

DEMETRIUS BOULGER AND HOW THE DEBATE ON LEOPOLD II'S RULE OF THE CONGO FREE STATE CHANGED BRITISH PERCEPTIONS OF BELGIUM

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«Mr. Boulger is guarded in what he says about the Congo State; in fact, he leaves the «atrocities» question on one side.»

Review of *Belgian Life in Town and Country*,
by Demetrius C. Boulger. *The Spectator*, August 6, 1904.

At first glance the above statement, from a book review of Demetrius Boulger's *Belgian Life in Town and Country* in *Spectator*, comes across as surprising. The British publicist and writer Demetrius Boulger is foremost associated with his apologist views on Leopold II's rule of the Congo Free State in the late 1890s and early 1900s. He is especially known for having written *The Congo State: Or, the growth of Civilisation in Central Africa*¹ (1898) and *The Congo state is not a slave state*² (1903). These works have to be understood within a wider body of pro-Leopold II books. They were also part of a concerted public relations push by Leopold II to counter the effective attacks by Edmund D. Morel on how the Congo Free State was run. Not surprisingly Boulger was on the payroll of Leopold II.³ Whereas the book review is correct that *Belgian Life in Town and Country* does not contain an ardent apologia for Leopold II's rule, this chapter argues that the shadow of the Congo Free State nevertheless hangs heavily over this and other books by Boulger. Through an analysis of Boulger's work on Belgium this chapter will highlight how empire and the debates about empire influenced British perception of Belgium. As such this chapter can

be read as a powerful reminder that the links between empire and tourism are multilayered and complex. A growing imperial focus did not only push tourism from being a largely European phenomenon into a global one, which is a central tenet of this edited volume, it also changed fundamentally tourism within Europe itself. As such the chapter further contextualises and qualifies Mary Louise Pratt's analysis of the intricate connections between travel writing and imperial expansion.⁴

DEMETRIUS BOULGER

Demetrius Boulger (1853-1928) made a career as a prolific writer and publicist. The focus of his writing was very much on the place of Britain in the wider world and on tracking the burning imperial questions issues of the moment. He published heavily on the history of China, on the relationship between Britain and Russia in regards of Central Asia, and on India, when these issues were at the forefront of the attention of the British reading public.⁵ Although most famous for his books, he also published widely in the periodic press and he was one of the founders of *The Asiatic Quarterly Review*.⁶ By the end of the nineteenth century, not entirely unsurprising given the surge of attention for Congo in Britain, the focus of his books and articles had shifted to the Congo Free State and especially Leopold II's rule. As mentioned above, in his writings on Congo Boulger comes out very strongly in favour of Leopold II and, as the title of his *The Congo state is not a slave state: a reply to Mr. E. D. Morel's pamphlet* demonstrates, against Morel's international campaign to bring the atrocities in Congo to light. Boulger's rebuttal of Morel's central claim that the Congo Free State was based on slave labour highlights well his position:

But to level such a charge at the Congo State is the less excusable because by the admission of every one except Mr. Morel it crushed by its own unaided efforts the Arab slave-trade in the whole extent of the Congo region.⁷

By the time of his publications on Congo and Belgium he was a resident in Belgium. As many other British residents in Belgium before him he threw himself on the travel literature market.⁸ On Belgium he published a series of handbooks and entry level histories aimed at the market of British tourists and the general reading public.⁹ Finally, at the start of the First World War he played a role in gathering intelligence on the movement of German troops.¹⁰

BRITISH TOURISM TO BELGIUM

Demetrius Boulger's works on Belgium were part of a longstanding and rich tradition of British travel to Belgium.¹¹ Throughout the nineteenth century Belgium had been a mainstay on the British travel routes through the Continent and places like Bruges, Brussels and Waterloo had become a 'must seen' for British travellers. Given its close proximity, Belgium had become one of the first travel destinations on the Continent for British tourists after the Napoleonic wars and this popularity was maintained throughout the nineteenth century. A very substantial body of travel guides, traveller's handbooks and introductory texts to Belgium's history and customs guided the tourists on their visits.¹² Boulger's works on Belgium were part of this genre and reviewers recognised its qualities: 'A very large number of English tourists visit Belgium every year, but few of them, we imagine, acquire even a superficial knowledge of the country.... So we were prepared to welcome a good general handbook to Belgium a volume that should elude the conventional futilities of the guide-books, and we are pleased to say that Mr. Boulger's book is very good indeed'.¹³

