

**Humanizing the Other**  
**Mark Twain and the Struggle Against Imperialism Part 5**  
**By Philip Chin**

The final decade in the life of Samuel Clemens, and the first of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, were in many ways quite depressing. His beloved wife, Olivia, died in 1904. His eldest daughter, Susie, had already died at their Hartford, Connecticut home in 1896 after suddenly developing a sudden case of meningitis and passing away. The rest of her family returned from one of their European trips only to be greeted by the news of her death. Clemens could never bear to live in the Hartford home again. His youngest daughter, Jean, prone to fits of epilepsy since childhood, had an attack while in the bath. This seizure led to a heart attack and she died by drowning in December 1909. The essay he wrote about her death included the heartbreaking image of finding Christmas presents that she'd bought, some of which were already neatly wrapped and others prepared, but never to be wrapped by her. Clemens was also increasingly suffering the debilitating ill-health and mental ravages of old age. Not only were his family members passing away but also old friends as well. At a time when the lifespan of most men didn't extend much beyond 50 years old, he'd already outlived many of his contemporaries.

In 1905, he released the booklet, *King Leopold's Soliloquy: A Defense of His Congo Rule*. As to be expected from Mark Twain, the writing was a satire, not an actual defense of King Leopold II. It was one of the darkest pieces that ever came from his pen, because it highlighted one of the worst examples of colonialism in the history of the world. The title starts with a quote about the absolute power of King Leopold II of Belgium in his rule of the Congo Free State in Africa: "Leopold II is the absolute Master of the whole of the internal and external activity of the Independent State of the Congo. The organization of justice, the army, the industrial and commercial regimes are established freely by himself. He would say, and with greater accuracy than did Louis XIV., "The State, it is I." This is followed by a laudatory quote from a Belgian publication: "Let us repeat after so many others what has become a platitude, the success of the African work is the work of a sole directing will, without being hampered by the hesitation of timorous politicians, carried out under his sole responsibility, -- intelligent, thoughtful, conscious of the perils and the advantages, discounting with an admirable prescience the great results of a near future." These quotes are formed provocatively into the form of a cross.

The first illustration of the work puts the lie to the quotes. The picture shows a heroically posed King Leopold II standing high atop a pyramid. In endless rows before him stand headless skeletons, their skulls form the pyramid atop which Leopold stands. The caption reads, "A memorial for the perpetuation of my name." The narrative takes the form of a soliloquy, an internal dialog of a character, spoken out loud, often used in plays such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (or in TV and movies today) to reveal the inner thoughts of that person. Leopold II starts the story alternately ranting against his detractors and piously kissing a cross for thinking sinful thoughts. Mark Twain was always keen to highlight hypocritical characters in his work that mouthed pieties while committing mortal sins. In this case, he chose King Leopold II, a real person, to skewer him not only for his religious hypocrisy, but also for his crimes against humanity. In many cases, he used the king's actual recorded words to rend him with.

The origins of this writing arose from the Great Game in Africa, the frantic effort of the European powers to divide Africa into exclusive spheres of colonial influence. King Leopold II of Belgium wanted his own piece of Africa, but Belgium was a small and relatively powerless country in Europe. The guise he took to win his empire was a benign one. He called an international conference in 1876 to form the International African Association, later to become the International Association of the Congo in 1878. The organization was ostensibly a humanitarian and philanthropic concern with the stated goals of protecting Central Africans from Arab slave traders coming from East Africa, educate the Central Africans in European civilization and culture (naturally), convert them to Christianity, and build up the region economically. The project received financial support from many wealthy humanitarians across Europe and fooled fellow European powers into believing that Leopold's motives were entirely philanthropic and peaceful. Even the cynically cagey German statesman, Otto von Bismarck, was drawn into supporting the project on those grounds. Meanwhile, the exploration that the association helped promote set off an even more intense race by all of Europe to control the interior of Africa which had heretofore not been explored by white people, or at least not by any that survived to tell about the experience. By 1884, the competition to control Africa had become so intense that a serious war threatened to break out between the countries of Europe. The newly powerful German Empire created in 1870 held a conference in Berlin involving Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden–Norway, the Ottoman Empire, and the United States. In short, most of these were countries regarded as the richest and most powerful in the world at the time.

The British, Germans, and the French, the key colonial powers surrounding the Belgian area of the Congo, likely saw a Belgian protectorate as a useful buffer zone between each other's colonial possessions. France and Britain had been traditional enemies for centuries, and would later almost get into a war over control of the Nile in Sudan in 1898. The Germans had beaten the French in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, taken away two French provinces, and incorporated them into their newly declared Second German Empire. France was naturally out for revenge, with tragic results after World War I. As a small and neutral country in Europe, Belgium wasn't considered a commercial or military threat to anyone. Most importantly and usefully from the viewpoint of the international community was King Leopold's promise of open trade. No company or country would be barred from doing business in the region. In effect, King Leopold II was offering an Open Door policy similar to the one the Americans were pursuing in China for similar reasons; both the United States and Belgium were too weak economically and militarily to force open overseas markets themselves. It served their interests to promote free trade and play off rival European superpowers against each other to win concessions and trading advantages. This is likely why the United States was the first country to recognize the Congo Free State in 1884, followed by the rest of the world in 1885 as a result of the Berlin Conference.

