

Luc Renders

Dutch literature on the Congo Free State (1885-1908)

1 A selective memory

In 2008 the 50th anniversary of the Brussels World Exhibition, which opened on 17 April 1958, was the focus of attention in the Belgian media. Newspapers and magazines were brimming with nostalgic reminiscences, glaring pictures and analytical articles; TV documentaries and commemorative exhibitions brought the World Expo back to life. The icon of the Exhibition was the so called Atomium. It symbolized the exhilarating benefits new scientific discoveries and technological advances would bring to mankind. The devastation caused by the atomic bomb had been effectively erased from people's memories.

Belgium showed off its cultural, scientific and technological achievements in the Belgian pavilion. And as was the case at previous World Exhibitions held in Belgium, the extensive Congolese section was the showcase for the fruits of the selfless labour tirelessly carried out by the Belgians in the Congo. That still a lot remained to be done was brought home in the jarring contrast between the replica of a primitive Congolese village and the futuristic buildings surrounding it.

600 Congolese participated in the World Exhibition. Amongst them were Patrice Lumumba and Joseph-Désiré Mobutu. In Brussels they and other black intellectuals were for the very first time treated on an equal footing with whites. Ironically, the mutual contacts between the young black elite provided a strong impetus to the yearning for independence of the Congolese. Soon after the World Exhibition closed its doors the smouldering fire of dissatisfaction erupted in a fierce blaze. In January 1959 riots broke out in Leopoldville after which the flames of unrest could not be extinguished anymore. On 30 June 1960 Belgian colonial rule came to an as abrupt as painful and even bitter end.

The World Exhibition coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the handing over of the Congo Free State to Belgium. In 2008 the centenary of Belgium's acquisition of the Congo, in sharp contrast to the razzmatazz surrounding the World Exhibition anniversary, is all but ignored. This is not at all surprising. The World Exhibition heralded a brave, new world; it was a joyous occasion most visitors remember with nostalgia. Belgium's takeover of the Congo Free State in contrast was a sombre event. 100 years ago Belgium was a reluctant partner in a hastily arranged marriage of convenience. Under heavy international pressure Leopold II had been forced to relinquish his sovereignty over the Congo Free State. On 18 October 1908 a law was accepted by Belgian parliament which enabled the takeover of the Congo Free State by Belgium on 15 November 2008.

From 1885 to 1908 the Congo was the fiefdom of Leopold II. In the nineteenth century a colonial possession was considered to be an important status symbol for a king or a queen. Already the first Belgian king, Leopold I, had colonial ambitions. However, he does not succeed in realizing them. His son and successor, Leopold II, follows in his father's footsteps with even greater determination and tenacity. After a number of failed attempts to acquire a colony in the Far East, he shifts his focus to Africa. The organisation in 1876 of an international geographical conference in Brussels has to provide a cover for Leopold II's imperialistic ambitions. The topics for discussion at the conference were: "[...] the suppression of the slave trade in Central Africa, the extension of scientific knowledge about the area, and the bringing of civilization to the peoples living there" (Foeken 1985: 19-20)* (1). The conference decided on setting up the International Africa Association, split up into a number of National Committees.

The Belgian National Committee becomes the vehicle of king Leopold's colonial campaign. Between 1877 and 1882 it funds five expeditions to Central Africa via the east coast with the aim of opening up a route to the interior. They are a dismal failure. In the meantime the exploits of Henry Morton Stanley have not failed to impress Leopold II. He succeeds in engaging his services. In 1878 Stanley accepts the mission to establish a number of settlements along the Congo river. On 22 April 1884 the United States was the first country to officially recognize the International Association of the Congo. At the Conference of Berlin in 1885, organized to divide the African spoils amongst the European nations, the Congo falls into the hands of Leopold II, who has astutely played out the European superpowers against one another. He is granted sovereign rule over it. The Congo Free State is born.

The colonization of the overseas territory starts immediately. The first phase in this process is the building of a railway line, a gargantuan task costing countless lives, to link the navigable part of the Congo river with the ocean. This railway line is a crucial cog in the economic machine of the colony because it enables the exploitation of the interior. When in the first years of the 20th century the inhuman treatment of the Congolese population is revealed mainly through the sustained campaign of Edmund Dene Morel, a British activist, and Roger Casement, the British consul in the Congo, Leopold II has to give up control over his kingdom on the equator. Under Belgian stewardship the ruthless exploitation of the Congo is continued but without the brutal excesses which characterised king Leopold II's reign of terror.

The Belgian population seems to be suffering from collective memory loss regarding the unsavoury aspects of their nation's colonial past. Colonial history has been thoroughly

airbrushed: the uncritical acceptance of the beneficial Belgian presence in the Congo was so overwhelming and widespread that the dissenting voices were drowned out in the tide of naïve enthusiasm, ideological and religious myopia, Eurocentric megalomania, moral hypocrisy and political and commercial expediency.

In his essay *Het koloniale in de literatuur* (the colonial in literature) written by Sylva De Jonghe in 1938 the author defines the concept 'colonial' as follows:

The colonial refers to what is related to the Colony, to the profit area, which is exploited by a more advanced and more civilized country, in order to civilize the colony and to uplift the population through this exploitation. Indeed, civilization seems to be the first objective of the colonization. Civilizing means the creation of a new and better social environment and the spreading of the greatest of all benefactions: spiritual order and the Christian faith [...] (De Jonghe 1938: 7) (2).

