



The Troubled Heart of Africa: A History of the Congo

Robert Edgerton

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Written over a century ago, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* continues to dominate our vision of the Congo, unlikely as it might seem that a late-Victorian novella could encapsulate a country roughly equal in size to the United States east of the Mississippi. Conrad's Congo is hell itself, a place where civilization won't take, where literal and metaphor darkneses converge, and where human conduct, unmoored from social (Western, in other words) norms, turns barbaric. As Robert Edgerton shows in this crisply narrated yet sweeping work of history, the Congo is still trying to awaken from the nightmare of its past, struggling to pull free from the grip of the "heart of darkness" cliché.

Plundered for centuries for its natural resources (which remain Africa's most abundant), the Congo was not always a place of horror. Before the Portuguese landed on its shores at the end of the 15th century, it was a prosperous and thriving region. The Congo River, the world's second longest as well as the deepest, and one of the only routes to the continent's interior, provided indigenous populations with ample means for living and trading. What the Portuguese found first to exploit were people, and with the slave trade began a dizzying downward spiral of conquest and degradation that continued for centuries. By the 19th century the race to explore the full length of the legendary river masked a fight for territorial and moral control among the French, Arabs, British, Germans, as well as American missionaries, all of whom dreamed of possessing Africa's very heart. When King Leopold of Belgium managed to solidify control in 1885, the Congo "question" seemed solved. His reign, of course, was almost pathological in its cruelty-the true source of Conrad's "horror"-and its grim legacy endures to this day.

Edgerton documents the Congo's long, sad history with a sense of empathy with and admiration for the character of the land and its inhabitants. Since independence in June 1960, the country has endured the machinations and disappointments of one dictator after another, beginning with Patrice Lumumba, and continuing through Joseph Mobutu, Laurent Kabila, and today Kabila's son, Joseph, who assumed power after his father was assassinated in January 2001. Whether called the "Congo Free State," or "Zaire," or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the country remains perilously unstable.

The Troubled Heart of Africa is the only book to give a complete history of the Congo, filling in the blanks in the country's history before the advent of Henry Stanley, David Livingstone, King Leopold, and other figures, and carrying us straight into today's headlines. The Congo continues today to be the subject of intense speculation and concern, and with good reason: upon it hangs the fate of sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. Here is a book that helps us face the stark truths of the Congo's past and appreciate both the enormous potential and uncertainty of its future.

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