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The Jameson Raid: An American Imperial Plot?

The Cowboy Capitalist: John Hays Hammond, the American West, and the Jameson Raid. By Charles van Onselen (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2018), 557 pp. \$35.00

The failed Jameson Raid (1895) implicated the British government; removed Cecil Rhodes from the premiership of the Cape Colony; strengthened Afrikaner control of the South African Republic (the Transvaal) and its world-supplying gold mines; led to, if not actually precipitated, the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902); and ultimately motivated the Afrikaner-controlled consolidation of segregation in the Union of South Africa and thence apartheid. As van Onselen concludes, the Raid initiated the postwar “handing-over of political power” to Afrikaner nationalist governments, a “betrayal of African rights,” and the eventual creation of apartheid, “the master plan for white racial domination of every single aspect of economic, political and social life” (470).

For years, local and external scholars and experts have puzzled about Dr. Leander Starr Jameson’s seemingly madcap and outrageous attempt to invade Johannesburg and join an uprising there by the English-speaking miners who were responsible for the Republic’s prosperity but had been denied the franchise. The mutual conspiracy sought to end President Paul Kruger’s control over Johannesburg and its gold mines by coup d’état.

As van Onselen says, the Raid was “a conspiracy by urban capitalists to overthrow a conservative rural elite rooted in a republic founded on agricultural production so as to . . . entrench the . . . privileges” of expatriate gold mining industry magnates (471). But who were those mining moguls? Who exactly thought that a filibustering expedition from outside the Republic and a revolt by non-citizen miners and shopkeepers could overthrow

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an established, if landlocked, constituted government? And to what exact ends?

Rhodes clearly paid for the arms that Jameson and his 500 men carried on their invasive endeavor. Secretary of State for the Colonies Joseph Chamberlain probably sanctioned the adventure. But who dreamed it up? Who invented and planned the incursion, imagining that a posse of lightly armed mercenaries could enter undetected on horseback from the west, support or incite a rebellion among the Johannesburg miners, and overthrow Kruger, just like that? Was it Rhodes' scheme, as has oft been believed, or was it Jameson's? Or did it depend on the so called "reformers" in Johannesburg led by the likes of Lionel Phillips, George Farrar, John Hays Hammond, and other English-speaking mining bosses?

The conspiracy was oddly and badly conceived and executed irresponsibly. Who contributed significantly to the fiasco? What were the constituents of what turned out to be a massive failure with monumental consequences? Why did Jameson start when he did, well before the bizarre and heavily contingent scheme was firmly in place? Did Jameson put too much faith in the power of the state-of-the-art Maxim guns that he had used successfully against the Ndebele kingdom in Zimbabwe? Did Jameson evade Rhodes' attempt to stop any attack? What motivated such a foolish, ill-conceived, and ill-prepared assault? Answers to these questions tell us about the Raid, but also about imperial designs, about economic imperatives and economic history on an emerging frontier, and about the perils and inconsistencies of leadership.

More than thirty years ago, a chapter on the Jameson Raid in my biography of Rhodes concluded, "The Raid was designed and prosecuted by Rhodes, but he lost control in the end." Rhodes finally gathered that Johannesburg was "unready," that the uprising of foreign miners would not take place. He tried, but failed, to stop Jameson. Jameson, always impulsive and decisive, had already "bolted."¹ That chapter names Hammond as one of the plotters in Johannesburg, but now it appears, thanks to van Onselen's careful culling of the available hard and circumstantial evidence, that Hammond had a central role in the conspiracy to supplant Kruger. In unwittingly anticipated corroboration of the main thrust of van Onselen's much more fully articulated argument, I wrote that

1 Rotberg, *The Founder: Cecil Rhodes and the Pursuit of Power* (New York, 1988), 541.

on the eve of the Raid, with Jameson champing at the bit to attack from Pitsani (near modern Mafikeng), 300 kms from Johannesburg, Jameson telegraphed, “Let Hammond telegraph instantly all right,” meaning that the revolutionaries were ready to move.² Instead, Hammond lost resolve, telegraphing, “Expert reports decidedly adverse. I absolutely condemn further developments at present” (190–191).

