

BOOK REVIEW

Returning Benin Treasures

Docherty, P. *Blood and Bronze: The British Empire and the Sack of Benin*, Hurst & Co. London, 2021. 216 pp main.

Hicks, Dan (2020). *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution*, Pluto Press. 242pp.

Phillips, B. *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, Oneworld, London, 2021. 293 pp main, 306 pb.

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ABSTRACT

The book review is of three new titles dealing with the Benin expedition of 1897 that looted the city, and the growing movement to return the Benin cultural objects to Benin.

KEYWORDS: Benin looting, Benin expedition 1897, returning cultural objects

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'You wait ages for a bus, and then three come along at once'. This is what Londoners used to say in the days before buses had satellite navigation technology. Now we have within the space of a year three new books about the Benin bronzes and the infamous 1897 expedition that looted them as well as destroying the city. The Benin art-works have become emblematic touchstones in the debate about colonial-looted objects, because of their quality as great cultural treasures and because of the shocking way they were taken. They remain the most iconic arguments for return to the culture which produced them and was abused, and these books all argue unequivocally in favour of returning them to the culture that made them. As the final sentence in Docherty's book puts it: 'The Benin Bronzes must be returned as a moral necessity; everyone would gain from an injustice being put right'.

The three books have inevitable overlaps, particularly in the narrative of the 1897 massacre and expedition, but they complement each other well, and are well researched and illustrated, and readable. The authors' different approaches and strengths make for a varied treatment. Dan Hicks is museum curator of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and from a museologist's approach develops a sophisticated argument for return (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010). Barnaby Phillips (no relative of the James Phillips whose death triggered the 1897 expedition) is a former journalist with wide African experience and connections, now working with an elephant conservation charity. He knows Nigeria better than the other two, has already published a book on a Nigerian theme, and has a journalist's ability to sniff out a newsworthy story and tell it with empathy and an accessible style (Phillips 2014). Paddy Docherty is a historian of empire, with 'a particular interest in the British Empire, anti-colonial resistance, and the cultural impact of imperialism', his first book having been about the Khyber Pass. His book is mostly a forensic textual analysis of the official correspondence and records on Benin in the UK National Archives at Kew, exploring their obfuscated meanings, and he revels in 'the joy of chancing upon a crucially illuminating fact or a documentary gem, a diamond of insight or wit among the raw rock and soil of daily bureaucratic spadework that the files typically contain (Docherty 2007).

Dan Hicks deploys some imaginative chapter headings for his arguments. His chapter 5 'World War Zero' borrows from numbering conventions in computer technology (original version .0, subsequent updates .1, .2 etc). It presents the years 1884-1914, between the Berlin conference that began the 'scramble for Africa' and the outbreak of World War One, as being the 'periodic removal of kings, armies and indeed whole human landscapes of towns and villages' (p13). The first half of Docherty's book investigates the role in these activities of Claude MacDonald, an imperial soldier-administrator whose years (1890-96) in the Niger Coast Protectorate won him a knighthood and promotion to the diplomatic service. His polite and beautifully written letters to his Foreign Office superiors in London got approval to threaten the local peoples with wholesale violence. He was an expert in 'divide & rule' strategy, rewarding one local group over another, inserting his protectorate into local disputes, and calling up gunboats and his constabulary to bombard and machine-gun any opposition. 'Corporate-militarist colonialism' (chapter 6) is Hicks' term for the aggressive British policies to 'open up' and 'pacify' the West African interior for British trade and resource exploitation. Chapter 7 ('War on Terror') might have been better headed 'Shock and Awe',

another slogan of the post-9/11 world. Hicks (pp.95-97) also links the Benin episode with the first mention of the geographical term 'Nigeria'. It was in a newspaper article to justify 'a major colonial corporate operation' against Benin, and was written by Flora Shaw, later married to Lord Lugard, who in 1914 became Governor-General of the amalgamated colonies of Northern and Southern Nigeria.

The result of these manoeuvrings was what Hicks calls an act of 'democide' in the title of his chapter 10. Originating with American political scientist R.J. Rummel, the term is defined as mass murder by government, which surpassed war as the leading cause of non-natural death during the 20th century (Harff 1996). During 'World War Zero' the Niger Coast Protectorate, which in 1900 was renamed the Southern Nigeria colony, mounted annual punitive expeditions that claimed to 'pacify' the territory, but did not bother to report the numbers of those they killed, probably running to many thousands. The Benin expedition deployed naval warships from both the Cape of Good Hope and the Mediterranean stations to exert overwhelming force, and used Maxim guns, indiscriminate volley fire and explosives to inflict maximum damage, casualties, and demoralisation.

