When the King Becomes your Personal Enemy: W. T. Stead, King Leopold II, and the Congo Free State

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I

The Congo Free State, Joseph Conrad, and the *Review of Reviews*

From the first year of its existence the *Review of Reviews* regularly touched on the subject of the Congo Free State. In fact, ProQuest's *British Periodicals* lists thirty-eight mentions of 'Congo' in the *Review of Reviews* for the year 1890 out of a total of 303 mentions in all of the periodicals covered in the database. Admittedly, most of those references are extremely brief, sometimes even only listings in the index. But there were a couple of interesting exceptions which this article will focus on. The Congo Free State was and remained a very hot topic in the British press during the entire last decade of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century. The publication of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (serialized in 1899 and published as a novella in a book containing three stories in 1903) symbolizes the culmination of that controversy as well as catching the general attitude of the British politically aware towards the Belgian rule over this African colony.

The Polish-born author Joseph Conrad had been drawn towards the Congo ever since he had placed his finger, as a nine-year-old, on that blank spot in the very middle of Africa promising to himself: 'When I grow up I shall go there.'[1] Conrad was indeed to go down the Congo river after he had been appointed as captain of a steamship (the ironically named *Roi des Belges* [King of the Belgians]) by Albert Thys, director of the Société Anonyme Belge pour le Commerce du Haut-Congo, in 1890. To travel through Africa to discover the blank spots on the world map was for him the fulfilment of that boy's dream, and the support of his aunt, Marguerite Poradowska, who lived in Brussels at the time, actually made it happen. But once in the Congo the dream turned into a nightmare and, four months later, a very ill Conrad had to return to Britain. For all its desired adventurousness this Congo episode was to prove traumatic. On 26 September 1890 he wrote to his aunt:

> Everything here is repellent to me. Men and things, but men above all. And I am repellent to them, also. From the manager in Africa who has taken the

> trouble to tell one and all that I offend supremely, down to the lowest mechanic, they all have the gift of irritating my nerves — so that I am not as agreeable to them perhaps as I should be. The manager is a common ivory dealer with base instincts who considers himself a merchant although he is only a kind of African shop-keeper. His name is Delcommune. He detests the English, and out there I am naturally regarded as such.[2]

These feelings of disgust and abhorrence were to become so overwhelming that he was to translate them into fiction. The first story based on that terrible Congo journey was to be published in 1897 entitled 'An Outpost of Progress', a short story with two Belgian officials as protagonists. After this he began to write a longer story about his Congo adventure. This is generally considered his masterpiece: the novella *Heart of Darkness*. The Belgian nationality of the characters is far less prominent here but the story, like 'Outpost', is set in the Congo Free State. In his letters Conrad claims he is not focused on the individuals pictured in the story but on the hidden criminal motives of Belgian colonization.[3] According to some commentators, *Heart of Darkness* was the most powerful and most convincing illustration of the inhuman treatment of the Congo population under the Belgian King's rule. The journalist E. D. Morel, for example, leader and founder of the Congo Reform Association, believed *Heart of Darkness* to be 'the most powerful thing ever written on the subject'.[4] Yet Conrad was not against colonization as such but, he thought, *only* the British had the talent and the right frame of mind to do it. On the occasion of the Boer War he formulated the following 'racist' statement about the Dutch:

> It is also a fact that they have no idea of liberty, which can be found under the English Flag all over the world. C'est un peuple essentiellement despotique, like by the way all the Dutch. This war is not so much a war against the Transvaal as a struggle against the doings of German influence.[5]

Conrad's attack was at one with the zeitgeist. The colonial policy of the Belgian King, Leopold II, drew an enormous amount of criticism at the time, which was to culminate in 1904 with the publication of the damning report by Roger Casement, a report strongly and publicly supported by Morel.[6] Conrad was certainly very much aware of the growing negative attitude towards the colonial policy of the Belgian King. In the decade preceding *Heart of Darkness* feelings had been building up against Leopold and the Congo scandal. And one of the most caustic critics in this journalistic attack before and after Conrad's short story and novella was the journalist William T. Stead.

