

Neil Parsons, *King Khama, Emperor Joe, and the Great White Queen: Victorian Britain Through African Eyes* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 1998)

At first blush Neil Parson's *King Khama, Emperor Joe, and the Great White Queen* is about British Empire history, and indeed it involves a great deal of this. But the subtitle, *Victorian Britain Through African Eyes*, gives an indication that it is even more a social and cultural history of Britain in the 1890s, as viewed around the catalytic event of the visit of three Bechuana chiefs. At times Parson almost parodies the newspapers of the time, which he uses extensively, and at others he appears to present a lengthy sketch for a Victorian melodrama. Parsons succeeds in weaving all of these elements into an interesting narrative and analysis.

As in a melodrama with a clearly defined villain who is booed and hissed and is basically unredeemable, Parsons casts Cecil Rhodes as the villain, who appears from time to time, exerting a darkly negative influence on events. And it is Rhodes who begins the process which brought the Bechuana chiefs from Africa to wander from September to November 1895 throughout Britain on a missionary and propaganda tour. Rhodes' ambitions for Southern Africa ultimately threatened the lands and autonomy of Khama, Sebele, and Bathoen, and they came to London to meet the new Colonial Secretary, Joseph Chamberlain, to see what they could do about subverting Rhodes' plans. Escorted by a representative of the London Missionary Society (L.M.S.), they used the series of missionary tours arranged for them to help propagandize their political purposes. In the end they stymied the evil villain. Maybe. Temporarily.

Cecil Rhodes is a controversial character in British imperial history. With an almost mythic reputation in his own time as businessman, politician, and imperialist, his star was somewhat in eclipse by the time of his death in 1902. Almost from the beginning of his career in Southern Africa, Cecil Rhodes was an excellent businessman, being opportunistic, enthusiastic, imaginative, and both ruthless and relentless. These qualities helped him create the De Beers monopoly in the diamond fields of Kimberley, and to create a substantial position in the gold fields of the Witwatersrand in the Transvaal. While he acquired enemies, he had even more friends fascinated by him and his vision, which went far beyond the making of money. Rhodes wanted the British Empire to dominate Africa, and he not only advocated an all-red Cape to Cairo chain of possessions linked by rail, but was instrumental in the creation of a British protectorate over Bechuanaland, the colonies of Southern and Northern Rhodesia, and the Nyasaland Protectorate. As in the case of his business

activities, Rhodes proved to be ruthless and relentless in pursuing his imperial dreams, and was willing to steamroller anyone that stood in his way, be they Portuguese, Boers, or the native inhabitants of the territories that he coveted.

The Ndebele War of 1893 enabled Rhodes and the British South Africa Company to seize control of the territory which became the colony of Southern Rhodesia. To help develop this territory and to extend British control further north, Rhodes needed to build a railway from Cape Province, which led him to try to acquire the intervening territory of British Bechuanaland, and the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Rhodes and his cohorts began negotiations with the Colonial Office for the transfer of this land, and by 1895 appeared to be on the verge of success.

Khama, Sebele and Bathoen ruled some of the territories in the Protectorate that appeared fated to pass under Rhodes' control, and having before them the dismal fate of the Ndebele, who had lost most of their land and cattle, they had little desire to suffer similarly. With the help of the Reverend William Charles Willoughby, a missionary of the L.M.S. in the territories of Khama, the most influential of the chieftains, and a devout Christian, the three took the lengthy trip from the interior of Africa to the imperial metropolis. While in Britain they were under the guardianship of the L.M.S. and to a very large extent at the service of that body, which organized their itinerary and provided them with the translators necessary to transmit their message both to the government and to the general public. They not only saw Chamberlain twice, but were shepherded throughout the country, the guests of congregations and municipalities, to which they constantly repeated their message of the value of Christianity (Sebele was apparently not a Christian but never failed to link himself with David Livingstone, who taught him for a brief period), prohibition, and their particular need to govern themselves under the authority of Queen Victoria, not Cecil Rhodes. If the L.M.S. used the Africans to raise the profile of the Society at a time when increased missionary activity in many parts of the world cried out for more generous contributors, the African chiefs consciously and effectively used the L.M.S. to further their ends.

Almost from the beginning of their trip, Khama, Bathoen and Sebele were sought after by journalists for interviews, and the many activities of the African party were extensively covered by the press. The journalists were primarily curious about what had brought to England three grave African gentlemen, and the fact that they were gentlemen had to be quickly acknowledged by most writers. Many also saw novelty in a situation where "savages" from Africa had come to London to plead their case and hoped to meet the Queen. Some writers came to mock, and mock they did in their articles, and some were obviously

disappointed to find not primitive men decked out in African regalia, but sober individuals in fashionable suits and top hats — “black Englishmen” was a term to be repeated over and over again.

As the little expedition wandered across the country, giving speeches and sermons, attending civic dinners and receptions, touring factories and cultural centres, the Africans attracted a great deal of popular attention. Newspaper accounts noted that the visitors preferred factories and industrial exhibits to art galleries, and made unflattering remarks about the lack of “culture” that this indicated; the writers consistently missed the point. The artistic culture of the Europeans was alien to the Africans, as alien as Bechuana art would be to most Europeans. But using tools is universal, and the factories consequently evoked a greater response. The newspapers also noted that the visitors responded very well to being constantly in view, the centre of attention of large crowds, but this is hardly surprising since the chiefs came from a society in which everybody lived a more public life. Khama and his companions would certainly be used to being the centre of attention, and would expect it.

Khama, Sebele and Bathoen met Joseph Chamberlain the first time in early September to present their case and the second on 6 November to hear Chamberlain’s decision. It was a compromise, which gave Rhodes his railway strip, but set aside reserves for the Bechuana chiefs, presumably free from Rhodes’ interference, and directly under the crown. As Parsons makes plain, this was probably a temporary solution, and Rhodes’ instant and indignant counter-attack might have shaken the final outcome, except that Rhodes over-reached himself in plotting a Transvaal Revolution which led to the damaging Jameson’s Raid at the end of the year. The consequent discrediting of Rhodes, and the events leading to the Boer War, put the Bechuana on the backburner, and preserved their tenuous autonomy. Chamberlain’s decision was not surprising; it reacted to the inroads in public opinion that the chiefs had made, but it also reflected Chamberlain’s basic imperialism. In fact, most of the people that received the chiefs so warmly — a reminder that even in the worst periods of British and European racism, the British did respond to dignity and courage — would have believed in imperialism and in what Rhodes was doing in Africa. Rhodes was connected with diamonds and gold and great deeds of empire, and it was not yet fashionable to despise any of this. The Reverend Willoughby, who guided the odyssey of the Bechuana, was a firm believer in the British Empire. Indeed, on the evidence of their speeches, the Bechuana chiefs were also anxious to remain in the British Empire, though in a relationship that would come close to “dominion status.”

Neil Parson’s excellent and very readable book illuminates the period about

which he writes. He reveals a British society that was complacently racist, materialistic, and self-centred despite its assumption of superiority it seemed always to be worried about what the chiefs thought of them, their factories and their culture. It was also a society capable of humanitarian response. Khama, on the other hand, and his companions, showed that simple dignity and courage and refusal to submit passively to oppression which subverts the image of victim. They were excellent and sophisticated propagandists who were capable of scoring a great coup in securing an audience with Queen Victoria. They had a firm concept of the political benefits of this, and thereby gave the lie to the racial myth of incapacity.

Laurence Kitzan
University of Saskatchewan