ARM Press cutting

The Looting of Benin

Richard Gott reappraises a British outrage against a tiny African fiefdom 100 years ago
Reproduced from THE INDEPENDANT Saturday February 22th 1997

On the half-landing of the main staircase of the British Museum hangs a unique display of 50 bronzes, depicting small groups of African soldiers in militay gear. These are just a small percentage of the 900 magnificent bronze sculptures, dating from the 16th century, that were seized from the palace of Benin during a British imperial rampage in west Africa 100 years ago, in February 1897.

The campaign against Benin, a small city-state east of Lagos in what is now southern Nigeria involved the invasion and destruction of the state, the show trial of its king, the execution of its leading chiefs, the torching of the royal palace, and the burning of innumerable villages. Throughout the fighting, in which "friendly" black troops were put in the forward ranks, British forces were largely protected by the steady use of the Maxim machine-gun. These typical atrocities of the British colonial era go unmentioned in the museum's accompanying wall notice, a continuing indication of Britain's officiall reluctance to come to terms with the real cost of its imperial past. Now Bernie Grant, the Labour MP, is backing a campaign for the looted treasures held in museums in London and Scotland to he returned to the King of Benin

The British "punitive expedition" of 1897 did not just result in the seizure of the Benin bronzes. It also helped to inspire Joseph Conrad's great novel Heart of Darkness. Thanks to the researches of the Swedish writer Sven Lindqvist we have a detailed knowledge of what Conrad had been reading when he started writing at the end of 1898. In a new book, Exterminate all the Brutes, to be published this spring by Granta, Lindqvist uses this fearsome phrase of Conrad's anti-hero Kurtz to illuminate the European origins of genocide.

There will he much celebration this year of the 50th anniversary of Indian independence in 1947. There will be rather fewer memorial meetings recalling the centenary of the Empire's heyday, when the British advanced into Africa like Hitler into the Ukraine.

The expedition against Benin was the culmination of several British assaults on the west African kingdoms that now form Nigeria. In 1897, it was the turn of Oba Ovonramwen, king of Benin, to deliver up his land, his people, and his treasures to a British army. The 40-year-old Oba had kept his kingdom isolated and independent, but the British were endlessly plotting to overcome his protectionist zeal. These were the years of the global rubber boom, consequent on John Dunlop's invention of the rubber inner tube. The virgin forests of Benin looked especially attractive.

The man who encompassed the Oba's downfall, Ralph Moor, was effectively the governor of Britain's Niger Coast protectorate. Moor, 36, had long argued that Benin should be opened up to trade, "if necessary by force". Like so many other colonial policemen, he had earlier been an inspector with the Royal Irish Constabulary, stifling rebellion in Ireland. Translated to Africa, he was to become one of Conrad's Kurtz-figures, bringing "civilisation" to the natives.

Moor's henchmen were equally keen for action. With Moor away in London his deputy, Lt James Phillips, requested permission from the Foreign Office in December 1896 "to depose and remove the King of Benin". He sent a messenger to the Oba announcing an impending "visit" to Benin. Then without waiting for a reply, he advanced on the Oba's

kingdom - with a small force of 10 British officers, a column of 200 African porters and a drum-and-fife band.

The Oba treated what seemed like an imminent British invasion as a national emergency. Later in the year from eye-witnesses, the British pieced together an account of what went on, explaining why the British Museum's Benin bronzes, when first captured were found to he heavily caked with blood.

"Twelve men were taken", with 12 cows, goats, sheep and chickens. "The animals were killed near the altar. and the blood from them was sprinkled on the ivories and the brass work." The 12 prisoners, with gags tied in their mouths, and held each by four strong men", were led to 3 wells where their heads were cut off.

This was portrayed as a form of human sacrifice, and the British used it to justify the seizure and destruction of Benin. Yet the eyewitness accounts also stressed that those sacrificed were criminals already sentenced to death.

Unaware of these fearsome rituals, Lt Phillips pressed on regardless, and in Benin, it was decided that Chief Ologbosheri, the Oba's son-in-law should be sent out with an armed group to check his advance.