By the time Stead turned to the Congo as a subject for his character sketches in his ambitious new monthly, the *Review of Reviews* (launched in 1890), he had already made a name for himself as the *enfant terrible* of journalism. Journalism was an almost obsessive passion for him and one that allowed him to try to save mankind. His best-known attempt at saving the world was the 'Maiden Tribute' campaign, a series of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in which Stead exposed child prostitution (6–10 July 1885). His unorthodox ways of investigating this, however, landed him in prison and damaged his reputation, but his spirit remained unbroken.

His new project, the *Review of Reviews,* had the world as its subject. In the manifesto, entitled 'Programme', published in the first issue in January 1890, he explains how he wants it to 'supply a clue to that maze [of modern periodical literature] in the shape of a readable compendium of all the best articles in the magazines and reviews'. Also, it was his aim to 'make the best thoughts of the best writers in our periodicals universally accessible'.[7]

In the same 'Programme', Stead promised four new items apart from an overview of the world's periodicals. First, the new monthly was to present a survey of events at home and abroad; second, it was to provide a catalogue of new books; third, it would include a condensed novel which might be the best foreign novel of the month; and finally, it was to publish a 'Character Sketch' of a man or a woman who had figured conspicuously before the world in the previous month. This sketch had to be written 'with sympathy' and with a desire to 'present the individual as he seemed to himself in his best moments, rather than as he seemed to his enemies in his worst' ('Programme', p. 14). Several of these character sketches were to refer to, or contain information about, some of the protagonists in the Congo story.

Stead often wrote the 'Character Sketch' himself: it was an opportunity for him to digress about his personal heroes and heroines but, contrary to the announcement in his 'Programme', he also used his sketches to slash a well-known person or thing. Nor did he always focus on people; there are character sketches of *The Times* and the New Cabinet, for instance. This paper intends to look at the articles dealing specifically with the Congo, Stead's point of view as derived from the 'sketches' and, perhaps most importantly, the reason for their genesis.

II

W. T. Stead: 'The Friend of Kings'

On 18 April 1912, three days after the *Titanic* disaster, the front page of the *Daily Mirror* labelled Stead as the 'friend of kings and the hater of injustice'. From what follows it will appear that at least one king was not Stead's friend: King Leopold II of Belgium. Stead was himself to reveal this particular story in a number of contributions to the *Review of Reviews* spread over more than a decade. His idea of the 'Character Sketch' as a new feature in the *Review of Reviews* played a crucial role in that piecemeal revelation.

As mentioned above, Stead had explained the importance of the character sketch as a genre in the same issue (that of January 1890) that included a sketch of explorer and journalist, Henry Morton Stanley, the first ever published in the *Review of Reviews*. The contents of this particular sketch are carefully foregrounded in the articles preceding it. In addition to the 'Programme', this first issue of the *Review of Reviews* also contains the article addressed 'To All English-Speaking Folk' in which Stead is truly visionary in his plea for a political vote for women, a European federation, and a religiously inspired empire: 'We believe in God, in England, and in Humanity! The English-speaking race is one of the chief of God's chosen agents for executing coming improvements in the lot of mankind.'[8] This article is also a necessary stepping stone for the reader who moves on to the first 'Character Sketch' in that issue because, as I discuss below, it explains the choice of the subject. The sketch presenting the life and career of Stanley is interesting to us because it is one of three such sketches directly or indirectly devoted to Leopold II and his colonial policy in the Congo Free State, while the second and third appear in later issues. The Stanley sketch is a pure rags-to-riches story: from the very beginning he is presented as one of ours, an ordinary boy: 'In all the annals of chivalric romance there is no more adventurous career that that of the Welsh workhouse boy who has just plucked the heart out of the mystery of the Dark Continent.'[9] Stanley had grown up in a workhouse, and his life fits the story of a male Cinderella, the American dream, and the journey of Ulysses all in one.

