

***Blood and Bronze* as history in public
discourse: a critical analysis**

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ABSTRACT

The continued presence of the Benin Bronzes in London and other cities of the rich world remains controversial and contested, arguably in large part due to the absence of an authoritative account of the 1897 British invasion of Benin, when they were taken as booty. The author's recent book *Blood and Bronze: the British Empire & the Sack of Benin* (Hurst & Co, 2021) set out to rectify that deficit and to contribute to the active public discourse surrounding the artworks and closely related issues of the representation of colonial history. Based on extensive new research in the National Archives, the book aimed at combining rigorous historical methodology with public accessibility.

This critical analysis first examines the context of museum politics and the repatriation debate, showing how the Bronzes have assumed an ideological role since their arrival in Britain. It then considers the historiography of the 1897 invasion, and highlights some of the problems arising from the lack of a definitive account, including the misrepresentation of historical events even in recent official statements. The book is then assessed in light of the existing historiographical deficits, and it is argued that it has successfully filled the gap, as well as making a series of additional archival discoveries and reinterpretations of events; these include new material concerning the brutal wrongdoing of Consul George Annesley in Old Calabar, the mechanics of imperial power in the Niger Delta, the neglected West African career of Major Sir Claude MacDonald, and several other issues. The academic and public reception of *Blood and Bronze* is then summarised, before some consideration of possible textual development (including a comic book adaptation) and future research areas. This critical analysis concludes by submitting that *Blood and Bronze* can serve as an authoritative account of the British invasion of Benin.

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Introduction

The Benin Bronzes have long generated controversy and disagreement, due to the nature of their removal from West Africa and their continued exhibition in London and other cities of the rich world; this contested status may arise in large part – as this paper will suggest – from the lack of an authoritative account of the history of the British invasion of the Kingdom of Benin in 1897, when the artworks were plundered. The present author's recent book *Blood and Bronze: the British Empire & the Sack of Benin* (Hurst & Co, December 2021) was designed to rectify that deficit; this critical analysis will examine the book in the context of both the active public discourse surrounding the ownership and display of the Benin Bronzes themselves, and the current state of historiography on Benin and the events of 1897.

The basic fact behind the presence of the Bronzes outside what is now Nigeria is not disputed: the remarkable cultural treasures were seized by British forces in an act of colonial violence in February 1897, and removed to Europe as booty. From universal acceptance of this essential point, however, the scholarly shortfall has allowed numerous competing claims and assertions to be made about the ethical grounds for what was labelled by Britain the 'Benin Punitive Expedition', and thus the moral and legal basis for the continuing presence of the artworks in foreign museums and private collections. These issues remain highly pertinent and actively contested, drawing attention to questions of intellectual framing and curatorial presentation quite separate from the historical facts.

The research for *Blood and Bronze* therefore led the author beyond the narrow issue of the events of the 1897 invasion, demanding a wider consideration of representations of the British Empire and of Africa, the politics of curating colonial-era collections, and the museum as a site of myth production and discursive formation. This generative evolution in the work process suggested new areas of research and additional possibilities for utilising the text of the book.

This paper thus places a work of history into the context of the material remains of empire that prompted its research and production. In doing so, it raises the question of the capacity of the book to reduce the scope for future contestation of the issues surrounding the ownership and presentation of the Benin Bronzes.

1. The current context: museum politics and repatriations

...the historicity of the human condition also requires that practices of power and domination be renewed. It is that renewal that should concern us most.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 1995

Recent protest movements such as the “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign have served to highlight the contested status of the history of the British Empire, even if progressive energies are still somewhat marginalised (the figure of Cecil Rhodes remains on the façade of Oriel College in Oxford, despite the statue at the University of Cape Town being swiftly removed in 2015).¹ The reluctance of financial and institutional vested interests to wholly embrace a revisionist approach (and the reparative consequences that would naturally follow) is arguably explained by the profound implications in view, reaching far beyond the question of a handful of monuments to imperial figures. The decentralised “Black Lives Matter” activism has, from its beginnings in 2013, critiqued the structural racism embedded throughout Western society and has grown into a significant global movement.²

These popular instances of disquiet are effectively the public manifestations of a substantial body of scholarship on what Priyamvada Gopal has labelled the “ongoing historical amnesia” in mainstream discourse on the history of the British Empire and other imperial formations.³ One of the landmark texts in this area is Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past*, in which he explores the suppression of the story of the Haitian Revolution of 1791 in order to examine the power inherent in the production of historical narratives and the capacity to deny them.⁴ With these processes in mind, a survey of the academic literature shows that the museum is a key site for the production of both historical narrative and myth, during the colonial period and in our own time; the continuing involvement of major institutions in reinforcing imperial narratives is a major point of contention.

In the British context, it was the South Kensington Museum – renamed in 1899 as the Victoria and Albert Museum – that was most directly embedded in the cultural representation of Victorian imperialism.⁵ From its foundation in 1857, this institution both echoed and helped shape the general trend towards a more populist imperialism in the later nineteenth century, regularly mounting overtly political exhibitions such as the display of the vestments of the defeated Emperor Theodore of Abyssinia in 1867 after his capital was seized by a British army, and of the numerous

¹ “Cheers and protests as University of Cape Town removes Cecil Rhodes statue”, *The Guardian*, April 9th 2015.

² “Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S.”, *The New York Times*, July 3rd 2020.

³ Priyamvada Gopal, “Redressing anti-imperial amnesia”, *Race & Class*, Vol 57, No 3, 2016.

⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, 1995.

⁵ Tim Barringer, “The South Kensington Museum and the colonial project”, Chapter 2 in Tom Flynn and Tim Barringer (eds), *Colonialism and the object: empire, material culture and the museum*, Routledge, 1998.

gifts received from Indian princes by the Prince of Wales during his visit to India in 1876.⁶

Explicit political campaigning through museum display was not limited to the nineteenth century, but has been seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum in recent decades, as discussed by Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo in their analysis of the heritage debates of the mid-1970s to the early 1990s.⁷ They cite the “notoriously polemical” V&A exhibition “The Destruction of the Country House 1875-1975” in 1974, which was later revealed to be a direct response to the attempt by a Labour government to introduce a wealth tax in the same year. More broadly, in his book *On Living in an Old Country*, Patrick Wright has charted the way in which an informal alliance of anxious aristocratic and aspirational middle class interests employed imperial heritage to shore up its power.⁸

Annie Coombes has also done extensive work on the use of the Benin Bronzes in politicised representations of Africa, in which she has highlighted the way in which the local and national museum – especially during the stringent economic cutbacks of the 1980s – were frequently used as a “site for the nostalgic manufacture of a consensual past in the lived reality of a deeply divided present”.⁹ Coombes looks at the complex trajectory of the Benin Bronzes within the British Museum, and explores the ways in which they became entangled in questions of taxonomy, disciplinary boundaries, cultural value and national identity. In her reading, the British Museum display of the Benin Bronzes has – from as early as September 1897 – played a politicised role in the representation of Africa to the British public, and thus the role of the British Empire on the continent.

An important implication emerges from Coombes’ analysis: she shows that the Benin Bronzes have always been hostage to political considerations that are unrelated to the artworks themselves or to the immediate issues connected to their origins and looting; with the invasion of Benin and the arrival of the Bronzes in London happening to come at a time when the new discipline of anthropology was striving to establish itself, both the incident and the artworks became the perfect vehicles for British anthropologists in their effort to achieve academic validation and state support.¹⁰ Moreover, the debate over the origins of the Bronzes – whether they were created by outsiders (Egyptians, Portuguese) or in fact made by Edo artisans – was subordinated to the politics of the discipline of ethnography within the British Museum. Charles Read and Ormonde Dalton, the curators handling the Bronzes in London, saw the identification of an African origin for the remarkable new works as

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jo Littler and Roshi Naidoo, “White Past, Multicultural Present: Heritage and National Stories”, Chapter 26 in Helen Brocklehurst and Robert Phillips (eds), *History, Nationhood and the Question of Britain*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

⁸ Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: the National Past in Contemporary Britain*, Verso, 1985.

⁹ Annie Coombes, “Ethnography, Popular Culture, and Institutional Power: Narratives of Benin Culture in the British Museum, 1897-1992”, *Studies in the History of Art*, No 47, 1996.

¹⁰ Ibid.

a viable strategy for bolstering the claim for a new ethnographic department within the Museum, and for increased government funding to the wider institution.

