

2016

Stanard, Matthew. *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011, 387 pp.

Danielle Sanchez  
dcsanchez86@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://encompass.eku.edu/jora>

---

## Recommended Citation

Sanchez, Danielle. "Stanard, Matthew. *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011, 387 pp." *Journal of Retracing Africa*: Vol. 3, Issue 1 (2016): 101-102.  
<http://encompass.eku.edu/jora/vol3/iss1/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Retracing Africa* by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact [Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu](mailto:Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu).

**Stanard, Matthew.** *Selling the Congo: A History of European Pro-Empire Propaganda and the Making of Belgian Imperialism.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011, xiv + 387 pp.

Matthew Stanard's *Selling the Congo* focuses on the development of Belgian pro-empire propaganda and how the construction and dissemination of such materials and ideas influenced understandings of empire in the metropole. In order to achieve this, Stanard focuses on five critical spaces of propaganda: expositions, museums, the education system, monuments, and colonial cinema (4). Stanard swiftly defines the value of these spaces in the construction of pro-empire propaganda in the metropole by emphasizing the complementary ways in which they reached the Belgian masses in their daily lives. Yet, Stanard shies away from discussing *bandes dessinées* (comics) within his analysis in his discussion of pro-empire propaganda because he dismisses such productions as "pure fiction" rather than a "tool to promote the colony or imperialism." (5). This is problematic because *bandes dessinées* were important spaces for promoting not only a Belgian civilizing mission, but also carefully constructed caricatures of blackness that bolstered imaginings of African otherness. By narrowly defining propaganda to exclude *bandes dessinées*, Stanard misses a critical opportunity to engage with Nancy Rose Hunt's work on *Tintin au Congo* and grapple with the meanings of truth, fiction, intent, colonial imaginings, and consumption through one of Belgium's most popular artistic mediums.

One of Stanard's greatest battles in *Selling the Congo* is fighting against the image of a Belgian population ambivalent to empire. Thus, he consistently pushes for a heightened understanding of colonial culture in Belgium. The two chapters on expositions and museums worked well together, as Stanard sought to explore temporary expositions and permanent museums as complementary agents in reinforcing understandings of Belgian imperialism. Pairing small and large colonial museums with twentieth century expositions that boasted a paternalistic image of Belgium's role in the Congo, economic growth, and the power of the nation, offers a complex and illuminating glimpse at the interconnected web of missionary groups, private interests, and the state in the forging of public opinion.

Stanard's chapter on monuments delves into the invention of "a national tradition of imperialism that not only celebrated the imperial project but also ennobled and legitimized it by founding contemporaneous rule on the heroic era... during which Belgians fought and died in the service of civilization in Africa" (202). While such monuments certainly changed the physical landscape of Belgium, it is uncertain whether such structures were actually capable of transforming metropolitan understandings of empire. Nuance is key in this area; as such, a

transformation was possible, as evidenced by the reimagining of King Leopold II. However, monuments alone could not rewrite history and ignite a population behind empire. Yet, Stanard's goal is not to present an image of Belgian masses vying to flock to Leopoldville to witness the miracles of Belgian colonialism in the Congo. Rather, Stanard presents a Belgian population that is somewhere between acceptance and fervor, because, as he states, "some people became aware that their livelihood or those of family members were dependent upon colonial commerce. Others became conscious of the empire in multiple forms, consented to it, and in many cases actively supported it" (6). In such a context, entertainment through a temporary exposition, an outing to a colonial museum, or an engagement with the Ministry of Colonies created not only leisure and educational opportunities, but also an environment of consent and affirmation through the pervasiveness of propagandized knowledge of the Congo. Furthermore, these spaces (and their creators) worked together to build a powerful imagining that could bolster pro-empire sentiments. Thus, the chapters on expositions and museums work well together as a way of emphasizing complementarity in the overarching mission, but Stanard could have made a greater effort to pull together the later chapters to stress the intersections of these spaces.

*Selling the Congo* is an important work in the larger historiography of Belgian colonialism because its multifaceted approach emphasizes a powerful and complex propagandizing mission that united multiple forces in the larger goal of marketing Belgium's role in the Congo. Furthermore, Stanard pushes beyond the 1908 transfer of the colony to Belgium, which is imperative because this is an area that requires greater attention from scholars. African voices are few and far between, but this is to be expected because Stanard clearly states in the introduction "Congoese perceptions and reactions remain secondary in this story of how metropolitan propaganda shaped perceptions of Africans and colonialism" (18). Stanard's monograph is simply not African history. Rather, it is a history of European imperialism that seeks to push beyond French and British dominated discussions of "colonial cultures in Europe" (21). Stanard's mention of decolonization was problematic at times, largely due to the dismissive statement that "Congoese leaders wrested their independence from Belgium without much of a fight (comparatively speaking) in 1960..." (14). This assessment minimizes the struggle of Congoese nationalists in the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, the text is a useful read for scholars and students interested in leisure, consumption, propaganda, knowledge production, imperialism, modern Europe, and Belgian colonialism.

Danielle Sanchez  
Assistant Professor of History  
Muhlenberg College  
Allentown, Pennsylvania, PA