

David Birmingham (2015), *A Short History of Modern Angola*, London: Hurst, ISBN 9781849045193, 159 pp.

More than a synthesis of the current state of historical research on Angola, David Birmingham's slim volume is in many ways the culmination of a lifetime of scholarly engagement. The book starts in 1820, two years before Brazil gained independence, after which Portugal's imperial ambitions focused chiefly on Angola. Following a brief introduction, the first three chapters focus on the earliest phase of the period under review, addressing in turn the city of Luanda, the Ambaca region and northern hinterlands, and the southern highlands, which evince very different social and economic dynamics. The author then turns to the increase in white settlement from 1890 onwards, and how successive colonial regimes affected existing social constellations. In all these chapters, the breadth and depth of the author's sources is impressive, as he leads the reader through the historical developments using the words and anecdotes of a host of colourful characters, from colonial administrators and Luandan slave traders to key figures, such as the Swiss missionary Héli Châtelain, and more incongruous ones, such as the Hungarian trader Ladislaus Magyar in the southern highlands. Birmingham sprinkles the book with nuggets of Angolan history hitherto known only to specialist audiences, such as the plan in 1912 to establish a Jewish homeland in the Angolan highland to "open up" the hinterland for effective colonisation (56–59). And although this book is essentially a national history of Angola, Birmingham ties developments in Angola back to Portugal's changing fates in European politics, as well as to events in the neighbouring colonies, which provides a broader perspective, one that goes beyond Angola's borders.

Continuing along this vein, the author then turns to the development of early nationalism under the Salazar dictatorship, doing justice to the complexity of the regionally differentiated articulations for independence, charting the thorny issues of race and class identities and how they shaped the make-up of the nationalist movements. Two excellent chapters, "The Struggles of the Seventies" and "Survival in the Eighties," are among the best and most concise introductions of the challenges the country and its people faced after independence, without being reduced to simple, one-dimensional narratives. The postwar period since 2002 is addressed only on the final five pages of the book. Though this is understandable for an historical treatise such as this, the author manages to make a few essential points about the current situation in Angola. Furthermore, benefitting from *ancienneté* and its corresponding wisdom,

Birmingham does not mince words when assessing the track record of the government on these last pages: “Politics in the 2000s was as unresponsive to public opinion as it had been in the 1970s, though the dictator [...] was now a member of Luanda’s home-grown élite rather than of Portugal’s imperially oriented *haute-bourgeoisie*” (118), and “institutions of political decision-making and the administrative practices [...] were the unhappy linear descendants of a colonial police-state founded 100 years earlier” (119). Mention of the embezzlement of public monies and the enrichment of a predatory elite indicates the author’s increasingly critical stance towards his subject of investigation. The most recent developments – the current economic crisis precipitated by mismanagement and a drop in oil revenues that has gone hand in hand with increased repression of any challenge to the regime’s dominance – are, however, mentioned only cursorily, so the book ends on a note of relative optimism. An appendix telling the story of the British cocoa trader William Cadbury’s investigation into forced labour in Angola and São Tomé in 1908 and 1909 takes up some of the key themes and motifs of the earlier chapters again, but as its purpose is not really introduced, it sits somewhat oddly with the rest of the book.

Birmingham’s ambition to paint a complete picture of every phase, addressing issues ranging from labour and economy to transport, commerce, legal reforms, religion, and the conditions of different social classes and groups makes for sometimes slightly unexpected transitions between topics within the individual chapters. Nonetheless, the author achieves his overall aim of presenting the reader with exactly this multiplicity of factors that contributed to the “forging of a colony” and that continue to mar Angola’s post-independence history today. In sum, this book is an excellent overview of Angola’s modern history for a broad readership: beyond being an accessible introduction to a country that is still relatively marginal in Anglophone historical scholarship, it also traces and highlights some of the important historical dynamics and connections that continue to shape Angola’s present.

- Jon Schubert