Van Onselen explains that Hammond was “*the* catalyst” behind the events leading to the Raid. “Hammond, sensing the emerging leadership vacuum [in Johannesburg, among the early set of plotters against Kruger] drew on his considerable American [filibustering] experiences and . . . became the de facto conspirator-in-chief in planning the insurrection and the coup d’état that was supposed to follow.” Instead of Rhodes’ British-inspired scheme to secure an imperial outcome, Hammond made the plot more American, “with a probable ‘republican’ twist to it” (105, 131). An American, in other words, helped to plunge South Africa and Empire into turmoil, and to keep Afrikaners from trusting Britons to this day.

Van Onselen argues that the Raid may have been given a “decisive boost” by Rhodes and Jameson, but “the *idea* of an uprising,” and of troops energizing it, “was born in the mind of a frustrated American mine-owning capitalist” with roots in Idaho (154). In 1894, Hammond plied Rhodes and Jameson with stories about his own supposed and exaggerated successes in arming freebooters and taking control of the mines of northern Idaho. He also talked to Rhodes and Jameson about the supposed successes of Vigilance Committees in San Francisco and about how such informal methods, if well supported by illicit weapons, could turn political tides. Rhodes had two reactions—(1) that removing Kruger as an obstacle to imperial advances northward would be beneficial to Rhodes’ ambitions and (2) that in the event of an insurrection, he wanted full control to avoid any upstart republicans supplanting Kruger.

Van Onselen provides a perverse answer, or series of answers, to the riddle of the Raid. His remarkable book thus sheds illuminating new light on South Africa’s historical course. In his ingenious—and thoroughly researched—*exposé*, van Onselen traces the origins

2 Telegraph message from Jameson quoted in *ibid.*, 538–539.

of the Raid to the mind and machinations of Hammond, an expert and highly compensated mining engineer and entrepreneur who had come to the goldfields in Johannesburg in 1893 and had ridden across the Matabeleland veldt of Zimbabwe with Rhodes and Jameson in 1894, scheming all the while.

This book is an innovative micro-history that pays close attention to industrial economics and labor relations. Few other authors have written so perceptively about the economics and finances of the modern mining business. Few have been as steeped in mining matters while also producing good social history. Few, when writing about Johannesburg, have so carefully explicated Hamilton's strange conspiratorial adventures. The overall result, however, is not explicitly interdisciplinary in the manner that this journal prefers. It draws from the work of cognate social sciences by inference only. Indeed, van Onselen pursues most of his sources, as well as the evidence in them, in a traditional manner that fits well with his quest to find a solution to the book's central conundrum.

Van Onselen portrays Hammond as a romantic, ruthless, and ambitious blowhard who used fanciful stories to regale Rhodes and Jameson and, much later, to embellish his autobiography. Van Onselen also depicts Hammond and Jameson as chancers and recalcitrants who delighted in skirting, if not breaking, the law. Furthermore, Hammond was faint-hearted, yet obsessively fearful of being called a coward.

Hammond always pushed his own interests and prospects. After growing up in San Francisco among ex-Confederate generals and Central American filibusters like William Walker—the invader of lower California and Honduras—Hammond made promising capitalistic connections at Yale, where he honed his mining knowledge, and in Washington, D.C., among Republican bankers and politicians. As a young man, he operated a silver mine in northern Mexico, employing questionable practices while managing to keep both bandits and the soldiers of President Porfirio Diaz at bay. His next move was to invest in, and run, a silver and lead mine in the Coeur d'Alene valley of northern Idaho. Attempting to raise profits, he reduced wages there, imported scab workers and Pinkerton mercenaries to deter striking miners, locked out his own employees, thereby stimulating the militant unionization efforts that eventually spawned the

Industrial Workers of the World (“the Wobblies”). He was not above calling in the Idaho National Guard or federal authorities for help. He left Idaho as a marked man—with the reputation of being a “bloodsucking” capitalist.

