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Most of us probably think we know what a ‘hero’ is, or have some ideas about the qualities and achievements that might make someone ‘heroic’. Berny Sèbe’s monograph, however, is one of those books that reveals an unexpected complexity, taking a seemingly familiar concept and successfully defamiliarising it. In Heroic Imperialists in Africa, Sèbe’s quarry is the ‘heroic reputation’ and specifically that of the imperial hero from the 1870s to the outbreak of the Second World War. An imperial reputation, he argues, is not made by monumental actions alone, but is rather the result of complex political and cultural mechanics, and networks of ‘hero-makers’ with vested interests in their subject. Published in Manchester University Press’s longstanding Studies in Imperialism series, Sèbe’s work is an important contribution to the study of ‘popular imperialism’. Indeed, by showing how widely promoted imperial heroes were in popular culture, and by examining the political utility of their powerful reputations, the book reveals just how significant a regime of heroism was to empire in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Heroic Imperialists in Africa, moreover, deals with heroic figures from both Britain and France. In deftly weaving British and French imperial history together, revealing both a cross-Channel heroic culture and conspicuous national differences, the book is important reading for those with interests in comparative empire studies.

Sèbe takes a three-pronged approach to the imperial reputation. The first part of the book focuses on the contexts that permitted this new type of hero to appear and flourish. As he argues in the first chapter, alongside the geopolitical circumstances of the Scramble for Africa, the domestic developments that accompanied the Industrial Revolution were fundamental. With the extension of the franchise, which enabled ‘public opinion’ to take on
greater significance, imperial heroes became increasingly useful propaganda tools. Urban expansion provided opportunities for commemoration in street and town names and in public monuments, while new markets of readers offered new scope for celebratory promotional material. In the second and third chapters, Sèbe addresses the role of a developing mass media in cultivating hero-culture. He zones in on the industrialisation of the newspaper trade, the influence of New Journalism, and the rise of the penny press as a propaganda tool. Books, he argues, were crucial in solidifying imperial reputations by extending the publicity initially offered by the press. For Sèbe, however, the written word didn’t operate in isolation. He points to the ‘audiovisual’ as an important ‘language’ for the promotion of imperial heroes. The illustrated newspaper, made possible by rapid printing techniques, was particularly vital in disseminating reputations to the mass market. Ranging across advertisements, photography, the cinema, music and popular theatre, Sèbe lays emphasis on the range of ‘promotional channels’ that established and entrenched heroes in the public imagination.

The second section shifts attention to the uses of imperial heroes. These figures were loaded with political value and broadly served pro-imperial agendas. In his fourth chapter, Sèbe identifies four ‘types of politically influential hero’. Figures like Livingstone and Lavigerie served as ‘indirect promoters of imperial expansion’, popularising the belief that Europe had a moral duty to intervene in Africa, while others such as Rhodes and Brazza acted as ‘direct promoters’, explicitly using their popularity on behalf of imperial activity. Yet if some heroes made political capital out of their own reputations, they were also put to work by others. Sèbe persuasively shows the ways in which imperial heroes – such as General Gordon and Major Marchand – could be used as ‘political arguments’ by colonial propagandists. Finally, in the post 1900 period, Sèbe identifies the ‘proconsul turned hero’, whose stature signalled ‘the slow shift from conquest to administration’. The fifth chapter further develops the discussion, by considering the status of imperial heroes as ‘exemplary
lives’. Examining their roles as representatives of ‘progress’ and the ‘civilising mission’, as ‘religious examples’, and as embodiments of ‘patriotic and nationalist values’, the chapter addresses the ‘moral meanings given to the heroic reputations of imperial heroes by their promoters’.

The case studies that make up the third section offer ‘micro-histories’ of two heroic legends and play out the arguments developed throughout the book. The sixth chapter focuses on Marchand, whose rise to fame compensated for national humiliation in the Fashoda confrontation when France failed to secure an outlet on the Nile. Marchand’s status owed itself in part to his own efforts, but also to a network of individuals who promoted him for political reasons. While he was particularly heroised by nationalists, Marchand also achieved a reputation that cut across divisions and could be revived periodically for contemporary purposes. Chapter seven dwells explicitly on the business of hero-making. By examining George Warrington Steevens’ role in establishing the Kitchener legend, in his best-selling work *With Kitchener to Khartoum*, Sébe exposes the commercial motivations of those who sought to foster heroic reputations. For Steevens and his publisher, William Blackwood III, turning Kitchener into a hero proved lucrative. The success of their hero-making endeavours had as much to do with ‘promotional mechanisms’ and an intelligent negotiation of the literary market, as with Kitchener’s own activities.

*Heroic Imperialists in Africa* is undoubtedly a superb piece of work. It is empirically rich, showcasing research across an impressive array of archives and primary sources. The author, moreover, handles diverse material with skill, ranging between newspapers, biography, statuary, illustrations, photography, music, theatre and cinema. Indeed, one of the book’s major strengths is its insistence on the varied mechanisms on which reputations depended. Another strength is the book’s emphasis on the category of the ‘heroic’. In several recent studies, Victorian explorers and other imperialist figures have been examined through
the lenses of ‘celebrity’. Sèbe’s analysis undoubtedly demonstrates the important role of the media in building reputations, but it also shows that these individuals were more than simply celebrities. We don’t, for instance, tend to name streets or towns after celebrities, or monumentalise them in civic space. Sèbe’s ‘heroic imperialists’ were figures with political meaning and utility, ‘exemplary’ individuals in whom there was national and moral investment.

While *Heroic Imperialists* is well argued, a few comments are worth making. Although Sèbe does not assume that heroic reputations remain static, more space might have been given to exploring the changing nature of particular reputations and their ideological mobilisation over an extended period. Sèbe rightly calls attention to the roles of major ‘hero-makers’ who shaped reputations in critical ways. But it is also important to recognise the limits of such key individuals: reputations are contributed to and adapted by numerous agents with their own agendas, in ways that exceed the control of the more prominent hero-makers. The book also lacks a bibliography. Doubtless, this was the publisher’s decision (my own book suffered the same fate), but given the extent of the material that Sèbe has uncovered it would have been satisfying to have a comprehensive list of sources.

*Heroic Imperialists in Africa* is a major addition to reputation studies and to imperial history. The author has clear command over the political contexts in Britain and France from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century: there is much here that will provoke established scholars to think about popular imperialism and imperialist icons in new ways. But Sèbe’s work is also accessible to those new to the field, offering for instance a helpful appendix of short biographies of the key figures he discusses. *Heroic Imperialists in Africa* paves the way for future research on imperial mythmaking, having successfully established the importance of the heroic legend to both British and French imperial culture.