This previous history takes on a new import at a time when the Benin Bronzes have become one of the flashpoints in the “culture wars” of the present era of Brexit, economic decline, and creeping authoritarianism. The continuity also emphasises the fact of the continuing harm being done to Nigeria and Nigerians by loss of the Bronzes. Peju Layiwola of the Department of Creative Arts at the University of Lagos has written of the ongoing negative impact of the theft of the treasures, and the numerous artistic expressions of loss and desire for repatriation, in sculpture, music, painting, performance art, cartoons, installations and new media, in Nigeria and elsewhere.¹¹

The obverse of this impulse raises a darker possibility about the continuing British ownership of the Benin Bronzes and their display in London and elsewhere. In his work on the South Kensington Museum, Tim Barringer writes of the plaster cast of the Eastern Gateway of the Great Stupa at Sanchi in India, which was placed on display in the new ‘Architectural Courts’ in 1873:

“Their political significance was unmistakable: the monument was situated in British India, rediscovered, excavated, photographed and published by officers of the British army; the South Kensington cast was proudly displayed at the imperial centre as a symbol of responsible British custodianship of, and authority over, Indian history and culture.”¹²

We can be certain (not least from the work of Annie Coombes¹³) that – relocated to Africa – this also describes the motives and mindset behind the original presentation and discussion of the Benin Bronzes in the wake of the conquest of the Kingdom of Benin; should we thus be asking the troubling question of whether some of the individuals and entities currently arguing against repatriation continue to value the display of power that the ongoing exhibition of the Bronzes in London represents? As Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, “practices of power and domination” must be renewed:

“Power does not enter the story once and for all, but at different times and from different angles. It precedes the narrative proper, contributes to its creation and to its interpretation.”¹⁴

¹¹ Peju Layiwola, “Making Meaning from a Fragmented Past: 1897 and the Creative Process”, *Open Arts Journal*, No 3, Summer 2014.

¹² Tim Barringer, “The South Kensington Museum and the colonial project”, Chapter 2 in Tom Flynn and Tim Barringer (eds), *Colonialism and the object: empire, material culture and the museum*, Routledge, 1998.

¹³ Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Yale University Press, 1994.

¹⁴ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Beacon Press, 1995, pp. 151 and 28-29.

Given that (at least some) Nigerians today experience the loss of the Bronzes as *violence*, what should we conclude about the political purposes of their retention? Important to such consideration is the growing body of work on establishing legal and philosophical grounds for the existence of trans-generational historical obligations that create requirements for reparative action in cases of past wrongdoing.¹⁵

Such developments in thinking have combined with vigorous activism for the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes to bring real progress to the campaign. Most powerfully, in 2018 the German Museum Association published *Guidelines on Dealing with Collections from Colonial Contexts*, which was followed in 2021 by a commitment from the Humboldt Forum to return its entire Benin collection to Nigeria.¹⁶ Returns of pieces from Germany to Nigeria have since begun.¹⁷ Advances have been made in the United Kingdom as well, with the Horniman Museum announcing the repatriation of its collection of 72 Benin pieces.¹⁸ Additionally, a number of individuals and institutions such as Aberdeen University have returned small collections or single pieces, and the Smithsonian Institution in the United States has announced the return of its Benin collection to Nigeria.¹⁹ Amid this good record of progress, however, the British Museum remains a holdout for retention.

¹⁵ For example, Janna Thompson, *Taking Responsibility for the Past: Reparation and Historical Justice*, Polity Press/Blackwell Publishers, 2002; Geoffrey Robertson QC, *Who Owns History? Elgin's Loot and the Case for Returning Plundered Treasure*, Biteback Publishing, 2019; Charlotte Joy, *Heritage Justice: Elements in Critical Heritage Studies*, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

¹⁶ "Berlin's plan to return Benin bronzes piles pressure on UK", *The Guardian*, March 23rd 2021.

¹⁷ "Germany returns 21 Benin bronzes to Nigeria – amid frustration at Britain", *The Guardian*, December 20th 2022.

¹⁸ "London's Horniman Museum returns looted Benin Bronzes", *Evening Standard*, November 29th 2022.

¹⁹ Victoria Reed, "American Museums and Colonial-Era Provenance: A Proposal", *International Journal of Cultural Property*, 1-21, 2023.

2. Historiography of the 1897 invasion of Benin

Although the Benin Bronzes themselves immediately attracted great scholarly interest and numerous academic studies in the wake of their arrival in Europe,²⁰ the history of the 'Benin Punitive Expedition' that seized them has been comparatively neglected. Following swiftly on the events in Africa, two accounts by participants were published. Captain Alan Boisragon had accompanied Acting Consul General Phillips on his unauthorised mission to Benin City in early 1897 and was one of the only two European members of the party to survive the ambush by Edo forces; he gave his version of the attack and his escape, along with a summary of the later invasion in which he did not take part, in *The Benin Massacre* (Methuen, 1897). Commander Reginald Bacon served as intelligence officer of the invasion force, and published *Benin: The City of Blood* (Edward Arnold, 1897) shortly after the campaign was over. The latter book, in particular, is highly partial and notably racist, but in the absence of any other account of the expedition for an extended period, it acquired a certain authority that has persisted even into the present day.

For many decades after the invasion, the focus of study respecting Benin remained in the spheres of art and ethnography, and no complete assessment of the events of 1897 was published. The most valuable work on the British annexation of Benin during this time was carried out by the 'Ibadan School' historians, based around the University of Ibadan and the *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* from the 1950s into the 1980s; the scholarly output of such leading figures of this group as Kenneth O. Dike²¹, Obaro Ikime²², J. C. Anene²³, and Philip Igbofe²⁴ served especially to place events in Benin into the wider context of the British occupation of what is now Nigeria as a whole. Thus, for example, "The Fall of Benin" features as a 15-page

²⁰ Of numerous early examples in English and (especially) German, the most prominent are: Charles Read and Ormonde Dalton, "Works of Art from Benin City", *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, No 27, January 1898; --, *Antiquities from the City of Benin and Other Parts of West Africa in the British Museum*, British Museum Press, 1899; Felix von Luschan, "Altertümer von Benin", *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, No 30, 1898; --, "Über die Alten Handelsbeziehungen von Benin", *Verhandlungen des VII. Internationalen Geographischen Kongresses Berlin*, 1899; --, "Bruchstück einer Beninplatte", *Globus*, No 78, 1900; --, *Die Altertümer von Benin*, De Gruyter, 1919; Karl Hagen, *Altertümer von Benin im Museum für Völkerkunde zu Hamburg: Teil 1*, 1900; Otto Stoll, "Zur Frage der Benin-Altertümer", *Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*, No 15, 1902; Henry Ling Roth, *Great Benin: Its Customs, Art and Horrors*, 1903.

²¹ Kenneth O. Dike, *Trade and Politics in the Niger Delta 1830-1885*, 1956; *A Hundred Years of British Rule in Nigeria*, 1957.

²² Obaro Ikime, "Colonial Conquest and Resistance in Southern Nigeria", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol 6, No 3, December 1972; "Chief Dogho: the Lugardian System in Warri 1917-1932", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol 3, No 2, December 1965; "The British in Bauchi, 1901-1908: An Episode in the British Occupation and Control of Northern Nigeria", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol 7, No 2, June 1974.

²³ J. C. Anene, "The Foundations of British Rule in 'Southern Nigeria' (1885-1891)", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol 1, No 4, December 1959; "The Protectorate Government of Southern Nigeria and the Aros 1900-1902", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol 1, No 1, December 1956.

²⁴ Philip Igbofe, "British Rule in Benin 1897-1920: Direct or Indirect?", *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, Vol 3, No 4, June 1967; "Slavery and Emancipation in Benin, 1897-1945", *The Journal of African History*, Vol 16, No 3, January 1975.

chapter in Obaro Ikime's book *The Fall of Nigeria: the British Conquest* (Heinemann, 1977), alongside lengthier treatment of the rest of the country. As Nigerians operating on home territory, the Ibadan School scholars possessed several obvious advantages in researching the early history of Nigeria, including ready access to the series of national archives established following independence in 1960, familiarity with oral material, language expertise, depth of cultural knowledge of the complex societies that make up the country, and so on. For these reasons, the Ibadan School body of work on the British occupation of Nigeria remains an essential resource, and was extensively consulted in the research for *Blood and Bronze*.

Despite this valuable Nigerian record, it was a young British scholar, Robert Home, who published the first book-length treatment of the 1897 invasion: *City of Blood Revisited: a new look at the Benin expedition of 1897* (Rex Collings Ltd, 1982). A serious work of history, this is based upon original documentary research in the Nigerian National Archives (Ibadan), the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, the National Army Museum in Chelsea and various collections of private papers, as well as newspaper archives and printed materials. It is not entirely free of errors of fact and judgement and is relatively slim at 124 pages, but does offer a full account of the British expedition against Benin and includes some valuable photographs. The biggest weakness of the book, however, is that it does not include any footnotes, which alone significantly diminishes its academic value.²⁵ Moreover, it has been out of print since shortly after publication²⁶ and is not easy to source.²⁷

In a striking measure of the growing public interest in the Benin Bronzes and the repatriation issue, this long period of relative historiographical neglect of the 1897 invasion was brought to a sudden end in 2020-21 with the near-simultaneous publication of fully three books bearing on the British attack on the Kingdom of Benin and the subsequent fate of the Bronzes: besides *Blood and Bronze* as under consideration here, this period saw the publication of *The Brutish Museums* by Dan Hicks²⁸, and *Loot* by Barnaby Phillips.²⁹

Dan Hicks is a professor of contemporary archaeology at Oxford University and a curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum, which itself holds a significant collection of Benin pieces; his focus is on placing the history of the British invasion of Benin into a theorised consideration of the curating challenge and the repatriation debate. The intention is to place the Benin Bronzes within a broader historical framework to more fully understand how the British 'acquired' the pieces, and how this process was understood by contemporaries.

