

Canada's Dark History in Africa: Killing Natives and Seizing Their Land for Leopold II in Congo

A Brutal Part of Canada's Dark History in Africa. The Role of Canada's William Grant Stairs

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*Featured image: Aged and Women had to die of starvation under the rule of King Leopold II in Congo.
(Source: [Annoyz View](#))*

Canada's 150th anniversary offers a unique opportunity to shed light on some darker corners of Canadian history. One of the dustier chapters is our contribution to one of the most barbarous regimes of the last century and a half.

In a bid to extract rubber and other commodities from his personal colony, Belgian King Léopold II instituted a brutal system of forced labour in the late 1800s. Individuals and communities were given rubber collection quotas that were both hard to fulfill and punishable by death. To prove they killed someone who failed to fulfill a quota soldiers from the Force Publique, the colonial police, were required to provide a severed hand. With Force Publique officers paid partly based on the number collected, severed hands became a sort of currency in the colony and baskets of hands the symbol of the Congo Free State.



King Leopold II (Source: [Annoyz View](#))

Between 1891 and 1908 millions died from direct violence, as well as the starvation and disease, caused by Leopold II's terror. A quarter of the population may have died during Leopold's reign, which sparked a significant international solidarity movement that forced the Belgian government to intervene and buy the colony.

Halifax's William Grant Stairs played an important part in two expeditions that expanded Leopold II's immensely profitable Congolese venture. The Royal Military College of Canada trained soldier was one of 10 white officers in the first-ever European expedition to cross the interior of the continent and subsequently Stairs led an expedition that added 150,000 square kilometres to Leopold's colony.

In 1887 Stairs joined the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition, which was ostensibly designed to "rescue" the British-backed governor of Equatoria, the southern part of today's South Sudan. Scottish merchant William MacKinnon asked famed American 'explorer' Henry Morton Stanley to lead a relief effort. At the time of the expedition Léopold II employed Stanley, who had been helping the king carve out the 'Congo Free State'. Seeing an opportunity to add to his colony, Leopold wanted Stanley to take a circuitous route all the way around South Africa, up the Congo River and across the interior of the continent.

One of ten whites, Stairs quickly became second-in-command of the three-year expedition. Read from a humanistic or internationalist perspective, the RMC graduate's diary of the disastrous expedition is incredibly damning. Or, as Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate George Elliott Clarke put it,

"Stairs' account of his atrocities establishes that even Canadians, blinded by racism, can become swashbuckling mass murderers."

Stairs' extensive diary, which he asked to be published upon his and Stanley's death, makes it clear that locals regularly opposed the mission. One passage notes,

"the natives made a tremendous noise all night and canoes came close to us, the natives yelling frantically for us to go away" while another entry explains,

"the natives destroyed their food rather than let it fall into the hands of the invaders."

Stairs repeatedly admits to "ransacking the place". A December 11, 1887 diary entry notes:

Out again at the natives, burned more houses and cut down more bananas; this time we went further up the valley and devastated the country there. In the afternoon [white officer, A. J. Mounteney] Jephson and I went up to some high hills at the back of the camp and burnt all we could see, driving off a lot of natives like so much game. I managed to capture some six goats and yesterday I also got six, which we gave to the men. The natives now must be pretty sick of having their property destroyed in the way we are doing, but it serves them right as they were the aggressors and after taking our cloth, fired on us.

On a number of occasions the expedition displayed mutilated bodies or severed heads as a "warning" to the locals. Stairs notes:

I often wonder what English people would say if they knew of the way in which we go for these natives; friendship we don't want as then we should get very little meat and probably have to pay for the bananas. Every male native capable of using the bow is shot. This, of course, we must do. All the children and women are taken as slaves by our men to do work in the camps.

Stairs led numerous raiding parties to gather "carriers", which were slaves in all but name. According to *The Last Expedition*,

"[the mission] routinely captured natives, either to be ransomed for food, to get information, or simply to be used as guides for a few days."

To cross the continent the expedition relied on its superior firepower, which included the newly created 600-bullet-per-minute Maxim gun. Stairs describes one battle, stating that his men were "ready to land and my Maxim ready to murder them if they should dare to attack us." On another day the firearm aficionado explained,

"I cleaned the Maxim gun up thoroughly and fired some 20 or 30 rounds at some howling natives on the opposite bank."

Twenty months into the mission Stairs coyly admits

"by what means have we traveled over 730 miles of country from the Congo to the lake? Why by rifle alone, by shooting and pillaging."



William Grant Stairs (Source: Pinterest)

Beyond the immediate death and destruction, the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition opened new areas of the African interior to Arab slave traders and it is thought to be the source of a sleeping sickness epidemic that ravaged the region. The expedition was also devastating for its participants. With little food and much abuse from the white officers, only 253 of the 695 African porters and soldiers who started the mission survived. Additionally, hundreds of

other Africans who became part of the expedition at later stages died as well.

There are disturbing claims that some white officers took sex slaves and in one alarming instance even paid to have an 11-year-old girl cooked and eaten. This story scandalized the British public.

