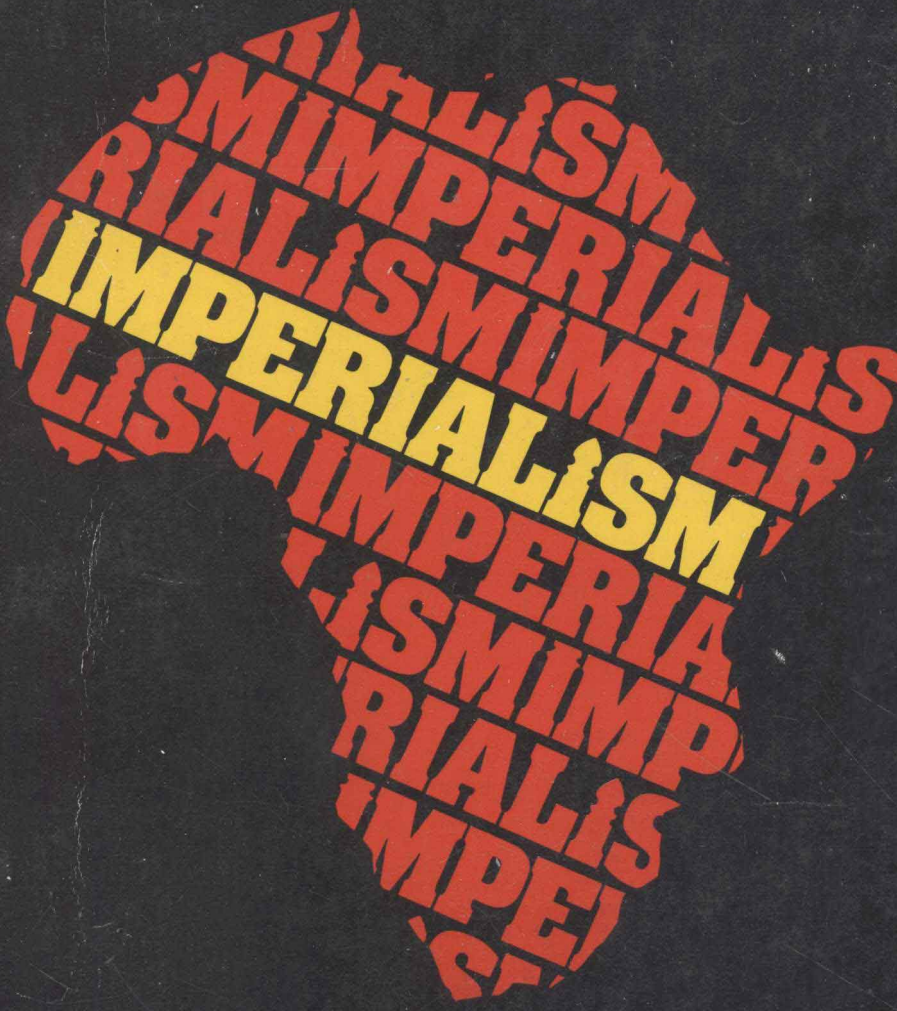
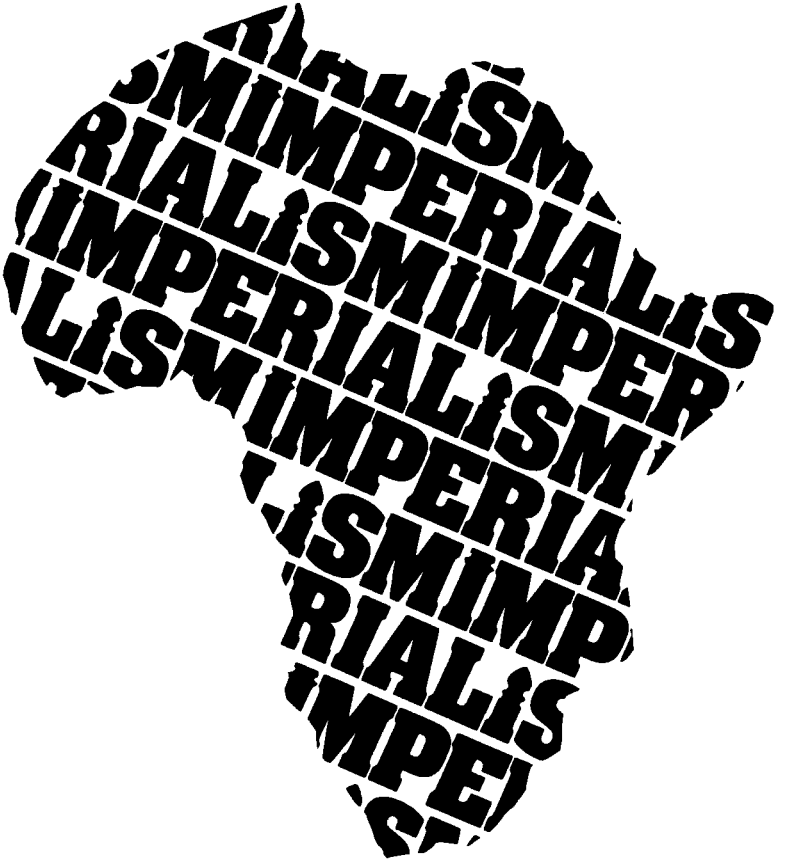