²⁵ In personal communications with the author (meeting in London, May 16th 2023 and email, July 12th 2023), Robert Home stated that he did not include footnotes because the publishing company did not require them on grounds of cost, and because he was not planning at the time to enter academe.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ The author was able to secure a used copy from the United States only at a cost of £120 plus postage from California.

²⁸ Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, Pluto Press, 2020.

²⁹ Barnaby Phillips, *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes*, Oneworld Publications, 2021.

Hicks has written in a polemical style, which at times becomes directly confrontational respecting the curating status quo and present museum hierarchies, and, as one academic reviewer noted, the book “has made a splash”.³⁰ He makes an impassioned demand for comprehensive return of all Benin treasures to Nigeria and for the recognition of past wrongdoing.

Barnaby Phillips is a journalist with extensive experience in Nigeria, and this is reflected in the method and final output of *Loot*; the book is based on secondary sources, author interviews, and newspaper reporting, with no use of the primary archive materials in the National Archives. Phillips is heavily reliant on some sources which are questionable, such as Jacob Egharevba (see below) and Henry Gallwey’s own account of his actions in the Benin District in the early 1890s. The value of *Loot* therefore lies especially in Phillips’ focus on the current debate surrounding the Benin Bronzes, in particular from the Nigerian perspective, and highlights an unexpectedly broad range of opinion on repatriation and restitution, garnered through a great many personal interviews. The historical chapters contain some errors of fact and interpretation, but these are comparatively minor and do not prevent the book being a useful volume overall.

In a sense, Phillips’ journalistic approach makes *Loot* a form of oral history, which is an interesting status in the context of Benin historiography given that before 1897 the kingdom was pre-literate and thus did not generate a written record that could be used by later historians. The oral record has therefore acquired a particular importance in reconstructing the history of Benin; the resulting archival asymmetry between the Kingdom of Benin and the British Empire (which had multiple layers of government each generating its own bureaucratic record) thus makes careful handling of the available written materials essential.

The oral history landscape for the Kingdom of Benin is dominated by the work of Chief Jacob Egharevba³¹, who published several books relating to Edo history, myth and culture in the middle of the twentieth century.³² Although there are some other sources of oral history on Benin (for example, the work of Professor Iro Eweka³³, as used in *Blood and Bronze*), Egharevba has achieved a ubiquity in Benin studies that somewhat obscures some serious problems with his methodology. Egharevba was not a trained historian and did not maintain any form of record of his sources, and nothing is known about his criteria of collection and use.³⁴ From his assembly of materials, Egharevba crafted a version of the long history of the Kingdom of Benin

³⁰ Elizabeth Marlowe, “Review of Dan Hicks, *The British Museums*”, *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol 28, 2021.

³¹ Stefan Eisenhofer, “The Origins of the Benin Kingship in the Works of Jacob Egharevba”, *History in Africa*, Vol 22, 1995.

³² The most widely available of Jacob Egharevba’s numerous books is *A Short History of Benin*, originally published in Ibadan in the Edo language in 1934 and in English in 1936. A new edition was published by the Ibadan University Press in 1968, increasing its impact and recognition.

³³ Iro Eweka, *Dawn to Dusk: Folk Tales from Benin*, Frank Cass, 1998.

³⁴ Eisenhofer, 1995.

that was appropriate to his era and social context, being himself from an Edo elite family.

As Stefan Eisenhofer has shown, in some instances it can be seen that Egharevba made significant unexplained changes to the factual record he presented even in different versions of the same book, as when “the Ogiso” changed from a single king (in *A Short History of Benin*, 1936) to a dynasty of twelve kings (in the second edition of *A Short History of Benin* in 1953).³⁵ For such reasons, Egharevba cannot be viewed as an authoritative source for Benin history, despite his continuing use in the dating of kings and dynasties.

Living under British colonial rule was an important factor also, as Egharevba felt compelled to bowdlerise Edo tales to render them more acceptable to imperial sensibilities.³⁶ Moreover, some of his works feature surprisingly ingratiating remarks about Britain and the British occupation of Benin. For example, in his short book *The Origin of Benin*, Egharevba makes the remarkable claim that the 1897 British invasion “has been a source of real blessing to the land”, as well as declaring that:

“I dare say that since the British Government’s occupation of our soil everything has changed for the better. And of all the leading governments of the day, the British government is the best of lots.”³⁷

Such obsequiousness must surely be interpreted as reflecting his delicate position as a member of the Edo elite under colonial rule and a corresponding desire to retain his social privilege in the difficult circumstances of alien domination; it must, however, diminish his usefulness as a source for the period of the British invasion and occupation (which is cursorily covered in *A Short History of Benin*).

As this brief survey has suggested, for over a century the historiography of the Kingdom of Benin suffered from the lack of an authoritative history of the 1897 invasion; in the following chapter, some consideration will be given to the impact of this absence in both academic and public discourse.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Paula Girshick Ben-Amos, *Art, Innovation and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Benin*, Indiana University Press, 1999.

³⁷ Jacob Egharevba, *The Origin of Benin*, 1954, pp. 21-22.

3. Epistemology and the absence of a definitive account

For anyone familiar with the documentary record for the events surrounding the British invasion of Benin, it swiftly becomes apparent that multiple tracings of errors of fact and interpretation can be found throughout both academic and public discourse. A comprehensive assessment of historiographical issues in the literature on 1897 and the Benin Bronzes is outside the scope of this paper, but a handful of examples are here given to illustrate the problems arising from the absence of an authoritative account of the British occupation of the kingdom.

As Annie Coombes has amply demonstrated, the epistemological defects began immediately after the 1897 military expedition, with the early use of the book by Commander Reginald Bacon as a reference in anthropological and ethnographical studies of Benin and its artworks.³⁸ In this way, Bacon's account came to be regarded as an ethnographic document despite the highly-coloured nature of his writing and his obvious racism. Coombes charts the transmission of material from Bacon into an article written by Henry Ogg Forbes for the official *Bulletin of the Liverpool Museums* in 1898, which drew heavily on Bacon, including via personal correspondence between Forbes and Bacon.³⁹ The prestigious journal *Nature* then published an article on the Liverpool collection of Benin pieces, which used much material from the Forbes piece and thus served further to validate both Forbes and Bacon as authoritative sources.

The paucity of published works on the events of the invasion itself (in contrast to the wealth of materials on the Bronzes and their cultural value) has also kept Bacon relevant into the present day, despite his deficiencies: even the recent revisionist books by Hicks, Phillips and the present author draw on Bacon to some modest degree. In addition, even though his own book is explicitly positioned as revising Bacon's highly partial publication, Home nonetheless describes *Benin: City of Blood* as a "sober account".⁴⁰

The epistemological dangers arising from the absence of an authoritative account of the invasion are, regrettably, not limited to the use of materials from the era: when liberties are taken with the historical record in new publications, the lack of a scholarly benchmark can be seen to allow factual inaccuracies to enter academic discourse. For example, in the review of *The Brutish Museums* cited above, the reviewer – Professor Elizabeth Marlowe of the Department of Art at Colgate University in the United States – has used over a page and a half of her piece to summarise Hicks' historical outline.⁴¹ In so doing, she has unwittingly included a

³⁸ Annie Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian England*, Yale University Press, 1994, p. 21.

³⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 24-25.

⁴⁰ Robert Home, *City of Blood Revisited: A new look at the Benin expedition of 1897*, Rex Collings Ltd, 1982, p. 99.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Marlowe, "Review of Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*", *International Journal of Cultural Property*, Vol 28, 2021; her précis of Hicks' history is on pp. 576-578.

number of errors of fact and interpretation around the Benin invasion in a refereed publication, the *International Journal of Cultural Property*. One example must suffice: she repeats Hicks' estimate that "tens of thousands" of Edo were killed by the British during the military occupation; this figure is undocumented in *The British Museums* and does not appear to be supported by any available documentary evidence, but this imaginary death toll can now be quoted as being found in a peer-reviewed journal.⁴²

This is not to criticise Professor Marlowe – her academic specialism is in art and critical museum theory, and she cannot be expected to have a working knowledge of the Foreign Office and Admiralty archives for West African military operations in 1897. Moreover, given that Hicks is a professor at Oxford University and that his book is professionally published as a work of history⁴³, it would seem reasonable for any non-specialist reader to assume that the contents are reliable. It is also interesting to note that when it comes to her home territory of curating practices and museology, Professor Marlowe *does* criticise Hicks, taking him to task for his dismissive attitude towards recent efforts to transform museum presentation of contested objects and for his apparent simplification of the ethical divide between "good guy" Nigerians and "bad guy" Westerners.

