The History of Ghana by Roger S. Gocking
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film, the film’s place in the history of European cinema, and the film’s current resurrection as a tool for would-be twenty-first-century empire builders facing insurgency. This dense layering can also be seen, although to a lesser degree, in the other chapters in this section, David Moore’s reading of Lumumba (Peck) and Teresa Barnes’s assessment of Flame (Sinclair). Moore offers the reader an entrée into the complex worlds of the “docu-drama” and of Congolese politics before the ascendancy of Mobutu, worlds in which image may equate to some sort of truth but is more likely to be a reflection of a reflection. Barnes demonstrates how a film not made by Africans but with Africans may, somewhat problematically, give “a voice and presence to the voiceless” (243), in this case to Zimbabwean women involved in the liberation war of the mid-1970s.

There is unfortunately not enough space in the present review to speak to all of the riches of this volume. I would therefore urge the historian, anthropologist, cineaste, or general Africanist to seek out the book and prepare to be tempted to watch some movies. For those who wish to use film in their classes on the continent, Black and White in Colour is close to required reading. Some of the topics that are touched upon as the contributors cover the continent from Algeria to South Africa include representations of colonialism, sexualities, settler societies, memory, resistance, independence, genocide, and the southern African experience of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. My main criticism is that it would have been useful to have more from eastern Africa and that central Africa is, as usual in such volumes, less well represented than one would hope. But to say that an already long volume—374 pages—does not seem long enough is surely plenty of praise; this is a wonderful volume and deserves to be used, not only read.

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The History of Ghana is one of the latest additions to the Greenwood Histories of Modern Nations series, intended to “provide laypeople with general and concise histories of nations in the contemporary world.” This volume provides a historical overview of Ghana from the emergence of precolonial societies, through European colonial rule in the nineteenth century, to the attainment of independence and the postcolonial period. For a book that aims to provide a “concise” history, this volume is quite comprehensive, spanning the history of Ghana from the Stone Age to the twenty-first century. It also provides a thorough treatment of specific political and eco-
nomic themes in the contemporary history of Ghana.

One major pitfall of studies that attempt general and concise national histories is that they tend to be spread too thin; they are often long on generalizations but short on detail and analysis. That cannot be said of this book. Unlike some other authors in this series, Roger Gocking does not paint the history of Ghana in broad simple strokes. Rather, he seamlessly navigates Ghana’s complex political history of colonialism, nationalist movements, independent republics, and military coups. Although the writing style is simple, Gocking pays attention to nuances and complexities. For example, in examining the “politics and protest” associated with British Indirect Rule, the author explores not only the obvious tensions between colonizer and the colonized but also the less-evident tensions within these categories. Even for the unsophisticated lay reader, long accustomed to simplistic and monolithic representations of Africans, it is useful to underscore the cultural, generational, and ideological diversity of African thought and action. Gocking highlights these differences not only between chiefs and the “educated natives” but also within the emergent African intelligentsia.

This volume also succeeds in presenting the history of Ghana not as the isolated history of a British colonial outpost but as an integral part of world history. The author draws appropriate connections between local and global histories in discussing the impact of the World Wars and the Great Depression on the colony and in examining how the Cold War reverberated in the politics of decolonization and postcolonial nation-building. The discussion of the Nkrumah years is particularly comprehensive, exploring Nkrumah’s socialist and pan-African idealism, the rise of the personality cult focusing on him, and the authoritarian tendencies that led to his eventual demise. The author examines the various angles of the debate on this controversial aspect of Ghanaian history, offering balanced and coherent conclusions.

The major weakness of this book is its disproportionate focus on political and economic history; the approach is very top-down. It provides detailed narratives of political and economic developments in Ghana, exploring the country’s changing economic fortunes from the socialist planning of the Nkrumah years through the economic restructuring programs of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Yet there is very little discussion of the underlying social and cultural history. The patrilineal and matrilineal kinship systems of Ghanaian ethnic groups get only brief mention in the epilogue, and there is virtually no mention of important religious movements such as the activities of European Christian missionaries and the rise of African Pentecostal Christianity. But despite these omissions, this book is a welcome contribution to the growing list of works that seek to take African history beyond the confines of university and college curricula to a broader audience.

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