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Book Reviews
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Swashbuckling with a conscience

John Laband, ***Bringers of War: The Portuguese in Africa during the Age of Gunpowder and Sail from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century***
Frontline Books, London, 2013
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The pull of riches, the push of religion: a recipe for centuries of violence and sacrifice in the name of duty, in the hope of glory. Here the story of Portugal in Africa is told as a military history. There are no arguments, no theories. In that sense the book is an easy read, as well as a vivid and richly detailed narrative. A caution, as one absorbs the horrors: it is well to remember that the Portuguese, styled as "bringers of war", were not alone in that regard. The book's six chapters pertain to regions. By consolidating accounts of Portuguese exploration and conquest in north, west and east Africa, the author provides chronologies that are readily grasped. The several timelines are drawn together in a master chronology of the near-five century period covered, namely, 1385 1856. Southern Africa hardly figures in this history. The death of Francisco de Almeida at the hands of Khoikhoi in Table Bay merits only a footnote (p 68).

Chapter 1 details Portugal's interest in Morocco. Most usefully, it provides a history of Christian-Muslim contestation, as well as of rival Muslim factions, which is relevant to all that follows. Portugal had expelled the Moors 200 years ahead of Spain. To block their return it seized Ceuta, and then other ports as far as Agadir. Its ill-fated invasion in 1578 had the character of a crusade. The crucial battle, which left the Moroccans rich in booty and prisoners, is related in surprisingly precise detail. This reader was intrigued by the descriptions of weaponry. For example: "twenty-eight distinct actions were required to discharge a single shot from an arquebus" (p 8). Despite that, the Moroccan cavalry desired and mastered the arquebus. After their defeat the Portuguese left Morocco alone, bar retention of the ports of Ceuta, Tangier and Mazagão.

With Portugal's interest in North Africa disposed of, Laband takes readers back in time to feats of exploration that are familiar to South Africans. The Cape Khoikhoi make a brief appearance when Bartolomeu Dias fires on them as they threaten his crewmen, fetching water at Mossel Bay in 1488: "mentally exhausted after days of riding the storm, vulnerable and very far from home, he reacted furiously" (p 45). Early on, the reader is aware that the author is "in the head" of protagonists. With respect to Morocco, Portugal's King "Sebastião burned with obsessive zeal …" (p 15). When Mombasa was sacked in 1505, the *mfalane* (ruler) was driven from the town: "While his emissaries sought out [Francisco] De Almeida, he hovered disconsolately among the palms with his courtiers …" (p 64). And so on. Ravaging the Swahili Coast is the title of this second chapter a coast that "stretched for 2 000 miles between the port towns of Sofala in the south and

Mogadishu in the north" (p 50). On gaining access to Indian Ocean trade, the Portuguese needed ivory and gold dust, traded through Swahili ports, in order to purchase the precious spices sold in Europe. That put them in conflict yet again with Islam. Laband asserts: "The Muslim-dominated Indian Ocean trading area was until then free of sectarian strife and open to Hindus and Jews" (p 53). The Christian invaders changed all that. Their arrival at Malindi, as reported by an Arab historian, provided the title of this book. After multiple swings of fortune respecting control of the several East African ports, the Portuguese focused their energy on Moçambique Island where they erected a fort and, soon afterwards, a hospital.

Throughout this phase of conquest and discovery, Portugal's elite embraced a vision of Christian triumph over Islam with the aid of Christians who, for centuries, were isolated in Ethiopia. Portugal's twin goals were to block the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, to "deny the Red Sea to Muslim shipping", and, by way of Jedda, to "sack Mecca and then hold it for ransom against the restoration of Jerusalem to the Christians" (p 73). This "ultimate crusader's fantasy" required the help of Prester John an umbrella term for Ethiopia's ruler, whomsoever that may be at any given time. Nor was the wish for contact one-sided. Down the centuries, embassies travelled in both directions. Portugal's ambitions were not lost on Muslim potentates who fended off Portuguese aggressions. In 1527 a Muslim leader commenced a *jihad* against the Christians of Ethiopia. "Coming to the Aid of Prester John" (chapter 3) details the years of warfare which, in 1541, saw the landing of a small Portuguese force led by Cristóvão da Gama, fourth son of Vasco, then Governor of India. We are told:

> When they began their march inland to the cheery sound of their fife and pipe band, they knew that to all intents and purposes they were being abandoned to their fate. Consciously, they regarded themselves as crusaders, even Christian martyrs … (p 95).

In 1542 that force was routed. No detail is spared respecting the fate of Cristóvão and his comrades. The warfare continued. Portugal had failed and Ethiopia was Islamicised, bar small pockets of tenacious Christians.