The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy
Edited with an Introduction by



The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy

Edited with an Introduction by
WM. ROGER LOUIS
Modern Scholarship on European History

New Viewpoints
A Division of Franklin Watts
New York London 1976

New Viewpoints
A Division of Franklin Watts
730 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10019

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Main entry under title:

Imperialism: the Robinson and Gallagher controversy.

(Modern scholarship on European history)
"Selected works of Robinson and Gallagher": p.
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
1. Colonies in Africa. 2. Imperialism. 3. Gallagher, John, 1919- 4. Robinson, Ronald Edward, 1920- I. Louis, Wm. Roger. II. Robinson, Ronald Edward, 1920- III. Gallagher, John, 1919-
JV246.I43 325'.341'096 75-26730
ISBN 0-531-05375-X
ISBN 0-531-05582-5 pbk.

Printed in the United States of America
5 4 3 2

PREFACE

It is probably no exaggeration to say that the Robinson and Gallagher controversy has produced the most substantial debate among historians of imperialism since Parker T. Moon and William L. Langer wrote on the subject in the interwar years. This volume discusses the critical issues. I hope that it also serves a useful purpose by bringing together the basic interpretative writings of Robinson and Gallagher, though of course anyone truly interested in the controversy will want to read their major collaborative work, *Africa and the Victorians.*

There are in fact two important controversies. The debate about "The Imperialism of Free Trade" has taken place mainly among economic historians in the *Economic History Review.* Africanists and students of imperialism in Africa have discussed various aspects of *Africa and the Victorians* above all in the *Journal of African History.* This symposium links the two debates. It attempts to indicate that there is a logic to the work of Robinson and Gallagher that unifies the entire field of the expansion of Europe. For them it is not enough to criticize hypotheses of broad and intellectual significance without offering another set to take their place. Robinson and Gallagher believe that their explanation is nearer the evidence and more sophisticated than the traditional interpretations of imperialism. Some historians regard their unified theory of imperialism as a valid alternative to the Marxist interpretation.

I will not attempt to list my colleagues who in one way or another have helped to bring this project to its completion, but I would like to convey my thanks to all of them. I greatly regret that rising printing costs prohibit the republishing of major essays by Jean Stengers, Oliver Macdonagh, A. G. Hopkins, V. G. Kiernan, Colin Newbury,

Ronald Hyam, and Noel Garson, and critiques of *Africa and the Victorians* by Roland Oliver, John Hargreaves, A. P. Thornton, and David Fieldhouse. References to these works may be found in the footnotes of the introductory essay. I would welcome comment on the usefulness of the present volume both for teaching purposes and as a means of carrying forward the debate.

