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King Leopold's Ghost

A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa

by

Adam Hochschild

1998



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Ray Mescallado

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

With its international scope, the book has scenes set across the world. However, the main events take place in the Congo region of Africa, the European nations of Belgium and England, and the United States of America.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Major Characters

Edmund Dene Morel - The British businessman who exposes the slavery atrocities of the Congo.

King Leopold II - The ruler of Belgium who colonized the Congo.

Joseph Conrad - Author best known for his novella of the Congo, *Heart of Darkness*.

George Washington Williams - An African American journalist and historian.

William Sheppard - The first African American missionary in the Congo.

Henry Morton Stanley - World-renowned journalist and explorer who finds the source of the Congo.

Roger Casement - British consul to the Congo whose report exposed the atrocities in the Congo.

Secondary Characters

Mark Twain - American author and vice president of the American Congo Reform Association.

Patrice Lumumba - First Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo, assassinated in 1960.

Diogo Cao - The Portuguese Naval captain who was the first European to arrive at the Congo River.

King Affonso I - The ManiKongo who ruled the Kingdom of the Kongo from 1509 to 1542.....

Dozens of additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Edmund Dene Morel, representing all those who want to reform the Congo as it stood.....

Antagonist - Leopold II and all those who followed the policies that encouraged the.....

Climax - Pressured by Morel's crusade to expose the atrocities in the Congo, Leopold sets up a Commission of Inquiry to placate critics. However, the Inquiry unexpectedly.....

Outcome - Leopold sells the Congo to the Belgian government, resulting in some improvement for the Congo natives, though problems persisted there and

SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

King Leopold II of the small European country of Belgium sought an empire of his own from which he could make a sizable personal fortune. Knowing that he could succeed only by claiming humanitarian reasons, he laid the groundwork by hosting a Geographical Conference in Brussels in 1876, which led to the creation of the

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much-lauded International African Association and a reputation of opposing evil "Arab" slave-traders. Finally, the opportunity was presented to Leopold when journalist and explorer Henry Morton Stanley - already well known for seeking out and finding Doctor David Livingstone in the African interior - discovered the mouth of the Congo on a separate expedition. Continuing under the guise of humanitarian work, Leopold hired Stanley to build an infrastructure to the Congo interior and sign treaties with tribal chiefs on his behalf. Deceitfully confusing the International African Association with his own International Association of the Congo, Leopold gained recognition for his claim on the Congo from the United States, and from there his promises of free trade led to recognition from European countries during the 1884 diplomatic conference that set up the "Scramble for Africa" or "Race for Africa". Thus, in 1885 the colony was renamed the Independent State of the Congo, and was wholly under Leopold's sole control.

The resources of the Congo were not fully known at the time, but there was an existing strong interest in ivory, followed in the 1890s by a sudden boom for natural rubber. Leopold had concession companies - in which he held shares and often control - to exploit these resources, and formed the military Force Publique to help carry out and enforce his policies. One of his first decrees for the Independent State of the Congo was to.....

THEMES

Major Themes

The defining theme of this work is Creating The Other - that is, the need for a community of people to define differences in another community, most often for the sake of exploitation. Related to this theme are Colonization and Empire Building, which is built on that exploitation of the Other, and Social Justice, which seeks to eradicate the sense of the Other in the name of humanitarianism and unity. The last major theme is.....

Additional themes are identified in the complete study guide.

MOOD

This is a clearly partisan work of history and journalism - that is, it makes no apologies for choosing one side of the main conflict over another - and the mood thus reflects this stance. The writing is often somber, motivated by a strong sense of righteousness that comes from the focus on a.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Adam Hochschild was born in 1942 in New York City. From the beginning of his career, a passionate interest in civil rights and progressive issues was evident. During his college years, he spent a summer in South Africa working for an anti-government newspaper. In 1964, he worked briefly as a civil rights worker in the Mississippi; he later became part of the anti-war movement during the Vietnam era. A writer and editor for *Ramparts* magazine, he became one of the co-founders of *Mother Jones* magazine in 1976, serving on its editorial board. As a journalist, he has written for a wide variety of magazines including.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

King Leopold's Ghost is meant to be part of a long history of texts about the colonization of Africa. Hochschild refers to those texts in the course of the book, most notably the wildly popular works of Henry Morton Stanley and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In a very real sense, Hochschild's book is not only a response and continuation of those works about the European colonization of Africa, but also a re-imagining of what that colonization meant and the consequences it had on all involved.

King Leopold's Ghost also follows a tradition of popular history narratives - that is, scholarly works of history that are intended for an audience beyond academics. In recent decades, other notable writers in this field include Barbara Tuchman (*A Distant Mirror*), David McCullough (*John Adams*), Stephen Ambrose (*Band of Brothers*),

and Joseph Ellis (*Founding Brothers*).