Hardly successful, and hardly a hero in Idaho, Hammond essentially escaped to South Africa after low silver prices, the retreat from bimetallism, and Grover Cleveland’s presidential victory in 1892 forced him to sell his Idaho mine and seek new fame and fortune from gold, the bulwark of American and other global currencies. Hammond’s gift was to understand the new technical processes of separating gold from conglomerate—the overburden. Moreover, because the extensive goldfields of the Witwatersrand were of low grade, blasting, separating, and refining were complicated, labor-intensive endeavors that Hammond could help to manage on behalf of Rhodes’ Consolidated Goldfields Company.

Van Onselen magisterially brings Hammond’s American past neatly to bear on his South African presence before (and after) the Raid. The result is meticulous—what Geertz and others would call “thick description” of the best kind.³ Van Onselen appears to be well aware of what each of the many persons involved in plotting against Kruger were doing day-by-day, almost hour-by-hour. Indeed, the many intertwined plots that he recounts were mostly hare-brained or at least haphazard. Hammond, according to van Onselen, was a chief instigator of the discontented miners in Johannesburg who were supposed to trigger and justify Jameson’s surge across the veldt toward Johannesburg. But the uprising was beset with serious problems:

(1) Few of the firearms that the insurgents needed were successfully smuggled into the city before Christmas 1895, when the rising and the Raid were first scheduled. (2) The preparations were shoddy. Hammond and his group of Americans thought that they had a substantial following of revolutionaries, but only a relatively few likely suspects turned into serious conspirators. (3) Hammond had rivals. Several other American mining principals opposed attacking the established order and actively worked to subvert him. (4) The timing of the uprising was questionable. Miners and other workers were reluctant to forgo their holiday celebrations (Christmas festivities and Boxing Day) for the sake of revolt. (5) Kruger knew

3 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York, 1973), 3.

what was happening, almost from the beginning. Secrecy among the plotters was compromised heavily by informers. (6) Jameson promised Hammond that he would stay in neighboring British Bechuanaland (now South Africa's Northern Cape Province) and not invade until the rising in Johannesburg had occurred. But Jameson, whose patience wore thin as he waited on the border of the Republic with his troops while Hammond kept postponing the day of the revolt, impulsively "bolted" before the plotters were ready (if they ever would have been). He hoped to summon the rising by entering from the west (right into the arms of Kruger's Afrikaner defenders).

The Jameson Raid in its smallest and largest senses was both farce and tragedy. Fortunately for historians and readers, van Onselen provides abundant evidence of the magical thinking of the plotting classes within Johannesburg. Wisely, he spends little time belaboring the political and social "injustices" under which the mining enterprises and the non-Afrikaans-speaking laboring class suffered under South African Republican rule. The workers and owners were indeed *uitlanders* (outsiders) who had not been granted the franchise. They were taxed without representation; they had almost no voice in how Kruger and the first and second *volksstaad* (people's congresses) governed the Republic and its bullion bonanza. The Republic treated its new immigrants as second-class transients, not contributing members of the agrarian Republic—with its long-harbored antagonism to imperial rule.

Van Onselen tells us in detail about Hammond's sub-plot—the putative plan to ransack Pretoria's armory and abduct Kruger. He also outlines the rivalry within frontier Johannesburg between the leading mining houses and the unwillingness of expert Cornish hard-rock blasters and shaft sinkers to take part in a plot conceived by Americans to upend legitimate authority. He further depicts opportunistic would-be revolutionaries morphing overnight into reformers willing to strike bargains with a wily Kruger, after the Raid.