After reading the introductory essay, Jean Stengers has told me that the reader should be warned about the contrast between the way Robinson and Gallagher write history and the way I have presented their ideas. Actually I have merely tried to make explicit the implicit argumentation of Robinson and Gallagher, and I would like to thank them for their assistance through correspondence and conversation.

There are times when one hesitates to criticize Robinson and Gallagher for fear of having missed the joke. The "excentric" theory, for example, is a pun to be taken seriously. Their work as a whole repays serious and close study. At Oxford Harold Macmillan once said in good-natured vein when introduced to Ronald Robinson, "Oh yes, Africa and the Victorians, couldn't understand a word of it." Without the acrimony that has characterized some of the controversy, the introductory essay to this volume and the comments at the end have been written with a genuine effort to understand the arguments of the participants, as well as to criticize their ideas.

Wm. Roger Louis
The University of Texas at Austin
Easter 1975

CONTENTS

PART I

Introduction

Robinson and Gallagher and Their Critics

In 1953 John A. Gallagher and Ronald E. Robinson published their celebrated article "The Imperialism of Free Trade," in which they argued that the nature of British imperialism in the nineteenth century remained constant. Seven years later appeared their magnum opus, *Africa and the Victorians*. The subtitle of the English edition, "The Official Mind of Imperialism," reflects the content of the book. The subtitle of the American edition, "The Climax of Imperialism in the Dark Continent," dramatizes the theme of continuity. In 1962 they sharply distilled their views on nineteenth-century expansion in a chapter in the *New Cambridge Modern History*, which, like "The Imperialism of Free Trade," is republished in this volume. A decade later, in 1972, in an article also included in this volume, Ronald Robinson advanced the argument into an "excentric" or collaborative theory of imperialism, which holds that imperialism in large part is the function of non-Western collaboration and resistance.[1] More than anything else, collaboration and resistance determine the incidence, the form, and the rise and fall of imperialism.

The accomplishment of Robinson and Gallagher has been hailed by Eric Stokes of Cambridge University as no less than a historiographical revolution, a new viewpoint in the history of the subject.[2] They themselves believe that they have achieved a unified theory of imperialism that is sustained in the case study of *Africa and the Victorians*. However one judges the work of Robinson, now the Beit Professor of the History of the British Commonwealth at Oxford University, and Gallagher, now Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at Cambridge University, there can be no question that their influence has been far-reaching.

In general, Robinson and Gallagher have attempted to replace traditional interpretations of imperialism with a new set of hypotheses which, they believe, is nearer the facts. They have tried to bridge the gap between theory and the historical evidence. The bedrock idea which underlies all their later work is to be found in the 1953 article. It argues continuity of British expansion and policy; but it also suggests discontinuity of imperialist activity and form or mode of expansion, according to circumstances in countries beyond Europe. Increasingly in their later work, they stress the trigger-action of non-European resistance. Response and collaboration introduce a random element into the process of imperialism, which, before Robinson and Gallagher, had been regarded from a narrow, Eurocentric point of view. Some of their critics have charged that they have merely inverted the old chronology of mid-Victorian anti-imperialism and late-Victorian imperialism, paradoxically producing the "Imperialism of Free Trade" and late-Victorian indifference to empire. What they have done, in fact, is something far more sophisticated and fundamental:

1. They have asserted that the urge to imperialism in Europe was merely one factor governing the timing and scope of imperialist activity abroad. Thereby they have challenged virtually all existing theories.
2. As they have developed their theories, they have argued that the process was governed as much if not more by non-European politics and economics as by European.
3. They have concluded that the phasing and changing forms of imperialism were unlikely to have conformed to chronological periods of opinion and policy in the expanding societies of Europe.

