

Robert M. Burroughs, *Travel Writing and Atrocities: Eyewitness Accounts of Colonialism in the Congo, Angola, and the Putumayo*. (Routledge, 2011)

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The discourse on human rights has been interpreted in recent years along two lines of argument. One view suggests that human rights are historically located: part of a long struggle, reaching back to the philosophy of classical Greece and Rome and the ethos of different world religions. After many centuries of struggle for 'rights', human rights are exalted as the language of international relations, a harmonising and universally applicable set of articles. According to this view, human rights extend out of an evolving discourse on natural rights, the rights of man and empathy for the 'other' born from the revolutionary thinking of the enlightenment and the antislavery movement of the nineteenth century. While there is something convenient and comforting about this evolutionary explanation, not all are in agreement with the trajectory. An alternative argument suggests that human rights are less the triumph of centuries of struggle for rights, but rather a specific response to the failure of other utopian ideologies. They are a distinctively modern manifestation: a reaction to the war and genocide of the mid twentieth century. In spite of their recognition in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, they only surface after the collapse of Communism and the demise of Pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism. Were they a necessary corrective to the limitations of the nation state to protect its citizenry? Are they an essential set of beliefs for the post-religious age?

One leading disbeliever in the history of human rights as a narrative of progress is Samuel Moyn. In *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (2010), Moyn argued perceptively that the history of human rights has been constructed rather like church history, a small group of people struggling through time to assert a set of universal values. But this, he claims, amounts to a narrative fallacy. Only in the 1970s did human rights become a widespread and motivating cause for public activism and international law. Before the modern conception of human rights, rights were about citizenship and the relationship of the individual to society. Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), captured the difference well

when she observed how the assertion of rights was the first prerogative of citizens, but they now risked becoming the last refuge of humans.

While the practical adoption of human rights as an instrument of international law can be accurately located in time and measured in terms of their application, it is not unreasonable to argue that there are legitimate historical antecedents. Even if the specific use of human rights is a product of recent times, the struggle for the rights protecting humanity, and advocating a set of universal values applicable to those unprotected by the state, are the cumulative product of earlier struggles and activisms.

One identifiable moment in turning the conversation about rights towards the margins and those without the protection of a benevolent state can be located in the investigations into the new slaveries resulting from world resource wars at the start of the twentieth century. A series of interconnected enquiries into atrocities, largely caused by the global demand for latex rubber, began to shift the conversation on both rights and freedoms in alternative directions. This discussion had an impact on questions to do with national sovereignty, anti-colonialism and the rights and status of peoples who had been dispossessed by imperial expansion and dehumanised by the impact of modernisation.

In recent rewritings of these investigations they have been claimed as important stepping stones along the path to human rights. Adam Hochschild in *King Leopold's Ghost* (1998) and Jordan Goodman in *The Devil and Mr Casement* (2008) have both asserted that the campaigns into rubber atrocities can be legitimately claimed as a bridge linking nineteenth century antislavery campaigning and humanitarian endeavour with the modern discourse of human rights and the culture of international non-governmental organisation. Concerns about fair trade and corporate responsibility were also part of the reform movement. The term 'crime against humanity' was used by the activists involved in the campaign and notions of what constituted 'human' moved away from Christian imperatives towards a more secular definition. The Congo Reform Association, an early international non-governmental organisation, drove this change.

In *Travel Writing and Atrocities: Eyewitness Accounts of Colonialism in the Congo, Angola and the Putumayo* (2011), Robert Burroughs takes a much closer look at how the travel literature describing these atrocities altered the language on empire and humanitarianism. By advancing a historicist interpretation of the textual production describing these atrocities and examining their reception, he has produced a stimulating and relevant study. He seeks to answer a vital question: how did the description by travellers on the margins alter the discussion in the centre?