Sylva de Jonghe seems to be blind to the fact that the terms 'exploitation' and 'civilization' make strange bedfellows. This type of convoluted and contradictory reasoning is typical of a large number of pro-colonial texts. The argumentation in favour of the Congolese colony is nearly always riddled with inconsistencies and misrepresentations if it is not blatantly hypocritical or downright misleading. The same can be said of the literary works written by authors who support the colonization effort. However, there are also authors who, from the very start of the colonial undertaking, do not slavishly follow the orthodox line. Their books are testimony of critical reflection, genuine concern and personal involvement. It can be no surprise that these literary works are of a much higher literary quality than those written by their colonialist counterparts. In what follows I shall discuss some of the fictitious texts and travelogues on the Congo written in the first phase of the colonization, namely the period between roughly 1885 and 1908.

2 Colonialist prose

Ook een ideaal (Also an ideal) by Pieter Danco, published in 1896, is the very first Flemish novel written by an author who had stayed in the Congo. Pieter Danco spent a three year stint in Boma where was a civil servant. The novel centres on a love affair. Hugo von Litze is a railway engineer and an agnostic; Helene Hoogenbosch, who is sorely tried by fate, is determined to convert Hugo to her catholic faith. The predictable melodramatic happy-end brings an unremarkable story to its syrupy close.

The way in which the Congo features in the novel is very revealing. The Congo is nothing but an exotic background. All the main characters are whites. Bomala is the black

household help of Helene. She is an orphan whose father died due to exhaustion: as a porter he had to carry heavy loads on the caravan trail between his village and Matadi. Nevertheless he was “[...] one of the first indigenous persons to realize that the civilization which the sons of the cold North brought to the children of the warm South was a blessing; that they had come out of love for their fellow human beings and not out of egoism in order to bring the light that radiates from the North to them and to allow them to benefit from all the advantages of material and spiritual improvement and progress” (Danco 1896: 15-16) (3). Helene, who loves music, likes reading books and is always hard at work, tries, as any good mother would, to instill in Bomala, the principles of civilization and of Christianity in order to “[...] wear away from the child the rough innate bark and to round off her education” (Danco 1896: 16) (4). She even considers taking Bomala back to Europe with her but decides against it as Helene is convinced that Bomala can be more useful in the Congo than in Europe “[...] where she would be in contact with the depraved civilization” (Danco 1896: 26) (5).

The reader is not allowed to lose sight of the fact that the main reason for the presence of the Europeans in Africa is to erect the beacon of civilization on the dark continent. The building of the railway line between Boma and Stanley Pool is the most important symbol of this task. But in their single-minded eagerness to carry out their idealistic mission the blacks are all but sidelined by the whites. When The Senegalese railway workers revolt against their treatment and launch an attack on the whites, they are described as “raging animals” (Danco 1896: 70) (6). The attackers are beaten off with no regard for limb or life. This assault is not more than a minor incident which momentarily enlivens the plot but is quickly forgotten.

Self-sacrifice is one of the main themes in the novel. However, the concept is only applied to the personal relationships between the white characters and is thus turned inwards. As early as 1877 a booklet by A.-C. Van der Cruyssen *Afrika, naar de beste bronnen* (Africa on the basis of the best sources) was published. The author concludes his description with the following climactic exhortation: “Yes, it will become a general crusade, not anymore with the sword in hand, but with words of peace and conviction, with feelings of love in the heart, with self-sacrifice in the soul!” (Van der Cruyssen 1877: 144) (7). *Ook een ideal* by Pieter Danco vividly illustrates the restricted applicability of this ideal in the Congo. Thus from the very beginning the mission to civilize the Congolese peoples is clearly circumscribed.

The theme of self-sacrifice is also prominently present in the travelogue *Van Antwerpen*

naar Stanley-Pool (From Antwerp to Stanley-Pool) by Pieter De Mey. De Mey travelled to the Congo in very select company on the occasion of the inauguration of the railway line in Leopoldville on 6 July 1898. In his book he describes his trip on the Albertville to and from the Congo and of course also his short sojourn in the Congo. In spite of his critical remarks concerning the unacceptable behaviour of some whites, he eulogizes the work done by the Belgians in the Congo and what they have managed to achieve in a very short span of time. The railway line will open up the interior of the Congo as Fuchs the governor of the Congo points out in his speech: “Its completion, he said, is a decisive step in the royal task and opens up a large area for all activity: commerce, Christianization, industry” (De Mey 1899: 228) (8). The proselytizing work and commercial and industrial activities are once again mentioned in one and the same breath.

The fact that the building of the railway line has cost a large number of lives is described as regrettable but also inevitable. It is proof of the determination of the Belgians, their sense of initiative and their stamina. The author is convinced that the Belgian presence in the Congo is very beneficial. The Congolese population will only understand this when the light of civilization will have enlightened them. At a cemetery for whites De Mey makes the following comment: “They have died in the carrying out of their noble task: the opening up of these barbaric regions for Christian civilization. The soil, in which they rest, will undoubtedly in later times be considered holy by the African, when he will understand at last for which magnificent task of salvation these humble heroes have sacrificed their lives” (De Mey 1899: 225) (9). Indeed the Africans are still living in the darkness of barbarism from which the Belgians will rescue them. In the short period they have been in the Congo they have achieved much more than any other colonizing nation. But their task will be long and difficult. The blacks are described as barbaric and primitive. The whites have to show the way forward, the Congolese population will follow their example.

The white colonizers have every right to be in the Congo. Their presence is described as “taking possession through civilization” (De Mey 1899: 230) (10) and a “European occupation” (De Mey 1899: 232) (11). De Mey often refers to the jungle as “maagdelijk” (virgin) thus suggesting that it is uninhabited. The bringing of civilization is nearly always linked to the exploitation of the Congo through commercial and industrial activities. As the Congolese themselves did not exploit the natural resources of their country, the Belgians have every right to do so. Self-sacrifice and self-interest go hand-in-hand. De Mey remarks that when the black man will start wearing clothes he will be a good customer of the

Belgian weaving industry (De Mey 1899: 190). De Mey's book is an unmitigated welcome of the colonization of the Congo.