Africa and the Victorians was conceived as the acid test for this argumentation. It led them to unanticipated conclusions. In their investigation they discovered that strategic considerations were the highest common denominator in the calculations of the men who did the carving up of Africa. These strategic calculations were to an extent phantasmagorical. Strategic ideas reflected subjective interpretations of the history of European expansion. British statesmen in fact suffered from neuroses about holding what they had inherited. Misapprehension and blunders in dealing with non-European crises without understanding them often inadvertently turned decisions not to advance into advances; very often high-flying strategic notions were covers for these blunders.

The result of *Africa and the Victorians* as a test case can be summed up in these propositions:

1. The highest common denominator in the partitioners' calculations was the search for strategic security in the world.

2. What compelled them to expand, however, were not these strategic interests as such but crises in Egyptian and South African politics which seemed to dictate that these interests must be secured by extension of territory.

3. The changes in Anglo-French relations and in the diplomacy within the European power balance which stemmed from the Egyptian crisis drove the partitioners in the same direction.

4. A distinction must be made between the "motives" of the partitioners and the "causes" of the African partition. The most compelling motives were strategic, although of course they did not exclude commercial interests or philanthropic interests in some regions. The causes of the partition of Africa, on the other hand, lie in the changes in Egyptian and South African domestic politics rather than in intensified drives to expansion in European society. These changes resulting from African crises in turn produced changes in the relations of Britain, France, and Germany.

The chapter in the *New Cambridge Modern History* attempts to generalize on these points from the British to the other European participants in the "Scramble for Africa." The chapter is an elaboration of the book. Robinson's 1972 essay develops the argument to its full implications, from acquiring empires to ruling and losing them.

More specifically, Robinson and Gallagher attack the traditional notion that "imperialism" is the formal rule or control by one people or nation over others. In their view, historians have been mesmerized by formal empire and maps of the world with regions colored red. The bulk of British emigration, trade, and capital went to areas outside the formal British Empire. A key to the thought of Robinson and Gallagher is the idea of empire "informally if possible and formally if necessary." In *Africa and the Victorians* they develop the argument of imperialism and subimperialisms, in other words, forces not fully amenable to metropolitan control such as the foreign community and bondholders in Egypt, Cecil Rhodes in South Africa, and monopolistic commercial enterprises such as those of George Goldie on the Niger and King Leopold on the Congo. They argue that to understand late-nineteenth-century imperialism it is important to grasp the significance of certain key events such as the occupation of

Egypt by the British in 1882. In this case in particular British imperialism should be seen to some extent as a response to indigenous nationalism. The essay in the *New Cambridge Modern History* extends the argument of unanticipated local resistance which drags in the metropolitan powers. What alters is not British policy but conditions abroad. Robinson and Gallagher do not deny that steadily mounting economic pressures led to a steady increase of colonies, but that the spectacle of the Scramble can be understood fully only by perceiving the difficulty of reining back subimperialisms and dealing with protonationalist movements. As the arguments develop and the emphasis shifts, it is useful to bear in mind that continuity is one of the dominant principles of "the official mind." Another is that of parsimony or economy. British statesmen persistently exercised economy of effort and expense. The official mind itself can be described as the way in which the bureaucracy perceives its own history, the memory of past triumphs and past disasters. It possesses its own self-image and aspirations. It appraises present problems obliquely and subjectively. It is capable of translating economic interests into strategic concepts. It is a force in itself. It can be a cause of imperialism.