The travel writing under investigation here is not ‘travel writing’ as most would understand the term. The principal texts examined are more akin to investigative journalism and official reporting. The motivation behind much of the writing was to assert claims upon the truth and construct evidence revealing the injustices, horrors and violence born of colonial administration and malpractices resulting from unregulated and asymmetrical trade relations between the industrialising North and the resource-rich South. Diaries and journals were a key element of this atrocity literature and often formed the basis for studies published subsequently. But what Burroughs convincingly demonstrates is how techniques of witnessing changed in a relatively short space of time. Travel writing shifted from its integral position in the cultural process of discovery and the spatial conquest of territory, promoting national and imperial interests; to a form of writing which bore witness by analysing the destructive capacity of colonial labour systems. This approach was both anti-conquest and anti-colonial.

The imprint of the *Heart of Darkness* is evident throughout the analysis. Joseph Conrad’s novel mirrored the type of confessional narrative which dominated the writing on Africa in the 1890s. The view that travel into the interior could unhinge a man’s mind was popularly held. A crisis in the authority of travel writing followed the disastrous Emin Pasha Relief Expedition. The leader of this venture, the explorer Henry Morton Stanley, was fixated with controlling the storyline. This provoked a war of representation among his subordinate officers and demonstrated how contradictory views of the same event could be shaped, managed and circulated. Truth was many-sided and travel narratives were unstable and vulnerable to manipulation. At the start of the twentieth century, with a desire within some circles in Europe to represent Africa in new ways, there was a move to reassert the legitimacy and authority of travel writing. This is most evident in the witnessing and description of atrocity. The new slaveries of the early twentieth century generated a vast paper trail stretching from official government archives to established humanitarian organisations such as the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines’ Protection Society and emerging ones such as the Congo Reform Association.

Of the three regions under investigation in Burroughs’ study – Congo, Angola, Putumayo – the most outrage was levelled against the administration of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State. Eye-witnesses, many of them evangelical missionaries, described observing and hearing about ‘unspeakable’ acts. In 1900, the campaign against King Leopold II’s administration began to organise around an Anglo-French journalist, E. D. Morel. Through his tireless work as editor of the *West African Mail*, and as author of a stream of books on European governance in West and Central Africa, he began to critique the impact of international trade as agreed among European and US diplomats at the Berlin West Africa Conference

of 1884 to 1885 and describe its often negative impact on the people and environment. Morel shouldered the responsibility of collating, verifying, publishing and popularising narratives and producing a kind of *histoire engagée*, a history in the present, which would live on and never be forgotten. In 1904, he was co-founder and acting secretary of the Congo Reform Association (CRA) and over the next decade mounted an effective campaign which awakened international consciousness by building public awareness and pressurising the British Foreign Office and the diplomatic world.

Other writer-reformers included the Baptist missionaries, John and Alice Harris, who had arrived as newly-weds in Africa in 1898, where they joined the mission station at Baringa. There they bore witness to the activities of the Anglo-Belgian India-Rubber Company at its most rapacious. In 1905 the Harrises returned to London and involved themselves in the CRA before John Harris accepted the appointment as acting secretary of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines' Protection Society. Harris was principally responsible for building the link between evangelical protest and the emerging arguments concerned with political and economic reform of empire.

Henry Nevinson, described by Burroughs as 'a war correspondent and reporter of international human-rights violations', was one of the most fêted journalists of his day (Burroughs, 2011, 103). From December 1904 to June 1905, he followed the slave trade route from the interior of Portuguese West Africa (Angola) to the 'cocoa islands' of San Thomé and Príncipe, in the Bight of Biafra. An estimated 97,000 African bodies had been involved in this slave trade over two decades. His serialised articles were quickly collected and published in *A Modern Slavery* (1906) and shocked the public with images of shackled bodies and brutal working conditions. Cruelties performed on the 'native' body were the stamp of authenticity of narratives investigating slavery and these violations were then used as a means of justifying colonial intervention. But Nevinson's narrative ventured beneath the surface to reveal British culpability at the very core of the system. The moral imperatives behind Britain's nineteenth century antislavery campaign had been usurped by a new duplicity, which could turn a blind eye to slavery if the business remained profitable. In turn these trading practices were supported by the old diplomatic alliance between Britain and Portugal. What gave the story a further twist was the involvement of the Cadbury family, one of the main buyers of the slave-stained cocoa. The Cadburys were upheld as a dynasty of antislavery philanthropists. Their factory at Bournville, where the well-being of the worker was situated at the centre of their corporate ethos, was a model of industrial best practice. Yet the cocoa used to produce their chocolate and maintain their workers was infused with African blood.