Danco's stay in the Congo partially overlapped with Constant De Deken's trip to the Congo from June 1892 to October 1894. De Deken is a member of the Missions of Scheut. In the travelogue *Twee jaren in Congo* (Two years in the Congo) (1902), republished in 1952 as *Twee jaar in Congo*, he provides an account of his trip. In the introduction it is pointed out that De Deken's travelogue had a twofold aim: firstly to show the progress which was being made by the missionaries in the Congo and secondly to demonstrate that the Congo was not so dangerous to the health of the white man as was generally believed on condition that he takes the necessary precautions.

De Deken approaches the Congo from a Eurocentric perspective. Moreover, as a missionary, he is convinced that everybody who is not a catholic is a dysfunctional human being. In the Congo he travels mainly by boat on the Congo river in the company of white people: fellow missionaries, civil servants and soldiers. He has the deepest admiration for them. De Deken stresses that the white presence in the Congo is very beneficial as the chaos and the anarchy, characteristic of the social fabric of the black communities, are being replaced by organisation and order.

Not surprisingly De Deken stresses that the tasks of the soldier and of the missionary are complementary: "In carrying out the work of civilizing the Congo the soldier has to be the ally of the priest" (De Deken 1952: 190) (12). And when the army is severely criticized he asserts that the missionary is the soldier's most trusted friend: "One has slandered these courageous soldiers unfairly by presenting a few deplorable exceptions as the general rule" (54-55) (13). When on the boat travelling up or down the Congo river a real or imagined threat is perceived, De Deken is fully prepared, gun in hand, together with the other whites on board, to stoutly defend the steamer on which he is travelling. He makes a point of stating that the railway line is the most remarkable thing he has seen in the Congo. He even goes so far as accepting that the missionaries use alcohol to barter for food in the area below Leopoldville despite the fact that he denounces this practice as a scourge. De Deken is an unequivocal apologist for the Belgian colonization of the Congo.

The blacks are described as barbaric, cruel and childlike. Moreover, most of them are cannibals. The only good blacks are the ones that are friendly towards the whites: they are slowly ascending the ladder of civilization. The goal of the civilization process, however, is not full equality with the whites but the speedy integration of the blacks into the administrative and economic system of the colony: "The negroes should be educated,

should be civilized through the faith which uplifts and purifies, and soon they will be found capable of carrying out all the services needed by the trading companies and the State” (De Deken 1952: 52) (14).

De Deken is not at all aware of or concerned about the negative impact of the presence of the whites on the blacks and on their communities. The most telling episode in this regard is the one in which he recounts the outbreak of a smallpox epidemic. While travelling on the Congo river a young black boy falls ill. He is suffering from small-pox. Soon a number of black crew members are infected as well. In order to prevent the spreading of the disease, the victims are put on shore together with a supply of goods they can use to exchange for food. De Deken describes the catastrophic consequences as follows:

The inhabitants of that region, lured by the bartering products we had left with our sick people had come into contact with them and thus had brought the infection to their own villages. One year later the region of the *Sankuru* was still affected by smallpox, ten thousand blacks had succumbed to it, whole villages had been deserted and burned to the ground by their inhabitants who had moved to the shores of lake Leopold. And when I, as I will recount later, passed by the same spot, with the nuns who I had to take from Leopoldville to Luluaburg, on the same steamer, the ‘Stanley’, our boat was immediately recognized and angrily attacked with arrows and spears, under the guise that it had brought the plague to the region. We had to flee at once [...] (De Deken 1952: 89-90)(15).

No further comment is provided. Not even a disaster of epic proportions can throw the intrepid missionary off his stride. The black victims are seen as unavoidable collateral damage of the civilization and Christianization drive.

De Deken’s travelogue is a curious mixture of anecdotes and adventures, interspersed with the admiring description of the fauna and flora and of the noteworthy features of the landscape of the Congo. He is an avid collector of birds and plants. Notwithstanding his low opinion of the way of living of the blacks, he is very keen to lay his hands on their artefacts for the museum of Scheut in Belgium. The Congo is to De Deken a treasure trove of exotic plants, strange animals and quaint objects and artefacts. He is a collector of curiosities and a narrator of trivialities.

The blacks only feature in the background of De Deken’s travelogue. A description of the characteristics of some tribes is concluded as follows: “But let us stop this boring description of the different tribes, to pay attention to the daily occurrences on our trip” (De

Deken 1952: 141) (16). Indeed these seem to be of paramount importance. De Deken's *Twee jaar in Congo* almost exclusively deals with the superficial banalities of travelling in the tropics. No attempt is undertaken to break through the surface in order to gain a deeper understanding of the country, its peoples, their cultures and social structures or of their precarious relationship with the white colonizers including the missionaries.

De Deken remains an outsider, a trophy hunter. The missionary unwittingly portrays himself as the indomitable explorer-collector-conqueror. He focuses on the differences between Belgium and the Congo. Obviously these highlight the superiority of the spiritual and cultural life, the technological achievements and the material comforts of European civilization. With every stroke of the pen De Deken's *Twee jaar in Congo* forces the black man into an inferior position. The colonized are not liberated but enslaved once more. His book gives carte blanche to the Belgian colonizers. Fifty years after the initial publication of De Deken's travelogue the same attitude is still prevalent in Belgium and in Flanders. Indeed in the introduction to *Twee jaar in Congo* the hope is expressed that the re-publication "[...] will greatly contribute to the adoration which our youth and our people should give to this tough traveller and missionary" (De Deken 1952: 6) (17).