Arguably the most egregious example of poor Benin historiography entering the academic bloodstream, however, is the two-part special edition of *African Arts*, published in 1997 to coincide with the centenary of the invasion and a conference held in Benin City to both commemorate and study the events of 1897.⁴⁴ This publication is also peer-reviewed. After recounting the opening addresses made by the British High Commissioner and by Oba Erediauwa, the first article in the special issue is a piece by the archaeologist Professor Ekpo Eyo, evidently intended to lay the foundation for the conference with a historical introduction.⁴⁵ Published without footnotes or other references, there can be no certainty on the sources used by Professor Eyo, but his paper contains a significant number of errors of fact and interpretation, as can readily be shown by reference to the documents.

A full assessment cannot be attempted here, and two examples must suffice. Firstly, Professor Eyo claims that in November 1896 Acting Consul General Phillips informed the Foreign Office that he *already had* an armed force of 250 NCPF soldiers, two 7-pdr guns, one Maxim gun, one rocket apparatus and a detachment of 150 Hausas from Lagos, whereas in fact this force was what Phillips said that he *would need*; it was the inability of the Colonial Office to commit the requested 150 Hausa

⁴² This issue of Hicks' alleged "tens of thousands" of Edo dead is a particular focus of Dr Lundén in his forthcoming article, in which he seeks to assemble all available information on Edo casualties for a detailed comparison.

⁴³ On the rear cover of the paperback version of *The British Museums* (2021), Pluto Press have categorised the book as "POLITICS/HISTORY".

⁴⁴ *African Arts*, Vol 30, No 3, *Special Issue: The Benin Centenary*, Part 1, Summer 1997; *African Arts*, Vol 30, No 4, *Special Issue: The Benin Centenary*, Part 2, Autumn 1997.

⁴⁵ Ekpo Eyo, "The Dialectics of Definitions: 'Massacre' and 'Sack' in the History of the Punitive Expedition", *African Arts*, Vol 30, No 3, *Special Issue: The Benin Centenary*, Part 1, Summer 1997.

soldiers that led the Foreign Office to decline permission for Phillips' request to mount an action against Benin in their telegram of January 1897.⁴⁶ Secondly, Eyo describes the military assault as a "three-pronged attack" on Benin City, whereas the British detachments sent to Gwato and Sapoba were merely diversionary and designed to contain enemy movements, and did not advance any further towards the main target of the operation.

By far the most problematic article in the *African Arts* special issues, however, is the opening address by British High Commissioner Thorold Masefield, which is reprinted in full.⁴⁷ Although Masefield begins his remarks by declaring that they are gathered "to recall history", he makes several politically charged statements that are at odds with the historical record. For example, he claims that "a re-examination of the contemporary documents will remind people that the British did not deliberately burn down Benin City"⁴⁸, which is untrue and valid only for the accidental fire that destroyed the palace complex on February 21st 1897; it is clear from statements by Consul General Ralph Moor that, had it not burned down by accident, the palace would have been razed by British forces, as had been done to the other public buildings and chiefly houses.⁴⁹

Secondly, Masefield declares that the British aim in invading Benin was to end slavery and the practice of human sacrifice, as well as to "open up" the kingdom to the advantages of contact with the wider world.⁵⁰ This claim cannot be supported by the archive documentation and amounts to a re-statement of British propaganda from the era of the invasion. Additionally, it is also notable that Masefield references Egharevba and his positive assessment of the British occupation in making the highly contestable claim that the Kingdom of Benin benefited from the invasion through gaining "education, technology, trade, and prosperity".⁵¹ The speech, and the resulting *African Arts* article, contains other contentious statements not summarised here.

In one respect, *African Arts* has of course performed its function by reporting the actual remarks made by a British official at a public event; however, by publishing these statements without accompanying notes or comment, the journal has arguably contributed to compounding the historiographical problems surrounding the history of the invasion of Benin. As a peer-reviewed publication, future scholars and students will feel entitled to regard *African Arts* as a reliable source of reference, and may be misled by such political claims being presented as historical fact in its pages. Once again, it may be concluded that the existence of an authoritative account would

⁴⁶ Foreign Office to J. R. Phillips, No 2, January 9th 1897, National Archives, ADM 116/87; see also *Blood and Bronze*, p. 143.

⁴⁷ Thorold Masefield, "The Great Benin Centenary, Benin City, February 17-23, 1997, Opening Ceremony Address by Thorold Masefield, British High Commissioner to Nigeria", *African Arts*, Vol 30, No 3, *Special Issue: The Benin Centenary*, Part 1, Summer 1997.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 28.

⁴⁹ *Blood and Bronze*, p. 190.

⁵⁰ Masefield, *African Arts*, p. 28.

⁵¹ *Ibid*.

have prevented Masefield from making contentious statements that are unsupported by the documentary evidence.

One particular point of interest in Thorold Masefield's speech is his use of the phrase "open up" to describe British intentions towards the Kingdom of Benin in advance of the invasion and occupation. As discussed in *Blood and Bronze*⁵², this was the preferred expression of imperial officials in West Africa, allowing them to discuss what was in fact unarguably *conquest* in innocuous or even positive terms.

Thus the phrase, or its active form "opening up", served as a key part of the colonial lexicon that was in use by British officials in West Africa. Drawing on the work of Ann Stoler and her reflections on the colonial archives of the Dutch East Indies⁵³, this can be seen as the set of rhetorical formulations that allowed imperial officers to communicate in a form of private language, stripped of potentially disturbing violence or emotive content, and often imparting purely internal meanings. As Stoler has described, such linguistic conventions both conveyed and helped create colonial logics, as well as providing officials with an in-house Orwellian doublespeak:

"Colonial lexicons were unevenly appropriated, sometimes constraining what agents of empire thought, elsewhere delimiting the political idioms in which they talked, indicating not what they thought but only what they said."⁵⁴

Judging by the repeated use of such professional language codes in the archive documentation consulted in researching *Blood and Bronze*, it is clear that colonial servants in West Africa found them of great value in carrying out their work, even if their use of such rhetoric was unconscious. From the perspective of public discourse in the present day, however, it can be seen that the colonial lexicon is dangerous when the uninitiated take such language at face value. When formulations from the colonial lexicon on occasion entered the public realm – for example, through the publication of a colonial despatch in the *London Gazette*, or when a retired official wrote to *The Times* – the risk naturally arose that the true (internal) meaning would be lost and the euphemistic form accepted in its place; through this mechanism, the public discourse becomes infected by misunderstanding. The use of the phrase "open up" by High Commissioner Masefield in 1997 is just one example of a formulation from the colonial lexicon making its way unchallenged into the academic record.

⁵² *Blood and Bronze*, p. 95, and see also the index entry for "opening up", p. 255.

⁵³ Ann Laura Stoler is the Willy Brandt Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and Historical Studies at the New School for Social Research in New York. She has an extensive record of publications, but on this particular theme, in addition to the works elsewhere cited in this paper, a recommended article is her "Perceptions of Protest: defining the dangerous in colonial Sumatra", *American Ethnologist*, Vol 12, No 4, November 1985.

⁵⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, "In Cold Blood: Hierarchies of Credibility and the Politics of Colonial Narratives", *Representations*, 37, Winter 1992.

We can trace the long history of such epistemological infections; given its contentious status and the absence of a definitive historical account, the British invasion of the Kingdom of Benin is a notably fertile source of such transmissions. Of particular interest is the fact that this can often happen via unlikely conduits; for example, *The Guardian* – surely the most progressive of the mainstream UK newspapers – published an article about the Benin Bronzes in February 2016, reporting on demands that a Benin artwork belonging to Jesus College, Cambridge, be returned to Nigeria.⁵⁵ The article clearly sets out the violence involved in the British seizure of the kingdom and its artworks, but even here there is a trace of the colonial lexicon in the way that the Phillips expedition is framed: the article reports that the British invasion “was intended to avenge the deaths of nine officers during a previous trade mission to Benin”. Even setting aside the factual inaccuracy (seven British men were killed, not all of whom were officials), it is highly problematic that the entirely misleading characterisation of the Phillips venture as a “trade mission” is reproduced as fact over a century later, when his aggressive intentions are very evident in the documentation. The continuing incidence of this kind of epistemological infection further highlights the need for an authoritative account of an event as contentious as the British military assault on Benin.

⁵⁵ *The Guardian*, “Cambridge college’s bronze cockerel must go back to Nigeria, students say”, February 21st 2016.

4. *Blood and Bronze*: an assessment

Having suggested some of the historiographical deficits and epistemological issues arising from the absence of an authoritative account of events surrounding the British invasion of the Kingdom of Benin, it is the contention of this paper that *Blood and Bronze* has now supplied that missing element. It is essential to recognise the limitations of any study reliant on only British documentation, in the absence of almost any Edo material on the experience and legacy of the invasion; with this important caveat, it is submitted that *Blood and Bronze* now serves as a more complete history of the British conquest of the kingdom and seizure of the Bronzes; no other extant work meets the same standards of historical method and sourcing. For providing an authoritative history of these events, *Blood and Bronze* can be said to have made a significant contribution to the historical literature, as well as, it is to be hoped, to the public understanding of the invasion of 1897.

