

# BOOK REVIEW

**Charles van Onselen. *The Cowboy Capitalist: John Hays Hammond, The American West and the Jameson Raid in South Africa*.** Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2018. xviii + 557 pp. Maps. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0813941318.

Charles van Onselen is arguably the most talented and influential South African historian of his generation. His latest book, *The Cowboy Capitalist: John Hays Hammond, The American West and the Jameson Raid in South Africa*, focuses on the influential elite composed of both mine owners and politicians of late nineteenth-century South Africa. Van Onselen presents us with a colorful and sometimes outrageous cast of characters entwined in schemes to either win money or power, or both. The primary trio is well-known: Cecil Rhodes, Leander Starr Jameson, and less well-known—at least to South Africanists—is the titular protagonist John Hays Hammond or “Cowboy Jack,” as van Onselen dubs him. In addition to these three, we meet a real cast of characters out of the old West: the cowboy Charlie Siringo and “Barbarian” Brown, and even the protagonists of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Van Onselen reveals all of their more colorful attributes including Jameson’s addictions and Hammond’s fascination with both American cowboys and British aristocrats.

But this book argues for more than a fascinating story of intrigue and failure. The real subject of the book is nothing short of a revision of our understanding of the causes and consequences of the Jameson Raid, the ill-fated military maneuver led by Jameson to overthrow the administration of Paul Kruger, president of the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR). As van Onselen sees it, the Jameson Raid was a uniquely pivotal moment in South African history, leading to the South African War and thus to the establishment of the Union of South Africa and ultimately to a political regime that ensured the impoverishment and exploitation of the African population. Van Onselen argues that the shortcomings of the current literature on the Jameson Raid have trapped the event and its aftermath in a “predictable, tedious, two-way north-south process” between rival British and Boer forces (532). Instead, he argues that American mining engineers, influenced by the rise of late nineteenth-century American imperialism, were in fact responsible for planning the raid. Thus, he sees the Jameson

Raid as a transnational event involving England, the ZAR, and the United States, that set South Africa on its course to twentieth-century tragedy.

This is indeed a novel interpretation. Can it be sustained? The crux of the argument rests on the role played by the “Capitalist Cowboy” of the book title, John Hays Hammond, Cecil Rhodes’ chief mining engineer. As the story goes, while on an expedition to Matabeleland with Rhodes and his business partner Jameson, Hammond regaled the two with tales of labor unrest on his silver mine in Idaho, suggesting that the white miners in South Africa could likely bring about a rebellion—or a revolution—against Kruger’s oppressive state if properly encouraged (117). He proposed that unrest by the white foreign mineworkers would be supported by a military attack on Johannesburg by armed British South Africa Company (BSAC) troops to topple Kruger and his government (164).

This interpretation rests heavily on van Onselen’s portrayal of the three men, with Hammond as the aggressive raconteur, Jameson as the rapt and somewhat naïve audience, and Rhodes curiously passive throughout. Although Cecil Rhodes has already been obsessively analyzed over the years, his portrayal here as a somewhat reluctant participant in this plan is not convincing. He was in fact the employer of both men, and he was responsible for providing the funding for the venture through the British South Africa Company, as well as obtaining clandestine support for the raid from the British government (8). Most certainly, he repeatedly expressed support for a British takeover of the area to preclude such a move by any other power. And the portrayal of Hammond as some sort of avatar of American interests is assumed rather than demonstrated. Hammond himself repeatedly makes claims of great self-importance in his autobiographical works, but these pronouncements after the fact sound like an attempt at rehabilitation within the ambit of U.S. politics. (For this reader at least, Hammond appeared to be a boorish blowhard rather than the dashing cowboy/chevalier he claimed to be.) Van Onselen’s observation that all of the men helping Hammond plan the raid were American engineers is as close as we get to an American hand in the effort (148).

Paradoxically, while the heavy reliance on character analysis in *The Cowboy Capitalist* enlivens the narrative, it gives the individual characters more credit than they deserve. At the same time, it obscures the larger context of the times that van Onselen aims to include in order to identify the Jameson Raid as a “transnational” event. As he argues, the United States at this time was certainly flexing its muscles and looking abroad for an empire—but so were England, France, and Germany. The Berlin conference of European powers, with the U.S. in attendance, had taken place only ten years prior to the raid when all attendees presumed to carve up the African continent. British and German capital was heavily invested on the Rand, and many international investors crowded the field to lay claim to the industry. Hammond, rather than being an emissary of romanticized American notions of western manliness and southern racism, fits more squarely in the category of the “profit sharing locust elite” which van

Onselen describes in Johannesburg at the time (106). Nevertheless, through the imaginative discovery of new evidence, introducing a broader cast of characters into our understanding of the Jameson Raid, Charles van Onselen has opened the way for a reconsideration of South Africa's history in the increasingly global world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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**For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

- McFarlane, Richard A. 2007. "Historiography of Selected Works on Cecil John Rhodes (1853–1902)." *History in Africa* 34: 437–46. doi:10.1353/hia.2007.0013.
- Silverman, Raymond, and Neal Sobania. 2004. "Mining a Mother Lode: Early European Travel Literature and the History of Precious Metalworking in Highland Ethiopia." *History in Africa* 31: 335–55. doi:10.1017/S0361541300003521.