Herinneringen aan Congo (Memories of the Congo) by Désiré Bossaerts, who stayed in the Congo between 1904 and 1907, is also meant as an apology for Leopold II's colonial rule. He does not succeed in making a convincing case as the text deconstructs itself. Bossaerts was stationed at Boma where he worked as a civil servant in the judiciary. On the basis of the diary he kept during his stay, he drafted *Herinneringen aan Congo* around 1920. His book only got published in 2007 with an introduction by Hein Vanhee.

The arrival of Bossaerts in the Congo coincided with the investigation by the Belgian commission mandated by Leopold II to look into the allegations and accusations of the gruesome cruelties committed in the Congo. In the chapter 'Tuchtigingsmaatregelen en straffen in voege in Congo' (Measures of punishment and penalties used in the Congo) he admits that some whites behave in a deplorable manner towards the blacks. To Bossaerts the behaviour of these whites is inexcusable.

Bossaerts makes a distinction between civilized whites and wild whites. The latter are the prey of their uncontrollable passions and commit unimaginable atrocities. Bossaerts describes some of these horrific acts. His aim is not to denounce the colonization, on the contrary. He emphatically asserts that these incidents are aberrations and that the judicial apparatus does all in its power to bring the guilty to trial: "In the cases in which it was still possible to have justice done, the guilty were tried and punished" (Bossaerts 2007: 241)

(18). According to Bossaerts the authorities do their utmost to uphold the law. Moreover, the majority of the whites are committed to civilizing the Congolese population. Bossaerts asserts with confidence that the colonizers will be successful: “Big difficulties have already been overcome and the day is dawning when the wild nature of these peoples will make room for civilized feelings” (Bossaerts 2007: 242) (19).

The largest part of his memories is devoted to a description of the different expeditions Bossaerts claims to have undertaken. In the introduction Hein Vanhee points out that it is unlikely that he made all these trips himself. Bossaerts depicts himself in the role of the investigating officer sent out to look into different incidents the authorities have been informed about, such as the disappearance of a white trader, the refusal by a village to provide manual labour, the ritual killing of some of the wives of a chief after his death, a case of cannibalism etc.

Bossaerts describes the hardships he endured on his expeditions, the dangers he has to face, the constant threats from hostile tribes who resent the presence of the whites and the imposition of white rule and the investigations he has to carry out in difficult circumstances. To the blacks he introduces himself as the “white man from the court” (Bossaerts 2007: 84) (20). He never tires of pointing out to the villagers that he judges equitably and fearlessly. Bossaerts is not at all aware of the ambiguities in his role, behaviour and decisions. He never questions the white man’s judicial system nor his own duties as a judicial officer. To Bossaerts the King’s law is simply the law. He does not understand the antagonistic reaction of the blacks to his presence nor does he have any inkling of the destructive impact of the white government’s law on the black communities. To the blacks these laws are completely incomprehensible, totally illogical, extremely harsh and utterly unfair. They fear the arrival of the white man from the court.

Bossaerts also does not seem to realize that the black tribes can only be subjected to this law by the use of brutal force. His is the law of the strongest. Tellingly, Bossaerts is always accompanied if not surrounded by soldiers. He always has his gun and a browning at the ready. Whenever his caravan meets resistance or comes under attack Bossaerts is quick to react with unrestrained force in order to shock and awe the blacks into submission. When he is carrying out his investigations he does not shy away from the use of threats and the taking of hostages. Everybody who opposes him is considered to be an enemy and portrayed as a barbarian. Especially the chiefs and the witch doctors are the targets of Bossaerts’ scorn. The outcome of his investigations, which is a foregone conclusion, often leads to the rounding up of a large number of blacks. *Herinneringen aan Congo* abounds in

contradictions which completely undermine Bossaerts' case that through the imposition of the law of the white man the Congo is gradually becoming a civilized country. Bossaerts' account unwittingly confirms the inhumane nature of the colonization as a result of the white man's disdainful disregard for the black man, his culture and traditions.

Herinneringen aan Congo also includes the short story 'De liefde van Janga en Makwara' (The love of Janga and Makwara), a love story between a black boy and girl, with a jealous suitor and an abduction as complicating twists. The story is a prime example of inauthenticity. Janga and Makwara behave like Europeans with a black skin. The story demonstrates once again Bossaerts' imposition of his own value system on black communities.

3 Critics of the colonization

3.1 Colonization with a human face

The American William H. Sheppard and the Fleming Arnold Maes show much more respect for the blacks than Danco, De Deken and Bossaerts do. William H. Sheppard's autobiography *Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo* differs markedly from De Deken's travel account. William Sheppard was a black American who went to the Congo in 1890 and stayed there for 20 years. According to Adam Hochschild in his *King Leopold's Ghost* the reason for sending a black missionary to the Congo had to do with race politics in America. White supremacists like Alabama Senator John Tyler Morgan hoped that he would pave the way for a full scale return of black Americans to Africa (Hochschild 1998: 152). Sheppard worked mainly in the Kasai region and established mission stations at Luebo and IBanj. He was the first missionary to gain access to the Kuba kingdom. In his letters, articles and speeches when on leave in the United States and the United Kingdom, he campaigned against Leopold II's colonial rule. As a result of his critical stance he became very famous and even met the American presidents Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt. In 1909 he was sued for libel by the Kasai Company, which Sheppard had accused of cruelly exploiting the Kuba people. He was put on trial in Leopoldville but acquitted.

About the first years of his Congo experience Sheppard wrote the book *Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo* (1917). It is remarkable that Sheppard focuses on his adventures, his skills as a hunter and his work as a missionary. In the Congo Sheppard was nicknamed "the black Livingstone" and "the king of huntsmen". He does not once mention the atrocities nor his nor his church's role in exposing the reign of terror the blacks are subjected to. Instead, the book portrays a missionary and adventurer who is not easily cowed and who often risks his own

life.