Critics might argue that van Onselen could have told the story of Hammond and the Jameson Raid more economically. But such a strategy would have risked the wealth of intricate and interlocking detail that van Onselen provides about how an embryonic Johannesburg functioned in the 1890s and the years preceding. It also would have shortchanged the intrigues of the many major and minor players in the

conspiracy before they arrived at the realization—too late—that they were all bit players in a slapstick comedy.

Van Onselen's careful unraveling of the various strands of the Raid makes Hammond the arch villain. It implies that Rhodes (as we knew before) championed the Raid to further his imperial ambitions and remove a major obstacle to British hegemony. It paints Jameson as equally a tool of Rhodes and Hammond and accepts that Jameson was acting well beyond "instructions" when he set out from Pitsani on December 29, 1895. Van Onselen concludes that Hammond attempted to orchestrate Kruger's overthrow without even a transient appreciation of the South African Republic's formidable strengths, failing to understand the state president's sagacity and believing (based on experiences in Mexico and Idaho) that he could foment an uprising of militant workers who would remain loyal to a wild scheme.

From van Onselen's point of view, the riddles of the Raid are now solved: Hammond was its inventor, and Rhodes, Jameson, many of his fellow Americans, and other Johannesburgers were his gullible followers. Many English-speaking mine managers, lawyers, storekeepers, and workers who chafed under Republican rule and wanted Kruger's regime gone were friendly to the interlocking cabal—the internal and external assault on Afrikaner hegemony in the Republic. But Hammond, the conspirator in chief, drew his closest support from the numerous Americans who had come to dig and sell gold. In that sense, the Raid indeed originated as an American plot—an extension of foreign adventuring that could be considered a southern African advancing of the Monroe Doctrine. Van Onselen stretches the evidence (albeit in an interesting fashion), however, when he suggests that the Raid "may, in fact, have been the very first explosive act in a decade that witnessed America's greatest push to extend its formal and informal empires" (470). Hammond was hardly an instrument of American foreign policy.

Otherwise, van Onselen makes a very good case that Rhodes was a victim of Hammond's insouciant persuasiveness; Rhodes saw Kruger and the Republic as major obstacles to the consolidation of British interests (and Rhodes'-sponsored mining accomplishments) in southern Africa. But, as van Onselen implies, the Raid would not have happened without Hammond's propaganda regarding the ease of filibustering and his ability to assure Rhodes that the miners would rise to oppose continued Afrikaner domination. Nor would

Rhodes have been heavily implicated in the plot if he had not feared a successful American-run coup d'état that would have culminated in a city-state or a republic under local or non-British control. Rhodes told Stead that if he had not involved himself in the Raid, "the forces on the spot would soon [have made] short work of President Kruger. Then I would [have been] faced with an American Republic" that was "hostile to and jealous of Britain."⁴

This new light on the Raid hardly exonerates Rhodes; he was culpable. But it shifts primary responsibility for the Raid's failure to Hammond; Rhodes' primary error was to believe in Hammond's credibility and to trust his good offices. Hammond, as van Onselen carefully depicts him, was a self-important scoundrel who largely evaded punishment for his part in South Africa's ultimate turmoil. Indeed, much of the second half of this long and sometimes repetitive book is about Hammond's maneuverings and machinations after the Raid, and even about his influence on President William Howard Taft.

This biography is a magnificent achievement, even though its subject was a smarmy troublemaker active across continents and cultures. As for Hammond's baleful influence on mining, Johannesburg, and South Africa's historical evolution toward apartheid, van Onselen makes an excellent case that he (and other Americans in the 1890s) played a much bigger and stronger role in shaping modern South Africa than has hitherto been appreciated.

4 Rhodes, quoted in William Thomas Stead, *The Americanisation of the World or the Trend of the Twentieth Century* (London, 1902), 30 (the interview was in 1900). Rhodes and Stead are fully quoted in van Onselen, *Jameson Raid*, 462.