

The Scramble for Africa

Follow all the maneuvers as you will, mystify yourself as you may, it never quite answers the obvious questions:

1. Why did the Scramble happen when it did?
2. Why did there have to be a Scramble at all?

Trade follows the Flag – but the Flag would rather not go along for the ride.

Unlike Portugal or Spain, English authorities generally wanted traders to do things on their own hook.

They forced the trading companies to become governments ..

exercising powers the Brit govt didn't want to perform

That's how America was settled...

and India

and much of Canada

t

Even in the late 19th century, Britain wanted traders to take care of their own protection, using their profits to do so.

See West Africa as a case in point.

Imperial power got involved only very late, to keep order.

Only after the traders were clear that they could not do it.

When British legislation made the slave trade illegal,
traders went after palm oil, instead,
to make soap and candles and
margarine and so forth.

But foreign traders still were shipping slaves out of West Africa.

British humanitarians were irate.
So were British traders, not allowed to compete.

A slave trade business drove out a palm oil
business – made their job harder,
and they knew it.

So a squadron of naval ships was stationed to slow down slave trading.

It needed a base – so so we have the first British sovereignty planted on
the Nigerian coast.

Later the traders it was, who spread it into the hinterland.

The Mohammedan emirates in northern Nigeria were the tap root
of the slave trade and slave raiding.

The Niger Company it was, a mix of trading firms, that raised the
West African Frontier Force and sent it north under
Lugard to wipe out the evil at its root.

The traders led the way to Kano.

The officials followed later.

The process only reverses in the last 20 years of the 19th century.

The government enters the scramble for Africa – and for the Pacific.

Yet again, the impulse came from the other countries, not Britain.

They fenced in the lands with protective tariffs.

They set up, effectively, national monopolies–

an injury to all traders, British included.

Britain was acting on the traders' behalf here, taking a stand for the open door – her territories, unlike other ones, open to all nations.

Did business interests do it, because Africa could make them money?

In fact, the real story is that Britain created an empire not because business could make money by it, but because business couldn't ... not without a big investment from the public sector.

Enterprises had tried –

German ones

English ones

and they had gone broke in short order.

Africa had very little trade.

Investors weren't interested in putting their money there, when there were so many places earning a much better return.

In 1880, British exports to all of Africa were a bit under 6% of all The goods it exported.

Ten years later, 6.7%.

As for imports, Africa hadn't much that any English person wanted.

In 1880 they provided 4.9% of all British imports

... and even less in 1890.

It might come closer to say that the Map of Europe was the real key to the Map of Africa.

Empire was made by diplomats whose eyes stayed fixed on Berlin
on Paris
on London
on St. Petersburg.

Behind every move into the Dark Continent was a Whitehall.

Again and again, Britain acted not because of what Africans could do or were doing, but because of what France or Germany was doing.

It set up colonies to keep them from falling to some other European power.

It set them up to forestall them.

Understanding Britain's strategy, we have to go back to the issue of trade.

As long as there was an informal empire of influence, Britain didn't need an empire.

But when land was closed off – claimed for Germany or France –
Britain had to have markets it could depend on....

“sheltered markets”

That was one reason why the defining force for their expansion was centered
around rivers....

The Gambia
The Niger
The Nile

Command the rivers, and Britain controlled the markets of
the interior

Why did Britain outdo other countries?

Because it had two advantages, blended together:

1. it was an island
2. it had the best Navy in the world

Being on an island meant that it didn't have to spend much of its defense budget on an army.

There were no enemies just across the border to invade.

It could look abroad more easily, and watch its back a whole lot less.

Being on an island, though, meant that everything depended on a tip-top Navy.

That navy it certainly had.

But a Navy means mobility to impose your will anywhere in the world fast ... faster than anyone else.

You may not have more soldiers, but the ones you have, you can use to immense advantage in Africa or Asia.

A Navy almost assures a commanding influence when it comes to making treaties opening trade, and protecting those treaties.

It gives you the firepower to offer native rulers the protection they need.

