

REVIEW - COMPTE RENDU

WIT-ZWART IN ZWART-WIT. SAMEN EN TOCH APART: FOTO'S EN VERHALEN UIT BELGISCH-CONGO

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Black lives matter, and Belgian king Leopold II and his red rubber past in our former colony, the Belgian Congo: for some these topics are simply *faits divers*, for others they are a matter of life and death. In the same context, and in the wake of the recent discussion on these burning issues, the Flemish author Jef Geeraerts' 'masterpiece' *Gangreen 1 – Black Venus* was removed from the Flemish literature 'canon' that lists the books every citizen should read. *Black Venus* was – condemned (in my opinion rightly) for its sexist and racist content that on publication shocked many, only later to be heralded as groundbreaking partly because it was perceived to be doing away with a number of dogmas and sacred cows.

The three illustrate the recent interest in, and activist interventions against, recurrent and lingering signs of racism, emphasis on (white) identity and supremacy, and the discussions between opposing parties.

The book we review here provides a very well-documented insight into the zeitgeist of the Belgian Congo, a colony more than



50 times the size of Belgium that was 'given' (rather than sold) to the Belgian state in 1908 by the then king, and the colony's previous owner, Leopold II.

The title reads White (and) Black in Black (and) White, and the book presents, discusses and puts into perspective 150 black-and-white pictures from the colonial period that feature at least one white and

one black person – in only a few exceptions do pictures show black people only. The pictures illustrate the sometimes (c) rude reality of how the Belgians ran their colony. The cover image shows that not all white people seemed to be aware of what they were actually bringing about or inflicting: two white children sit next to a large bird cage in which a black child sits. An innocent scene it might seem, but also a hard illustration of the fact that most were unaware of what their attitude and disposition were inflicting. The book is full of pictures that in another era would only document how life evolved in the colony and how it was run. It shows scenes of family life, the military-at-work, missionaries, etc. – all pictures are grouped thematically, which helps to build a story

within the book. Seen with our present-day eyes, and with what we now know, many of the images are deeply disturbing, and basically so ‘wrong’ ! However, this is now, and the pictures were taken ‘then’. So, our vision and interpretation should still remain nuanced. As such, the pictures invite the viewer and reader to reflect, not forget.

I warmly recommend this book which has pictures with multiple layers of meaning and significance I hope there will soon be an English version available, but for the time being I think that we can let the pictures speak for themselves...

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