Lowell J. Satre's recent history *Chocolate on Trial* (2005) explains this contradiction and the resulting scandal it provoked.

The most radical voice in this analysis of the political economy of the Atlantic was a product of the covert world of the British Foreign Office. The official investigations undertaken by Roger Casement into the administration of the Congo Free State and the business of extractive rubber in the Putumayo region of the north-west Amazon, form the basis for two of the five chapters. Burroughs demonstrates how Casement 'helped to forge a new rhetoric of authentic travel in the Congo; off the beaten track, independent of technological aid, and in close contact with 'the people'. His official report of 1904 details the degeneracy of the colonial system by using the victims of that system to tell their own stories. Often this approach transgressed accepted racial, gender and sexual protocols of diplomacy. But Casement's technique anticipated a form of investigative reportage used later in the century by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other such organisations.

The Amazon Journal of Roger Casement (1997) is where these skills are most evident. Burroughs claims that this text 'represents the outermost limit of antislavery travellers' embrace of political radicalism in its period: the representation of the traveller, pained and angered by the atrocities that he witnessed, and willing to trace those atrocities, and that anger, to their bases in British venture capitalism in colonised territories' (Burroughs, 2011, 132). *The Amazon Journal* is an intense and multifaceted narrative. In the dozen pages dedicated to its analysis by Burroughs only a fraction of the essence is captured, and his conclusion is partial and misconstrued.

Burroughs illustrates how, in his ethnographic description of the Putumayo Indian, Casement projected idealised discourses on the typology of the Irish peasant and how his relationship with the other commissioners enabled his construction of his Manichaen world by drawing the 'British colonial metropole into the frame' (Burroughs, 2011, 134). If all Europe was responsible for the making of Kurtz, so the second industrial revolution, resulting from the efficiency of the Ford production line and global intercommunication, was responsible for the Putumayo atrocities. As he ventured deeper into analysing the extractive rubber economy, Casement linked the history of slavery, ethnocide, inhumanity, resource wars and colonialism across time and space. He interconnected his Congo investigation with what he witnessed on the spot in the dystopian underworld of the Putumayo. This, in turn, informed his aspirations for an *Eire Nua* (New Ireland) rooted in a modern code respecting humanity and encouraging empathy for the marginalised and dispossessed. In this narrative, the fusion of 'human' and 'rights' is made plain.

Through his emotional immersion in what he witnessed, Casement entered into profound communication with the human condition, inhumanity and the structure of national and international rights which either recognise or deny that condition. Under the lawless company regime of the Peruvian Amazon Company, the hierarchical natures of both rights and freedoms are evident. At the bottom of the ladder was the Indian, who had no rights at all: either natural or human. At the top of the ladder was the financier, divested of responsibilities by the market and divorced from the localised realities rendered vulnerable by the ruthless search for profit.

One reason for the revival of interest in Casement in recent years is because it has required the discourse of human rights to be historically located in order for his deeper message to emerge. Though Casement may not have specifically adopted the term 'human rights', he realised that humanitarian intentions were a component of the deceptive claims of 'civilisation'. In the Congo, Amazon and Ireland he advocated new configurations for delivering international justice especially for those dispossessed and oppressed by the system and with no recourse to agencies of state power. He made explicit the difference between citizens and those without rights, and in making that distinction he recognised the need for a form of international law capable of transnational protection.

Although these investigations may have been separated in geographical terms by the Atlantic Ocean, Burroughs analyses them as a series of contingent protests. Through interaction and collaboration the immense textual production generated by each enquiry helped to stimulate a new language relevant to race and gender relations as well as ethical standards in business. With the outbreak of the war in 1914, Casement turned on the British Empire and advocated global colonial revolution. Morel's focus also shifted towards the abuse of both secrecy and diplomacy in the undermining of democratic governance, and both were branded renegades. Casement was executed for high treason in August 1916. Morel was imprisoned the following year for a technical breach of the Defence of the Realm Act. Their networks of influence were demolished and the narratives of their *histoire engagée* were first of all silenced, and later scrambled in the public imagination.