President Grover Cleveland sent a message to King Leopold in 1885 saying, "This Government at the outset testified its lively interest in the well-being and future progress of the vast region now committed to your Majesty's wise care, by being the first among the Powers to recognize the flag of the International Association of the Congo as that of a friendly State."

A major goal of the expeditions of exploration that were sponsored by the Belgians and led by the English explorer, Henry Stanley, was to sign treaties with local rulers. Whether the natives understood what those documents meant is highly doubtful. It is hard to imagine that any leader that read the documents would have consciously signed them since they effectively signed control

of themselves, their people, and all their territory to the International Association which King Leopold II had been elected to head. King Leopold had promised to give up leadership of the International African Association a year after it was founded and he was elected to lead it. No prominent European royals or leading citizens took charge of this international philanthropic association in 1877 as expected. Instead, Leopold engineered permanent leadership of the association. It was the first of many promises that he would break. After the 1885 Berlin Conference, he secretly bought out the backers of the International Association of the Congo. While maintaining a front as an international philanthropic organization running a country, the Congo Free State would in reality be a business corporation run solely to enrich King Leopold and his supporters.

Several commodities were produced in the 800,000 square miles of the Congo Free State that King Leopold sought to directly control including elephant ivory, which was harvested on an industrial scale. The major commodity though was rubber, one of the key ingredients of the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, because vulcanized rubber tires were needed by an ever-growing numbers of automobiles and bicycles. Less financially important areas of the country he left under the control of Belgian companies who were left free to make profit as they saw fit, with suitable payments to the king.

King Leopold II was not a philanthropist. He led one of the worst genocides in history in pursuit of building his own personal wealth. Every single promise he'd made at the Berlin Conference about his humanitarian and philanthropic motives and goals in the Congo would prove to be a lie. Since everything in the Congo had been signed over to King Leopold, it naturally followed that everything in that land, people and commodities, were his personal property. Laws were passed so that everything had to be bought or sold solely from the agents or appointed companies of the Congo Free State at prices that they alone determined. Those agents almost invariably decided not to pay anything for what they took. Monopolies were granted to Leopold's supporters and friends cutting out foreign trade in direct contravention of the promise of open trade made at the Berlin Conference, "No Power which exercises sovereign rights in the said regions shall be allowed to grant therein either monopoly or privilege of any kind in commercial matters."

Workers were required to meet strict quotas in the production of rubber but were paid nothing, becoming slaves. This made nonsense of another solemn promise made by King Leopold in Berlin, "All the Powers exercising sovereign rights or influence in these territories pledge themselves to watch over the preservation of the native populations and the improvement of their moral and material conditions of existence, and to work together for the suppression of slavery and of the slave trade." To force workers to produce even more rubber, women and children were taken hostage and held until the demanded quota was produced. This had serious consequences for food production across the whole region as all work extracted from the Congolese men was at the expense of work they did for their own survival. Women and children held in chains couldn't effectively work to produce food even if they were allowed to. To make the food supply situation even worse, the Congolese were forced to provide food to the Belgians for nothing. In some cases, this forced them to sell family members and fellow villagers into slavery to get enough food. A white witness described seeing natives reduced to eating leaves to survive.

The police and military forces, made up of Belgian military, foreign mercenaries, and African recruits hostile to whatever Congolese they faced, were noted for their extreme cruelty and indifference to the suffering they caused. Wholesale and indiscriminate slaughter, rape, robbery,

whippings, hostage taking, and even documented cases of cannibalism were regular tactics used as amusement and for terrorizing the population in enforcement of the rubber quotas and the harsh laws. Villages were also destroyed to make way for rubber plantations. Added to these atrocities was an even more horrifying feature adopted for reasons of economy. A quotation from the diary of a Belgian officer was introduced as evidence. The use of the initials M.P. were probably designed to protect the identity of whoever the diary entry came from. Acting as a whistle-blower while still in Belgian service could very well get the officer killed for what he revealed. The entry read, "Each time the corporal goes out to get rubber cartridges are given to him. He must bring back all not used; and for every one used, he must bring back a right hand.' M. P. told me that sometimes they shot a cartridge at an animal in hunting, they then cut off a hand from a living man." Hands became a commodity to account for every bullet expended, collected not only from dead bodies, but from living people. Sometimes they were also chopped off as punishment or for fun, always leaving one hand so that the person could continue to work. Nobody from the young to the elderly were spared.