Hicks' chapter 12 introduces the term necrology (the study of the phenomena of death), borrowed from medical and forensic science, to treat the forced removal of cultural objects as a kind of death, and necropolitics as the politics of who lives and who dies (Mbembe 2019). The physical remains of the dead may be preserved in community memory and ritual, in Africa and in Europe. The severed head of Simon Sudbury (Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England, killed in the 1381 Peasants' Revolt) is still preserved in his birthplace of Sudbury, and in 2011 was CT scanned to make a computerised facial reconstruction of how he appeared in life.¹ In an extreme example of collective remembrance, the dried skin of Bragadino, the Venetian commander in Cyprus flayed to death by the Turkish conquerors in 1571, was recovered and is still preserved in a bronze reliquary urn fixed to a church wall in Venice (Madden 2012). The British occupiers of Benin might have expressed horror over the severed heads of white captives from the earlier massacre, yet European history has many examples of severed heads as displays of power: the gory history of the Tudors, the execution of King Charles in 1649, and public display of the heads of regicides after restoration of the monarchy in 1660. When Kitchener desecrated the Mahdi's tomb after the Battle of Omdurman, and took the skull as a trophy of war, he later apologised to Queen Victoria, but not to the Sudanese people, whose religious leader the Mahdi had been.

Phillips (in his chapters 'See how their families fared' and 'Family secrets') and Hicks track the looting of Benin objects through the individuals who took them: 'calling up their ghosts so we can start better to understand what spoils they left behind and where' (Hicks, p155). Hicks has assembled five appendices of world-wide locations of Benin plaques looted in 1897, and Benin holdings of museums, galleries, and collections, including in the two Pitt Rivers Museums. His last chapter ('Ten Thousand Unfinished Events') suggests that the number of objects, while ascertainable only by guesswork after so many years, could be far higher than Dark's estimate from 1982 of four thousand (Dark 1982).

In his book on the 1897 Benin massacre which he had survived, Boisragon, commandant of the protectorate constabulary, justified what he believed was 'the glorious work of rescuing the native races in West Africa from the horrors of human sacrifice, cannibalism, and the tortures of fetish worship' (Boisragon 1897). Thus mass killing, destruction and looting came to be seen as just punishment for their barbarism. As an Oxford professor, an eminent historian of ancient Greek art long associated with the Ashmolean Museum, recently put it: 'With the Benin bronzes, the rape proved to be a rescue' (quoted in Hicks, p.195). Keeping the artworks could be defended by the motto 'give it back, and it'll only be stolen'. When General Gowon, then head of Nigeria's military government, removed a Benin bronze head from the National Museum in Lagos and presented it to Queen Elizabeth II during his state visit to the UK in 1973, he was gifting part of Nigeria's national heritage to the country which had looted it; it remains in the royal collection, along with the famous carved ivory leopards given by Moor to Queen Victoria in 1897, now displayed in the British Museum but with little prospect of being returned. Meanwhile auction prices for Benin Bronzes have risen dramatically over a century: the record price so far is £10 million (in 2016 to a private buyer) but are now falling because of the stigma attached.

The 2002 self-serving Declaration of the Importance and Value of Universal Museums by 18 Western museums (all in Europe or North America) claimed that return of cultural objects acquired by purchase, gift, or partage (a system to divide ownership of excavated artifacts during the early 20th century - no mention of looting) would be a great loss to the world's cultural heritage, because they have become part of the museums that have cared for them, and by extension part of the heritage of the nations which house them. This idea of a universal museum of 'world culture' obscures how colonial acquisition asserts the universality and superiority of Western knowledge. Black students, especially in the era of 'Rhodes Must Fall' and 'Black Lives Matter, increasingly point out that 'permanent' gallery displays of looted material are an 'open glorification of the racist and bloody project of British colonialism'(McGonnell, S. 2021). Museums have debts for things that were taken, and curators can learn from forensic science their ethical duties to those who live with the ongoing effects of killing, destruction and loss. Hicks uses the Benin objects in the two Pitt-Rivers Museums to show how European museums 'in acquiring military loot from Africa, became weapons in their own right' (p165), disregarding the diverse communities they serve. In 2020 the Pitt Rivers Museum accordingly removed from display on its permanent galleries some of its collection of shrunken human heads (these not from Benin) and engaged with its colonial legacy by including stories from indigenous peoples.