But we still have to ask: why did the informal empire break down?

What happened, around 1880, was an un-knotting of old alliances.

As long as England and France cooperated, there was no race to grab Africa

But that cooperation ended, as France found itself hemmed in, powerless to avenge itself on Germany.

Bismarck had brought just about every other power in Europe into his web of ententes and treaties.

Where could France turn for glory and honor, if not to a war on the Continent?

It must revive its fortunes abroad.

By the early 1880s, other countries were closing off parts of Africa...

Belgium had been given the Congo as the private preserve of its humanitarian king, Leopold.

Germany was making claims in eastern Africa.

Italy was looking to Tunisia, Libya, and Ethiopia.

The old world of trade seemed to be vanishing.

Now, if ever, Britain would need to create a sheltered market by something more enduring than an informal arrangement.

ALONE WITH COMPANY

It was companies, private enterprise, that pushed open the door of Empire in Africa.

One of those was in the Niger, and the makings of a first-class rotter.

George Goldie Taubman – Goldie, he called himself¹

Descended from landowning squires, who'd made their money as smugglers, he could have written a book about Playing Cad Games.

Sort of a real-life version of Flashman.

He went into the army blind-drunk and stayed that way all through military school.

When he inherited a fortune, he went AWOL, ran off to Cairo, and ran away with a beautiful Egyptian.

They set up a refuge in the deserts of Sudan.

Lots of sex among the sands, and learning Arabic on the side.

¹ The German end of the name was an embarrassment, and he dropped it himself.

After a few years, Goldie got bored, ditched her and Africa altogether, went back to England and fell head over heels for the family governess – running off to Paris with her, and got there just in time for the Franco-Prussian War. Paris was besieged, and like everybody else, they lived on rats, horses and an occasional elephant.

He did end up marrying the governess, and continued to have the morals of a character from “Sex and the City.”²

So far, Local Boy Makes Bad.

Palm oil made a new man of him.

His eldest brother had married into a family that did business in palm oil.

It was going broke and needed help.

Goldie’s family bought the firm out, and now they had to turn a sow’s ear into a silk purse.

If there was a time for bad George to redeem himself, it was now, bailing out his in-laws.

Sudan wasn’t so far from the Niger River, where the palm oil came from ... a thousand miles or so.
They spoke Arabic there.

Maybe he could go troubleshooting.

Which is what he did. What George Goldie found was that too many people

² Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man’s Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 183-84.

were selling palm oil.

Europe needs palm oil.

They grease their frying pans with it.

They turn it into oils for factory machines.

They make it into soap to wash the factory workers who use the machines.³

But it needed that oil cheap, and as long as natives had buyers competing for the oil, they could keep prices high.

What you needed, to make the natives sell at a low price was one set of buyers – and that meant putting the trade in one set of hands.

So Goldie worked out a whole set of mergers, and by the end of the 1870s, had put on the books the National Africa Company.

Now all you have to do is cut out the middlemen, the blacks who carry the oil out in their canoes.

Them ... and the French trading companies.

You can handle the first, by putting steamboats on the river – and getting British gunboats to back them up.

³ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 185.

You can handle the second only by making the Niger River strictly British turf.

Either you make it a British protectorate.

Or you make it a colony.⁴

And the cost to taxpayers? Peanuts! Pennies!

Goldie's firm would do the trading – and the governing.

It would be his own private colony.

In fact, it would be better for the natives.

Already, in effect, most of the tribes on the lower Niger were British client states.

Every few years, British gunboats had to sail up the river and restore order by blowing up cities and burning every town where white traders were being messed with.

A lot of bodies of women and kids scattered in the ruins was a pretty good deterrent.

Goldie's companies hadn't got into trouble.

The gunboats hadn't been called out as much.⁵

⁴ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 186-91.

⁵ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 192-93.

Eventually, the Niger Company was so much trouble that the only thing to do was buy it out.

It couldn't govern.