Besides this overall contribution, it is further submitted that *Blood and Bronze* has added to scholarship by placing the British occupation of the Kingdom of Benin solidly within the context of what was in fact *reactive* British expansion in West Africa in the 1880s and 1890s, stressing the importance of growing European competition and the determinative role of political economy in British strategic thinking. Additionally, the book makes a number of specific archival discoveries and reinterpretations of events, including:

(1) George Annesley as British consul in Old Calabar

Arguably the most striking new archive material to be published for the first time in *Blood and Bronze* is the extensive record of wrongdoing by George Annesley, British consul in Old Calabar 1889-1891, most especially his ordering of the gang rape of a local woman in March 1891, and the involvement of Prime Minister Lord Salisbury in covering up this crime.

In researching the development of the Oil Rivers Protectorate in the late 1880s (renamed as the Niger Coast Protectorate in 1893) as background for the later assault on Benin, the author came upon George Annesley and his brief West African career in the Foreign Office papers in the National Archives. The material on his wrongdoing was shocking even for someone familiar with colonial records and their often-casual accounts of colonial violence; since Annesley had benefited from the ability of the British imperial system to ensure that he retired into quiet obscurity without being punished in any way, his deeds have remained almost completely unknown. The author therefore determined to dedicate a complete chapter of *Blood and Bronze* (Chapter 4) to this story.

The details of George Annesley and his career in Old Calabar were pieced together largely from the Foreign Office records in the FO 84 series ('Slave Trade Department and successors'), covering multiple files between 1888 and 1892. The London Gazette

and some press articles from the period were useful for reconstructing Annesley's family history and career progress, but, significantly, there was not a single mention of his gross misconduct in any public materials.

The most egregious of Annesley's crimes is set out in some detail in *Blood and Bronze* (pp. 81-84), as an important example of suppressed colonial wrongdoing: his ordering and supervision of the gang rape of a local woman named Ekang, in March 1891, by his unit of soldiers. As detailed in the book, this crime entered the records only because a Sierra Leonean consular clerk named George Turner happened to be a partial witness to proceedings in Old Calabar and took it upon himself to communicate the facts directly to the Marquess of Salisbury in London. Importantly, as revealed in *Blood and Bronze* (p. 90), we can be certain that Lord Salisbury had read the documents concerning the involvement of Annesley in a grotesque sexual crime and yet decided that he should be pensioned off into obscurity rather than face justice.

New material is also recounted in *Blood and Bronze* about George Annesley and his extensive record of arbitrary violence against local people throughout his eighteen month posting in Old Calabar; it is possible that this period is neglected in the historiography of Southern Nigeria because it came during the transition period from informal rule to a properly organised colonial administration under Claude MacDonald. Nonetheless, it sheds important light on the methods of British empire-building and the actions of British officials, and it is submitted that putting George Annesley properly into the historical record is itself a significant contribution made by *Blood and Bronze*.

(2) The mechanics of imperial power in the Niger Delta

Close analysis of the archive records has been employed in *Blood and Bronze* to deepen our understanding of the process of extending British rule over the Niger Delta in the 1880s and 1890s, particularly respecting the use of the tools of performative/structural violence.

As noted elsewhere in this paper, the output of the Ibadan School historians, among others, was particularly valuable in providing a framework for examining British expansion in what is now southern Nigeria, but the details of the establishment of the consular system had to be reconstructed for *Blood and Bronze* through the Foreign Office archive materials. The FO 84 file series in the National Archives was once again crucial for this task, along with the FO 2 'General Correspondence' file series (primarily FO 2/51, FO 2/64, FO 2/83, FO 2/86 and FO 2/99 for the Oil Rivers Protectorate/Niger Coast Protectorate). Many files in the FO 881 'Confidential Print' series were also helpful.

In addition to setting out the general development of British administration over the Niger Delta once formal structures were laid down from 1891, the account in *Blood*

and Bronze serves to highlight several instructive instances of the mechanics of imperial rule in action. By examining the archive materials in the context of British expansion (driven by the political economy of the palm oil trade and official determination to make the protectorate self-financing), certain performative aspects of the British military and official presence can be properly interpreted as structural violence in action. Thus official correspondence from Major Claude MacDonald and Ralph Moor has been used to show the high value they placed on the eleven-gun salutes and guards of honour that accompanied their status as Consul General, as well as the mere presence of a Royal Navy gunboat (see for example *Blood and Bronze*, pp. 99-101).

Material from the archives has also been unearthed and deployed in the book to enhance our understanding of some of the British techniques of 'divide and rule' (p. 79), threat of force (for example, against King Jaja and Opobo, pp. 58-60), and the direct use of military force to conquer rival powers, such as the campaign against Chief Nana at Brohemie (pp. 115-121).

(3) The West African career of Major Sir Claude MacDonald

In the course of reconstructing the establishment of British rule over the Niger Delta as summarised above, research in the Foreign Office archives for *Blood and Bronze* has, in addition, served to enhance our knowledge of the early career and character of Major Sir Claude MacDonald. Better known for his period as Minister and then Ambassador in China and Japan (during which he commanded the ad hoc forces for the defence of the foreign legations in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion), MacDonald is a highly interesting figure and his time in the Niger Delta has been comparatively neglected.

The close detail laid out in *Blood and Bronze* about MacDonald's creation of the Oil Rivers Protectorate serves to extend our knowledge of his character and methods, offering fresh insights into his attitudes towards local rulers, relations with the Foreign Office, and the extent of his personal commitment to ethical standards. MacDonald is the principal figure in *Blood and Bronze* in Chapters 5 and 6, and it is submitted here that the book offers a nuanced portrait of a complex, intelligent and devoted imperial servant.

(4) Revealing mention of the blockade of Opobo

In respect of both Claude MacDonald and the methods of British rule, a small but important piece of new evidence on the little-known blockade of Opobo in 1889 is also published for the first time in *Blood and Bronze* (pp. 66-69). As one of the leading local power centres in the palm oil trade, Opobo was a target of British expansionary aims even before the formal creation of an imperial administration; when MacDonald arrived in the Delta in 1889 as H. M. Commissioner (with a brief to

investigate the options for future governance), a crisis over access to the areas of the interior dominated by traders from Opobo was the first matter with which he had to deal.

As his first act in the Niger Delta, MacDonald decided on the blockade of the town (which lay on a riverine island, making naval blockade relatively easy), with the aim of forcing the powerful statelet to surrender all its weaponry. As set out in *Blood and Bronze*, the short campaign is touched on only briefly in the British documentation, where it is presented as a swift and triumphant British success; no information was transmitted through the usual Foreign Office channels about the impact on the local people, including casualties. Given that it was a pre-literate society, there was very little prospect of any written evidence being compiled inside Opobo, and for these reasons almost nothing is known about the level of destruction suffered by the town and its population.

Demonstrating the value of a forensic trawl through the archives, however, the present author found an accidental admission by MacDonald that there had been a large number of civilian deaths caused by his action against the town, in a document from over six years later (in the FO 2/84 series, July 1895). Discussing an entirely different matter, MacDonald mentions in passing that “many women and children died of starvation or were drowned” during the 1889 blockade (*Blood and Bronze*, p. 68). Despite its vagueness, this snippet of information is valuable in suggesting the severity of the British action, and highlights the way in which British officials often avoided making a contemporaneous record of the impact of their policy choices.

(5) New analysis of the 1892 treaty with the Kingdom of Benin

In what has been the prevailing presentation of the events surrounding the 1897 invasion, the existence of a ‘treaty’ between Britain and the Kingdom of Benin (signed with Oba Ovonramwen by Captain Henry Gallwey in 1892) is frequently invoked, on the assumption that it – at least in part – justifies the military response to the death of Acting Consul General James Phillips and party. It is submitted here that any such conclusions cannot be accepted when the treaty itself and the circumstances of its signature are properly considered, and *Blood and Bronze* therefore provides a fresh analysis (pp. 103-106), including assessment of translation issues that can only be fully understood when cross-referenced with the despatches of Captain Gallwey (primarily in the FO 84 series in the National Archives, as well as FO 2/51).

Besides the treaty document being simply the standard pre-printed British text, used on literally hundreds of similar occasions throughout what is now Nigeria (and thus in no way representing any kind of authentic negotiations), we can see from the treaty document that the interpreter was a man named Ajaie. Gallwey mentions elsewhere (see *Blood and Bronze*, p. 105) that Ajaie was in fact his personal servant (the official interpreter having proved to be “useless”), and was evidently a Yoruba

by origin. As reconstructed in *Blood and Bronze*, the conversation between Gallwey and Oba Ovonramwem was thus comprised of Gallwey speaking English to Ajaie, who transmitted the meaning in the Yoruba language to a Benin official who spoke Akure, a dialect of Yoruba. This official then translated into Edo, the language of Benin, for the understanding of the king. This laborious language chain offered significant scope for misinterpretation, with four people and three languages (or four languages, if Yoruba and Akure are counted separately) being involved. Careful examination of the treaty document itself also shows that Ajaie has signed his interpretation declaration with an “X”, demonstrating that he was illiterate and thus unlikely to be well equipped to convey the subtle meanings of the treaty text, which contains language couched in terms of friendship that only a knowledgeable reader would understand to represent bold claims by Britain to be taking possession of the kingdom. As argued in *Blood and Bronze*, it is likely that Oba Ovonramwem thought he was signing something more akin to a treaty of friendship, rather than willingly submitting his kingdom to British rule.