The term "popular history" is quite elastic, but certain.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Summary

The author imagines Liverpoolian businessman Edmund Dene Morel in 1897 or 1898, stepping off a steamer in Antwerp, Belgium. Morel sees no exchange for the incoming rubber and ivory cargo, but does see firearms and ammunitions going out. He realizes slave labor is taking place in the Congo and goes on to expose these practices to the rest of the world. That revelation of atrocities in the Congo is the focus of the book, and how he found out about this when following a footnote about Mark Twain, which revealed he took part in a worldwide movement against slave labor. Upon finding out that what happened in the Congo claimed eight to ten million lives, Hochschild is amazed at how one of the great mass killings in recent history is mostly unknown and forgotten; for his own part, he had been in the Congo in 1961 as a student, and had an unsettling conversation with a CIA man who was happy at the death of Patrice Lumumba, the Republic of Congo's first prime minister. He then goes on to realize he had read about the early history of the Congo in a famous literary work, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

Morel may have sparked the worldwide movement, but he was not the first to try to expose these practices: African Americans George Washington Williams and William Sheppard had also tried, as did others. Hochschild observes that this was the first worldwide scandal in the modern age of the telegraph and camera, and sees a modernity in that, as well as King Leopold II's distance from the atrocities committed under his rule. He also notes the wealth of records about that time, but how very little of it is directly from the native Congolese people; however, the records from the conquerors themselves have echoes of the words of those native people.

Notes

The introduction clearly frames the author as imagining the events that he will describe in the book, particularly Edmund Dene Morel's epiphany in Antwerp. By emphasizing how he became interested in the topic of the Congo, Hochschild shows the "great forgetting" in action, which he later critiques. Further, describing his own time in the Congo shows his personal concerns about human rights, which mirrors the passionate outrage that drove the Congo reform movement in this book. In this way, this book is in the same spirit of activism as what Morel and his colleagues accomplished.

PART I: WALKING INTO FIRE

PROLOGUE: "The Traders Are Kidnapping Our People"

Summary

Europeans saw Africa as a strange land, a site that encouraged fantasies that were fearsome and even supernatural in scope. However, starting in the fifteenth century, European explorers systematically ventured southward to gain a better understanding of the land and see what profits may be exploited from it. Among the noteworthy developments: in the 1440s, Portuguese shipbuilders developed the compact caravel; there was an interest in locating the source of the Nile River; and there was a strong interest in meeting the legendary Christian king Prester John. In 1482, Portuguese captain Diogo Cao headed further south than any European before and finally came to the mouth of a huge fresh-water river, which was the Congo River. He declared the territory for his liege, King Joao II of Portugal; the river and colony would come to be called the Congo, while the people and the indigenous kingdom in the area would be called the Kongo. A monarch who went by the title of the ManiKongo ran the Kingdom of Kongo. In 1491, the ManiKongo at that time welcomed Portuguese

priests and emissaries in the first sustained interaction between Europeans and a black African nation. The Portuguese were aghast at many practices, most particularly polygamy, but respected how developed the kingdom was, both culturally and politically.

Like many African nations, the Kingdom of Kongo has slavery, but it was more flexible than in European countries and the Western hemisphere. Soon after the Portuguese arrived, slave-buyers arrived to purchase humans for the growing economies in the Western Hemisphere. Slaves not only came from the Kongo but were also sought in outlying regions through other African peoples. Affonso I became the ManiKongo of Kongo in 1506: a convert to Christianity, he tried to selectively modernize his kingdom, in part to protect it against the worst-case scenario of the European incursion. He wrote to King Joao III about the slave trade and how European goods were used to buy slaves, lamenting how it was wreaking havoc on his people. In 1539, Affonso I himself lost ten relatives to slave traders. After Affonso I dies, the Kongo kingdom's power slowly diminishes as the slave trade booms; individual chieftains take advantage as other European countries join in the trade. In 1665, Kongo's army fought the Portuguese, were defeated, and the ManiKongo at the time was beheaded.

In the same way Europeans had misconceptions of Africa, Africans were superstitious about the Europeans. Many Africans believed the Europeans were *vumbi*, ancestral ghosts, who were said to possess chalky skin. Their ships seemed to emerge from below the ground, and Africans feared Europeans were cannibals; on slave ships, captured Africans would refuse to eat for fear they were being fed the bodies of those who sailed before them. As African middlemen brought captives to the European slave ships, traders rarely went far inland. Thus, the Congo remained a puzzle, and one of its major mysteries was why its flow was consistent year-round - unlike other major explored rivers such as the Amazon and the Ganges. However, the source of the Congo River could not be traced, in part because the Europeans could not sail upstream and faced rapids along the way. In 1816, a British expedition led by Captain James K. Tuckey of the Royal Navy tried to locate the source of the Congo and after 150 miles, turned back; twenty-one of the fifty-four men on the expedition died from the journey, including Tuckey himself.