The image of Belgium portrayed in the travel literature underwent some fundamental changes through the nineteenth century. In the two decades after the Belgian Revolution of 1830, British perceptions of Belgium were exceptionally positive as Belgium was seen as a liberal and industrial bridge-head on the Continent which seemed to follow the «British model». After

1850, and especially after 1870, Britain lost interest and Belgium became above all just another Continental country. Travel literature generally reflected this change in perception. Although some of the positive imagery had a long afterlife, generally portrayals of Belgium became more moderate in tone as the century progressed.¹⁴

CONGO'S LONG SHADOW ON DEMETRIUS
BOULGER'S VIEWS ON BELGIUM

Demetrius Boulger's portrayal of Belgium harks in important ways back to the older and much more positive perception of Belgium. His closing statement of *Belgium of the Belgians* has, for example, much more in common with mid-nineteenth century British travel literature on Belgium than with contemporary British guidebooks: 'The national alliance between the peoples of Flanders and England is the oldest in Europe. There are no two people more alike. Their most cherished institutions, those of civic liberty, are the same'.¹⁵

The reason behind Boulger's picking up of the older imagery and for his desire to depict Belgium in a positive light is Congo. The debate and criticism of Leopold II's rule of the Congo Free State and the international campaign against slave labour are the meaningful fold for much of Boulger's writing on the Belgian sights, past, customs, and traditions. Whereas Boulger's work on Belgium follows many of the genre conventions of British travel literature on Belgium, the positive portrayal of Belgium and the place of Congo in the books are revealing and meaningful differences. Boulger refrained from the too aggressive and idolatry defence of the rule of Leopold II that he is known for in his publications on Congo. A powerful example of this praise is the hyperbolic language used when introducing Leopold II in the opening statement of *The Congo State, or, The Growth of civilisation in Central Africa*: 'If it is permissible to apply to modern affairs the Biblical imagery that the man who successfully plants

a tree where none grew before has done a good life's work, then it is true to say that the happiest monarch should be the one who founds a new State'.¹⁶ Although avoiding such high levels of praise, it is nevertheless very clear where Boulger's loyalty lies. For example, his Congo chapter of *Belgium and the Belgians* opens with the following sentence: 'Belgium having been provided with a magnificent colony in the vast Congo region, not by her own merit or efforts, but by the cleverness, courage, and pertinacity of her great ruler, Leopold II'.¹⁷ He publishes this in 1911 and thus after more than a decade of unprecedented international protest and three years after Belgium had taken over the Congo Free State from Leopold II. In *History of Belgium*, published in 1925, the choice of language is similarly revealing when discussing Leopold II's reign in the early 1890s: 'In 1892-93 the object to be achieved was to put down the slave raids of the Arabs, to drive those invaders out of the country, and thus to accomplish the first half of civilising the Dark Continent'.¹⁸

Boulger's approach of either ignoring controversial aspects of Leopold II's rule, as is evident from the opening quotation of this chapter, or putting a positive spin on the rule, as is evident from the paragraph above, was picked up strongly by reviewers of his work. For his reviewers the long shadow Congo threw on Boulger's views on Belgium was apparent. The more interesting question, that of how the typical reader or tourist assessed Boulger's attempts at either ignoring or downplaying Leopold II's rule of the Congo Free State, is unfortunately much harder to answer. How effective was Boulger in using travel literature and general histories to shape British perception of Belgium and the Congo Free State? The number of books he published on Belgium and the reviews these attracted suggests that there was a healthy readership. Whether sales correlate with successfully shaping perceptions of individual readers is however impossible to ascertain in this case. The fact that Boulger had been part of a well financed public relations campaign to counter Morel's accusations suggests that at least he himself believed that he could achieve more with his books than simply generating income. The soft power of tourism was well understood by Boulger.

By an analysis of Demetrius Boulger's works on Belgium this chapter has highlighted the many, and sometimes unexpected, ways of how empire impacted upon the world of travel. Whereas often empire was the channel through which tourism moved from being a largely European phenomenon to a global one, this geographic expansion of the tourist world was not the only way 'empire' and 'tourism' were interlinked. As this chapter has demonstrated, Congo also heavily influenced the British views and travel to Belgium. 'Empire' is about more than adding new tourist destinations to the map. It also fundamentally changed a well established tourist tradition within Europe.

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