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## **BOOK REVIEWS**

**Emma Christopher. *A Merciless Place: The Lost Story of Britain's Convict Disaster in Africa and How it Led to the Settlement of Australia*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2010, pp. 448 (paperback). ISBN 9781742372273, \$A 35.00.**

The ‘founding’ of New South Wales in 1788 as a penal colony is commonly understood to be the major event that ignited the creation of the modern Australian state. This convict landing episode is taught throughout the country’s schools and has been recounted in numerous historical texts. Even ‘Australia Day,’ a date of supposed nationalistic celebration, has been controversially established on the anniversary of this historical event. Those with a more nuanced understanding of colonial history might further be aware that the United States was also used for penal transportation from Britain since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, with this practice coming to a sudden halt in 1776 due to the American War of Independence. The end of the United States as destination for convicts in turn provoked the search for a suitable replacement in Australia. However, few people are aware that between the American Revolution in 1776 and the arrival of the first fleet in 1788, there were numerous penal experiments across Africa, which acted as precursors to Australian settlement. This is a nearly forgotten and untold piece of history. That is, at least until now.

Emma Christopher narrates this important chapter in British colonial history, which is set during a period when the British presence in Africa was limited to a handful of strategic forts along the West African coast. These forts were being utilized by British merchants trading in commodities, both human and material, across Africa. After the settling of convicts in the United States was no longer a possibility, the British judicial system, continually seeking alternatives to hangings and long prison sentences, perceived these small outposts as a potential solution to the British convict problem. However, the fallout from these experiments was nothing short of astonishing, which resulted in acts of piracy, torture, horrific murders, wars and widespread desertions. It is remarkable that this interesting piece of colonial historical has not been recounted in detail before.

Overall, *A Merciless Place* is an extremely engaging read. Christopher is reflexive enough in her writing to provide insight into the process of

historical reconstruction and ensure rigour in her analysis, while still maintaining a fluent broader narrative. This means that the work is highly relevant as an academic text, while still being accessible (and appealing) to a broader reading audience that has an interest in early colonial African and Australian history. Christopher utilizes extended accounts of relevant individuals, both convicts and those sent to guard them, as a method from which to unfold her story. Thus the reader encounters a series of remarkable individual tales, which are interwoven to provide pictures of what can be only described as a failed experiment.

One of the most interesting aspects of *A Merciless Place* for ARAS readers is the links that Christopher makes between Australian and African colonial histories. As she has elsewhere noted, “Africa was viewed, in itself, as punishment for white men, and often seen as not fit at all for white women. For the black poor, however, it was deemed the right and fitting place.”<sup>1</sup> Australia emerged as an alternative to West Africa which had been reaffirmed during these experiments as being a ‘white man’s grave.’ Nevertheless it was seen as an ideal location for former black slaves living in London. On the same day the first fleet set sail from London, other boats full of these ‘black poor’ were setting sail for Sierra Leone to found a settlement that would later become the city of Freetown. Christopher’s examination of the vicissitudes of these penal settlement experiments in Africa ultimately provides insights into British society during this period, the unease surrounding British criminal society, broader class tensions and the complexity of race relations, which led to the shipping out of these ‘unwanted’ elements of British society in 1787.

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Christopher, “A ‘Disgrace to the Very Colour’: Perceptions of Blackness and Whiteness in the founding of Sierra Leone and Botany Bay,” *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 9:3 (2008) [https://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/journal\\_of\\_colonialism\\_and\\_colonial\\_history/v009/9.3.christopher.html](https://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v009/9.3.christopher.html)

**Peter McCann. *Stirring the Pot A History of African Cuisine*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010. ISBN 9780896802728, \$A 26.95.**

Anyone who has experienced African life will be well aware of the vast range of dishes, ingredients, and flavours that one encounters from region to region throughout the continent. Such a variety of cuisines reflects the cultural diversity of Africa and is also a marker of local cultural identity. While many publications have presented African cuisine in the form of recipes and cookery books, few have delved deeper than the basics of meal preparation. It is refreshing that some authors have explored further, and pose, for example, the question - "What can we learn about African history from its cookery?" This matter is the central focus of "Stirring the pot. A history of African cuisine", a text by the history professor James C. McCann.

Within the disciplines of Cultural Studies and History research on food traditions is a relatively new though expanding area of enquiry. McCann adds to it by examining Africa's culinary arts as an "historical phenomenon," influenced by empires and the cultural exchanges that mark major historical events. In the opening chapter he illustrates his assertion by providing descriptions of the basic ingredients available to cooks in Africa over the past few thousand years. He examines the distribution of the ingredients, their origins, and their incorporation in local dishes. In later chapters the influences of new food types on culinary practices is discussed, and thus a basic chronology of the history of African cuisines is presented, with a final chapter on "Diaspora cookery."