Notes

The title of this chapter is taken from a plea made by Affonso I to Joao III, but it extends to the eventual plight of the Congo when agents of Leopold and the concession companies implement a policy of forced labor.

CHAPTER 1. "I Shall Not Give Up the Chase"

Summary

Henry Morton Stanley, who eventually discovered the source of the Congo, was born John Rowlands in 1841, a quarter-century after the Tuckey expedition. The bastard son of Betsy Parry, he was unsure of who his father was and shunted from home to home before winding up at the St. Asaph Union Workhouse at the age of six. He left St. Asaph's at fifteen and at seventeen was offered a job on the American merchant ship the *Windermere*. He sailed to New Orleans, jumped ship, and then asked for a job from a cotton broker named Henry Stanley. Rowlands eventually took the man's name, but the story of his affectionate relationship with Henry Stanley and his wife is called into question by historical records; such embellishments were not unusual for Rowlands / Stanley, as seen by another story about a sailor named Dick Heaton who turns out to be a woman in disguise. Henry Morton Stanley fought for the Confederate Army, was captured, and got out by fighting for the Union as a sailor.

Stanley abandoned the Union navy in 1865 and became a newspaperman: he covered the Indian Wars in 1867 in dramatic detail, which caught the attention of James Gordon Bennett, Jr., the publisher of the *New York Herald*. Bennett sent him to cover a war between the British government and the Emperor of Abyssinia; a bribe to the telegraph clerk in the Suez assured that he had the scoop to this war, which further propelled his career and had him named a permanent roving foreign correspondent for the *Herald*.

Based in London, Stanley was aware of the growing interest in Africa and the increasing celebrity of African explorers such as Richard Burton and John Speke. There was not only a strong interest in the raw materials available on the African continent, but also a fervor to "civilize" and bring Christianity to the natives. The British were particularly interested in combating slavery, though the empire's high moral stance had a questionable basis, at best. Further, the main focus of much of Britain and France's antislavery fervor was directed not at Spain and Portugal or Brazil, but at Arab slave-traders raiding Africa from the east and bringing slaves back to the Arabian Peninsula. This was seen as abominable as it was one "uncivilised" race enslaving another (while the enslavement by other European or Europe-colonized countries continued); further, the term Arab was misused in such rhetoric, as they actually tended to be Africans adopting some aspects of Arab culture.

The epitome of all these European impulses was the British explorer Doctor David Livingstone, who became a national hero when he was the first white man to cross the continent from coast to coast. In 1866, Livingstone went on another long expedition and was not heard from for years. According to Stanley, his employer Bennett called him to Paris in 1869 and told him to find Livingstone. In spring of 1871, Stanley set out on an expedition of 190 men - the largest to date - and found Livingstone over eight months later, uttering the famous phrase, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" Stanley traveled with Livingstone for a time; the doctor remained in Africa and died there, while Stanley returned to Europe to great acclaim across the continent. There was some controversy with Britain's Royal Geographical Society, who sent their own expedition to find Livingstone just as Stanley prepared to leave Africa triumphant, and his nationality was questioned. On a more personal level, his fiancée Katie Gough-Roberts had married while he was away, wounding his pride deeply.

Notes

The title of this chapter is taken from a statement Stanley passes along to his newspaper readers, ironically emphasizing the bravado that made him famous and which obscured his cruelty and narcissism during his expeditions.....

OVERALL ANALYSES CHARACTER ANALYSIS

As a work of popular history, *King Leopold's Ghost* relies on dramatic characterization to engage the general reader's attention: we are encouraged to understand the key characters, to see things from their unique perspectives, then to root for or against them. However, the subject matter is ideologically broad - the conquest of Africa by the Europeans and the consequences of seeing whole peoples as "other" when colonizing them - and many specific events contribute to the circumstances at the heart of the book. There is a good deal of basic historical exposition necessary to properly convey the.....

Leopold II - Leopold II thus looms large as the villain of this book, the figure most responsible for the murder of millions of humans in the quest for profit. He is portrayed throughout as someone with a single goal - to create a personal empire - and pursues it in a near-monomaniacal fashion. In keeping with this characterization, he is almost always made responsible - directly by his decrees or.....

Henry Morton Stanley - Henry Morton Stanley is given a rather complex psychological profile from his very first appearance in the book: he is born a bastard and deals with abandonment by both parents through a fear of intimacy and an unhealthy desire for approval. As widely celebrated as he is in the public eye, he nevertheless is a jumble of neuroses who takes his anger out on underlings and aggrandizes his considerable achievements because whatever he does is still not enough to earn him the.....

