

H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 88

Bertrand Taithe, *The Killer Trail: A Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xii + 324 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-923121-8.

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In the autumn of 1898, two French army officers embarked upon a mission across West and Central Africa, accompanied by a few fellow officers and French soldiers and 1,700 indigenous African auxiliaries, porters, slaves, and women. Officially, Captains Paul Voulet and Julien Chanoine were to lead their expedition east from Senegal, exploring the region along the border recently arranged between the French and British territories of Niger and Nigeria, and meeting up at Lake Chad with two other French military missions sent from Algeria in the north and Congo in the south. Rather unofficially, the Voulet-Chanoine mission and its sponsors had hopes of annexing more territory to France's African empire, perhaps even moving farther east and realizing the dream of ardent French colonialists to establish an uninterrupted French imperial domain from eastern Sudan to the coast of West Africa.

But something went terribly wrong. Reports began to filter back to colonial officials in West Africa and Paris of indiscriminate slaughter and pillage, of a mission that had "lost its moral bearings" (p. 18). These reports were so alarming that officials ordered Lieutenant-Colonel Arsène Klobb, a regional French commander based in Timbuktu, to pursue Voulet and Chanoine and place them under arrest. Following a trail marked by the hanged and mutilated bodies of men, women and children, shallow mass graves, and burnt villages, Klobb caught up with his quarry on 14 July 1899. By now alerted to the danger they faced from their own countryman, Voulet and Chanoine resolved not to allow themselves to be arrested. Voulet ambushed Klobb's force, shooting the superior officer dead. In the face of this rash and treasonous act, most of the French soldiers apparently distanced themselves from their commanders and a number of the African soldiers moved into open rebellion on the following day. In the melee that followed, Chanoine was killed while charging his own mutinous men, yelling, "France, France!" (p. 33). Voulet escaped for a time with a female African companion and sheltered overnight in a nearby village, but then African sentries shot and killed him as he attempted to return to camp in the early hours of the next morning.

In *The Killer Trail: A Colonial Scandal in the Heart of Africa*, Bertrand Taithe endeavors not only to tell an inherently interesting story—with its sensational themes of murder, madness, and betrayal in the unforgiving physical environment of the west and central African Sahel—but also to explore the larger significance of this lurid scandal. Taithe probes these events for what they can tell us about the nature of French and European imperialism, of war and violence in colonial Africa, and of the French military and politics in an era convulsed by scandal, duplicity, conspiracy, racism, and anxiety. This is an ambitious task—to trace the threads that connect this smaller incident in Africa, with its sometimes obscure and opaque events recorded in a fragmentary archival record, to broader forces and better-known events such as the Scramble for Africa and the Dreyfus Affair—but one well worth undertaking. Taithe's largest goal is to ask what the Voulet-Chanoine mission can tell us about the role of trauma and violence in encounters between the servants of Western states and non-Western peoples. The latter were, and are, all too often the victims of outbursts of violence that seem aberrant and shocking but are in reality more systematic and symptomatic than many would like to admit.

Taithe is in a good position to explore these issues. An accomplished historian of culture and politics in the early Third Republic, with two important works on these topics to his credit, he is particularly sensitive to the broader issues that this specific instance of violence in the colonial context can reveal.^[1] The first chapter of *The Killer Trail* narrates the story of the Voulet-Chanoine mission and lays out the author's plans to explore its wider significance. In particular, Taithe introduces one of his most important questions: whether contemporary presentations of this "scandal" were correct in interpreting it as singular, and therefore shocking, or whether the events "provided a glimpse of the customary brutality of colonial conquest" (p. 41). The second chapter examines French conceptions of the fragility of civilization, and civilized human beings, in an Africa perceived to be corrosive of Europeans' sanity. It was an environment in which always lurked the danger of "Soudanitis," a generalized mental instability and torpor thought to be brought on by isolation, heat and humidity, a brutal landscape, and even more brutish inhabitants.

Chapters three, four, and five explore the activities of the French army and its personnel as they built an African colonial empire, "privateering" for a government often little interested in their methods. These methods were often, of course, exceedingly violent, but French officers rarely saw any paradox in wielding violence to bring "civilization" to Africans. Neither did they see, or care about, the contradictions between their complicity in slavery and the republican ideals of the government they served. This all added up to "a pattern of inhumanity across Africa" (p. 171), and it is symptomatic of the moral vacuum in which colonial soldiers operated that Voulet and Chanoine's crimes came to light, not because colleagues regarded them as particularly outrageous or unusual, but because the leaders of the expedition fell out with fellow officers and colonial officials.

