

# BOEKBESPREKINGS

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **THE RULERS OF GERMAN AFRICA 1884-1914 By L.H. Gann and Peter Duignan**

This book is described by the authors in their preface as 'the first in a multi-volume work designed to elucidate the sociological and functional characteristics, the achievements as well as the shortcomings, of the white empire builders, civilian and military, during the age of the 'New Imperialism' in Africa.'

Certainly an attempt at such a challenging theme is to be welcomed by scholars of African history. Yet the authors also use the preface to qualify their somewhat grandiose scheme. They indicate that the book is largely based on published sources, and on case histories rather than exhaustive original research, and that this remains an interpretative study rather than a definitive analysis of the Germans, administrative and military impact on the varied regions which comprised their African empire.

In fact this qualification proves to be a somewhat limiting one. For the most part the focus is very steadily on the Europeans who ruled and settled Africa for Germany. Certainly several unexpected characters emerge, not least Heinrich Schnee, sometime Governor of German East Africa and known to most South African military historians merely from the scathing, and apparently misleading, comments of von Lettow-Vorbeck. The latter, it comes as little surprise, is portrayed less than heroically in Schnee's own papers as a ...'brilliant soldier but also a ruthless egocentric and a 'psychological sadist' who took pleasure in bullying his immediate subordinates.'

Despite the attention paid to individual case histories, however, the authors appear to have had great difficulty in producing any sort of positive synthesis, although bold generalised statements

and judgments are not lacking, as for example in the attack on the Arendt-Bley thesis about the relationships between imperial overlordship and totalitarianism. More sweeping, and with less support, is the authors' attempt to weigh the progressive function of colonialism against the undoubted brutality of much of the German rule in Africa. It is strange in this day and age to see such an assessment attempted with so little attention to the work already done on African societies and their reaction to conquest.

This is not to say that the indigenous peoples are totally ignored in this work. For example, the observations made about the role of the mercenary in East African society indicate a profitable field for further study - particularly in the light of the military's present pre-eminence in African politics.

This sort of observation and the challenging generalisation of the book itself probably provide its greatest value, as a work which will provide a basis for further research and which will probably provoke quite an amount of serious criticism and for all its shortcomings, this work will certainly become required reading for any student of Germany's Empire, for the multifarious facts it contains. It is a great pity therefore that the authors have not seen fit to include a bibliography, and that such meagre footnotes have been provided.

It is evident too that the difficulties of organising material about different types of German official or settler in different types of colonial environment, in different periods of colonial history have proved almost insuperable. As a result the book is somewhat fragmentary and the reader is left with no clear picture even of the rulers of German Africa.

**Richard Cornwell.**