After this short introduction we are told about Stanley's impossible feats. The second subtitle reads 'The Hideous Forest of Congo-land', which Stanley is said to have wrestled with for 160 days and come out of alive although many men in his company died

en route. Next, he is juxtaposed with a number of historical heroes. Curiously enough, the list starts with the name of Godfrey of Bouillon, crusader and hero of Christianity. But if the readers of the *Review of Reviews* did not readily recognize this name, they surely did that of the next who came from their own country and whose heroic deeds were performed at a more recent moment. General Gordon had, in 1885, died a hero's death after a long and bloody battle, waiting in vain for help from the British army to counter an attack against the Mahdi, *nom de guerre* of the legendary leader of the Muslim rebels Muhammad Ahmad Ibn Abd Allah. Gordon's untimely and unexpected death — the army sent to relieve him simply arrived too late — occasioned a deluge of indignation in England. The comparison of Stanley with Gordon already gives a measure of the admiration with which the former is being looked upon by the author of the article. But the comparison was not as far-fetched as one might assume at first sight because Gordon, too, was connected to the Congo. Prior to his mission in the Sudan, he had been asked by Leopold to take on the ruling of the Congo Free State. Gordon had first accepted the responsibility because he was bored at the time and wanted, so it has been claimed, to die an early death.[10] The request by the British government to go and fight the Mahdi then intervened, a request prompted by Stead's controversial interview with Gordon published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, and the earlier Congo plan was dropped.[11] From Stead's article about the Congo and Gordon in the *Review of Reviews*, it appears that Stead had also had a personal interview with Leopold about the Africa problem and the part the King could play in it. Stead's account at this point is, however, still very vague and superficial; he is after all talking about Stanley.

After having described Stanley as a heroic adventurer of poor descent, Stead moves on to Stanley's religiosity. He makes it quite clear from the start that Stanley is not a devout person and certainly not a bigot, but that he started to believe in missionary work after having met Dr Livingstone. Stanley is portrayed as an adventurer, but a good and religious one; moreover, to top it all, he is British. Stead writes: 'Mr Stanley's patriotism is something like Mr Stanley's Christianity. It is real enough, but it is somewhat peculiar' ('Stanley', p. 23). Stanley was a Welshman, born John Rowlands, who later went to live in Louisiana, fought in the Civil War on both sides, and then became an American journalist who had to carry relief to Livingstone. After that he accepted the position of salaried officer of the International Association of the Congo, which had Leopold II as its chief. Now this may seem like a man with no scruples to us, but it certainly did not to Stead. In

fact, Stead seems to have no problem with Stanley's objectionable morality. This is most blatant in a paragraph about cannibalism. Under the subtitle 'His Supreme Practicality', Stead discusses Stanley's ethical code in the context of means justifying ends. 'If it will help the success of the expedition to employ cannibals, he will employ cannibals', he reasons, and to make it slightly more graphic adds:

> Nor does anyone really think that his gorge would rise even at the spectacle of human hands sticking out of the cooking pots. Other things being equal, he would, of course, rather do without cannibals, but as cannibals are useful, he will impose no test of anti-cannibalism on his followers. ('Stanley', p. 26)

Stead does not discuss all aspects of Stanley's life or character, but that is clearly not his purpose. He wants to share his admiration for this man with the readers because Stanley's career is exactly what he believes his implied public is interested in and it fits precisely the ultimate aim he has for the *Review of Reviews*. His newborn monthly is aimed at 'All English-Speaking Folk' and, in the 'Character Sketch', the editor finds it necessary to point out how clever it was of him to discover Stanley as a subject: 'The unity of the English-speaking race is the key-note of the policy of the *Review of Reviews*, which, by a fortunate coincidence, is able to lead off with such an Anglo-American as the first subject in its monthly gallery' ('Stanley', p. 24).

