

Paul Van Damme

Wit-Zwart in Zwart-Wit. Samen en toch apart: foto's en verhalen uit Belgisch-Congo.

Borgerhoff & Lamberigts, 199 pp. (ISBN 9789463932264)



Black lives matter, and Belgian king Leopold II and his red rubber past in our former colony, the Belgian Congo. For some just some *faits divers*, for others a matters of life and dead. In the same context, and in the wake of the recent discussion on these burning issues, the Flemish author Jef Geeraerts' 'masterpiece' *Gangreen 1 – Black Venus* was taken off the Flemish literature 'canon' that lists the books every citizen should have read. *Black Venus* was – in my opinion – rightly condemned for its sexist and racist content that shocked most right after its publication, but was then heralded as ground-breaking and because it was doing away with a number of dogmas and sacred cows.

The three illustrate the recent interest in, and activist interventions against recurrent and lingering signs of racism, emphasis on (white) identity and supremacy, and the discussions between opposing parties.

The book we review here provides a very well-documented insight in the zeitgeist that was prevailing in Belgian Congo, the colony that was 'given' (rather sold) to the Belgian state in 1908 by the then king Leopold II who had before privately owned the country that was more than 50 times the size of Belgium.

The title reads White (and) Black in Black (and) White, and the book presents, discusses and puts in perspective 150 historical, from the colonial period, black-and-white pictures that have at least one white and one black person – only in a few exceptions are there only black people depicted. The pictures show the sometimes (c)rude reality of how the Belgians were running their colony. The front page shows that not all white people seemed to be aware of what they were actually bringing about

or inflicting: two white children sit around a big bird cage with a black child inside. An innocent scene or so it would seem, but also a hard illustration of the fact that most were unaware of what their attitude and disposition were inflicting. The book is full of pictures that in another era would only document how life evolved in the colony and how it was run. It shows family life scenes, the military-at-work, missionaries,... - all pictures are grouped thematically, which helps to build a story within the book. Seen with our present-day eyes, and with what we know now, a lot are confronting, and basically so 'wrong' ! However, this is now, and the pictures were taken 'then'. So, our vision and interpretation should still remain nuanced. As such, the pictures invite the viewer and reader to reflect, not forget.

May I warmly recommend this book which has pictures with multiple layers of meaning and significance ? I hope there will soon be an English version available, but for the time being I think that most pictures speak for themselves...

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