It was keeping out not just French competition, but Liverpool merchants who wanted a chance to share in the trade.⁶

Again and again, the thing we see in Africa isn't England muscling out the Germans.

It was the French that gave them the worst headaches.

And often, it was the French that got muscled ...

Out of Uganda

Out of the Niger valley

Out of the upper Nile.

III. AFRICA FIGHTS BACK

How could Europeans have got away with it?

As a matter of fact, they got away with it because Africans let them.

⁶ Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Random House, 1991), 517-19.

Some Africans saw in the Scramble a chance to get a Big Brother to help them against their enemies.

Others thought that they would cash in – railroads, mines, and schools. Development would come, and without costing them anything.

Most Africans did not resist the conquerors at all.

And they never united with other Africans to do it.

Resistance was always very, very local and sporadic.

They were also in the worst position to do it. Even without a single white footfall on the African coasts, the natives were being battered very badly in the last decades of the 19th century.

1. rainfall

Africa had been lucky for quite a few years.

More than average rainfall.

Land that couldn't be farmed or lived on, for lack of water, became dotted with villages.

Africa's population had risen nicely.

But then the rains quit coming.

Some places had a drought.

Others just went back to normal.

Either way, it was a disaster – lands that no longer
could support as many people.

Towns that withered, dried up, vanished.

Starting around 1890, there would be a quarter-century of drier
weather.

Lake levels fell.

River flow went down sharply.

Dry areas had full-scale droughts.

And of course harvest failed in farming regions all across
West Africa and southward to the Kalahari.

A people facing famine aren't about to worry much about the lines
Europeans are drawing on a map.

If anything, they might figure: couldn't make things worse.

Europeans might develop our countries and keep
us fed.

Famished people are more prey to diseases – typhus and cholera.

Smallpox cut many villages down to 1/10th their old size.

And then there was rinderpest, the cattle plague.

bloody diarrhea
fever
restlessness
loss of appetite

madness
weakness and death.

Italians brought it in 1889 when they landed, to found an empire.
Their cattle had immunities.

African cattle didn't.

It started on the Horn of Africa, but spread across the grasslands
to the westernmost coasts and down to the Zambezi and into
Bechuanaland, moving 40 kilometers a day.

By 1897 it had reached the Cape of Good Hope.

90 to 95% of the herds were killed in the 1890s by it.

Sheep caught it. So did goats.

It wiped out whole herds of buffalo and giraffe and eland.

It killed most of the small antelopes.

It eliminated warthogs and bush pigs.

The death of cattle was a calamity worse than the Scramble for Africa
could have been at its very worst.

To stop it, white settlers built a 1,600 kilometer barbed wire fence from
Bechuanaland to the coast at Natal.

There were police patrolling the fence.

Disinfection points were set up.

Infected herds were shot.

A million pounds was spent, just to keep the disease out of South Africa alone.

None of it worked.

South of the fence, 2 ½ million cattle died.

South of the Zambezi river, 5.5 million died.

In the pasturelands of all Africa, 95% of the cattle died.

Think of the implications. People starve and die, who depended on the herds for meat and drink.

In some areas, maybe 2/3ds of the people in a village perish.

Survivors feasted on dead donkey, chewed on bones and hides and horns for lack of anything else.

They became refugees, looking for help elsewhere.

They came to their kinfolk, as beggars, only to find that their kin were no better off than they.

To live, Africans had to turn farmers – on land with not enough water in wet years, and much less water now.

They have to become farmers, when they haven't the skills,

the training, to do it.

But cattle were, for so many Africans, money in the bank.

They were the one true measurement of wealth.

Your power, your authority as a chief lay with how many head of cattle you have.

And now they are all wiped out.

Their tens of thousands of head become a dozen or less.

It's a terrible, traumatic blow.

Tribesmen, having lost all, went mad.

Many killed themselves.

Grasslands, with no cattle to graze them short, turned into woodlands in a season or two, and thorn-bush thickets.

And it's in just such conditions that the tsetse flies can thrive – carrying sleeping sickness to the inhabitants.