The Stanley theme emerged again thirteen years later in June 1903, when Stead wrote a character sketch of Leopold II. This was published after the Congo debacle, after the Boer wars, and after the campaign against and public disgrace of Leopold's policy as a result of the attacks by, among others, the journalist Morel. The *Review of Reviews*' sketch of Leopold is interesting for those who want to analyse Stead's journalistic work and evaluate the credibility of his reports. Also, it marks Stead as one of the first journalists to take up the cudgels against Leopold and his abuse of the Congo population. Stead was convinced he was able to write in a detached way and to make a rational choice as to his personal position when he came to discuss a certain subject. As we have seen in his description of the character sketches, he was, in these cases, presumed to be 'in full sympathy' with the subject. He himself remembers that promise at the start of his description of Leopold since he begins by writing that 'it is the rule in these character sketches always to describe the subject as he appears to himself at his best', but adds, 'it is impossible for me to do [this]. […] The resources of the English language are inadequate to describe Emperor Leopold as he appears to himself at his best moments.'[12]

The sketch is especially interesting in the context of and juxtaposed with the earlier one of Stanley. It deals essentially with the same material: the colonization and abject exploitation of the Congo and the abuse of the Congo population. Yet the overall tone of the sketch is very different. Every subtitle indicates the development of the argument and Stead's hidden message. Leopold is called an 'emperor' and 'a conquistador', and the author refers to his ambition and his 'conservative church' ('Leopold', p. 564). After that, Stead opens the floodgates with subtitles such as 'His Fall from Grace', 'The Man who Made Hell Pay', 'The Loot of a Continent', and 'The Profits on Rubber'. When Stead returns to Stanley here, the reader is offered a very different picture from the one presented in 1890:

> For the first two years very little was done; but when the American, Mr. Stanley, arrived from his exploration of the Congo, the King saw an opportunity for giving practical effect to the designs over which he had been brooding since the formation of the association. He was careful to deny that he contemplated turning it into a Belgian colony. ('Leopold', p. 566)

Stanley is now consistently called an American; there is no reference whatsoever to his British roots. Also the recruitment of cannibals is discussed but not condoned this time, in two separate passages:

> The foundation-stone of the profits made by King Leopold lies in the fact that he has a standing army of about 15,000 men, most of whom are admittedly cannibals, with whose aid he is able to collect rubber from the natives. ('Leopold', p. 565)

A little later, Stead goes on to observe that 'as the troops employed, in thus enforcing discipline and collecting taxes, are to a large extent recruited from the cannibal tribes, [the cannibals] usually better their instructions' (p. 569).

The Congo Report by Roger Casement commissioned by the British government was finished in 1904. This was the fuel Stead needed for his most daring question, 'Ought King Leopold to be Hanged?', the title of a short article, not a character sketch, which is purportedly an interview with the English missionary, Rev. John H. Harris, who had lived in the upper Congo for seven years and who played a modest role in the compilation of the accusations listed in the Casement report.[13] The somewhat sensational title of this short article is said to be the sole responsibility of the editor of the *Review of Reviews.* The interview looks at the possibilities opened up by the report and the effects occasioned by the suicide of Paul Costermans, the governor-general of the Congo Free State. There is no conclusion to the interview but Stead's fight was not finished.

Actually, Stead wrote a fourth article about the Belgian King's colony. The occasion this time was the death of Leopold, on 17 December 1909, and Stead's article appeared a month later.[14] In it, Stead reveals why he was so obsessed with Leopold and the Congo. The article relates the personal meeting of Stead and Leopold; it uncovers the curious relationship between General Gordon and the Belgian nation; and it deals at great length with the problematic political situation at the time of the siege of Khartoum and how he, Stead, was sent to Leopold to secure a deal by which Gordon would be rescued and subsequently recuperated by the King to govern his colony, with Leopold receiving Sudan in exchange. The article paints a picture of Leopold as an immoral ruler who discarded his rightful wife and daughters in favour of a young prostitute and his illegitimate offspring with her.

