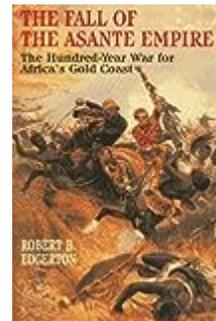




Robert B. Edgerton. *The Fall of the Asante Empire: The Hundred Year War For Africa's Gold Coast.* New York: The Free Press, 1995. x + 293 pp. \$23.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-02-908926-2.



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A Clash of Empires: Asante and the British

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a veritable renaissance of historical literature on the Asante empire. Most of the newly published material falls into three overlapping categories. The first deals with the administrative apparatuses of the Asante state. Here one should mention the work of Ivor Wilks, whose collection of essays, entitled *Forests of Gold* (1993), picks up many of the themes first addressed in *Asante in the Nineteenth Century* (1975). One would also want to mention Larry Yarak, *Asante and the Dutch* (1990), which deploys an analysis of the diplomacy of trade to critique Wilks's interpretation of the elaboration of Asante bureaucracy.

The second category consists of works which deals with aspects of Asante society and belief. T.C. McCaskie has blazed the trail in this regard, most notably in his *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (1995). Finally, there is the literature which deals with aspects of the pre-colonial Asante economy. In addition to the authors already mentioned, a recent article by Gareth Austin, "No Elders Were Present: Commoners and Private Ownership in Asante, 1807-96" in the *Journal of African History* 37, 1 (1996), promises significantly to revise the conven-

ditional wisdom about the weakness of the private sector in nineteenth century Asante.

What many of these works have in common is their attempt to write about Asante economy, state and society 'from within.' This does mean that they eschew models derived from beyond Asante (or indeed African) history. Indeed much of the debate has centered on the manner in which particular theoretical approaches have been applied to the Asante past. However, they all seek to explore aspects of the inner workings of the Asante social formation. The book under review was put together at a time when much of this revisionist literature was still in the pipeline. This may help to explain the somewhat traditional casting of the book.

It presents a narrative history of the cycles of military conflict between Asante and Britain in the nineteenth century, drawing heavily on the published accounts of British journalists and officials of the period. The style in which *The Fall of the Asante Empire* is written also reflects an explicit agenda on the part of the author. Unlike those who have tried to get to the heart of Asante structures and ideas, Robert Edgerton is looking at Asante from

afar—using British lenses, and nineteenth-century lenses at that. He states that his aim is to render the history of these events accessible “to the general reading public rather than scholars” (p. ix). Hence, while the author clearly wishes his readers to empathize with the Asante (a point to I return below), the book has some of the feel of an older work of imperial history (a comparison with W. E. F. Ward, *A History of Ghana* (1948) is instructive).

The book does have its strengths. Most importantly, it places the military orientation of Asante squarely back in the frame where it belongs. Edgerton shows how the Asante incorporated European weapons into their own military structure with considerable success. He also demonstrates how the Asante, over the course of the nineteenth century, were disadvantaged by a growing gap in military technology. The discussion of Asante innovations designed to cope with superior British firepower during the Yaa Asantewaa uprising of 1900—notably the construction of stockades (apparently an idea borrowed from the Mende of Sierra Leone)—is especially illuminating. It is reminiscent of James Belich’s excellent account of Maori resistance in *The New Zealand Wars* (1986), although the Maori record was arguably even more impressive because they were both outnumbered and out-gunned.

The author does not deal with the Maori parallel, but does make some helpful comparisons with Zulu resistance to the British, which he has written about elsewhere (incidentally, this presumably accounts for the strange fact that the cover of the book actually bears a picture depicting the Zulu Wars!). Edgerton paints a highly sympathetic of Asante performance on the battlefield which would doubtless go down well in Kumasi. It also has to be said that the book is clearly written and offers a number of memorable vignettes along the way.

However, there are features of this book which diminish its overall impact. Firstly, the author is frequently too close to his historical sources. In particular, British stereotypes of the period are replicated throughout the text. The Asante are presented as unusually honourable in their dealings and extremely brave on the battlefield. By contrast, the Fante are depicted as “cowardly” (p.114), “militarily inept” (p.47) and “notoriously feckless” (p.47), while the Hausa and Mende are frequently described as blood-thirsty and unreliable. On the British side, brave officers and plucky troops abound.

These are nineteenth century British perceptions and prejudices which clearly need to be approached very cautiously by the historian. One has to question whether the

Asante really exhibited a greater sense of honour than their neighbours. After the invasion of Eweland in 1867-71, communities who supported the Asante armies were effectively enslaved in return for their loyalty (see Wilks, 1975: 83-87). It is also difficult to sustain the thesis that other Africans made poor military material. After all, it was Africans who bore the brunt of the fighting against Asante, with the major exception of the Wolseley campaign of 1873-74. The book sometimes struggles to reconcile the images with the historical record. Hence when the Asante encounter stiff Fante resistance, as they often did, the latter is described as “unexpectedly resolute” (p. 96). In fact, towards the end of the book Edgerton himself shows that it was the so-called ‘Hausa’ troops who secured victory for the British.

Secondly, the consideration that is accorded to Asante state and society is fairly limited, drawn mostly from Bowdich’s account of his visit to Kumasi in 1817. The treatment of the state is heavily inflected by a desire to render Asante institutions intelligible to a non-Ghanaian readership: hence the military position of the Asante-hene is likened to that of the President of the United States, while the role of the ‘inner council’ is likened to Congress (p.52). Obviously, this kind of cultural translation is problematic and is as likely to distort impressions as to shed light on the matter in hand. But perhaps more important is the limited treatment of the political structure of the empire.

The centripetal tendencies within Asante are important to the purely military dimension because, as Edgerton himself points out, the failure of important chiefs to mobilize troops was crucial on many occasions, including the 1900 uprising. As far as Asante society is concerned, the author does refer frequently to the importance of slavery as well as to the paradox that slave recruits performed most of the fighting for the kingdom. Surprisingly, though, he fails to develop Wilks’ observation that resistance to conscription by the ‘ahiafo’ (the lower orders, of free and not-free origin) was crucial to the political success of the peace interest.

Finally, there are a number of ‘bum notes’ that have found their way into the text. There is a map purporting to show the geographical extent of the Asante empire in the early nineteenth century (p. 8) which shifts the generally accepted boundaries of Asante much further to the north and east without any explanation (it can be compared with Wilks’s map in *Forests of Gold*, p. 203). Equally, the claims that are made about the population of the empire are questionable. The figure of “just under

one million” people for metropolitan Asante (p. 13) has already been scaled down considerably by Wilks (1975: p. 88). And the claim that the Asante empire as a whole contained “more than 3 million people” (p. 1) is even more unlikely, given that the 1921 census counted only 2.3 million people for the whole of the Gold Coast following a period of population growth.

The medieval empire of Ghana certainly did not flourish for a thousand years and was located to the northwest and not “far to the east of modern Ghana” (p. 2). Again, the Ewe peoples are not just found in modern Togo (p. 97), but in Ghana as well. Equally, French troops did not take control of Togo and Cameroun during the partition of Africa (p. 11): in fact, France only gained full control of these areas after the repartition of the German colonies on the conclusion of the First World War. Many

of the errors in the text are not fatal, but they are likely to undermine confidence in the book as a whole.

In conclusion, this book will probably evoke different kinds of response from the reading public. The general reader with an interest in military history is likely to find much of interest in it, and much to entertain as well. Professional historians of Africa are likely to feel that essential pieces of the the analysis are missing. Finally, historians of Asante will flinch at some of the assertions that are made in the book and wonder whether the debate has not moved beyond it.

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