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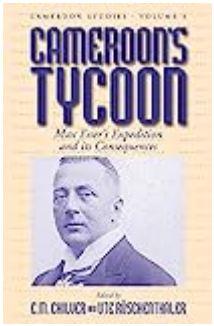

E.M. Chilver, Ute Röschenthaler, eds. *Cameroon's Tycoon: Max Esser's Expedition and its Consequences.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2001. xx + 204 pp. $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57181-310-7.

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A German Pioneer in Cameroon and His Musical Throne

The present work is part of a new and burgeoning series of works in publication at Berghahn that is aimed at providing scholars with much more comprehensive and interdisciplinary representations of Cameroon than has hitherto been the case. As such the volume is certainly a success. The focus of this volume is the experiences and significance of Max Esser, a rich industrialist from Cologne with an eagerness for (mainly) cocoa plantations. Esser was actively involved in the process of imperial Germany's economic penetration of Cameroon, making several trips throughout its coastline and hinterland between 1896 and 1908. The book is divided into three major parts: the first section briefly outlines Esser's family background and business affairs; the second section, the heart of the book, comprises Esser's own account, along with useful background information provided by the editors, of his Cameroon expedition; and the third section contains writings of and background about other Germans who were involved in social, economic or military matters pertaining to Cameroon. As opposed to extensive analysis, the editors present a short, solid summary of Max Esser's undertakings both in Germany and abroad while giving the most space to Esser's writings.

Esser's narratives are filled with characterizations and prejudices typical of the age concerning Africans and women, accentuating the prevalence of contemporary racial and gender stereotypes. A litany of African groups endures the assault of Esser's descriptions, most notably the Sudanic, Angolan, Bantu, Bakundu, Bimbia and Duala peoples. At the start of his voyage, Esser almost immediately "ponders on the character of the Africans" by recalling a horrifying incident (p. 31). He notes that a canoe approaching his ship capsized, yet Angolans expressed more interest in recovering the cask of oil than saving the three "Negroes," one of whom "drowned with a scream of terror," because "the former would be of more value" (p. 32). Other prejudices intrinsic to the worldview of Esser follow. He characterizes the Duala as "averse to hard physical labour" and "any attempt to introduce rational cultivation among them" as a fruitless exercise (p. 59). Regarding what he sees as "evidence of the Negro's incredible unreliability and lack of a sense of obligation," Esser points to the Bimbia people having earlier agreed to transport his expedition via canoes at a cost of ten marks per man, only later to demand twenty-five instead (pp. 67-68), as if bargaining and conflicts over

contracts did not exist in Europe. In reference to his encounter with African women, Esser again makes his feelings perfectly clear. He states that "like everywhere else in the world, women's whims reign and create the fashions which make their menfolk sigh and suffer" (p. 77). In this instance Esser laments that the women insisted on the "latest fashions" of beads and had no interest in European cloths since they only dressed themselves in beads anyway (p. 78).

The main objective of Esser's expedition was to gain African labor for German cocoa plantations in Cameroon. In hopes of winning over the chief of Bali, King Garega, Esser and company brought along a bizarre gift: a metal throne that, when occupied, blared "Ach du lieber Augustin." Esser had surmised that the only way to achieve his goal was to appeal to the vanity of the African chief, who was initially hesitant to even talk about the labor issue. As Esser describes it, he explained to Garega that the "power and prestige of his people would grow" and that "he would always be able to enjoy sugar and palm wine," the latter argument of personal gain ultimately having the greater effect on the king (p. 88). Upon agreeing to "binding contracts" with Garega, Esser concludes that his expedition was a success, since "the route to the hinterland had been made more accessible and secure" and "the provision of workers for the coastal plantation companies" had been "guaranteed" (p. 100). The entrepreneur foresees that "establishing plantations on a large scale" would provide Germany with the groundwork to create a flourishing agrarian and industrial trade network in Cameroon (p. 100).

E.M. Chilver and Ute RÃ¶schenthaler have produced a quality work of scholarship. The book contains maps of both Esser's route and the various ethnic groups in the region, a thorough bibliography of the secondary literature and some vivid images of Esser's travels. Moreover, appendices explain the many "fetishes" that Esser collected abroad and eventually shipped to the Linden Museum in Stuttgart (pp. 171-83) as well as a concise, thoughtful summary of the so-called Esser Affair, in which a series of heated public exchanges ensued between Esser and his critics after the latter accused him of making untruthful claims in a book he had written about his travels (pp. 164-70). Chilver and RÃ¶schenthaler correctly avoid exhausting their energies by demonizing the flawed character of Esser, but instead let his writings speak for themselves. The editors are to be commended for following through with their stated objective, namely bringing the reader "to the beginnings of an important development in the person of one of its pioneers" (p. xiv). While the volume is best suited for specialists of Cameroon, its coverage of economics, gender, ethnography and racial stereotyping also recommends the book to anyone interested in the multiple dimensions of European-African encounters. It would make a splendid assigned reading for courses on European colonialism generally and German imperialist ventures in particular.

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