What sets him apart from De Deken, is the way in which he describes the Kuba people. Sheppard is very impressed by the orderly society they have established, by their way of living and their cultural products. To Sheppard the Kuba people are “Highly Civilized”: “They were the finest looking race I had seen in Africa, dignified, graceful, courageous, honest, with an open, smiling countenance and really hospitable. Their knowledge of weaving, embroidering, wood carving and smelting was the highest in equatorial Africa” (Sheppard s.d.: 137). His attitude is not one of superiority. He learns their language and is interested in their customs and society. Sheppard respects the Kuba people and they in their turn show him their esteem. He nevertheless unwaveringly believes in the wholesome presence of the Christian missionaries in central Africa.

A similar open attitude is demonstrated by Arnold Maes, who is a scientific member of the first Belgian expedition to central Africa in 1877. The expedition’s brief was to set up a staging post on the shores of lake Tanganyika. Maes will not reach his destination. In Zanzibar he dies from sun stroke. He is 23 years old. The letters about his trip are published in *Reis naar Midden-Afrika* (Voyage to Central Africa) (1879). His scientific training is evident from the detailed descriptions and precise observations in his letters. But he is not only a scientist. He also comes across as a very sensitive human being. Maes does not look at his surroundings exclusively through western eyes. Sometimes he puts himself in the position of the blacks he encounters. In South Africa e.g. he utters his misgivings about the way in which the blacks are treated by the whites. In the following criticism of the whites he puts himself in the shoes of a black man: “And as far as his negative disposition towards the whites is concerned, this is the result of the fact that he considers them to be people who want to enrich themselves and who make him work to satisfy their desires. If the whites had no interest in keeping the black man as stupid as he is, he would certainly be civilised much more quickly” (Maes 1879: 165) (21). The critical remarks by Maes make of him an open minded, empathic scientist, though not without Eurocentric prejudices, who sees the blacks as fellow human beings.

3.2 Anti-colonialism

Sheppard and Maes are critical of the way in which the whites behave. They are nevertheless in favour of the colonization of the Congo. There is, however, from the outset also a remarkably strong anti-colonial strand in Dutch Congo literature. Whereas the pro-colonial texts abound in ambiguities and contradictions, the most striking characteristic of the anti-colonial texts is that they expose the hypocrisy and the fallacy which lie at the basis of

colonial imperialism. While the pro-colonial texts disguise and hide, the anti-colonial texts unmask and reveal.

The first Flemish literary texts on the Congo are two of Cyriel Buysse's satirical *Verslagen over den Gemeenteraad van Nevele* (Minutes of the municipal council meetings of Nevele), pamphlets which Buysse personally distributed in Nevele. These minutes, five in total, are also the first literary texts he wrote. The sessions of 9 April 1885 and of June 1886 are devoted to the Congo. At the meeting of 9 April the mayor proposes to send King Leopold II a message of congratulations on the occasion of his appointment as the sovereign of the Congo. The council, which consists solely of members of the catholic party, table this motion not because they want to express their support for a lofty undertaking but out of political expediency. They want to please the king in order to gain his backing in their fight against the anti-catholic liberal party. They actually take no or very little interest in the Congo and indeed do not even know where it is situated. About the Congo they can only talk in stereotypes: the Africans are portrayed as cannibals; they are very black and terribly wild. Not even the mentioning of coalmines can excite the councillors; financial gain is not what they are after. Their only concern is their own party's political fortunes. These would be greatly enhanced if the influence of liberal teachers in Belgium could be reduced. Sending them to the Congo would achieve that purpose: "If that could be true; and to send them there under the pretext of civilising the local population." (Buysse 1974: 988) (22).

In the second sketch the Congo discussion has an even more blatantly self serving character. The catholic party has recently won the municipal elections but in order to ensure its electoral victory the doubters had to be bribed into voting for the catholic party. Now the party is looking for a means to replenish its depleted funds and at the same to free itself from the liberal opposition once and for all. The bishops have come up with an ingenious scheme: a number of well to do and prominent party members are to found a colony in the Congo. When the colony is established liberals from all walks of life, especially teachers, will be enticed to leave for the Congo. As soon as they have settled there the Catholics will return to Belgium. Shortly afterwards a new tax, which will be siphoned off to the catholic party, will be imposed on imports from the colony. The mayor considers this to be a brilliant plan and volunteers to be the chief of the new colony, which is to be given the name Noume-Assialand or New-Oxencountry. The remainder of the meeting is devoted to choosing who will accompany him on his mission.

The absurd exchanges and incidents, the use of the local dialect and a horrible Dutch-French mixture rob the councillors of their last shred of dignity and make them into laughing-

stocks. The portrayal of the main characters, the farcical dialogues and the comical situations make the mockery all the more biting. The council debates abound with hilarious absurdities. Through this irreverential treatment Buysse indicates that the parochial Belgian politicians have to civilise themselves first before they can afford to entertain imperialistic ambitions. Belgium had better stay out of the Congo. The last two minutes of the village council meetings of Nevele are the first anti-colonial texts in Flemish literature. Before the colonial enterprise had gained significant momentum Buysse is already asking questions about its usefulness and is highly critical of way in which the political establishment is manipulating the Congo for its own selfish purposes.

In *De zwarte kost* (Black grub), a novella published in 1898, Buysse returns both to the colonial theme and to the scathingly satirical treatment of his subject matter. Buysse's *De zwarte kost* is firmly rooted in Flemish soil. The story is set in the small village of Akspoel. Its main character is the stuttering Fortuné Massijn, the clerk of the notary. Massijn is obsessed with the mania of making the acquaintance of strangers. He lavishes attention on them and buys them drinks in the local inns. As a result of his eccentric behaviour Massijn frequently becomes the target of the villagers' mockery and scorn.