Close analysis of the treaty and the circumstances of its signature therefore show that it cannot be viewed as a meaningful justification for the violent invasion of February 1897.

(6) Analysis of the decision by James Phillips to visit Benin

Forensic analysis of the documentation has provided for a full examination of the reasons why James Phillips launched his unauthorised bid to visit Benin City, and a better understanding of the mechanics of his mission (*Blood and Bronze*, Chapter 7, and especially pp. 149-152). Given that the death of Phillips and his party was the rationale supplied by the British for the conquest of the Kingdom of Benin, the claims surrounding his intentions – most notably the standard insistence that his mission was “peaceful” – must be considered in detail.

Most damning is the despatch written by Phillips in November 1896, in which he requested permission from the Foreign Office to depose the king of Benin with an armed force (No 105, November 16th 1896, National Archives, FO 2/102). From this clear demonstration of his violent intent, *Blood and Bronze* traces the most likely genesis of the plan by Phillips to visit Benin City without permission from London and with only an unarmed group of officers and carriers. As set out in the book, this must be understood as an effort to provide a rationale for future military action: being turned back by Edo forces was the likely aim. Also important in this analysis is material about Phillips, his character, and his intellectual capacities, obtained by the author from the archives of Uppingham School, which Phillips attended 1876-82.

It is to be hoped that the clear demonstration in *Blood and Bronze* that Phillips had already committed to the deposition of the King of Benin will end the inaccurate practice of referring to his effort to reach Benin City as a “peaceful trade mission”.

5. *Blood and Bronze*: reception

Happily, it can be concluded that *Blood and Bronze* has been well-received by academia, judging by two important factors. Firstly, the publisher (Hurst & Co) distributed copies of the book to selected academics in advance of publication, as is usual for academic publishers, and the feedback received was highly supportive – please see Appendix I. Positive comments were supplied by several scholars from prominent universities, including the leading imperial historian Professor John Darwin of Oxford University.

Secondly, *Blood and Bronze* was assessed by a handful of academic journals, which gave it universally positive reviews. Interestingly, Robert Home, author of *City of Blood Revisited* as discussed earlier, reviewed *Blood and Bronze* alongside the books by Hicks and Phillips, for the *Journal of African Cultural Heritage Studies*; he describes *Blood and Bronze* as being “mostly a forensic textual analysis of the official correspondence and records on Benin in the UK National Archives at Kew, exploring their obfuscated meanings”.⁵⁶

Standalone reviews were also published in the *International Journal of African Historical Studies* and the *Journal of Military History*, both of which gave positive verdicts:

“Docherty’s book is well researched and written in an accessible manner. It extends the widely accepted and repeated general narrative of the Benin invasion to include many of the inconvenient and unpleasant facts associated with it, demonstrating clearly the remorseless and often violent encroachment on the sovereignty of Africans by the British in their quest for resources and thus wealth. It makes a useful addition to the literature of colonialism in general and the British imperial project specifically as well as to the continued debate on the return of works of cultural importance stolen or taken under duress from their owners during the colonial period.”⁵⁷

Professor Jean M. Borgatti, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*

“*Blood and Bronze* draws upon in-depth archival research in the U.K.’s National Archives, and also cites late nineteenth-century periodicals. Docherty achieves the difficult feat of turning clearly intensive archival work into a well-wrought text that is accessible to the general reader as well as the

⁵⁶ Robert Home, “Book Review: Returning Benin Treasures”, *Journal of African Cultural Heritage Studies*, Vol 3, No 1, April 2022.

⁵⁷ Jean M. Borgatti, “Book Reviews: *Blood and Bronze*”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, Vol 55, No 2, 2022.

scholar. This is very strong narrative history that succeeds in maintaining one's attention...

Blood and Bronze makes an impassioned and, to your reviewer, convincing argument that the Benin Bronzes should be returned to Nigeria... He ties enduring 'imperial nostalgia' to contemporary issues impacting Britain today, such as Brexit. Inevitably some readers of this text will not agree with Docherty, and his wider arguments around the enduring 'insidious power' of imperial narratives, but it is testament to his strong scholarship and gift for writing history that he will probably change the minds of a fair few readers."⁵⁸

M. T. Howard, *Journal of Military History*

Finally, *Blood and Bronze* was listed in the "Commonwealth bookshelf" compiled by independent scholar Terry Barringer for the Commonwealth journal *The Round Table*.⁵⁹ In addition, the distribution rights to *Blood and Bronze* for the United States and Canada were acquired by Oxford University Press.

Outside the academic press, a number of mainstream media outlets reported on research contained in *Blood and Bronze* or reviewed the book, including:

- In advance of publication, *The Observer*⁶⁰ carried a feature article based on the new research published in *Blood and Bronze*, focused in particular on the revelations surrounding Consul George Annesley:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/21/revealed-how-lord-salisbury-hid-by-his-british-consul-in-benin>

- Radio France International⁶¹ reported on *Blood and Bronze*, once again focusing on the new research into British brutalities in West Africa:

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20220614-blood-and-bronze-unveiling-the-british-empire-s-brutality-in-nigeria-paddy-docherty-benin-bronzes-lord-salisbury-george-annesley>

- David Olusoga reviewed *Blood and Bronze* in the *BBC History Magazine*.⁶²

⁵⁸ M. T. Howard, "Book Reviews: *Blood and Bronze*", *Journal of Military History*, Vol 86, No 4, Oct 2022.

⁵⁹ Terry A. Barringer, "Commonwealth bookshelf", *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 111, No 1, 2022.

⁶⁰ Dalya Alberge, "Revealed: How Lord Salisbury hid rape by his British consul in Benin", *The Observer*, November 21st 2021.

⁶¹ Laura Angela Bagnetto, "*Blood and Bronze*: unveiling the British Empire's brutality in Nigeria", Radio France International, June 14th 2022.

⁶² David Olusoga, "Looting History", *BBC History Magazine*, January 2022.

- The author also had the opportunity to publish an opinion piece in the *Byline Times*⁶³, summarising the research findings of the book and making a public case for repatriation of the Benin Bronzes:

<https://bylinetimes.com/2022/02/16/opening-our-eyes-to-the-cost-of-empire-why-we-must-demand-the-return-of-nigerias-benin-bronzes>

Following the publication of *Blood and Bronze*, the author has presented the research findings in a number of guest lectures or public events, including:

- Lawrence University – a regular guest lecture on the British invasion of Benin (once per semester since January 2022) for Dr Louise Raw of the London Centre of Lawrence University, held in the British Museum and using the Benin Bronzes display as a background. This lecture presents the events of 1897 as a case study of imperial expansion and colonial violence for students from the US studying for a semester in London.
- Shoolini University, India – a guest lecture (June 16th 2023) to the Chitrakoot School of Liberal Arts at Shoolini University in Himachal Pradesh, now the leading private university in India.
- Institute for Study Abroad – guest lecture on *Blood and Bronze* and the Benin Bronzes in the British Museum, February 24th 2022
- Bookmarks – Author talk chaired by David Olusoga, London, February 24th 2022
- HistFest 2022 at the British Library – panellist in discussion on the Benin Bronzes and related issues of contested histories, April 10th 2022
- How To Academy event with David Olusoga, December 10th 2021:
<https://howtoacademy.com/events/blood-and-bronze-the-british-empire-and-the-sack-of-benin/>
- New Books Network podcast interview with Dr Miranda Melcher, May 2022:
<https://newbooksnetwork.com/blood-and-bronze>
- Guest appearance & reading on “Roots” book group on Clubhouse, January 2022

This public-facing aspect of the publication of *Blood and Bronze* is ongoing, and a readiness to speak in all available public fora is part of the commitment by the author to tell the story of the invasion of Benin as widely as possible.

⁶³ Paddy Docherty, “Opening Our Eyes to the Cost of Empire: Why We Must Demand the Return of Nigeria’s Benin Bronzes”, *Byline Times*, February 16th 2022.

6. Textual development and further research

An important aspect of the original intention behind the research and writing of *Blood and Bronze* was the value of a history text that is both authoritative and, crucially, *accessible* for communicating the full story of the 1897 invasion of Benin to the general public. Besides the variety of media channels used to discuss the book as widely as possible (as summarised in Chapter 5 of this critical analysis), the author has begun a collaboration with the leading illustrator Patrice Aggs to produce a comic book version of *Blood and Bronze*, with the aim of further increasing the potential readership: there will assuredly be a significant segment of the population who might enthusiastically access a graphic novel or comic book while being less likely to tackle a densely footnoted history text, however readable.