In one of the most interesting of Taithe's chapters, his sixth, he probes the connections between this comparatively minor scandal and the larger and essentially simultaneous climax of the Dreyfus Affair. The latter, of course, consumed and divided the nation, and Captain Chanoine's father, General Jules Chanoine, even briefly served as Minister of War during a decisive phase of the debate over Dreyfus's fate. The general also testified against Dreyfus at the dramatic Rennes trial that resulted in a guilty verdict but nonetheless soon led to an official pardon for the Jewish officer. The father then endeavored to defend his son's honor by exploring the devious machinations that had led, the general believed, to false accusations of treason and murder against the young man who had accomplished so much for France in Africa. The environment was ripe for such conspiracy theories, not least because many in France were indeed conspiring, in one way or the other, in a political scene boiling with rumor, anxiety, and myriad swirling and intertwined scandals. Taithe is at his best in making sense of this disturbed cultural and political landscape for his readers.

In the final two chapters, the author returns to his larger concerns about the systemic relationship between violence and colonialism. That one can discern in Taithe's title the faint echo of Joseph Conrad's famed meditation on evil and madness in the African colonial context, *Heart of Darkness*, is no accident. The Voulet-Chanoine scandal broke just as Conrad's novella was published, and so it could not have served the author as a model, but both the fictional and the real stories of Europeans losing control and descending into madness and murder may reveal the nature, not of "darkest Africa," but of the colonial project as the context of Europeans' most spectacular losses of moral grounding. Taithe rightly notes that the French colonial past is not laid to rest even today because, "its fundamental issues are those of today: inequality, insecurity, and servitude; the antonyms of the French motto of liberty, equality, and fraternity" (p. 212). He also examines the applicability of the psychological concept of trauma to the Voulet-Chanoine mission and its memory, "as a means of exploring the meanings Western societies give to the violence that takes place, away from our shores but always in our name" (p. 230). In one of his more penetrating insights, Taithe notes that these events occurred precisely at a time when rhetorical commitment to republican ideals was becoming virtually obligatory (despite very serious challenges from anti-republican forces, even within the army, which took so prominent a part in

the Dreyfus affair), when even perpetrators of acts of extreme brutality felt compelled to describe their actions as “humanitarian.”

Yet this was also a moment when French official and public sensibilities could not tolerate such glaring contradictions, at least if they became too public. This explains the scandalized reaction to Voulet’s and Chanoine’s actions, from the extraordinary order for their arrest to the vocal repugnance with which many greeted the news of their deeds. It is surprising that Taithe does not cite Alain Corbin’s *The Village of the Cannibals* in discussing the emergence of this “different sensibility to brutality” (p. 247), since Corbin so famously described a similar phenomenon in France itself in 1870, in response to another shocking, murderous rampage.^[2] But Taithe is certainly correct in arguing that Voulet and Chanoine’s killer trail sends a message down through the century and more after they blazed it; that their main mistake was to confuse “practices and policies” (p. 253); that they foolishly and publicly followed the implications of French military and colonial policies to their extreme; and that the two men “embodied the ordinary cruelty of the servants of the modern state” (p. 254).

The Killer Trail is a fascinating piece of historical scholarship and analysis, but it is not without problems. The most serious of them, in fact, have little to do with Taithe’s reconstruction of the events of the Voulet-Chanoine mission and his examination of their significance. The honesty required of a reviewer requires me to note very serious problems with the text itself. It is riddled with typographical, spelling, and grammatical errors, as well as poor style, awkward translations from French, inconsistent and confusing explanations, and factual errors. To catalogue all of these would be tedious and ungenerous, but a sampling here may give some idea of their extent.

Technical problems are numerous. “Censure” is confused with “censor” (e.g., pp. 65, 123). Some errors are unintentionally, if grimly, humorous: French soldiers fired “salves” (pp. 27, 35, 137) instead of salvos. Pronouns very often do not match their antecedents. Semi-colons sometimes set off dependent clauses, while elsewhere clauses and phrases pile into each other, unchecked by commas. And the errors appear throughout the book. On p. 32, a period appears in the middle of a sentence, and on p. 217 a paragraph begins with a sentence fragment.

