

BOOK REVIEW

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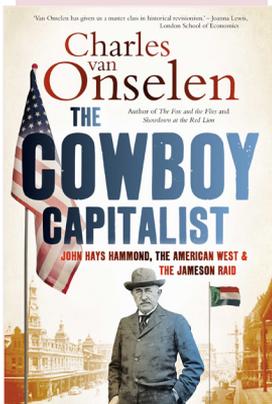
Charles van Onselen *The Cowboy Capitalist: John Hays Hammond, The American West & The Jameson Raid*

Picture an agrarian, rural country that is struggling to become a modern mining-industrial state. It has a shaky government that many of its citizens see as corrupt. It is experiencing rapid urbanisation, high levels of crime, incompetent policing and phases of labour militancy. Add into this an increasingly disaffected professional class and a capitalist elite, including foreign business interests, intent – through one means or other – on what we might call ‘state capture’. In other words, a country ripe for revolution or a coup.

No, I am not speaking of South Africa in 2017. I am referring to the Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR), (often called in those days the Transvaal), in the 1890s. And the attempted ‘state capture’ did occur around the turning of the New Year in 1895-1896. The Jameson Raid, the attempted overthrow of Paul Kruger’s Transvaal Republic, is named after its ‘leader’ Dr Leander Starr Jameson – medical practitioner, politician and dreamer of Empire, but conventional wisdom holds that the brains behind the operation was politician-imperialist, the mining magnate and sometime Prime Minister of the Cape Colony, Cecil John Rhodes. With a wink and little nod from higher-ups in Britain, who shared Rhodes’ vision of a British southern African federation – and control over the then richest gold mines in the world.

Not so, says Professor Charles van Onselen, possibly South Africa’s most distinguished historian. Amassing a wealth of information that has hitherto hardly been examined, he suggests that the Raid was in fact an attempted coup masterminded by an American mining engineer and businessman, John Hays Hammond. Aimed less at adding a golden jewel to the Crown Imperial than at creating a modern republic in the Transvaal modelled on his native United States that would include Johannesburg as a kind of semi-autonomous ‘District of Columbia’.

The plan, van Onselen argues, was hatched by Hammond on a trip he took with Rhodes and Jameson to Matabeleland in 1894 (It entailed drawing on internal discontent within the Transvaal’s president, Paul Kruger – from disenfranchised uitlander miners, mining capital that felt Kruger’s politics undermined growth, as well as Boers who also saw the need for a more modern state.) Building on public unease about crime in Johannesburg, the first stage was the creation of Vigilance Committees. The second step was creating a Reform Committee, comprising mainly mining magnates and professionals to demand political change. Arming



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and organising loyal miners was part of the process. Finally, there would be a group of Raiders, led by Jameson, who would invade the Transvaal. In Johannesburg there would be a simultaneous uprising. Sections of the rebels would capture the Boer arsenal in Pretoria. Kruger would be kidnapped and the government of the Transvaal would be ultimately replaced by one sympathetic to the dream of Rhodes, but ultimately based on Hammond's vision.

Drawing on both South African and United States sources, van Onselen presents a powerful case for his thesis that it was Hammond ultimately, not Rhodes, who was the real brains behind the Jameson Raid. He suggests, in fact, that Rhodes was uneasy with the plan – though ultimately he went along with it. As history recounts the Raid was a fiasco – the internal insurrection fell apart as the Raid started, and the invasion force was captured with ease by Boer forces. If Rhodes had had misgivings, he was indeed prescient. Ironically it shattered his political ambitions nonetheless.

To defend his argument further, van Onselen delves extensively into the life and context of John Hays Hammond. Born in 1855 to a Southern family living in California, his worldview was shaped by an environment that extolled the values of the 'cowboy' and the filibusterer, the latter the aggressive adventurer who – like William Walker in Central America – organised insurrections and led invasions of territories and countries for profit and personal glory, sometimes in the name of the United States.

As a child in California, Hammond lived through a moment in 1861 when Southern 'gentlemen' plotted a coup in San Francisco, with the view to creating a Pacific Republic sympathetic to the Confederacy. The means they used, one might say 'Surprise! Surprise!' was a 'vigilance committee'. Though his family were not involved in the plot, he could not have been unaware of it through conversations in later life.

Later, before studying engineering at Yale University and in Prussia, part of his informal education was in the rough and ready life of the cowboy. As an engineer and mining magnate in the Wild West, Hammond had his fair share of battles with bandits and, later, trade unionists. A diehard capitalist and radical conservative (he was a stereotypical Southern racist and eugenicist), Hammond's determination to stop unionised labour generated a low intensity war in the early 1890s Idaho mines he owned.

In the wake of the Idaho debacle, he moved to Johannesburg and rose into the mining aristocracy there. This was not difficult, since there were hundreds of American mining experts on the Witwatersrand and trade with the United States was extensive. Many observers felt that Johannesburg was in fact becoming 'Americanised', something Hammond – who'd clearly imbibed the 19th Century vision of American 'Manifest Destiny' and anticipated the United States' imperial expansion at the turn of the 20th Century – clearly wanted extended.

Hammond failed in his South African filibustering: he and three other key figures in the Reform Committee (Frank Rhodes, Lionel Philips and George Farrar) were sentenced to death for treason. This was commuted to 15 years imprisonment, later reduced to a heavy fine. Yet, van Onselen recounts, this did not stop Hammond on his return to the United States from getting heavily involved in economic and

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political wrangles in the Mexican Revolution, becoming an advisor and confidante to a number of U.S. Presidents, and almost William Howard Taft's Vice President.

It would be wrong, I think, to see this book as simply a biography of Hammond. Van Onselen rather uses him as a hinge on which to hang a much broader picture of, firstly, the Jameson Raid. By giving a detailed accounts of other conspirators – and significantly Boer 'collaborators' or sympathisers with the plan, including the great South African writer Eugene Marais – he shows how we cannot simply reduce the Raid to an Imperial and/or capitalist conspiracy, least of all the ambitions of Cecil Rhodes. Or even Hammond for that matter.

Secondly, this book strongly defends – and echoes – one of van Onselen's major themes in recent years: that globalization was as much a part of the 19th Century as it is of the 20th and 21st centuries. Colonial southern Africa was already becoming part of the 'American sphere of influence' through the movement of people (especially mining professionals), products, popular culture and ideas.

I have personally long held the idea that beyond such views in comparative history of opening and closing frontiers, the (somewhat) parallels between the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements, that South Africa and the United States mirror each other – even if like a mirror the image is inverted: majorities become minorities, but much is similar. (Even more so now, with populist demagoguery passing for politics in both countries!). I suspect van Onselen might hold a similar view.

Beyond the academic value of this book – taking an all too familiar event, almost done to death (or so it feels) by historians, and blasting open (if I may use a mining metaphor) a whole new understanding of it – one cannot but also enthuse at the quality of van Onselen's writing. As with his other books, he has an uncanny, an almost Sherlockian knack at following up clues scattered in sources on two continents that brought together reveal in Conan Doyle style the 'villain of the piece'.

While it is a dense and long book, it is never dull. Van Onselen weaves together his narrative and analysis in sharp, engaging prose, often heavily ironic in tone and with more than a little insight into the political cost of the Jameson Raid to modern South Africa. Once again, at the risk of repeating what I've said before, *The Cowboy Capitalist* is book prize material.