But it soon appears that there is another problem with Leopold that looms over Stead's judgement, however correct that judgement may have been in hindsight. There was a personal resentment vis-à-vis Leopold, which had grown from the humiliating circumstances of that personal meeting hinted at for the first time in the Stanley sketch of 1890. Leopold was the first king Stead had interviewed, and it had not been a pleasant experience; he was required to stand for the duration of exchange, which the King had made clear he would conduct solely in French. Moreover, he categorically refused the deal offered by Stead and the British government: the gift of the Sudan in return for timely help to Gordon. He dismissed it angrily:

> 'I would not accept it if you offered it to me on a silver salver,' he retorted. 'No, no! Why did you take Gordon from me? You treated me very badly, and now you want me to get you out of this mess. It is impossible.' ('Leopold: Some Reminiscences', p. 76)

Stead notes:

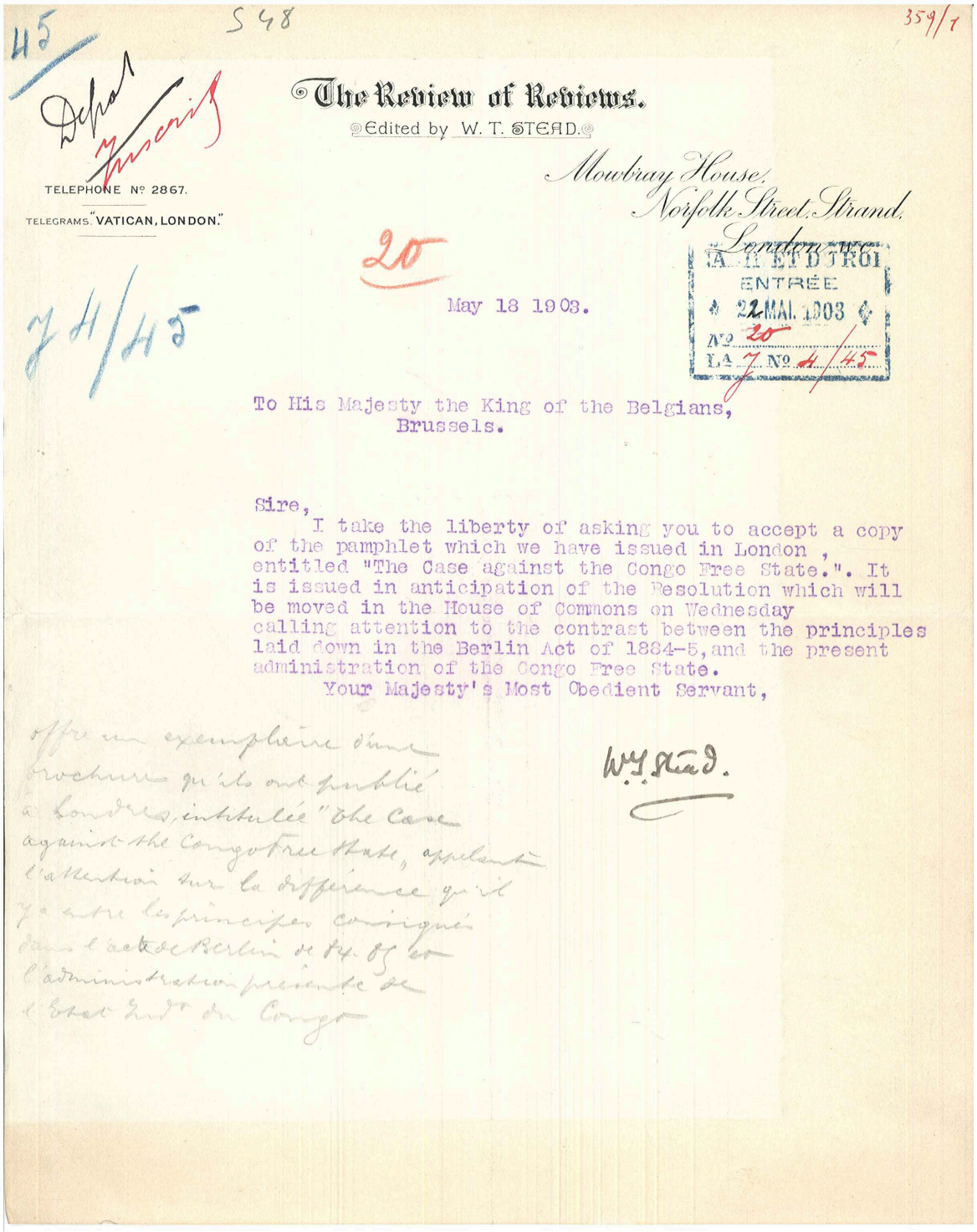
> Leopold was furious. He listened impatiently, first standing on one foot and then on the other, fidgeting, angrily interrupting me now and then, and never again resuming the silly pose of one who did not understand English. He spoke English excellently, with a foreign accent, of course, but his pretence that he could not speak English was merely assumed in order to annoy. (p. 75)