On 4 January, 1897, on the road to Benin, the British force was ambushed by Ologbosheri. Many of the African carriers were captured, and many left dead. Lt Phillips himself and eight British officers were killed. Only two of the whites escaped. It was an unexpected and unusual victory .

Claims were later made that Lt Phillips's expedition was unarmed. This was not so. The British officers took no machine-guns, but they had revolvers with them. In the African heat, they had been kept locked up in boxes carried by their African porters.

A brutal British response was not long in coming. The deaths of so many officers provided the opportunity that Ralph Moor had been looking for. "Force" could now be safely used against Benin. A "punitive expedition" was organised under the command of Admiral Sir Harry Rawson, the commanderin-chief at Cape Town. Within a month, an elite force of 1,200 British soldiers, brought to the Benin River from 4,000 miles away (from London, Cape Town and Malta), had landed on the Nigerian coast, and teamed up with several hundred black troops, locally recruited. Thousands of African porters were brought from the British military base at Sierra Leone.

Admiral Rawson's three pronged attack on Benin City in February 1897 was no pushover. Each of his advancing columns met strong resistance from the local African population. The first one was harassed by Benin soldiers for several days. The second one was attacked in its base camp and the commanding officer was killed.

The story of the third one is given in the diary of Felix Roth, a naval surgeon. He provides considerable evidence of the indiscriminate way in which British forces used their machine-guns to mow down Benin resistance. "We shelled the village, and cleared it of the natives. As the launch and surf-boats grounded, we jumped into the water... at once placed our Maxims and guns in position, firing so as to clear the bush where the natives might be hiding."

Luckily, Roth recorded, "no white men were wounded; we all got off scot-free." This providential protection was easily explained. "Our black troops, with the scouts in front and a few Maxims, do all the fighting."

Benin City was finally captured on 18 February. British marines put the palaces and compounds to the torch. Worse was to come. After three days the fires got out of control, burning up what was left of the city as well as the equipment of the invading British force. Much of the carved woodwork in the Oba's palace was lost.

Thus was destroyed the great city of Benin. Miraculously, its extraordinary collection of bronze sculptures, depicting the chief events of the history of Benin's people, had

survived. These treasures were removed by the British troops and subsequently auctioned by the Admiralty to defray the cost of the expedition. Most of the 900 bronzes were bought by museums in Germany. Only a handful found their way to the British Museum.

For a further six months, a small British force harried the countryside in search of the Oba and his chiefs who had fled. Cattle were seized and villages destroyed. Not until August was the Oba cornered and brought back to his ruined city.

An immense throng was assembled to witness the ritual humiliation that the British imposed on their subject peoples. The Oba was required to kneel down in front of the British military "resident" the town and to literally trite the dust. Supported by two chiefs, the king made obeisance three times, rubbing his forehead on the ground three times. He was told that he had been deposed.

Some weeks later, Ralph Moor, the orchestrator of these events, arrived to prepare the final humiliation. "Now this is white man's country," Moor told the Oba. "There is only one king in the country, and that is the white man." The Oba and his chiefs were then subjected to a show trial. charged with the murder of Lt Phillips. Moor was the judge.

While the life of the Oba himself was spared, six of his chiefs were condemned to death. One of them, Ologhosheri, continued a guerrilla struggle against the British for another two years. But he too was eventually captured and hanged. The Oba was exiled to Calabar, and replaced by Chief Obaseki, a controller of many villages with rubber-producing forests. These were soon sold off to European firms, to supply the rubber for Europe.

The British made much of the cruelties of the Benin kingdom in justifying their military action. In the jargon of the late 20th century, they would have claimed that they were acting to preserve human rights. Yet later investigation showed that the cruelties practised in Benin were not as great as originally pictured. The idea of Benin rule "as one of bloodstained despotism", wrote one historian, "appears at variance with the truth."

Years later, in January 1914, the exiled Oba died in Calabar. Ralph Moor committed suicide in Barnes in September 1909, drinking the potassium cyanide he had bought to kill the wasps in his garden. Admiral Rawson became governor of New South Wales. And less than 20 years after the British had so recklessly turned their machine-guns on the Africans of Benin, they were to receive a taste of their own medicine in the First World War.

Meanwhile museums are refusing to return the Benin treasures. As one curator put it: "We are not in the business of redressing historic wrongs."

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