For his part, Stairs became almost pathologically inhumane. His September 28, 1887 diary entry notes:

It was most interesting, lying in the bush and watching the natives quietly at their days work; some women were pounding the bark of trees preparatory to making the coarse native cloth used all along this part of the river, others were making banana flower by pounding up dried bananas, men we could see building huts and engaged at other such work, boys and girls running about, singing, crying, others playing on a small instrument common all over Africa, a series of wooden strips, bent over a bridge and twanged with the thumb and forefinger. All was as it was every day until our discharge of bullets, when the usual uproar of screaming of women took place.

Even with some criticizing the expedition in Britain, Stairs' efforts were celebrated in Canada. An honouring committee established by the mayor of Halifax decided to give him a sword made in London of Nova Scotia steel and the city organized a reception attended by the Lieutenant-Governor with a military band playing "Here the Conquering Hero Comes."

Within two years of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition Stairs helped King Leopold II conquer the resource-rich Katanga region of the Congo. Suggested to Leopold by British investors and having already impressed Stanley with his brutality, Stairs headed up a heavily armed mission that swelled to 2,000.

The goal of the expedition was to extend Leopold's authority over the Katanga region and to get a piece of the copper, ivory and gold trade. Stairs' specific objective was to get Msiri, the ruler of the region, "to submit to the authorities of the Congo Free State, either by persuasion or by force." In his diary Stairs says more or less as much, writing that his goals were "above all, to be successful with regard to Msiri ... to discover mines in Katanga that can be exploited ... to make some useful geographic discoveries." Investigating the area's suitability for European settlement and for raising domestic animals were other aims of the mission.

As leader of the mission Stairs prepared a daily journal for the Compagnie du Katanga. It details the terrain, resources and inhabitants along the way as well as other information that could assist in exploiting the region. It also explains his personal motivations for taking on the task despite spotty health.

"I wasn't happy [garrisoned with the Royal Engineers in England] in the real sense of the word. I felt my life passing without my doing anything worthwhile. Now I am freely making my way over the coastal plain with more than 300 men under my orders. My least word is law and I am truly the master."

Later, he describes his growing force and power.

"I have thus, under my orders, 1350 men — quite a little army."

Stairs admitted to using slaves even though Leopold's mission to the Congo was justified as a humanistic endeavour to stop the Arab slave trade. He wrote about how "the anti-slavery society will try and jump upon me for employing slaves as they seem to think I am doing... however, I don't fancy these will disturb me to a great extent." The RMC graduate also regularly severed hands and reportedly collected the head of an enemy.



Congolese were whipped with chicotte for failing to reach their quota (Source: [Annoyz View](#))

The expedition accomplished its principal objective. Stairs had Msiri killed and threatened Msiri's brothers with the same fate unless they accepted Leopold as sovereign. After securing their submission Stairs divided the kingdom between Msiri's adopted son and brothers.

Stairs used a series of racist rationalizations to justify conquering Katanga. He describes the population as "unfortunate blacks who, very often, are incapable of managing their own affairs" and asked in the introduction of his diary:

"Have we the right to take possession of this vast country, take it out of the hands of its local chiefs and to make it serve the realization of our goals? ... To this question, I shall reply positively, yes. What value would it have [the land he was trying to conquer] in the hands of blacks, who, in their natural state, are far more cruel to one another than the worst Arabs or the wickedest whites."

At another point Stairs cites another standard colonial justification:

"Only rarely do the natives think of improving their lot — that's the great weakness among the Africans. Their fathers' ways are theirs and their own customs will be those of their sons and grandsons."

While Stairs died in the Congo his exploits were lauded in Ottawa when Senator W.J. Macdonald sought to move “a parliamentary resolution expressing satisfaction for Stairs’ manly conduct.” There’s a Stairs Street in Halifax and two brass plaques honour him at the RMC (one for Stairs alone and another dedicated to him and two others). The main plaque reads:

“William Grant Stairs, Captain the Welsh Regiment. Born at Halifax Nova Scotia 1 July 1863. Lieutenant Royal Engineers 1885-91. Served on the staff of the Emin Pasha Relief Expedition 1887 under the leadership of H.M. Stanley and exhibited great courage and devotion to duty. Died of fever on the 9 June 1892 at Chinde on the Zambesi whilst in command of the Katanga Expedition sent out by the King of the Belgians.”

Another plaque was erected for Stairs (and two others) at St. George Cathedral in Kingston, Ontario. And a few hundred kilometers to the southwest “Stair’s Island” was named in his honour in Parry Sound.

Stairs was one of hundreds of Canadians who helped conquer different parts of Africa at the turn of the 20th century. Accounts of Canada’s first 150-years are incomplete without this chapter in our history.

Yves Engler is the author of [A Propaganda System: How Canada’s Government, Corporations, Media and Academia Sell War](#) and [Canada in Africa: 300 years of aid and exploitation](#). [Read other articles by Yves](#).

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