For two decades, this genocidal operation to enrich King Leopold continued without much of the news registering outside the Congo Free State. Generally, people in Europe and America dismissed the atrocity stories as baseless rumors. Few chose to believe an enlightened European and Christian monarch and his people would act in such a barbaric fashion, even though the damning reports were coming from Christian missionaries. Leopold could hardly keep foreign missionaries out of the Congo when converting the natives to Christianity had been sold as one of his primary goals for creating the country, but the few missionaries that dared to offer written testimony of the atrocities to the international media that they witnessed and heard about weren't media savvy or powerful enough to engage Leopold and his supporters in their propaganda campaigns lauding the king. These missionaries were dismissed as hysterical and deluded or exposed as morally questionable (with questionable evidence).

It wasn't until the British government was pressured by humanitarian and anti-slavery campaigners to investigate what was happening in the Congo Free State that an official report was produced in 1904 that documented the atrocities with reliable eyewitness testimonies. This was accompanied by irrefutable photographic evidence from many different sources including missionaries. The Casement Report was written by Roger Casement, a British diplomat of Irish extraction based in the Congo. Casement as a young man had been an idealist who'd originally worked with Henry Stanley in the Congo as part of the International African Association before he'd joined the British Foreign Office. Casement was later knighted by the British Empire for his efforts in exposing and combating the human rights crimes in the Congo. Ironically, he became so disenchanted by colonialism, partly as a result of his investigation into the Congo Free State, that he became an Irish revolutionary. He was executed by the British for treason for conspiring with the Germans to attempt revolution in Ireland in 1916, during World War I. Roger Casement became a highly honored martyr to Irish independence.

It was no accident that Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel, "Heart of Darkness," and "the horror" he described in it were based upon his experiences in the Congo Free State as a ship captain along the Congo River. Casement had met Conrad in 1890 and they were friends. "Heart of Darkness" was much later loosely adapted and made into the 1979 film, "Apocalypse Now," set around a journey up the Mekong River during the Vietnam War. Casement described his journey along the Congo River in preparation to writing his report that found echoes in Conrad's writing (and in the latter part of "Apocalypse Now"). On the British-run Sudanese and Uganda controlled side of the

river were all the normal signs of human habitation, small villages, houses, and people. On the Belgian side of the river was a howling wilderness in which there were no dwellings and human sightings had become rare. Roger Casement wrote in his report, “The reason of all this is obvious enough. The Belgians are disliked. The people fly from them, and it is no wonder they should do so, for I am informed that the soldiers' are allowed full liberty to plunder, and that payments are rarely made for supplies. The British officers wander, practically alone, over most parts of the country, either on tours of inspection or on shooting ‘expeditions.’ I understand that no Belgian officer can move outside the settlements without a strong guard.” He described revisiting bustling villages he’d last seen in 1887. One area with about 5,000 inhabitants in 1887 was reduced to about 800 by 1904. Another area that had once had three villages totally about 5,000 inhabitants had completely disappeared. Starvation, forced labor, killings, and torture had contributed to the death toll. The abuse must have also made the general population weaker against the fatal ravages of African sleeping sickness.

The result of the exposure of these horrors was the formation of the Congo Reform Association in England by Dr. Henry Grattan Guinness, Edmund Dene Morel, and Roger Casement. The organization had prominent British members such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and Joseph Conrad. Doyle would write his own book about the Congo Free State entitled, *The Crime of the Congo*, in 1909. Branches of the organization opened in the United States as well and Samuel Clemens became a member. His work, *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, contained a declaration by the publisher that Mr. Clemens had decided that all the “pecuniary return” from sales of the booklet would be donated to “further the effort for relief of the people of the Congo State.”

Estimates of the number of the dead range from 2 to 10 million, with the upper figure accepted as the more likely by official census estimates taken immediately after the Belgian national government assumed control of the Congo from King Leopold in 1908 and by many modern historians. This would have been about half of the total population estimated to be in the area at the time. Leopold used his riches from the Congo to spread culture and civilization, but only in Belgium. Grandiose buildings, cultural centers, and public works were built as monuments to himself and to burnish his reputation as an enlightened monarch. The only part of that wealth that returned to the Congo Free State during his rule came in the form of bullets, weapons, and chains, a fact noted by missionaries and reporters alike.

[http://www.kongo-kinshasa.de/dokumente/lekture/crime\\_of\\_congo.pdf](http://www.kongo-kinshasa.de/dokumente/lekture/crime_of_congo.pdf)

<https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrj/i21/kls.html>

<https://ia801006.us.archive.org/14/items/CasementReport/CasementReportSmall.pdf>