

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Mau Mau whitewash: Britain slandered: a critique of the revisionist account of Mau Mau*

by Lee Boldeman

*CopyRight Publishing: Indooroopilly, Queensland; 2021; 376 pp.; ISBN 9781921452567 (paperback); RRP \$49.50; Ursula Davidson Library call number 443 BOLD 2021*



The two decades following the end of World War II were characterised by numerous anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia. One of these, in Kenya, became known as the Mau Mau Uprising. In this book, the author uses the Mau Mau Uprising as a case study to enable him to fire another shot in the so-called 'history wars'. He debunks revisionist accounts of the Mau Mau Uprising and champions the traditional account.

The author, Dr Lee Boldeman, is an economist, sociologist and historian with a PhD in economics from the Australian National University. He has published one book previously, a critique of the conceptual bases of libertarianism and neo-classical economics titled, *The cult of the market: economic fundamentalism and its discontents* (ANU Press: Canberra, 2007).

The post-war unrest in Africa and Asia had anti-colonialism as a common thread, but the unrest in different areas frequently conflated anti-colonialism with other local sociological issues, such as inter-tribal disputes, and the egos and agendas of leaders frequently were at cross-purposes, while opportunistic individuals used the cover of the unrest to settle personal scores. The unrest in Kenya was no different.

The Mau Mau rebellion proper broke out in 1952 between the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (KLFA) and the British authorities. The KLFA was dominated by the Kikuyu tribe, but also contained members of other tribes – Meru, Embu, Kamba and Maasai. The war proper was fought between the KLFA and the British Army and local militia, with white settlers and pro-British Kikuyu people caught up in the associated terrorism. The military phase effectively ended in October 1956 with the capture of the principal rebel leader, but Mau Mau terrorism continued sporadically until after Kenya was granted independence in 1960 under the leadership of Jomo Kenyatta.

The book describes the deeply superstitious Kikuyu society, in which oath-taking was central and

violence beget violence. These characteristics were reflected in the Mau Mau campaign, e.g. Mau Mau 'recruits' were forced to take oaths. The book also details the atrocities committed during the Mau Mau reign of terror. The book's main focus, though, is the distortion of historical truth by those who would rewrite history from an ideological perspective and the author's efforts to rebut those claims. He objectively records the horrific happenings of the 1950s, including English involvement in atrocities, but questions the accounts of more recent historians who have downplayed the terror as a peasants' revolt or an heroic, rationally-conceived, nationalist independence movement. I consider that he makes this case well.

Boldeman says in his introduction that he wrote the book for a 'sophisticated lay audience' (p. xii). If so, I consider he missed his mark. He apparently assumes that the reader will already have a solid grounding in the history of the conflict, as he makes no attempt to summarise it, although many historical events do emerge during the course of the discussion. His focus rather is the ethical obligations of historians to present facts and evidence objectively and to analyse them accordingly. He examines the origins, aftermath and consequences of the Mau Mau terror campaign in that light and uses this analysis to rebut the revisionists' ideologically-driven apologia which laud the terrorists and condemn the British administration.

The book is a very-well researched and referenced academic work. In my view, though, it is a suitable only for specialists in the field who are already well-versed both in the history of the Mau Mau Uprising and in the associated academic literature. If they wish to engage further in the debate about re-evaluating historic events in the light of present-day ethical standards, regardless of the contemporary standards at the time the events took place, they will be stimulated by this book.

**David Leece**