While Burroughs' study is compelling and valid for both historians and historicists, his analysis is lacking in two critical respects. Despite the use of the word 'atrocities' in the title of the work, Burroughs avoids any sort of considered critique of the use and abuse of atrocity narratives. The atrocities under examination shook the foundations of the imperial project and the assumptions supporting civilization, Christianity and commerce, which underwrote the European scramble for the interior regions of both Africa and South America. History teaches us how atrocities in every age

are carefully managed, and too often manipulated for political purpose. In the late nineteenth century several atrocities were used for political leverage; Bulgaria, Armenia, and the Indian famines are the better known ones. The representation of atrocity tends to serve particular configurations of power and when they have served their purpose they are often propelled into oblivion. Historians in Belgium have recently reassessed the production and diffusion of their colonial history in the Congo to illustrate how unpalatable elements were suppressed and disremembered in Belgian school books. Guy Vanthemsche's (2006), analysis of how the story of Belgian's colonial history in the Congo Free State was carefully managed during the twentieth century should make us wary of the long-term issues born from the investigation of the new slaveries. That the most celebrated investigator of international atrocities at the height of imperial expansion went on to be instrumental in the founding of the Irish Volunteers might alert us to the possibility that the powers which authorised him to investigate the atrocities wished to control his narrative once his treason was identified.

While Burroughs is prepared to refer to some of the Irish dimensions in the story, his analysis falls short. The first meeting of the Congo Reform Association (CRA) took place in Ireland at the Slieve Donard Hotel in County Down. The supporters of the CRA included a notable number of Irish Home Rulers, among them Lord Morley, Lord Aberdeen and the historian Alice Stopford Green. Stopford Green was a great mentor and financial support to Morel and she collaborated with Casement in the running of guns into Ireland for the Irish Volunteers, a week before the outbreak of the First World War. It is also essential to read the politics of Ireland in Nevinson's investigation. The two barristers involved in the libel trial of *Cadbury Bros., Ltd. v. The Standard Newspapers* would later resurface as strategic players in the disintegration of affairs in Ireland. The architect of the Ulster Volunteers, Sir Edward Carson, represented *The Standard Newspapers* and faced Rufus Isaacs on behalf of the Cadbury family. Isaacs later was the presiding judge at Casement's trial for treason. When Britain came to the defence of Belgium in 1914, the Congo campaign was an extremely inconvenient truth. The Putumayo investigation was also a highly embarrassing attack on the moral turpitude of venture capitalists. Meanwhile, Casement's own transgression into revolutionary politics compounded the problem and rendered it unspeakable.

By avoiding confrontation with the political implications of the representation of atrocities, Burroughs is able to fudge the controversy of the Black Diaries and the persisting storm at the eye of the Casement story. He ignores how the Black Diary narrative has successfully impeded and challenged the authority of Casement's investigations, and that same generation of anti-slavery activist who risked everything to take on the forces of untrammelled global capitalism. He also avoids undertaking the

necessary comparative analysis of the parallel diaries, or seeks to answer the awkward questions prompted by the clash of two such diametrically opposed versions of the same journey. This requires Burroughs to disregard the significance of how the Black Diaries configure and overlap with the three key moments of Casement's investigation into crimes against humanity in 1903, 1910 and 1911. Casement's reliability as an investigator was dependent upon his scrupulous reporting of the facts in a dispassionate way; occupation of the moral high-ground was essential to the legitimisation of his official reports, to his public image and to justifying his revolutionary turn. In a book analysing the relationship between travel writing and the reporting of atrocity some effort should have been made to answer this critical and persisting concern.

While such omissions in the analysis might be addressed by the author they should not dissuade the potential reader away from this otherwise coherent and innovative study. The history of human rights may still be in its infancy, but Burroughs has contributed to expanding scholarly understanding of a critical conjunction and pushing research and reasoning in new directions and along other dimensions.

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