Patrice Aggs has a long and distinguished record of publications, having illustrated over fifty books for children and adults. In addition, she was part of the team that produced and animated the classic film *The Snowman* in the early 1980s. Her recent books include the award-winning *No Country*, written by Joe Brady and published by David Fickling Books in 2021.

The comic book version of *Blood and Bronze* is a work-in-progress; please see Appendix II for some sample pages.

As well as the subsequent textual development of *Blood and Bronze* itself, the process of researching and writing the book has led the author to further areas of academic investigation. The most notable (not least because it forms the subject of his next book) is the African career of Hugh Trenchard, who later became Lord Trenchard and one of the central figures behind the establishment of the Royal Air Force in the 1920s.

While researching *Blood and Bronze*, the author came upon a surprising note in an article from the 1980s by Professor Felix Ekechi, who referred in passing to one 'Major Trenchard' as being "perhaps the greatest destroyer of towns in Eastern Nigeria".⁶⁴ On the face of it, this description seemed opposed to the general representation of Lord Trenchard as the affable and highly-respected 'Father of the RAF', who is celebrated with a prominent statue that stands outside the Ministry of Defence in London. This led the author to research Trenchard's period of service in Africa in the first decade of the C20, in both the Colonial Office records in the National Archives and in the RAF Museum in Colindale. The initial curiosity was rewarded with bountiful evidence of Trenchard's extensive record of brutal violence when in the service of the Southern Nigeria Regiment of the WAFF (including latterly as its commanding officer).

⁶⁴ Felix Ekechi, "Portrait of a Colonizer: H. M. Douglas in Colonial Nigeria, 1897-1920", *African Studies Review*, Vol 26, No 1, March 1983.

Importantly, this material was not mentioned in the official Trenchard biography, written by Andrew Boyle⁶⁵, nor in the recent treatment by Russell Miller⁶⁶ (which relies heavily on Boyle). The present author will therefore seek to publish a full account of Trenchard's record of violence in Africa to place this largely hidden knowledge into the public domain.

In addition, *Blood and Bronze* suggests a possible research agenda in pursuing the question of the impact of the colonial lexicon entering public discourse and causing what might be thought of as *epistemological infection*. Similar to the example instances provided earlier in this paper, work could be done on developing a genealogy (or perhaps this should be conceptualised as an *etiology*) of official language entering the public domain through Gazette publication and similar means, tracing changing meanings and the strategic use or misuse of private language for political or ideological ends. Such a study could be valuable in adding to understanding of the construction of the mythos of the British Empire in its most stridently imperialist phase.

⁶⁵ Andrew Boyle, *Trenchard: Man of Vision*, Collins, 1962.

⁶⁶ Russell Miller, *Trenchard: Father of the Royal Air Force*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016.

Conclusion

To speak of colonial ruination is to trace the fragile and durable substance and signs, the visible and visceral senses in which the effects of empire are reactivated and remain. But ruination is more than a process. It is also a political project that lays waste to certain peoples and places, relations, and things. To think with ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artifacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present.

Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 2008⁶⁷

Blood and Bronze ends with an exhortation that the Benin Bronzes be returned to Nigeria both because it is morally required and because Britain itself would also benefit, if such an action took place within the context of a proper engagement with our colonial legacy. This highlights the way in which the continued possession of the Benin artworks by the British Museum (and other institutions and individuals in the rich world) represents continuing empire, not only symbolically but also materially in a very real way. As explored powerfully by Ann Laura Stoler, Michel-Rolph Trouillot and others, and as briefly touched upon in this paper, we can see how the ownership and ongoing display of artefacts seized through colonial violence serves in an active way to reproduce narratives of domination that should finally be laid to rest.

In making an assessment of *Blood and Bronze: the British Empire & the Sack of Benin*, it is submitted here that the book succeeds in its goal of offering a fuller account of the 1897 British invasion of Benin that is also accessible to the general public. The existence (and easy availability) of a more complete treatment of the seizure of the Bronzes should help restrict the future potential for deliberate or accidental misrepresentation of events surrounding the British occupation of the Kingdom of Benin. It is essential to recognise the limitations of any account based only on British documentation, and the almost complete absence of Edo material on the experience and impact of the invasion will forever prevent a truly definitive history of the events of 1897 being realised. Within this crucial caveat, however, the author hopes that *Blood and Bronze* will assist in prompting the public discussion towards a better reckoning with the history of Britain in Africa.

⁶⁷ Ann Laura Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination", *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol 23, No 2, May 2008.

Appendix 1 – Academic endorsements for *Blood and Bronze*

As is standard practice for publishing firms with an academic focus, Hurst & Co supplied a number of academics in the UK and US with proof copies of *Blood and Bronze*, in advance of publication in the autumn of 2021, in the hope of attracting an endorsement. Included below are all the responses received, which can also be found on the Hurst & Co website and in abbreviated form on the dust jacket of the book.

'Blood and Bronze is a scholarly, forensic and wonderfully readable account of the circumstances leading to the fateful Benin Expedition of 1897 and the looting of the bronzes. Vivid, passionate and compelling, it deserves to be widely read—and surely will be.'

John Darwin, Professor of Global and Imperial History,
University of Oxford, and author of *Unfinished Empire: The
Global Expansion of Britain*

'This compelling account of the plunder of Benin provides a deeply disquieting snapshot of the workings of the British Empire in Africa and beyond. There is a manifestly powerful case for restitution and reparation.'

Priyamvada Gopal, Professor of Postcolonial Studies,
University of Cambridge, and author of *Insurgent Empire*

'Docherty gives vivid access to a place and time we don't know but should: the resource-rich Niger Delta when the British Empire still believed its own myths. An impassioned plea to understand our colonial past in all its greed and ruthlessness—and to return the spoils of Empire to where they belong.'

Llewelyn Morgan, Professor of Classical Languages and
Literature, University of Oxford

'This is, hands down, the most granular and compelling account yet of the 1897 British invasion of Benin. After reading this book, I dare you to make any reasonable argument against restitution of Benin's looted treasures.'

Professor Chika Okeke-Agulu, Director of the Program in
African Studies, Princeton University, and author
of *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-
Century Nigeria*

'A powerful and thoughtful exploration of the deep history behind the looting of some of Africa's greatest artistic treasures. If you want to understand why the Benin Bronzes must be returned to Nigeria, read this book.'

Professor David Olusoga, historian, broadcaster, and author of *Black and British*

'An absorbing, original and beautifully written historical horror story. Docherty skilfully weaves a rich tale of the almost primal evil inflicted on Benin by the British Empire. Essential reading for anyone with an interest in the unvarnished truth of the "glorious" days of Empire.'

Dr Louise Raw, historian and author of *Striking a Light*

'An audacious and brave narrative about how the Benin Bronzes were looted during the colonial era and exhibited in the British Museum. Careful and lucid, *Blood and Bronze* weaves an engrossing narrative explaining how the theft of cultural artifacts is the theft of culture itself.'

Rafia Zakaria, writer, political philosopher, attorney, and author of *Against White Feminism*

Appendix 2 – Graphic novelisation sample pages

The following pages show sample work from the forthcoming collaboration with Patrice Aggs on a comic book version of *Blood and Bronze*.

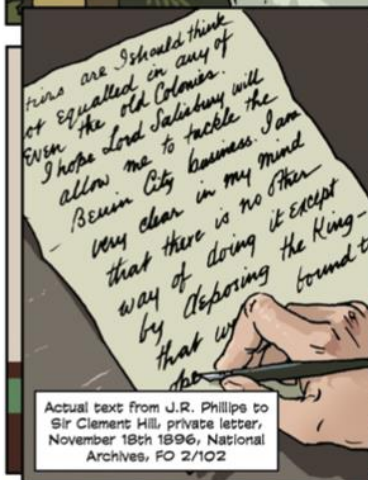
The featured section is an excerpt from Chapter 7, corresponding directly with Chapter 7 of *Blood and Bronze*, in which we follow Acting Consul General James Phillips in setting off on his unauthorised visit to Benin City.



With some impatience, Phillips awaited an answer in Old Calabar.

As his school magazine would later write, self-restraint was not one of Phillips' characteristics:

"...he was a high-spirited young man, full of life and energy... He was not head and shoulders above the rest of us in anything, except, perhaps, that priceless thing which we call 'keenness'..."