Theses of the "Imperialism of Free Trade": Continuity and Regionalism

The point of overriding importance in "The Imperialism of Free Trade" is the argument of continuity: "a fundamental continuity in British expansion throughout the nineteenth century." The character of this continuity or the nature of imperialism itself is determined by the changing circumstances at various times and in different regions—in their words, imperialism "is largely decided by the various and changing relationships between the political and economic elements of expansion in any particular time and place." The product of this interaction is *imperialism,* which remains constant. This interpretation constitutes a challenge to the basic idea of periodization in history and flies in the face of traditional views. Taking on at once the major analysts of the subject, Robinson and Gallagher attack the concept of the "new imperialism" espoused by such diverse writers as John A. Hobson, V. I. Lenin, Leonard Woolf, Parker T. Moon, Robert L. Schuyler, and William L. Langer. Those students of imperialism, whatever their purpose in writing, all saw a fundamental difference between the imperialist impulses of the mid- and late-Victorian eras. Langer perhaps best summarized the importance of making the distinction of late-nineteenth-century imperial-

ism when he wrote in 1935: "Centuries hence, when interests in the details of European diplomacy in the pre-war period will have faded completely, this period will still stand out as the crucial epoch during which the nations of the western world extended their political, economic and cultural influence over Africa and over large parts of Asia. . . . *in the larger sense* the story is more than the story of rivalry between European imperialisms; it is the story of European aggression and advance in the non-European parts of the world."[3] In most important accounts, the partition of Africa in twenty years' time stands as the very symbol of new forces of imperialism and as a watershed in modern history.

With this watershed Robinson and Gallagher will have nothing to do. On the contrary, they demonstrate the disadvantages to the concept of the "New Imperialism." Looking at maps in imperial colors in order to judge the nature of imperialism, they argue, is like gauging the size of icebergs only by the parts above the waterline. With this remarkable analogy they are able immediately to expose the central error of earlier historians such as John R. Seeley and Hugh Edward Egerton and untold numbers of historians of the British Empire whose interpretations have been guided by constitutional and racial concepts—the same as those which originally inspired the imperial federation movement. The mid-Victorian empire was informal as well as formal, economic as much as it was political. Leaving aside for the moment the powerful argument of informal expansion and control, it is important to point out that Robinson and Gallagher rightly criticize many conventional historians who see the mid-Victorian empire almost exclusively as one of indifference toward colonial activity. Again, this time by use of an arresting series of facts, Robinson and Gallagher in a few sentences launch a frontal attack on the myth of the static nature of the mid-Victorian empire in even its formal and constitutional structure:

> *Between 1841 and 1851 Great Britain occupied or annexed New Zealand, the Gold Coast, Labuan, Natal, the Punjab, Sind and Hong Kong. In the next twenty years British control was asserted over Berar, Oudh, Lower Burma and Kowloon, over Lagos and the neighborhood of Sierra Leone, over Basutoland, Griqualand and the Transvaal; and new colonies were established in Queensland and British Columbia.*[4]

They thus provide a dazzling reminder that there should be nothing especially surprising about additional territorial acquisition during the last two or three decades of the century. The question is whether the case is strong enough to destroy the old concept of a "New Imperialism," or whether their theory of continuity can be applied—

as later in the *New Cambridge Modern History* they emphatically imply it can—to the colonial experiences of other countries as well as to Great Britain. The force of the argument of "The Imperialism of Free Trade" derives from the history of the British Empire. The test of its universality must lie in explaining not only the unique features of Great Britain as the greatest imperial power of the nineteenth century but also the imperialism of Europe and of the United States and Japan as well. The phenomenon of late-nineteenth-century imperialism was worldwide.

No one has more clearly expressed doubts about the universality of the Robinson and Gallagher concept than has Professor Geoffrey Barraclough:

> *The central fact about the "new imperialism" is that it was a world-wide movement, in which all the industrialized nations, including the United States and Japan, were involved. If it is approached from the angle of Great Britain, as historians have largely been inclined to do, it is easy to underestimate its force and novelty; for the reactions of Britain, as the greatest existing imperial power, were primarily defensive, its statesmen were reluctant to acquire new territories, and when they did so their purpose was usually either to safe-guard existing possessions or to prevent the control of strategic routes passing into the hands of other powers. But this defensive, and in some ways negative, attitude is accounted for by the special circumstances of Great Britain, and was not typical. It was from other powers that the impetus behind the "new imperialism" came—from powers that calculated that Britain's far-flung empire was the source of its might and that their own new-found industrial strength both entitled them to and necessitated their acquiring a "place in the Sun."*[5]