Some time after a disastrous visit by two Congolese princes to Akspoel, Massijn, inspired by the travel literature he has read, decides to leave for the Congo. Immediately he gains the stature he has always longed for. After a tearful departure the letters Massijn sends back home keep his family and friends informed about his life in the colony.

The rude confrontation with Congolese reality has a sobering effect on Massijn. He quickly realizes that the ideals he believed in were nothing but a pipe-dream. The idea of bringing western civilization to Africa is deflated as a preposterous illusion. Massijn's disillusionment is mainly brought about by the behaviour of the whites. In Africa the veneer of Western civilization is soon eaten away. Massijn's fellow colonizers uninhibitedly debauch themselves. Instead of being civilized the Congolese are being corrupted by the colonizers. Massijn is of the opinion that the blacks were much happier before they knew our civilization. The most shocking sign of the whites' moral depravity is their inability to stay away from black grub or to have intercourse with one or more black women. This licentiousness is rumoured to be the cause of a large number of untimely deaths.

Massijn is at first disgusted by this state of affairs but after some time he succumbs to the temptations of black grub himself. But he, in contrast to other whites, seems to have felt true love for his "[...] sweet Khamissi" (Buysse 1974: 454)(23). This love affair indicates that to Massijn his black lover is his equal. He has shed his feelings of superiority. He dies not long

after his arrival in the Congo. Nothing remains of his colonial adventure but a few forgotten trophies in the houses of the dignitaries of Akspoele. They are a reminder to Massijn's acquaintances that life in Akspoele is not so bad after all. The moral of *De zwarte kost* is that man should be humble because firstly, in spite of appearances, people behave in pretty much the same unflattering manner wherever they live and secondly because life is fleeting and status very tenuous.

In *De zwarte kost* the whites are the butt of Buysse's harsh criticism, some because of their narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, bigotry and ignorance, others because of their naivety and megalomania. Western civilization is not worth its name. The whites are the real barbarians; they can offer the Congo nothing but misery and hardship. Buysse denounces the colonial propaganda which plays on the exotic appeal of the Congo, the prospect of a life of adventure and the ideal of bringing Western civilization to a backward continent. The motives of the colonizers are unmasked as well: they are driven by self-glorification or base instincts and not at all by humanitarian concerns. At a time when the colonization effort was still in its infancy, its bankruptcy was publicly declared by Buysse.

Buysse publishes his novella in 1898. In the same year Henri van Booven left for the Congo in the service of a Dutch trading company. His novel *Tropenwee* (Suffering in the tropics) (1904) vividly describes the horrors awaiting the whites in central Africa. *Tropenwee* is the account of the trip undertaken by a certain Jules to the Congo. The closer he gets to the tropics and the more the heat increases, the more his unease and discomfort grow. As soon as he has landed in the Congo his chief sends him straight into the interior. On the boat on the Congo river he is weakened to such a degree by malaria and dysentery that he has to return to the Netherlands forthwith. He barely manages to survive his ordeal. The middle section of the novel consists of the hallucinatory nightmares of the main character. The last part describes the hellish return trip. Only when Jules gets closer to the north, does he feel his energy and strength returning. Congo has brought him nothing but suffering.

Tropenwee is the description of a descent into hell. The writer paints an evocative and haunting picture of Jules' excruciating spells of fever during this voyage on the Congo river. For Jules Africa is a threat. The heat, the insects and storms make his life unbearable. It is remarkable that in no way the presence of the white man in Africa is justified. Not a single word is mentioned about the civilizing mission. Only commercial interests motivate the presence of the Europeans in Africa. Once again the motives for the colonization are punctured:

It was all deceit, all lies and chicanery. Could one have done something about it? To

complain, to confront the supervisor? It would be to no avail. Then one would lose one's chance to be promoted. To work hard, to do one's duty, duty animal, duty bastard and to deceive for the benefit of the company and your own. In this way everything of value was destroyed. Nature itself withered, was just an obstacle and no more than that. And the blacks, they were black cattle who you had to treat harshly, rigidly and cruelly; you had to keep them under your thumb and make sure that they did not steal from you. With kind words? O, No! With bestial toughness and with lots of beatings. Yes, sure, ultimately you had to become a torturer, to beat your fellow human beings with dried out rhinoceros skin until they started bleeding, these hard long, dirty-yellow sticks with which you could hit so hard that whole muscle groups were torn apart ... The shares stood a lot above par and there they should stay. You had sold yourself, so duty-animal, duty-scoundrel! Duty-torturer! And all the profit to the company! (Van Booven s.d.: 118-119) (24).

Tropenwee is a fierce indictment of the fact that the suffering, the diseases, the greed, the inhumanity and the deadly victims resulting from the exploitation of the tropics are swept under the carpet. As in Buysse's *Zwarte kost* the blacks figure only in the margins of the novel. They do not form a counterweight to the depravity of the whites. Van Booven does not hold up the African or African society as an ideal. He focuses on the presence of the European in Africa. The white man is not adapted to Africa. Europe has nothing to offer to Africa apart from avarice and greed, Africa to Europe nothing but diseases and death. This sobering assessment leaves no room for colonial triumphalism and renders any alibi for colonial imperialism null and void. The novel was a popular success and is reprinted time and again.

Van Boven's novel appeared two years after the publication in book form of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). The parallels between both novels are very striking. Conrad went to the Congo in 1890. Besides *Heart of Darkness* also his short story 'An Outpost of Progress' (1897) has the Congo as its setting.

Joseph Conrad supported E.D. Morel's campaign against Leopold II. In 1904 Morel travelled to the United States at the invitation of a number of American Congo missionaries. His visit led to the setting up of the American Congo Reform Association of which Mark Twain was one of the vice-presidents. Mark Twain wrote the biting satirical *King Leopold's soliloquy* in 1905 in which, in a rambling monologue, the King defends his colonial rule with all the wrong arguments. In the United States the soliloquy had a big impact in swaying public opinion against Leopold II.

