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The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880. William B. Cohen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003. 360 pp.

The French Encounter with Africans provides a review of French thinking about race and slavery as it developed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Cohen's book emerged in response to three studies of the Anglo-Saxon image of Blacks: Curtin's *The Image of Africa* (1964), Jordan's *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro* (1969) and Fredrickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny* (1971). Cohen's study was intended to constitute a French-focused examination of the image of Blacks, but instead generated unprecedented attention when reviewed in *Le Monde* by Emmanuel Todd who attacked the central thesis of the study: that there existed a consensus in French thought, which relegated the Black to a position of inferiority. So violent was Todd's attack on Cohen's study that it was taken as further evidence of the French reluctance to engage with the race question.

Taking a revisionist approach, Cohen challenges the reputation that France had gained for itself for being a country incapable of race and color prejudice; a perception that was so widely held, he argues, that it had come to form an integral part of the French self-image. Tracing the inequality of Blacks and Whites back to ideas inherited from the Classical world, in the first five chapters of the study Cohen explores the foundations of slavery, the ways in which it was justified, and its development. He goes on to chart the rise of imperialism as well as the demands for the abolition of slavery through emancipation in the nineteenth century, hesitation over which Cohen attributes to deep underlying doubts about Blacks. Chapter eight is a key chapter, which explores scientific racism and the ascendance of race thinking, the culmination of centuries of hostility towards Blacks that found its expression in language borrowed from the biological sciences. The progressive expansion of French Empire, explored in the final chapter of the volume, continued to present Africans as passive, reinforcing existing images of Blacks. In Cohen's words, "Imperialism did not cause any reassessment of Blacks, but rather helped to preserve the negative images that had existed since the earliest stages of Franco-African contact" (283).

The first edition of this once groundbreaking and now classic book was published in 1980, and it is surprising that it has only recently been published in paperback. Although the present edition is identical to the original, the addition of a foreword by Professor Le Sueur of the University of Nebraska provides not only a valuable overview of the text, highlighting its central thesis, but also an appreciation of Cohen's life and achievements as a scholar. Cohen received his PhD from Stanford University and spent his entire academic career at the University of Indiana, serving as Chair of the Department of History for part of that time. Cohen's first two books *Rulers of Empire* and *European Empire Building* addressed the French colonial service in

twentieth-century Africa. He then turned to the study of earlier times, which led to the publication of this volume in 1980. The present edition was published shortly after his death in 2002.

The French Encounter with Africans is clearly written, well structured and detailed without being too dense, making it accessible to a broad readership. Although Cohen's book lacks a bibliography, extensive endnotes provide clarification on points of interest, as well as references. Cohen's approach was controversial when the book first appeared, but the new lines of inquiry initiated by Cohen have since been followed up in the writings of other prominent historians, most notably Tzvetan Todorov. Cohen's ideas are now widely used and accepted, making *The French Encounter with Africans* an important point of reference for both academics and students.

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