As Barraclough points out, no one would deny the importance of the expansion of Europe's economy, technology, languages, and ideas throughout the world. The result probably constitutes the major revolution of our times. The legacies of European imperialism are undeniable. The question is whether there can be a single explanation and whether the theory of continuity has universal applicability. Put a different way, the question is whether late-nineteenth-century imperialism manifested an unprecedented urge to empire, or whether, for example, the partition of Africa merely represented the culmination of earlier expansionist tendencies. There lie some of the crucial areas of controversy raised by Robinson and Gallagher.

Themes of *Africa and the Victorians* and "The Partition of Africa." Imperial Security. Subimperialisms and Protonationalisms. Comprehensive Criticisms.

If the imperialism of the 1880s and 1890s represented no real

break with previous patterns of expansion, what then were the immediate causes of the Scramble? The answer can be found in part in the phrase "subimperialisms" or in other words the actions of the local agents of imperialism and their indigenous collaborators in such places as on the frontiers of southern British Africa. "Local crises" at the peripheries of the empire precipitate the intervention of the imperial power. Despite the importance of this theme, it is crucial to note that it is subordinate to the grand design of the book, which may be summed up as "imperial security." British statesmen acted on strategic calculations in a way quite differently from what they would have done had they based their decisions on economic advantages as such. Economic interests were involved but were not determinative. "The official mind" translated economic calculations into strategic concepts drawn from long-rooted experience of the worldwide empire. Thus Robinson and Gallagher differ radically from those historians who emphasize designs for economic exploitation. Their view is also the reverse of those who hold that the calling of the "white man's burden" played a central part in the European advance into the interior of Africa. Leaving aside for the moment their implicit attack on the theorists of economic imperialism, Robinson and Gallagher believe, as Sydney Kanya-Forstner has pointed out, that, far from espousing the "civilizing mission," British statesmen saw that Africa could not be transformed in the British image. Lord Salisbury, like Lord Milner in the later era of the First World War, pessimistically adopted the policy of "We hold what we have." To protect the existing empire in the East, the British were driven into strategic annexations and spheres of influence that eventually extended British power and lines of communication through the "Southern British World" from the Cape to Cairo to Singapore.

In "The Partition of Africa" Robinson and Gallagher extend their arguments to apply to the European powers as well as the British, and they expand the dimension of their analysis to take account of the African (and Asian) side of the equation. The countertheme of subimperialism is protonationalism, which plays an even greater role in the chapter than in the book. In the long run it develops into their ultimate argument that nationalism is a continuation of imperialism, which subsumes the argument of imperial security.

In both the book and the chapter they hold that the character of European imperialism fundamentally did not change but responded to non-European nationalist resistance of both neo-traditional and modern kinds. While taking into account rivalry with France and other powers in such areas as West Africa and the Congo, they

contend that African resistance more than anything else brought about the transition from informal to formal empire and helped to trigger the Scramble. "Imbroglios with Egyptian proto-nationalists and thence with Islamic revivals across the whole of the Sudan drew the powers into an expansion of their own in East and West Africa. Thousands of miles to the south, English efforts to compress Afrikaner nationalists into an obsolete imperial design set off a second sequence of expansion in southern Africa."[6] As Eric Stokes has pointed out, this proposition reverses the Eurocentric interpretation of historians such as Moon, Langer, and A. J. P. Taylor, who hold that tensions within Europe generated the Scramble for colonies.[7] After the dramatic insight of *Africa and the Victorians* and "The Partition of Africa," Africa can no longer be seen as a blank map on which Europeans freely wrote their will.[8] In overturning the traditional historiographical assumption that pressures within Europe produced European imperialism in Africa, Robinson and Gallagher attempt to prove that the idea of economic exploitation came after the event of political takeover, as if almost by afterthought.[9]