The vehemence with which Stead describes the event and his skill at making sure he has the reader on his side really show Stead at his best. The story was one that he had been involved with from the mid-1880s when he was still writing for the *Pall Mall Gazette* but even now, twenty-five years later, he could write about the events and the feelings it had aroused with such vigour and such detail as if they had happened the day before.

These articles in the *Review of Reviews* allowed Stead to vent his feelings to some extent. As well as being the expression of his strong and rightful indignation at the King's crimes against humanity, the last article also shows the personal nature of Stead's attacks. This was his revenge for the way in which he had been treated previously, and for the King's decision not to help Gordon. Leopold was a very tall man who towered over Stead during that interview and the latter felt humiliated and belittled. Stead recalled that 'the tall angry man with the long nose, the sinister eye, and the dangling sword towered over me as a Cochin China rooster might tower above a little bantam cock […]. It was a trying ordeal for me' ('Leopold: Some Reminiscences', p. 76).

Thus I must come to my conclusion. First, a small anticlimax: as an archive enthusiast I contacted the Royal Archives to check whether this interview had indeed taken place and whether it had left any traces. And yes, Stead's name is there among the King's visitors in that period but, unfortunately, the file that might have told us more has disappeared. The only proof of contact between the two men is a note that probably accompanied a copy of the brochure 'The Case against the Free State' which Stead sent to the King on 18 May 1903, a few weeks before the first character sketch solely devoted to him. The copy of the pamphlet has disappeared but the note is still there (*Fig. 1*).

There is more to conclude. Several journalists were involved in this Congo affair: Stanley, E. D. Morel, and Stead. The work of the first two has been well documented.[15] Stead's role, however, seems totally unknown. I have checked several of the seminal works about the Congo scandal and his name is never mentioned. For Stead, however, often considered the father of investigative journalism, this must have been truly what a journalist was supposed to do: he not only investigated the injustice he wanted to uncover, he also became involved. As with the 'Maiden Tribute', he did not limit his involvement to writing about the injustice, he actually played a role. Thus he not only investigated what happened in the Congo but also went further by participating in the events and by meeting the indirect perpetrator of the Congo crimes, or at least the one responsible for them. But what he writes is not that he confronted Leopold because of his policy in the Congo; rather, he saw him in order to have him act in order to save Gordon, and when the King refused, he became Stead's enemy. His hatred was compounded by Leopold's treatment of his wife and daughters: the behaviour of a womanizer and adulterer was one which Stead could never condone and which also influenced his political standpoints (in fact, it similarly explains his attitude vis-à-vis Joseph Chamberlain and Charles Dilke, for



The Review of Reviews.
Edited by W. T. STEAD.
Mowbray House,
Norfolk Street, Strand,
London, W.C.
TELEPHONE Nº 2867.
TELEGRAMS "VATICAN, LONDON."

May 18 1903.

To His Majesty the King of the Belgians,
Brussels.