In Belgium, in contrast, the ranks were closed. The attacks on Leopold II were seen as unfair and unjustified and inspired by political motives. The same arguments which were used

by Leopold II to win popular support for his rule over the Congo kept on being used after 1908 by the Belgian government. In a brochure issued on the occasion of the Colonial Day in 1923 the colonial achievements are praised as follows:

Instead of the anarchy in which the Congolese peoples were immersed, always falling prey to civil unrest, diseases, cannibalism and slavery now peace, order, systematic and triumphant victory over local diseases have been achieved. Not a single colonising nation, has, in any area of human endeavour, shown so much determination and achieved so much success that it can in any way be compared with what Belgium has done (in Vints 1984: 54) (25).

And even today the same arguments can sometimes be heard.

The myth of a civilizing colonization was widely propagated and accepted at face value. In Flemish literature only a handful of literary works critical of Belgium's colonial involvement in the Congo have appeared in print since 1908. The praise for the labour of civilization resounds loudly and proudly throughout the colonial period and long afterwards. In recent decades with the notable exception of Lieve Joris very little literary attention has been paid to our former colony. English and American authors such as Ronan Bennet with the *The Catastrophist*, Robert Edric with *The Book of the Heathen*, Barbara Kingsolver with the *The Poisonwood Bible*, John Le Carré with the *The Mission Song* and a number of writers of travelogues such as Redmond O'Hanlon with *Congo*, Geoffrey Tayler with *Facing the Congo* and Tim Butcher with *Blood River: a Journey to Africa's Broken Heart* have been paying more attention to the Congo than Flemish authors have. It is evident that the Congo is not a popular topic in Flemish literature and in Belgian society at large, although of late there seems to be a growing interest in the Congo and its cultural products.

The Congo is indeed not such a happy or colourful place of remembrance as the 1958 World Exhibition. The Brussels World Exhibition of 1958 offers an agreeable trip down memory lane. While the World Exhibition is nostalgically remembered for its unfettered optimism and thus is associated with the bright side of hope and progress, revisiting the Congo confronts us with the dark side of our ideals: our naivety, hypocrisy, arrogance, intolerance, racism and barbarism. Who wants to be confronted with his own heart of darkness?

* all translations are mine.

Original quotations

1. "... het onderdrukken van de slavenhandel in Centraal-Afrika, het vergroten van de

- wetenschappelijke kennis van het gebied en het brengen van beschaving naar de daar woonachtige volkeren”
2. “Het koloniale is dat wat betrekking heeft tot de Kolonie, tot het wingewest, dat uitgbaat wordt door een meer gevorderd en meer beschaafd land, om door dit uitbaten die kolonie te beschaven en de bevolking op te beuren. Want, beschaving lijkt wel het eerste doel der kolonisatie. Beschaven heet scheppen van nieuwe en betere sociale toestanden en het verspreiden der grootste aller weldaden: de geestelijke orde, de kristelijke idée [...]”
 3. “Hij was een dier inlanders die ’t allereerst begrepen dat de beschaving welke de zonen uit het kille Noorden aan de kinderen van ’t warme Zuiden brachten, eene weldaad was; dat ze uit liefde tot de medemensch en niet uit ikzucht gekomen ware om hun het licht mede te deelen dat uit het Noorden straalt, en om hun al het voordeel van stoffelijke en geestelijke verbetering en vooruitgang te doen genieten.”
 4. “[...] de ruwe aangeboren schors van ’t kind af te slijten, en hare opvoeding te volmaken.”
 5. “[...] waar zij met de verdorvene beschaving in betrekking zou komen.”
 6. “razende dieren”
 7. “Ja, het zal een algemeene kruistocht worden, niet meer met het zwaard in de hand, maar met woorden van vrede en overtuiging, met liefdegevoelens in het hart, met zelfopoffering in de ziel!”
 8. “hare voltrekking, zegde hij, is een beslissende vooruitgang voor het koninklijk werk en opent een breed veld voor allen arbeid: handel, geloofsverkondiging, nijverheid.”
 9. “Zij zijn gestorven bij het vervullen eener edele taak: het openen dezer barbaarsche streken voor de christene beschaving. De grond, waar zij rusten, zal ongetwijfeld in latere tijden voor den Afrikaan heilig zijn, wanneer hij eenmaal zal begrijpen voor welk grootsch verlossingswerk deze nederige helden hun leven hebben opgeofferd.”
 10. “de inbezitneming door de beschaving”
 11. “europeesche bezetting”
 12. “In het werk der beschaving van Congoland moet de soldaat de bondgenoot van de priester zijn.”
 13. “Men heeft deze moedige soldaten zeer erg belasterd met enige jammerlijke uitzondering voor algemene regel te doen doorgaan.”
 14. “Men onderwijze de negers, men beschave ze door het geloof dat verheft en veredelt, en weldra zal men ze bekwaam vinden tot al de diensten die de handelshuizen en de Staat van doen hebben.”
 15. “De inwoners van dat gewest, aangelokt door de koopwaren welke wij bij onze zieken hadden achtergelaten, waren met hen in aanraking gekomen, en hadden aldus de besmetting in hun eigen dorpen overgebracht. Een jaar later heerstten de pokken nog in de streek van de *Sankuru*, tien duizend negers waren bezweken, ganse dorpen waren verlaten en afgebrand door hun inwoners, die daarna naar de oevers van het Leopoldmeer verhuisd waren. En toen ik, zoals ik in ’t vervolg zal vertellen, met de Zusters die ik van Leopoldville naar Luluaburg moest brengen, op dezelfde stoomboot, de ‘Stanley’, daar voorbijkwam, werd ons schip aanstonds herkend, en woedend met pijlen en werpspiesen aangevallen, onder voorwendsel dat het de pest in de streek gebracht had. Wij moesten in aller haast de vlucht nemen [...]”
 16. “Doch laat ons van deze vervelende beschrijving der verschillende volksstammen afzien, om ons met de dagelijkse voorvallen onzer reis bezig te houden.”
 17. “[...] zal op rijke wijze bijdragen tot de verering die onze jeugd en gans ons volk verschuldigd zijn aan deze stoere reiziger en missionaris [...]”
 18. “In de gevallen waar het nog mogelijk was recht te doen geschieden, heeft men de