This polemical argument against the theories of economic imperialism leads Robinson and Gallagher along with David Fieldhouse into a direct assault on Hobson, who viewed British expansion as synonymous with attempts at exploitation.[10] Here the point should be emphasized that Hobson's theory of imperialism differed from Lenin's. Lenin gave a more subtle explanation. According to Eric Stokes:

> *. . . [I]t is too easily forgotten that the theory of economic or capitalist imperialism does not stand or fall on the authority of Hobson but of Lenin. A scrutiny of Lenin's principal writings reveals that no error could be more fundamental than to suppose that he was putting forward the same model of imperialism as Hobson. In the vital question of chronology Lenin made it plain that the era of monopoly finance capitalism did* not *coincide with the scramble for colonies between 1870 and 1900 but came after it.*[11]

In this view Robinson and Gallagher as well as Fieldhouse err in seeing "the conflation of arguments of Hobson and Lenin . . . [as] a single model." After reviewing Lenin's writings and concluding that he was less concerned with providing a theoretical analysis of the scramble for colonies than in explaining the genesis of the First World War, Stokes goes on to isolate the economic argument of Robinson and Gallagher, thereby putting it into perspective:

> *Robinson and Gallagher rightly pour scorn on the notion that economic interests were anything like powerful enough to bring about a historical*

phenomenon so remarkable as the scramble for Africa, but it is another thing to say they had no place at all, and sub silentio *they admit their importance. . . .*

Only in Egypt and East Africa were commercial interests clearly of subordinate importance. The "official mind" may have placed considerations of strategy and security uppermost in its calculations of African policy, but it would be difficult to show that it acted very differently in that part of the world where Robinson and Gallagher regard the British economic stake as preponderant, and for whose strategic defence they argue Britain's African policy was shaped. . . . in Asia, as in Africa, the agencies *of expansion were essentially economic and provoked the crises that drew the statesmen on to the scene. . . . when free of the elements of exaggeration Lenin's account of the colonial scramble is not one of narrow economic determinism, nor is Robinson's and Gallagher's one of simple non-economic motivation.*[12]

Reduced from complexity, the interpretations both of Lenin and of Robinson and Gallagher have similarities. "[W]hen the arguments of both Lenin and of Robinson and Gallagher have been freed from the elements of caricature," Stokes concludes, "their general analyses of European colonialism between 1870 and 1914 exhibit a surprising degree of correspondence. Lenin, it would appear, was no Leninist; he too stands the classical model of economic imperialism on its head."[13] If this interpretation is accurate, then Robinson and Gallagher might be considered non-Leninist Leninists, and their contemptuous rejection of Marxist interpretation of imperialism deserves rescue from the relegation of a single footnote in *Africa and the Victorians*.[14] It is a good point about Lenin and a good joke on Robinson and Gallagher. They are anything but Leninists.

With vivid recognition of the seriousness of the attack, V. G. Kiernan in the *Socialist Register* commented on the way Robinson and Gallagher have left Lenin's bones "bleaching in the Sahara."[15] Where else except at the North and South poles could one find less evidence of capitalist exploitation? According to this engaging and sardonic critique, Robinson and Gallagher have failed to meet Hobson and Lenin fairly on their own ground. In a supremely sophisticated manner the evidence has been rigged. Robinson and Gallagher have based their interpretation on "the official mind," which they erroneously assume is the originator of policy. "It is . . . a delusion of archive-searchers, who inhale a subtly intoxicating atmosphere and need its stimulus to keep them going, to suppose that ministers and under-secretaries are careful to leave behind them all the documents required for a verdict on their actions."[16] Laying the ground rules that evidence must consist mainly of the official records, Rob-