Some of these errors appear to stem from confusions between French and English vocabulary (“salve,” for instance, is the French term for the English “salvo”). But in many cases the book’s prose style and translations are also rather too close to French. Military ranks are not preceded by an article in English, but they are in French, hence we have, “the Sergeant Bouthel” (p. 29). A famous periodical is rendered as “the *Illustration*,” even though on the very same page it is also rendered as “*L’Illustration*” (p. 110). Prepositions are a problem as well, and the French construction “faire faire” is awkwardly translated: “I made him notice that selling these pictures would be immoral.” (p. 126). L’État Indépendant du Congo is customarily rendered in English as the Congo Free State, not the “Free State of Congo” (p. 243).

The text is sometimes difficult, even bewildering. At one point, Taithe discusses a group photo of the expedition’s officers (p. 110), but he does not indicate clearly that he is doing so, or that the photo is included among the book’s plates, as Figure 5. Farther down the page, he finally, but incorrectly, indicates he is discussing Figure 1. Even more perplexing is Taithe’s treatment of a drawing of five severed heads. Strangely, Taithe calls the drawing a photograph, which it clearly is not, and writes that, “The photographer took his picture after artistically arranging the heads in a jar” (p. 124; see also p. 126). Four of the heads are actually spread out on the ground, with the fifth set atop a block of wood, and one searches in vain for a “jar,” which would be hard to miss if it were big enough to contain five human heads. There is a wooden bowl in the background, but it contains no heads.

Finally, there are simple, outright errors of fact. Taithe refers to the “conflict of civilizations” (p. 66), when he no doubt means to invoke Samuel Huntington’s famous thesis, “The Clash of Civilizations.”^[3]

The military acronym NCO stands for “non-commanding officer” (p. 15), we are told, but in fact it stands for “non-commissioned officer.” Frenchman Albert Londres was not a “Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist” (p. 35), since the prize is awarded to American journalists and writers. (The Prix Albert Londres, for French journalists, was created following his death.) It is not clear where Taithe got the idea that Lieutenant William Calley—the U.S. Army officer who presided over the scandalous massacre at My Lai in Vietnam in 1968—made “a political career from the incident” (p. 249). Aside from a brief and unsuccessful attempt at a college lecture tour, Calley lived relatively unassumingly in a small city in Georgia and worked in his father-in-law’s jewelry store.[4]

Overall, one gets the feeling of reading an unfinished manuscript, rather than a complete, carefully honed and polished text. Finding the author’s note to himself to “check” the accuracy of one of his citations only magnifies this suspicion (p. 275, note 6). It is hard to imagine how a text in this state made it through the publication process.

This litany may seem gratuitous, but it really represents only a fraction of the problems in the text, and it is necessary to give some idea of their extent. I can honestly say that in a lifetime spent reading thousands of books, I have never seen anything even remotely this bad, let alone such carelessness by an esteemed publisher. This is a disservice to the reader, but also to a historian of Taithe’s stature and talents. To be sure, authors are ultimately responsible for the content of their books, but publishing is a collaborative effort and publishers owe readers and authors alike the essential courtesy of a careful copy editing process. I cannot believe that this book had the benefit of such a process, or of any at all, really. I sincerely hope that Oxford University Press puts out a paperback edition of this important work, and takes the opportunity then to revise the text thoroughly, to give it the serious and attentive copy editing that it needs and deserves (and from which it should already have benefited). Until then, only readers with a great deal of patience and a professional interest in late-nineteenth-century French colonialism will bother to work their way through the text, to travel along *The Killer Trail* and learn the lessons that Taithe shows it can teach us, and that is a shame.

NOTES

[1] Bertrand Taithe, *Defeated Flesh: Welfare, Warfare and the Making of Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), and *Citizenship and Wars: France in Turmoil 1870-1871* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[2] Alain Corbin, *The Village of Cannibals: Rage and Murder in France, 1870* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[3] Samuel P. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs* 72/3 (Summer 1993), 22-49. Huntington later transformed the article into a book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), and the thesis has been famous, or notorious, depending on one’s point of view, ever since.

[4] See Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim, *Four Hours in My Lai* (New York: Penguin, 1992) and David Jones, “Found: The Monster of the My Lai Massacre,” *Daily Mail*, October 6, 2007 (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-485983/Found-The-monster-My-Lai-massacre.html>).

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ISSN 1553-9172