

## SHORTER NOTICES

*Afrika: Eine neue Welt in deutschen Schriften des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts.* By MARILLA DOS SANTOS LOPES. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992. Pp. 286. DM 76 (ISBN 3-51506-087-1).

In the year 1992 we were overwhelmed by literary works commemorating the 'discoveries' of Christopher Columbus. It is all the more welcome, then, to review a volume that deals with European 'discoveries' of a different sort – the 'discovery' of Africa. In this study, which was originally presented as a doctoral thesis at Bamberg in 1991, Marilla dos Santos Lopes has set herself the task of analysing the reception and spread of knowledge about Africa in German writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The author is not so much interested in the process of geographical discoveries *per se*, but in the aspects of cultural history that stemmed from the discoveries. This has involved an assessment of the writings of German travellers to Africa in this period and of the extent to which writers have borrowed from one another, as well as considering how far and wide this new knowledge was disseminated.

To cope with this far-reaching aim, Marilla dos Santos Lopes has divided her study into three parts. The first deals with the manner by which Africa became a subject of attention for German authors. She analyses German writings on the discovery of Africa, discussing in particular how these writers gathered their information. The second part presents travellers' reports, written in German, on many parts of the continent. These chapters are arranged geographically, giving the reader an idea of the extent of European knowledge on each region during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As one would expect, these chapters concentrate upon coastal regions. The third part offers a discussion of specific elements drawn from the travel reports, dealing with geography, anthropology, religion and history, and showing how this information was fitted into the wider understanding of the world (as presented in German writings) and how it was used.

Each of the three parts of this study adopts a rather different methodological approach, yet the author has succeeded in making each part easily readable. Marilla dos Santos Lopes' painstaking work and her profound knowledge of the sources make this an important book for all those who study the history of Africa.

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*Un centenaire: 1885–1985. Les relations Europe–Afrique au crible d'une commémoration.* By JEAN-LUC VELLUT. Leiden: Institute for the History of European Expansion, 1992. Pp. 153. No price given (ISBN 90-74429-01-7).

This small book, published under the sponsorship of Leiden's indefatigable Institute for the History of European Expansion, has not been widely advertised and may well escape the eye of even the most scholarly of scramblers for Africa. This loss would be their misfortune, for Jean-Luc Vellut has produced a survey that should become the starting point for the future study of the subject now that all the ruminations of the centenary of the Berlin Conference have been aired and most of them, so it seems, published too.

The book consists of two parts: a substantial historiographical commentary (pp. 1–95) and an *annexe* (pp. 97–152). The *annexe* will be something of a revelation to anyone who thinks that he is on top of this subject. After listing seventeen *colloques* and *réunions* devoted to the Berlin Conference in 1984–5, the author provides an annotated list of nearly one hundred publications (in half a dozen languages), all dealing with the centenary. Understandably, some of these are slight pieces written

for the occasion, and others are repetitive (and, as Vellut points out, they sometimes repeat errors), but there are a large number of sizeable contributions too, even if the best known of these<sup>1</sup> also remains the most substantial. The *annexe* provides the foundation for Vellut's astute and wide-ranging commentary. Vellut begins by identifying the main themes of the literature, by noting the influence of different national traditions of historiography and by giving a welcome emphasis to the development of *un discours africain* on the subject. He then enlarges his comments by placing the Berlin Conference in the wider context of the scramble for Africa, examining the interests of the major powers and traversing the continent in both short-term and long-run perspectives.

The scholarship that underpins this essay is as formidable as it is modest. Vellut is alert not merely to the accumulation of evidence and argument but also to the ideology and symbolism of the Berlin Conference and the centenary conferences too. The historian can easily be tempted into producing the type of formula writing required by commemorations of this kind, and Vellut concludes by reminding us of the need both to keep our minds open to the unforeseen and often contradictory 'incoherences' of the past and to accept the challenge of writing about it with subtlety, originality and coherence ourselves. Let the challenge now be directed at its author: Jean-Luc Vellut is one of the few historians who possess the necessary armoury to attack the problem of the scramble from a fully European perspective. He is also exceptionally sensitive to the need to understand and respond to African perspectives on the European invasion of the continent. Can we encourage him to write the book that is now needed so badly on this subject?

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*Scenes from African Urban Life: Collected Copperbelt Papers.* By A. L. EPSTEIN. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992. Pp. xxvi + 233. £29.50 (ISBN 0-74860-321-2).

*Scenes from African Urban Life* is a collection of essays on the towns of the Zambian Copperbelt by the renowned urban sociologist, A. L. Epstein. While most of the essays have been published before, and remain in their original state, the last chapter, 'Response to social crisis: aspects of oral aggression in Central Africa', is an extended and much revised version of a previous paper. In his introduction, Epstein provides the collection's rationale, pointing out that the neo-Marxist preoccupation with structure and class rather than culture and context that dominated much of Africanist scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s, seems to have 'run its course' (p. xi). Epstein sees the collection as a chance 'to draw the attention of younger scholars to an earlier tradition and even persuade some of them to follow in its path again' (p. xi).

Indeed, one is struck by the richness and complexity of Epstein's findings. We follow one of his research assistants around town, listening in on his conversations with friends and acquaintances. We discover new words and language being invented to enable people to understand one another in the urban environment. And in the last chapter, we are tantalized by the possible relationship between African weaning patterns, ambivalence towards parents and both marital behaviour and reactions to colonial policy.

The extraordinary detail in these chapters offers much to the contemporary scholar, particularly those interested in issues of language, knowledge and power. However, even in his innovative last chapter, Epstein remains caught up in old debates, particularly the argument with Max Gluckman over the legitimacy of

<sup>1</sup> Stig Forster, Wolfgang Mommsen and Ronald Robinson (eds.), *Bismarck, Europe and Africa: The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 and the Onset of Partition* (Oxford, 1988).