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The book is broken down into two major parts. The first part involves early exploration of the Congo, Henry Morton Stanley's expeditions, Leopold II laying the groundwork to lay his claim on the Congo and have it recognized by the initial community, the ivory and rubber trade, and early critics of the Congo state from George Washington Williams to William Sheppard. The last chapter in the first part is Edmund Dene Morel's discovery in Antwerp of forced labor and exploitation in the Congo. The second part then draws out....

THEMES – THEME ANALYSIS

The over-arching theme of this book is Creating The Other: what happens when a group of people are motivated to consider another group of people as significantly, qualitatively different from themselves. The reasons are often complex - fear of the unknown, a community's need to define itself, political expediency - but the results are the same: Creating The Other effectively dehumanizes that other group of people, makes the first group less able to empathize with that other group and realize that there are common needs and rights that must always be respected. From this theme, several following themes of the book develop.

Hochschild shows how Creating The Other goes back to the very beginnings of the European exploration of Africa. While the initial beliefs about Africa were outrageous and bizarre, Europeans in the nineteenth century had set aside the most obvious lies and misunderstandings but held onto the.....

Additional themes are fully analyzed in the complete study guide.

AUTHOR'S STYLE

The style of *King Leopold's Ghost* can be summed up as pedagogical, passionate, and partisan.

As this is a work of popular history, part of Hochschild's duty is to educate and inform his readers, providing as full a context as necessary to understand the full import of the events. Hochschild has a strong interest in sharing documents from the historical events themselves, as they are the best first source for information - and the preservation of those documents and records was one of the.....

QUOTATIONS – IMPORTANT QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

King Leopold's Ghost begins with these paragraphs:

The beginnings of this story lie far back in time, and its reverberations still sound today. But for me a central incandescent moment, one that illuminates long decades before and after, is a young man's flash of moral recognition.

The year is 1897 or 1898. Try to imagine him, briskly stepping off a cross-Channel steamer, a forceful, burly man, in his mid-twenties, with a handlebar mustache. He is confident and well spoken, but his British speech is without the polish of Eton or Oxford. He is well dressed, but the clothes are not from Bond Street. With an ailing mother and a wife and growing family to support, he is not the sort of person likely to get caught up in an idealistic cause. His ideas are thoroughly conventional. He looks - and is - every inch the sober, respectable businessman. (1)

Note how the first paragraph uses very esoteric, abstract words before focusing in the second paragraph to a very detailed, historically specific image: one gets the impression of a camera fading in, or perhaps penetrating through a fog onto a bright light. Hochschild positions himself, not as a distanced historian without any attachment to the events he describes, but as someone taking part in an act of imagination and recreation - history as something that is lived and not merely observed. This act of foreshadowing makes plain the key event by which the rest of.....

Many additional quotations are analyzed in the complete study guide.

SYMBOLISM / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / METAPHORS / SYMBOLS

The map is the first major motif of the book. Originally, Africa was a blank area on European maps of the world, which symbolized the unknown nature of the continent and how it fired the imagination of potential explorers like the young Joseph Conrad. However, as time passed, explorers were able to fill in the blank area - but in doing so, they were able to impose their own values and standards on the continent, as seen by the names given to various landmarks and centers, as well as by the way Africa was colonized and pillaged for its resources during the Scramble for Africa. Maps are all about being able to.....

Additional items are identified and analyzed in the complete study guide.

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title: *King Leopold's Ghost*

Author: Adam Hochschild

Date Published: 1998

Meaning of Title: The legacy of Leopold's rule on the Congo region of Africa

Setting: Primarily the Congo region of Africa, Belgium, England, and the United States

Genre: Historical nonfiction

Protagonist: Edmund Dene Morel.....

STUDY QUESTIONS – MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. Why were hands severed and smoked by Leopold's agents and allies in the Congo?
 - a. To receive credits for kills.
 - b. To prevent stealing.
 - c. To stop infectious disease from spreading.
 - d. None of the above.
2. Who was William Sheppard?
 - a. The first African American missionary to the Congo.
 - b. The first Westerner to reach the court of the king of the Kuba tribe.
 - c. Both.
 - d. Neither.....

ANSWER KEY

1.) a 2.) c 3.) b 4.) b 5.) c 6.) b 7.) a 8.) b 9.) d 10.) b 11.) c 12.) d 13.) a 14.) d 15.) b

ESSAY TOPICS - BOOK REPORT IDEAS

- 1.) Give a rough outline of how a major human rights event today would be handled if written as a personal history such as *King Leopold's Ghost*. Choose an actual event and sketch out how it would fit the general plot structure and thematic concerns of this book.
- 2.) Trace the ways humor and irony is used throughout the work. What coincidences or parallels are most compelling to readers, and why? How does this reinforce the message of.....

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