Sire,
I take the liberty of asking you to accept a copy of the pamphlet which we have issued in London, entitled "The Case against the Congo Free State.". It is issued in anticipation of the Resolution which will be moved in the House of Commons on Wednesday calling attention to the contrast between the principles laid down in the Berlin Act of 1884-5, and the present administration of the Congo Free State.
Your Majesty's Most Obedient Servant,

W.T. Stead.

Fig. 1: Signed letter sent by W. T. Stead to King Leopold II accompanying the pamphlet 'The Case against the Congo Freestate [*sic*]'. 'Archief van het Kabinet van [K]oning Leopold II. Expansie'", no. 359 (previously AKP, "'Archief van de bevelen van de Koning', no. J 4/45). Reproduced by kind permission of Mr Gustaaf Janssens, the Royal Archives, Royal Palace, Belgium.

instance).

Stead's hatred for Leopold, then, was on account of the inhuman rule he had established in the Congo, and it grew over the years. It had been kindled by a personal squabble and Stead's deep loathing of the King's personal character which then fell on fertile ground with the public because of the general British attitude towards Leopold's rule of the Congo. Stead's feelings worsened over the years as he was given more reason to hate the King and official reports confirmed his opinion. The process is to be followed, almost step by step, in his articles for the *Review of Reviews.* Stead's systematic attacks on Leopold II and the colonization of the Congo left no traces in historiography, yet they may very well have influenced his readership at the time; conversely, Conrad's novella provoked hardly any ripples when it was first published but its effect grew as time passed.[16] All in all, therefore, the *Daily Mirror*'s epithet for Stead — 'the friend of kings' — seems truly ironic when one has read these character sketches.

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[1] Joseph Conrad, *Some Reminiscences* (London: Nash, 1912), p. 41.

[2] *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, ed. by Frederick R. Karl, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983–2007), I: *1861–1897*, ed. by Frederick Karl and Laurence Davies, p. 62.

[3] Letter to William Blackwood (31 December 1898), in *Collected Letters*, II: *1898–1902*, 139–40.

[4] E. D. Morel, quoted in Catherine Wynne, *The Colonial Conan Doyle: British Imperialism, Irish Nationalism, and the Gothic* (London: Greenwood Publishing, 2002), p. 27.

[5] Letter to Aniela Zagórska, (25 December 1899), in *Collected Letters*, II, 230.

[6] 'Roger Casement's Report on the Condition of the Congo State Territory' (1904). This was recently edited by Séamas Ó Síocháin and Michael O'Sullivan in *The Eyes of Another Race: Roger Casement's Congo Report and 1903 Diary* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2004).

[7] 'Programme', *Review of Reviews*, January 1890, p. 14.

[8] 'To All English-Speaking Folk', *Review of Reviews*, January 1890, pp. 15–20 (p. 17).

[9] 'Character Sketch: January — Mr. H. M. Stanley', *Review of Reviews*, January 1890, pp. 20–27 (p. 20).

[10] Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Gordon, Charles George (1833–1885)', *ODNB* <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/11029> [accessed 22 March 2013].

[11] 'Chinese Gordon for the Sudan', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 January 1884, pp. 11–12. Reproduced on the *W. T. Stead Resource Site* <http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/pmg/interview.php#sthash.vUN66A8U.dpbs> [accessed 26 March 2013].

[12] 'Character Sketch: Leopold, Emperor of the Congo', *Review of Reviews*, June 1903, pp. 562–70 (p. 563).

[13] 'Ought King Leopold to be Hanged?', *Review of Reviews*, September 1905, pp. 246–48 (p. 246).

[14] 'Leopold of the Congo: Some Reminiscences by W. T. Stead', *Review of Reviews*, January 1910, pp. 73–80.

[15] See E. D. Delathuy, *E. D. Morel tegen Leopold II en de Kongo-staat* (Antwerp: Epo, 1985); and Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

[16] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. by Ross C. Murfin, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989).