The climate of opinion has been changing, with Docherty in *Blood and Bronze* stating his wish to confront 'the imperial nostalgia that still ruins our national thinking about our place in the world' (p.216). When key stage 2 of the new national history curriculum for British schools required after 1991 a case study of 'a non-European society that provides contrasts with British history', one of the three options was Benin (in the period 900-1300), which was understandably popular to restore pride and respect with pupils of African descent (Dept for Education 2014, Forson 2015). The legacy of the slave trade and slave

ownership in Britain and elsewhere is being acknowledged, and calls grow for some form of reparations for historical wrongs by colonialists. Britain's Conservative government, however, continues to talk about 'culture wars' and 'woke' culture, and has increased penalties against damage or desecration of memorials, particularly following the overthrow of the Colston slave-owner statue in Bristol (Hall 2016, Kwoba and Nkopo 2018).

Several Benin bronzes have been voluntarily returned to the city within the last decade, from a growing sense of moral responsibility by those who were holding them. Phillips gives vivid accounts of the associated celebrations: he devotes a chapter to the story of Dr. Mark Walker in 2014 voluntarily travelling to Benin to hand back his grandfather's bronze bell and bird looted in 1897 and being met with overwhelming gratitude ('the shine in people's eyes'). Phillips also recounts in an afterword for the updated paperback edition two handovers in 2021: of the famous bronze cockerel held by Jesus College, Cambridge (after the initiative of its Master, the first black woman to head an Oxbridge college, and of Aberdeen University's bronze Oba's head. France and Germany are also beginning to return some of their collections (Paquette 2020). The Benin Dialogue Group now exists as an international collaborative working group with representation from Western museums, the Nigerian Government, its National Commission for Museums and Monuments and the Benin royal court. The British Museum's position is increasingly isolated, handicapped by its relationship with a British government that leaves decisions on return to it while mentioning its dependence upon government money. Barnaby Phillips gives the most space to current Nigerian voices on these on-going issues of restitution, and the difficult negotiations around an appropriate African home for the Benin bronzes in the future.

Museums and researchers can contribute to building a body of knowledge and understanding on these complex matters. Not only do African museums hold few of its own cultural treasures, but African voices and philosophies remain under-represented in heritage debates around the world. The strong oral history tradition of Benin has received limited attention since the days of Chief Egharevba, and it is possible that both individual and collective memories (family and community) may still be recoverable. In Britain regimental army museums fulfil a similar function, preserving campaign medals (such as the West Africa medal and clasps, created in 1892). Archaeology may be able to contribute, since Connah's pioneering work on the Benin walls in the 1960s (Connah 1975, Hicks and Beaudry 2006). The British in 1897 destroyed the Oba's palace compounds and those of senior chiefs (according to the British 'fetish priests'), but physical evidence may still remain under-ground, and in other sites of destruction such as Akassa, Brohimi, and Opobo, although there are security and environmental degradation issues for fieldwork in the oil rich delta. Burial grounds in many places have become sites of conscience, such as the Newton enslaved burial ground which formed part of Barbados' bid on the UNESCO tentative list for World Heritage status (Schroeder and Shuler 2006). Since 1999 the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience has sought to provide physical spaces for traumatic memories, connecting the past with contemporary human rights issues, and Hicks argues in his discussion of the Pitt Rivers Museum collections that Western museums should also be seen as sites of conscience and remembrance. ⁱⁱ

Finally, this reviewer declares a personal interest, being the author of yet another book on Benin, published forty years ago by an obscure publishing house specialising in Africa, and now long out of print (Home, R. 1982). As an adolescent living with my father in Benin City soon after Nigeria independence, I became absorbed in the 1897 story. Those were the days when Graham Connah was excavating the Benin city walls, and Nigerian researchers of the Ibadan history school were active, especially Philip Igbafe and Obaro Ikime (Ikime 1969, Igbafe 1970). I was able to interview about a dozen 1897 survivors still alive - Edo chiefs and retired naval officers in Britain, all willing to share their reminiscences in old age. Admiral Brian Egerton, son of Rawson's chief of staff named as one of Hicks' looters, loaned me a shoebox with revealing private papers on the expedition. Although I never got any royalties, and the publisher later went bust, I don't regret my venture into African history, and the book is recommended reading for Key stage 2 of the History school syllabus and cited by Phillips as 'still a refreshing and balanced read forty years on', and by Hicks as 'revisionist history', correcting the contemporary accounts of Boisragon and Bacon (Bacon 1897).

(This review article was finished on the 125th anniversary of the fall of Benin, 18 February 2022)

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ⁱ <https://www.stgregorychurchsudbury.co.uk/history/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.coalition@sitesofconscience.org>.