

The Lost White Tribe: Explorers, Scientists, and the Theory That Changed a Continent. By Michael F. Robinson. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. x+306 pp., acknowledgments, introduction, maps, illustrations, select bibliography, index. \$29.95 cloth.)

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The Lost White Tribe is the history of the idea, or more precisely the myth, that a wave of superior “white” conquerors spread throughout the world at some point in human prehistory. In the Western imagination, this advanced “race” left behind hidden pockets of nobility and civilization in Africa, Asia, and the Americas that awaited discovery by European explorers. Over the course of the nineteenth century, various linguists, scientists, journalists, adventurers, and eccentrics referred to these civilizing conquerors as Hamites and/or Aryans. The fact that no one was able to actually produce a living white tribesmen did nothing to dampen the Western public’s appetite for scientific, journalistic, archaeological, and novelistic accounts of their origins and influence. Michael F. Robinson, a historian of exploration at the University of Hartford, convincingly argues that these myths helped justify the European conquest of Africa as a resettlement by kindred peoples rather than an invasion by marauding foreign empire builders. In Robinson’s view, the “lost race literature” was a “thought experiment that examined . . . the essential qualities of whiteness.” Advanced white tribes made it easier for those Victorian thinkers who worried about the negative consequences of industrialization and urbanization to celebrate the romance of primitivism without giving up their confidence in their racial superiority over their new African and Asian imperial subjects.

Robinson does not exactly break new ground in telling this story, as historians, particularly Africanist historians, have been well aware of the pernicious origins and consequences of Hamitic myth for decades. Indeed, as *The Lost White Tribe* points out, depicting Africans as descendants of the cursed son of Ham, or more precisely Ham’s cursed son Canaan, helped justify the brutalities of the Atlantic slave trade. But Robinson has nonetheless made a valuable contribution to the intellectual history of exploration, imperialism, and Western racial thinking by drawing all the threads of this story into a well-planned and highly readable book. His short but informative chapters cover Henry Morton Stanley’s accounts of encountering indigenous light-skinned people at the foothills of the Gambaragara

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(Ruwenzori) Mountains in western Uganda, the Old Testament story of Noah and his son Ham and how it became the basis of the “Hamitic hypothesis” that imperial apologists used to explain away the civilization and achievements of non-Western peoples, the role of language and human skulls in shaping Western racial ideology, H. Rider Haggard and popular “lost race” fiction, and even Sigmund Freud’s deployment of “white tribesmen” to help explain primitive elements of the human mind. Along the way, Robinson also weaves in stories of “blond eskimos” in northern Canada, an account of a 1938 Nazi expedition to Tibet in a bizarre quest to locate racially pure Aryans, and contemporary debates over the fate of the Kennewick Man skeleton in Washington State.

Robinson is an engaging and entertaining writer, and *The Lost White Tribe* will have considerable appeal to general readers as he manages to make the history of Western racism into an engaging story. The book is heavy on narrative detail, and we learn a great deal about the personal backgrounds and daily lives of key figures like Stanley, Freud, and an assortment of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racial theorists. Robinson even makes himself into a central character in the book’s epilogue as he scales the Ruwenzori Mountains in an effort to see them through Stanley’s eyes. Robinson is not an Africanist by training, but he deserves considerable praise for the deft manner in which he adds African perspectives back into this story of racially justified empire building. The readers of *Ethnohistory*, however, will most likely wish that he had spent more time developing his central arguments about the essential qualities of whiteness and the role of the Hamitic myth in legitimizing the new imperialism of the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, the role of the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt as a catalyst for transforming Hamites from cursed black slaves into civilizing white conquerors gets little mention even though Edith Sanders’s highly influential “Hamatic Hypothesis” article on this subject is in his bibliography. It is also worth noting that notions of racial supremacy did not prevent Edwardian Britons from being as enamored with the primitive and martial virtues of the Zulu as they were with fictitious white tribesmen. This is the challenge that comes with structuring historical narratives around a single theme, though these minor quibbles do not detract from the value of Robinson’s book. *The Lost White Tribe* will be useful to general readers, particularly undergraduate students, seeking an accessible and polished history of whiteness and empire.

Reference

Sanders, Edity. 1969. “The Hamatic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective.” *Journal of African History* 10, no. 4: 521–32.