- schuldigen geoordeeld en gestraft.”
19. “Grote moeilijkheden zijn reeds overwonnen en de dag is in het verschiet dat de wilde ingeborenheid dezer volkeren voor beschaafde gevoelens de plaats zal ruimen.”
 20. “de ‘blanke van het gerecht’”
 21. “En wat zijne weinige ingenomenheid voor de blanken aangaat, dit komt hieruit voort, dat hij ze aanschouwt als lieden, die het maar op het geld hebben en hem doen werken om hunne begeerten te voldoen. Indien de blanken er geen belang in vonden om den neger zoo dom te laten, als hij is, zou deze zeker veel spoediger beschaafd zijn.”
 22. “Dat da kost waar zijn; en ze daar naartoe zenden onder voorwendsel van ’t volk ginder te gaan beschaven.”
 23. “mijn lieve Khamissi”
 24. “Het was alles bedriegerij, alles leugen en bedrog. Was er iets aan te doen geweest? Opspelen, standjes maken bij den hoofd-inspecteur? Dat gaf niets. Dat kon alleen kans geven op weinig promotie. Hard werken maar en plicht doen, plicht-dier, plichtschoff zijn en mee bedriegen ten bate van de vennootschap en ten eigen bate. Op die manier ging alle moois weg. De natuur werd er zelfs dor van, hinderlijk alleen nog maar, meer dan hinderlijk. En de zwarten, dat was het zwarte vee waartegen je hard moest zijn, stug, wreed; die moest je onder den duim houden, zorgen, dat ze je niet bestalen. Met goede woorden? O! Neen! Met beestachtige hardheid en met veel ransel. Ja, zeker, beul moest je ten slotte ook nog worden, je medemenschen ten-bloede slaan met gedroogde nijpaardenhuid, van die harde, lange, vuil-gele stokken waarmee je een slag geven kon, die heele spierbundels stuk rukte De aandeelen stonden ver boven pari, en boven pari zouden ze blijven. Je had je verkocht, dus plicht-dier, plicht-schurk! Plicht-beul! En alle winsten voor de Vennootschap!
 25. “In plaats van de anarchie waarin de Kongolese volkeren gedompeld lagen, steeds ten prooi aan burgertwist, ziekte, menseneterij en slavenhandel, heersen er thans vrede, orde, stelselmatige en zegevierende bestrijding der plaatselijke ziekten. Geen enkele koloniserende natie deed, op elk gebied van 's mensen bedrijvigheid, een krachtinspanning blijken welke kan vergeleken worden met deze door België verwezenlijkt.”

References

- Bossaerts, Désiré. 2007. *Herinneringen aan Congo*. Antwerpen: Uitgeverij Manteau/Standaard Uitgeverij.
- Bennett, Ronan. 1998. *The Catastrophist*. London: Review Books.
- Butcher, Tim. 2007. *Blood River: a Journey to Africa's Broken Heart*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Buysse, Cyriel. 1974. *Verzameld werk 4*. Brussel: Manteau.
- Buysse, Cyriel. 1974. *Verzameld werk 7*. Brussel: Manteau.
- Conrad, Joseph. 1960. *Tales of Heroes and History*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Conrad, Joseph. 1989. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin.
- Danco, Pieter. 1896. *Ook een ideaal*. Gent: A. Siffer.
- De Deken, Constant. 1952. *Twee jaar in Congo*. Antwerpen: De Vlijt.
- De Jonghe, Sylva. 1938. *Het koloniale in de literatuur*. Turnhout: Van Mierlo-Proost.
- De Mey, Pieter. 1899. *Van Antwerpen naar Stanley-Pool*. Turnhout: Boekdrukkerij Joseph Splichal.
- Edric, Robert. 2000. *The Book of the Heathen*. London: Black Swan.
- Foeken, D. 1985. ‘België behoeft een kolonie’. *De ontstaansgeschiedenis van Kongo Vrijstaat*. Antwerpen/Amsterdam: De Vries/Brouwers.
- Hochschild, Adam. 1998. *King Leopold's Ghost*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

- Joris, Lieve. 1992. *Terug naar Kongo*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.
- Joris, Lieve. 2001. *Dans van de luipaard*. Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.
- Joris, Lieve. 2006. *Het uur van de rebellen*. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Augustus.
- Kingsolver, Barbara. 1998. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: HarperFlamingo.
- Le Carré, John. 2006. *The Mission Song*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Maes, Arnold. 1879. *Reis naar Midden-Afrika*. Leuven: Peeters-Ruelens.
- O'Hanlon, Redmond. 2001. *Congo*. S.l.: Pandora.
- Sheppard, William H. s.d. *Presbyterian Pioneers in Congo*. Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication.
- Taylor, Jeffrey. 2000. *Facing the Congo*. London: Abacus.
- Twain Mark. 1970. *King Leopold's Soliloqui*. New York: International Publishers.
- Van Booven, H. s.d. *Tropenwee*. Amsterdam: Maatschappij voor goede en goedkoope lectuur.
- Van der Cruyssen, A.-C. *Afrika, naar de beste bronnen*. Kortrijk: Ch. Vandesteene.
- Vints, L. 1984. *Kongo made in Belgium*. Leuven: Kritak.