Things are I should think equalled in any of the old Colonies. Even the Lord Salisbury will allow me to tackle the Benin City business. I am very clear in my mind that there is no other way of doing it except by deposing the King that will be found to

Actual text from J.R. Phillips to Sir Clement Hill, private letter, November 18th 1896, National Archives, FO 2/102



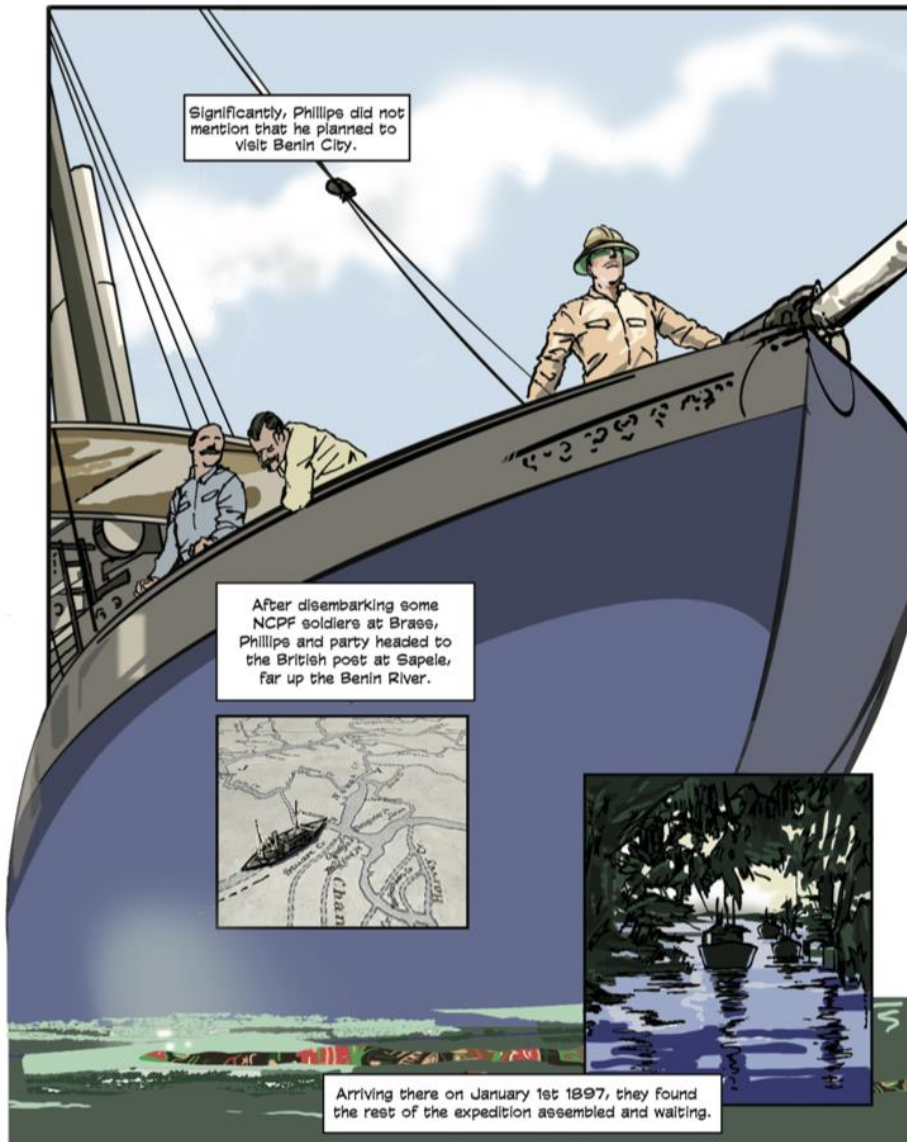
By late December, no answer had arrived from the Foreign Office.

Deciding to set off anyway with an unarmed expedition, Phillips sent a final despatch.

Take this down:

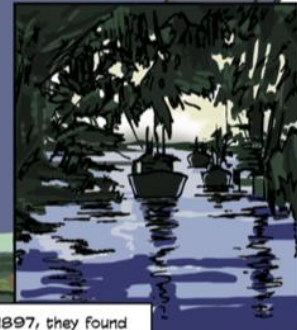


'No. 119. Sir, I have the honour to inform you...

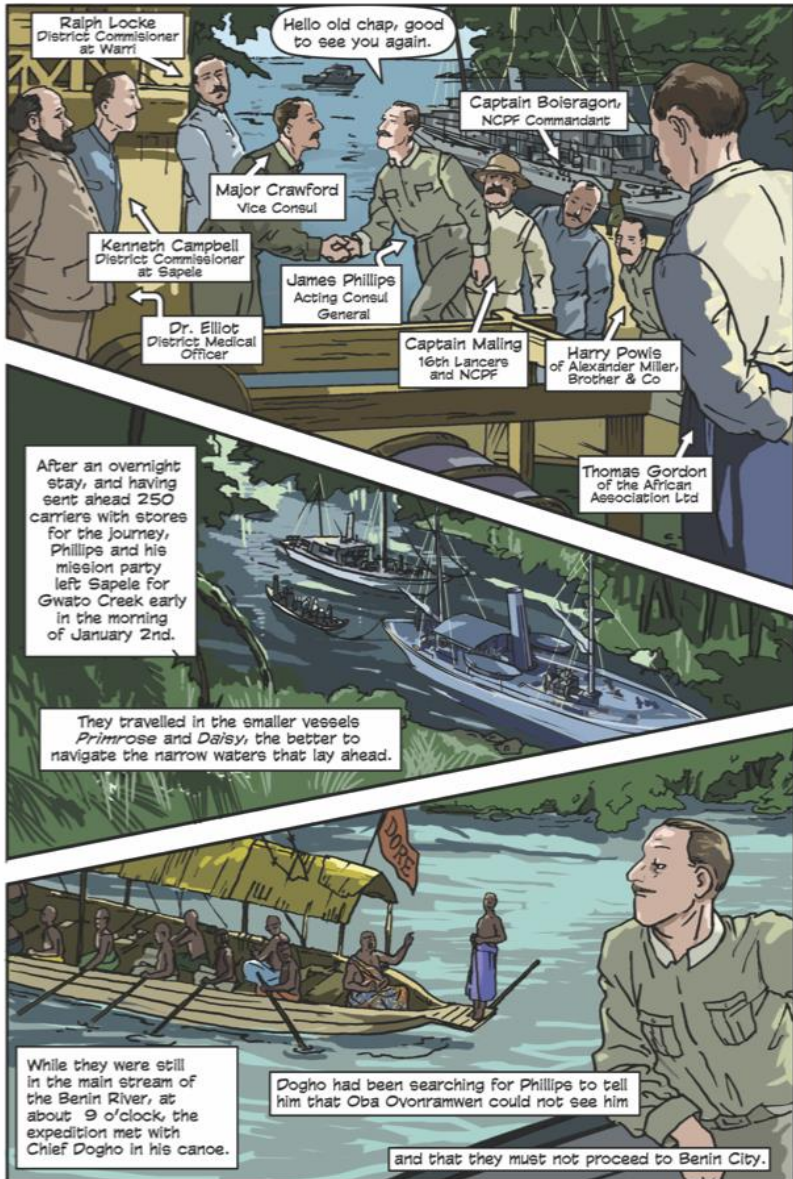


Significantly, Phillips did not mention that he planned to visit Benin City.

After disembarking some NCPF soldiers at Brasse, Phillips and party headed to the British post at Sapele, far up the Benin River.



Arriving there on January 1st 1897, they found the rest of the expedition assembled and waiting.



Don't go!

Turn back!

Please delay!

Wait!

They will resist!

BURROWS

The official diary of District Commissioner Burrows, who accompanied Phillips as far as Gwato, gives a terse but vivid account of the effort by local people to persuade the British expedition not to continue.

January 2nd 1897 12.10pm
*Anchored at Dudu's town. King's message to Consul-General - that he is making his "father", and cannot possibly see us under a month, and on no account to go to him. Dore says it will be certain death to go. Consul-General says he will go.**

While Phillips was at Dudu's Town, other messengers arrived from Oba Ovotramwen, pleading with him to delay.

These officials were dismissed, and the British party continued up the creek, arriving at Gilli Gilli at about 4 in the afternoon.

*Actual text from Diary of District Commissioner Burrows, showing Circumstances of Start of Expedition to Benin City, enclosed in R.D.R. Moor to Foreign Office, No 2. January 29th 1897, National Archives, ADM 116/87



When Phillips and his men arrived at Gwato, they found that the Benin soldiers had diplomatically withdrawn. The carriers and stores were ready and waiting, and the Gwato chief put the British officials up for the night.



Please, Mr Phillips, sir, we don't want any trouble...



Even at this late stage, efforts continued to persuade Phillips to change his plans...

...but he would not listen to advice or pleas.



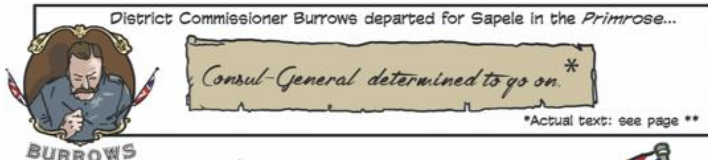
Early the next morning, the mission prepared for departure to Benin City.

In an effort to demonstrate the peaceful nature of the expedition, Phillips ordered all officers to keep their service revolvers strictly out of sight.



In this heat? We're all in our shirtsleeves!

Stow the weapons in the baggage then



District Commissioner Burrows departed for Sapele in the *Primrose*...

*Consul-General determined to go on.**

*Actual text: see page **



...and at 7.30am on January 4th 1897, Phillips and his unauthorised expedition marched off into the jungle, heading for Benin City.

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