This is a military history, published by Frontline whose promise is: "Quality military history for the knowledgeable reader". In his introduction, Laband states that "considerable emphasis is placed on the nature of the widely differing societies confronting each other in war and, more particularly, on their diverging military cultures" (p xxiv). He honours that pledge throughout the book and the historical sweep respecting the Horn of Africa appeared to me of particular interest. There are also arresting details such as the fact that the Ethiopian warrior "rode with his big toe in a stirrup ring, rather than resting his foot on a stirrup iron like the Portuguese or Ottomans" (pp 84 85). This can be seen at No. 23 in the second set of illustrations. By the sixteenth century's close, the Portuguese had to defend more than 40 forts and factories (trading stations), from Africa to Japan.

In chapter 2, Laband described Portuguese advances with respect to shipbuilding: construction of a stronger hull conferred advantage with respect to sails, equipping them to outclass other maritime powers. Able to dominate Indian Ocean trade, they were tempted to over-extend. In that situation, they were obliged to protect trading posts with fortifications. That was hugely expensive, thus

they had to be selective. Chapter 4 returns to the Swahili coast where, in 1558, the fortress São Sebastião on Moçambique Island had been completed. Forty years later, Fort Jesus stood ready to protect a second East African port Mombasa (it would be lost to a Muslim force in 1631).

We meet the Zimba, whose name replaced that of a European conqueror when Rhodesia became Zimbabwe. Fierce warriors and cannibals, they enjoyed many conquests until 1589 when they were driven from Malindi: "Tradition has it that only about 100 of the Zimba … ever reached their own country again" (p 120). Here Laband offers a footnote: "More prosaically, some historians contend that the leaders of the Zimba succeeded in establishing chiefdoms in the areas they had conquered, which endured into the colonial period." Historians may be disappointed that the author does not take on this issue, in the way that historians normally do. More helpfully, he provides excellent descriptions of fort design and construction. He also explains in succinct terms the means by which the Dutch and British overtook the Portuguese and Spanish with respect to financing the enormous costs attached to empire. Ultimately, the Dutch failure to capture Moçambique Island left Portugal free to explore the interior from that base.

Readers unfamiliar with the Portuguese quest for "The Elusive Gold of Mutapa" (chapter 5) will find this a gripping story. Numbers of pioneering Portuguese were absorbed by local populations, among whom they enjoyed a peculiar status:

> In the Zambezi valley the enfeebled Portuguese crown had no option but to leave the *prazeiros* (holders of crown estates) alone so long as they provided *chikunda* (military retainers) to keep order, maintain the roads and keep up government buildings … by the mid nineteenth century four or five *wazungu* (Afro Portuguese) family groups dominated the whole Zambezi valley … (p 190).

Long before the nineteenth century, the *prazeiros* had to accept that gold was not the fast track to wealth the Europeans had imagined. Here again, the author usefully explains how things were made, how in practice they worked in this case, the difficulties miners faced if they were to exploit the region's gold bearing rock. Awakened to that reality, the Portuguese gave their attention to other trade goods: to ivory, and to slaves.

Throughout this book, slavery is "the elephant in the room". The index leads us to slave capture, and to slavery as practiced by Europeans, by Muslims and by Africans themselves, where it is referred to prior to chapter 6. With Portugal's acquisition of Brazil, the hunt for slaves escalated to the point where millions were taken from regions such as Angola:

> An economy developed by the seventeenth century in which slaves worked the Portuguese farms along the main rivers in their colony of Angola to produce the food to feed the slaves penned up in Luanda awaiting export to the New World (p 194).

Slavery is the focus of the book's final chapter, "Wars and Miseries" a title, like that of the book, found in sources where Africans gave vent to the feelings roused by the intrusions of the Portuguese.

Bringers of War is swashbuckling with a conscience. The tale is told in lively fashion. Few nouns or verbs, for that matter are wallflowers:

> Lethally for the arrogant, if heavily outnumbered, Christian community, the Swahili angrily resented the blatant corruption and sharp dealings of Portuguese officials and traders, and abhorred the increasingly energetic attempts of Christian missionaries to convert them … To please the white men, they killed the unfortunate sultan and delivered his body to the gloating [Captain Sima] de Melo Pereira. He in turn pickled the "traitor's" decapitated head and triumphantly dispatched it as a trophy to the astonished viceroy in Goa (pp 135 136).

This is not a cavil. We have a rich language so why not use it? It may, however, surprise readers habituated to sober texts. The fore-mentioned conscience is formalistic. The institution of slavery is deplored, but this book does not pretend to explore it. I enjoyed the explanations of concrete things: the construction of ships and of forts; the techniques required by mining; the evolution of weapons. At the end, we are told of the advantage of flintlocks over matchlocks and reminded of the demands of the ancient arquebus: "only seven distinct drill movements were required to fire a flintlock" (p 239), compared with that weapon's twenty-eight. The book succeeds as a readable military history. *Bringers of War* includes excellent illustrations, a helpful glossary and an invaluable chronology.

Vertrees C. Malherbe
Cape Town