



Benin: The City of Blood (1897)

Sir Reginald Bacon

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Admiral Sir Reginald Hugh Spencer Bacon (1863 –1947) was an officer in the Royal Navy noted for his technical abilities. He was described by the First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir Jacky Fisher, as the man "acknowledged to be the cleverest officer in the Navy".

In 1897 he served as a member of the British punitive expedition to Benin, and on his return from active service wrote the book *Benin, the City of Blood* (1897), describing the campaign.

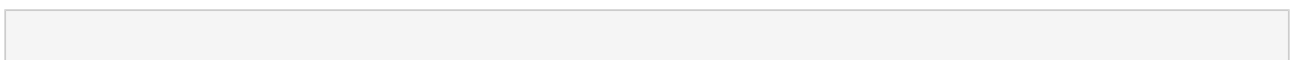
The Benin Expedition of 1897 was a punitive expedition by a United Kingdom force of 1,200 under Admiral Sir Harry Rawson in response to the defeat of a previous British-led invasion force under Acting Consul General James Philips (which had left all but two men dead).

Bacon has made his story brief, and at the same time has avoided baldness. Almost at once the reader is put in possession of the facts, drawn irresistibly into line with the expedition, and compelled to follow it through all its hardships and dangers. Scarcely ever has such a complement of men been got together from so great a distance and furnished so completely in so short a time. Nor has a British force had such a task set them as the march along the bush-path to Ologo.

The author gives the picture in a few words: "Imagine a country 25¢ a square miles, one mass of forest, without one break, except a small clearing here or there for a village and its compound. Imagine this forest stocked with trees: some 200 feet high, with a dense foliage overhead, and interspersed between these monster products of vegetable growth smaller trees to fill up the gaps. Imagine between all these trees an undergrowth of rubber shrubs, palms, and creepers, so thick that the eye could never penetrate more than twenty yards, and often not even ten. Imagine the fact that you might even walk for an hour without seeing the sun overhead, and only at times get a glimmer of a sunbeam across the path, and you have an elementary conception of the bush country of Benin." The path through all this was just broad enough for one man to walk in comfort, able only to touch the bush each side with outstretched arms. All was grand overhead, while from the ground came the rank smell of decaying vegetable matter, charged with the germs of malaria. Fighting under such circumstances gives overwhelming advantages to the enemy, but nevertheless Benin was finally taken with but little loss of life.

It is difficult in a short space to give any idea of the striking way Commander Bacon brings the horrors and trials of the campaign vividly before the reader; or to give even a vague notion of the loathsome practice of Ju-Ju, or the terrible picture of slaughter and sacrifice Benin presented when it was at last reached. This books should be read not only by those who care for adventure, but also by those who care for history. England has spilt much blood in the doing of unpleasant yet necessary deeds with varying degrees of success; but it is for the reader to determine whether "purging of this 'pest-house,' this decomposing ghastly cesspool, in so summary a fashion" was justified or merely misguided imperialism.

This book originally published in 1897 has been reformatted for the Kindle and may contain an occasional defect from the original publication or from the reformatting.



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