Minor? Tell that to the people in southern Uganda.

Of those who survived famine and war, one in three had died of sleeping sickness by 1906. That's 200,000 deaths.

Now and again, African kingdoms resisted. But few or none could hold out for long.

A last look to the Ashanti.

In 1800, they had dominated West Africa. The trade routes south from the desert, laden with slaves – the roads north from the Atlantic coast laden with salt and kola nuts and gunpowder – all the Ashanti had dominated.

Forty kings paid homage to the king in Kumasi.

But over a century, the preponderance of European firepower had grown too great to match.

Flintlocks against English muskets – this the Asante could meet,

... even if their aim was so poor that they
tore the bark off the trees over the
enemy's heads, and never hit a one of them.

But what could they do against the Snider rifle?

or the Maxim gun?

What were their hammered pieces of metal, shot from
out of date muzzle-loaders, against the dum-dum
bullet and smokeless powder?

War by war, they had gone from a mighty state into a half-
subject ally.

What independence they still kept couldn't last. And in 1900, word came

that the British authorities down on the Gold Coast would take the one thing the Asante would die to the last man to save, the symbol of their nation – where the soul of them as a people rested: the Golden Stool.⁷

The Asante had been some of the best warriors in all Africa. English soldiers would say, some of the best warriors in the world.

Adapting to the new kind of weapons Europe had to bring against them, the Asante built stockades and blocked every road with log barricades.

With slave labor and armed troops, they cut logs by the thousands – immense trees.

With telegraph wire to lash them together, they built walls six feet high and filled in between them with five to six feet of dirt, densely packed, and stones, and smaller logs, put loopholes in them to allow firing.

They were in a zigzag pattern, so that – as Union soldiers found at Cold Harbor – you could rake the British with fire from several directions, as soon as they got anywhere close.

Against cannon, what could a wooden barricade do?

Everything – wooden walls like these, the shells bounced off of.

Could troops go around the walls?
Ah, but they weren't on the roads only.

⁷ Robert B. Edgerton, **The Fall of the Asante Empire**, 188-92.

They stretched 400 yards out.

That's a quarter of a mile, or nearly.

And at the sides, there were forts and entrenchments. Taking them would be a killing operation.

And behind each stockade, big war camps, to hosue troops by the thousands.

Some of them had roofs of logs so strong that only a 75 mm. shell could bring them down.⁸

The Asante fought bravely, and they stood up against bayonet charges without breaking or running – something that no other tribes in Africa had done.

But they did no more than delay the inevitable.

Against them came British commanders and black African armies.

Vast levies of African troops, called the “locusts,” would follow behind the soldiers’ track, burning villages and destroying their crops.

They had full freedom to rape and murder.

⁸ Robert B. Edgerton, **The Fall of the Asante Empire**, 195-96.

Any Asante woman or child they caught, they were allowed to enslave.⁹

Modern firepower guaranteed that when 400 British soldiers met 3000 Asante, all the deaths would be on one side.

At war's end, just 16 British officers had been killed and 113 enlisted men.

The Asante lost several thousand.

Villages were in ashes, fields devastated, their leaders dead or in exile.

Asante was divided into four districts, with a British commissioner to run each of them.

Not for 24 years would their king be released from his imprisonment in the Seychelles Islands.

He was no longer dangerous, and he came back, still honored by his people until he died.¹⁰

Everybody came in for a share of the cake.

But the lion's share outdid them all.

⁹ Robert B. Edgerton, **The Fall of the Asante Empire**, 228.

¹⁰ King Prempe hadn't exactly pined away the years in between. He had been given very good treatment, and full freedom of the island. The king took up Christianity (the British monarch was C of E., so Prempe declared that he would join it, too. When he returned, British officials were surprised to find him a gracious, gentle man, with many charms, and a wool overcoat, too. Robert B. Edgerton, **The Fall of the Asante Empire**, 250-51.

Of the new colonies and protectorates, fully half – 15 out of 30 – fell
to England.

