombasa. And, unremarked upon by Lonsdale, his own words were written after his retirement from Cambridge, at the same time of life when Fazan wrote his reminiscences. It struck me that Fazan and Lonsdale alike were both shaping a legacy – be it independent Kenya or the historical profession. As I read Lonsdale's foreword and notes, I often felt that I was being tutored – gently, as is his custom – on the need to be a better, more sensitive, more generous historian. He warns that 'A sceptical younger generation may . . . meet here a wiser, more humane, economically and sociologically literate imperial servant than they may have been led to expect' (xii). It is easy to write a history that uncovers shocking brutality and condemns vicious colonial officials. The sins of colonialism were undeniably many and, for the sake of those who suffered under the colonial yoke, those sins must not be forgotten. Yet simply cataloguing those evils is poor history. It is harder, yet more truthful, to write a history that captures colonial officials as real human beings, 'who tried to live justified lives in testing situations'. It also takes some humility to recognize that 'We cannot claim any moral superiority' over those we study (xxxvii), for we live in different times, with different challenges. There are many lessons in this book – about colonial Kenya, about Fazan's work as youth and elder, about the writing of history and, perhaps, about Lonsdale's influence on Kenyan historiography.

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## CONTINGENCY AND THE PREDICTION OF VIOLENCE

*On the Path to Genocide: Armenia and Rwanda Reexamined.*

By Deborah Mayersen.

New York: Berghahn Books, 2014. Pp. xi + 248. \$95.00, hardback (ISBN 9781782382843).

doi:10.1017/S0021853716000803

**Key Words:** Comparative, Rwanda, civil wars, international relations, method, violence.

Historical and social scientific analyses of genocide have proliferated in recent years. Yet, in spite of this, most monographs remain conceptual. This theorising may provide some basis for discussion but it often fails to produce empirical results or truly original lines of inquiry.