McCann informs us that one of the principal reasons for the great diversity found in African cuisines lies in the distribution of raw materials. Here, he draws our attention to the introduction and exportation of various food types. His description of the introduction of New World crops (tomatoes, corn, pineapples, etc) is enhanced by his list of African foods that were exported (okra, coffee, millet, etc), and a chapter is devoted to the topic of "Africa, circulation, and the New World Pot." Here the author introduces the term "the Atlantic circulation," which is the cultural exchange between Africa and the New World, and underscores its importance in the development of African culinary cultures. This huge flow of ideas, recipes, and ingredients had a major impact on African (and New World) cuisines, and here McCann emphasises his point that cultural exchange lies at the heart of modern African cuisine. His argument thus rejects the static notions of "traditional" food, but rather impresses upon the reader that what makes a

cuisine unique is a multiplicity of factors that help shape society itself.

McCann saves a large section of his book for the topic of Ethiopian cuisine, which covers some 500 years of their culinary practices. Here he discusses the links between food and national identity, and focuses on the efforts of Queen Taytu Bitul in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. He provides a fascinating account of her national feasts, which lasted many days, and which heralded both a new political order and a new concept of nationhood through the repertoire of dishes presented. The author also situates the cuisines of West Africa, such as the Akan, Asante, and Manding, within a broad historical framework which covers the colonial period to the modern era.

It is unfortunate that in the media Africa is often associated with famine and poor nutrition. Little evidence is provided to show the rich diversity of regional cuisines on offer, and the important role that cooking has in Africa's history. This text by McCann will hopefully go some way to correct that notion, while also illustrating the important relationship between food, identity, and history. An extensive list of local terms for staple ingredients is also included in the text, as are numerous recipes, some of which are centuries old. The author also writes extensively on the origin and usage of staple cooking ingredients such as rice, yams, sorghum, millet, cassava, plaintains, maize, and chillies, and discusses cooking techniques that have evolved over time. The text is thus suitable for students and chefs alike.

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**Francis Mading Deng. *Sudan at the Brink: Self-Determination and National Unity*. New York: Fordham University Press, The Institute for International Humanitarian Affairs, 2010, pp. xi + 55 (paperback), ISBN 9780823234417.**

Immediately after the January 2011 referendum in Sudan, Francis Deng, former Sudanese diplomat, scholar, international civil servant and one of the key architects of Sudan's peace agreement, felt so compelled by allegations he had voted for unity that he released a public statement to South Sudanese media clarifying (a) that he "did not vote" because he comes from the contested region of Abyei and (b) that had he been entitled to do so, "there [could] be no doubt that [he] would have voted for the secession of the South."<sup>1</sup> In that same statement he refers his accusers to his book *Sudan at the Brink*, where he has articulated his position on the question of separation versus unity. This position is generally linked to the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army leader, Dr. John Garang's vision of New Sudan that is democratic, secular and non-discriminatory.

Garang championed this concept, and one can infer from his speeches immediately after his swearing in as First Vice President of Sudan and President of the Government of South Sudan following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) signed to end Africa's longest civil war in 2005, that he wanted to keep pursuing it.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Garang died in a helicopter crash in 2005 and all evidence seems to support the argument that his dream of New Sudan did go with him. In *Sudan at the Brink* Deng does not seem to let go even if he acknowledges that unity under the current system is untenable and cannot produce the vision of New Sudan.

The vision of New Sudan is an appealing one and Deng makes a convincing case for keeping it alive. However, history has taught South Sudanese that more often than not, religion – and I mean Islam here – seems to be more effective than race or social class, as a uniting force in

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Mading Deng, "Statement by Dr. Francis M. Deng" *Gurtong.net & New Sudan Vision* (20 January 2011), <http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/4721/categoryId/120/Statement-by-Dr-Francis-M-Deng.aspx> (accessed 1 March 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Soon after swearing in, Garang fronted a crowd of Sudanese who shouted "bilad junub wa bilad shumal!" and said, "Baz, haikun Bilad as-Sudan" (There will just be Sudan [not North & South as the crowd suggested]) – *Sudan TV*, January 2005 (author's translation).

the Old Sudan. For example, one historian has observed that “northern Sudan has been united by Islam, and therefore confronts the south with a political and cultural unity.”<sup>3</sup> Problems in the Muslim regions of the north may contradict this point but the entrenched view in Khartoum that a non-Muslim has no right to rule a country with more than 65% Muslims is one that Deng himself concedes, albeit with qualification. If this argument is not contested, then how can the vision of New Sudan be achieved?

That said, there are other elements of *Sudan at the Brink* that urgently need to be heeded. The first is amicable separation and maintenance of amicable and cooperative relations. Deng argues that the North and the South have such intimate knowledge of each other and so much reach into each other’s territory and populace that acting otherwise could result in humanitarian catastrophe or even genocide. This is true, but his proposal to share natural resources other than the Nile seems too much a price for appeasement.

The most commendable part of the book, however, is not Deng’s rumination on the prospects of secession or unity but his reflection on the peace process. Deng has written about conflict resolution a few times before but this summary of the ten basic principles drawn from Dinka practices but also common among African societies, comes, not only from a long and deep scholarly engagement with Dinka and African customs, laws and social life but also from first hand participation in conflict resolutions like the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

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<sup>3</sup> Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of Sudan’s Civil War*, Suffolk: James Currey, (2003):1