And they were the pick of the lot

Gold mines in Transvaal

Markets on the Niger

Tea and coffee of Uganda

Cotton from Egypt and Sudan.

To which Henry Labouchere wrote his angry reply:

Pile on the Brown Man's burden!
And if ye rouse his hate,
Meet his old-fashioned reasons
With Maxim's – up to date –
With shells and Dum-Dum bullets
A hundred times make plain
The Brown Man's loss must never
Imply the White Man's gain.¹¹

Imperialism killed, even when it didn't mean to kill.

Bring people in contact with one another, and they may get along fine – and so do their
viruses.

¹¹ John Ellis, **The Social History of the Machine Gun** (New York: Random House, 1975), 99-100.

So if you go to somewhere like Bunyoro, one of the kingdoms in what later became Uganda, you can see what happened to the people there.

For one thing, the Bunyoros weren't going to surrender peaceful-like.

Armies of over 20,000 had to fight through the thickets and jungles in the mid-1890s, just to keep the British flag flying.

Maybe one British soldier in ten was killed or wounded.

No frontier war had been that bad before.

Officers kept off cholera and fevers with lots of morphine, lots of alcohol, and except for the d.t.'s had nothing to worry about except nervous breakdowns, malaria, the jiggers, malnutrition.

Before long, the soldiers hated every minute they were there. And they hated the Nyoro people, too.

Any, all of them, were fit for extermination.

A machine gun provided a "taste of civilization."

Besides, this wasn't real warfare with pitched battles.

Rules, in a knife fight?????

So none of the rules applied.

Everybody is a combatant.

Everybody can be turned into a victim.

Torture? Perfectly okay.

Make the captives into slaves/ Entirely legitimate.

To suppress them, the army finally tried scorched earth policies.

If you can't shoot them all, at least you can starve them.

Even after the Empire was in control, it had to keep garrisons on the soil.

Nobody thought that the people wouldn't rise up, if they got a chance.
They were hostile as mad bees.

But that was nothing compared to the loss of life from famine and disease.

You bring in Ganda armies and Sudanese troops, they've seen lots of action –

in every sense of the word.

Smallpox? Venereal disease? These are the guys to go to.

And Sudanese soldiers were especially noted for rape.

Wars throw farmlands into abandoned open fields.

No crops grown, and nothing to feed people with.

As for “pacified” areas, their granaries go to feed the armies of occupation.

There’s nothing left for them after that.

A cattle economy is wiped out.

So are most of the cows themselves.

Once Uganda became a part of the Empire, the population decline just kept on going.

There were terrible food shortages – intense famines.

Sleeping sickness – small pox.

It would take thirty years ... till the mid-1920s – before the population decline really slowed down .

Education helped.

Cotton and tobacco growing helped.

Improved communications helped, too.

Building hospitals in the 1930s helped, too.¹²

CODA: ADVENTURELAND BECOMES FANTASYLAND

¹² Shane Doyle, “Population Decline and Recovery in Bunyoro, 1860-1960,” *Journal of African History*, 41 no. 3 (2000): 429-58.

What we may miss, looking at the map of Africa, is how phony the whole thing was.

These weren't African nations.

Their borders fit no map any tribe would have drawn, even if it had expert cartographers to consult.

They had no coherence, of African tribe or language or religion.

They were designed to fit European needs.

Standing alone, the colonies could not be self-sustaining.

It had just about no chance of seeing itself as a nation.

Italy had been many kingdoms and duchies.

But at least everybody shared a language ...

a religion...

a heritage.

What did the natives of Tanganyika share?

They were herdsmen, with no government higher than their many clans.

They were Pangwa and Ngoni

Beni and Makonde and Mweru and

Ngindo and Pogoro and Mbunga and

Vidunda.

The map England helped make at the beginning of the twentieth century was a fantasy.

But it is the map Africa is stuck with at the century's end...

and in that lies much of the tragedy and much of the

bloodletting that is Africa's since
de-colonialization.