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**OTHER TITLES**


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*History*

**THE SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA:** The White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912. By Thomas Pakenham. Random House. 738 pp. \$32

Africa during the last 100 years is history in fast motion. When the explorer Dr. David Livingstone died in 1873—the incident that opens this narrative—Europeans had established only a few colonies in Africa, including Mozambique and the Gold Coast. By 1912, the entire continent, apart from Liberia and Ethiopia, was in the hands of one European nation or another. In 50 years, those same European powers were gone—or would be soon.

Pakenham, author of the monumental *The Boer War* (1979), has written the first comprehensive account of the European whirlwind that twisted its way across Africa. But that is not the only distinction of his book. Early histories of Africa are mainly Eurocentric accounts based largely upon the records of diplomats and explorers who invaded a continent that, judged by their words, might as well have been unpopulated. More recent African historiography has attempted to recapture the experience of the Africans themselves. Pakenham combines both perspectives into a chronicle that reads with the narrative force of a novel.

But a novel without heroes, black or white. The Mahdi, a Muslim leader who drove the British from the Sudan in 1885, might have served as an African savior, but he initiated such a brutal slave trade that 15 years later, when the British reconquered the country, they were welcomed as liberators. As calamitous as the Mahdi's policies was the British decision to ensure their own control by partitioning the Sudan into north and south—a division that led to civil strife that persists to this day.

Whatever horrors they inflicted, the Europeans justified their presence by invoking the "3 C's"—the Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization that all claimed to advance. At times the

mask of benevolence fell. "I do not want to miss a good chance of getting us a slice of this magnificent African cake," King Leopold II of Belgium declared in 1876. Yet European colonization, if disastrous for the Africans, nearly wrecked Europe too: "By the end of the century," Pakenham writes, "the passions generated by the Scramble had helped to poison the political climate in Europe, brought Britain to the brink of a war with France, and [started a war] with the Boers . . . one of the most humiliating in British history."

A generation ago it was fashionable to denounce European colonialism in terms resembling Joseph Conrad's indictment: "the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience." Pakenham here substitutes understanding for moral indignation, knowing that the worlds of the traditional Africans and of the confident European empire-builders are both gone forever. We live in a different world entirely, one in which last year—as no colonialist ever would have dreamed possible—all but one of the finalists for Britain's most prestigious literary prize were from former colonies. The winner was a Nigerian.

**AZTECS.** By Inga Clendinnen. Cambridge. 398 pp. \$29.95

When Hernando Cortés entered the great Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1519, he was stunned by a practice that later perplexed students of this once-formidable empire. In the temple of the god Huitzilopochtli, human hearts smoldered in braziers, and a nauseating stench rose from the blood-stained floors and walls. Human sacrifices might have been commonplace in most advanced Mesoamerican societies, but nowhere else was ritual sacrifice combined with so aesthetic a culture and such fastidious social graces as among the Aztecs, "a people notable for a precisely ordered polity, a grave formality of manner, and a developed regard for beauty."

Scholars previously resolved this contradiction by marginalizing Aztec sacrifice, dismissing it as a top-of-the-pyramid affair concerning priests and rulers. Here, however, Australian historian Clendinnen shows that most of the butcher's work was done in full view, with all of society helping to prepare the victims and to distribute their dismembered heads and limbs. Clendinnen studies this "intimacy with victims' bodies, living and dead; [and] how that intimacy was rendered tolerable; what meanings were attached to it," to understand "how ordinary Mexica men- and women-in-the-street made sense of the vital world." Her *Aztecs* not only supersedes Jacques Soustelle's classic *Daily Life of the Aztecs* (1961) but also overturns most scholarly dicta about the Aztecs, from their honoring the elderly (on the contrary) to the role of sorcerers in society (far greater than was supposed).

Aztec sacrifice was intended to initiate human beings into the universe of the gods: Even the sun's rising out of darkness required continual human bloodletting. Young warriors were taught that their destiny was to be as much victim as victor, that their "precious eagle-cactus fruit" (their heart) would one day be "drink, nourishment, food to the sun, the lord of earth." The Aztecs conducted "Flowery Wars" against their allies—perhaps the strangest battles in history—fought not for territory or economic gain but "solely for the mutual taking of prisoners worthy of sacrificial death." With only the highest-ranking soldiers participating and fighting prearranged opponents, these battles involved what often appeared to be the ritual courtesies of a family reunion: The victor would ceremoniously address his captive as "my beloved son" and in turn be addressed as "my beloved father."

Scholars have long struggled to apply the



modern understanding of war, politics, and civil life to the Aztec empire. Clendinnen, by demonstrating that barbaric sacrifice was the defining act of Aztec society, makes such efforts seem misguided. Her approach derives from that of an American anthropologist working in an entirely different part of the world. Studying the Balinese, Clifford Geertz abandoned models from the contemporary social sciences and interpreted his subjects' system of government as a form of ritualized theater. Similarly, Clendinnen reveals a system of political governance that was so much a stylized mythological ritual that it barely seems to us like politics at all. Comparing Aztec researchers to "Ahabs pursuing our great white whale," Clendinnen concedes that it is "our own limitations of thought, of understandings, of imagination we test as we quarter those strange waters."

#### WOMEN AND GENDER IN ISLAM:

*Historical Roots of a Modern Debate.* By Leila Ahmed. Yale. 296 pp. \$30

What is the place of women in Islam? The success of fundamentalist movements in many parts of the Islamic world—which today includes some 40 nations and more than one billion people—adds urgency to the question. Countless Western news stories imply that the return to the veil required by Iran and other Islamizing regimes heralds a reign of repression that Muslim zealots will impose on women should their movements take hold in such comparatively "progressive" states as Turkey and Algeria.

For the past quarter century, much of the discussion about women under Islam has followed an argument put forth by the militant feminist, Dr. Nawal al-Saadawi of Egypt: Yes, Islamic women were oppressed, Saadawi conceded, but Islam itself could in no way be blamed. Rather, pre-Islamic conditions or reprehensible Persian or African codifications were smuggled into the essentially nonmisogynous religion of the Prophet. Ahmed, director of the Near Eastern studies program at the University of Massachusetts, brings balance and evidence to what has too often been a polemical debate.

Ahmed frankly admits the sexist,