



The Dark Side of Sunlight - The Story of King Leopold, Lord Leverhulme and the Congo

By David Hollett

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With a great deal of political manoeuvring, and the able assistance of the famous explorer, Sir Henry Morton Stanley, in 1885 King Leopold II of Belgium founded the Congo 'Free' State. However, this was not as a Belgian colony, but as his own private domain which extended to 905,000 square miles of Central Africa. Leopold then set up a system of forced labour under which millions suffered and died due to brutal treatment, exhaustion, hunger or disease. Eventually, in 1908, the Belgian government took control of the Congo away from Leopold and the worst excesses of his despotic rule came to an end. However the forced labour system established by Leopold remained largely in place. It is against this historical background that Lever Brothers, the soap manufacturers of Port Sunlight, became significantly involved in the affairs of the Congo. In 1911 the Belgian Government offered the company land "Concessions" to develop as oil palm plantations. A decade later William Hesketh Lever was controlling vast palm plantations, oil mills and a fleet of 74 steam vessels on the Congo River. In 1930 the firm was employing no less than 28,000 Congolese workers. The rise and rise of Lever Brothers wealth and good fortune was to continue, throughout the Congo and West Africa in general.

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