

JAMES GUSTAVUS WHITELEY: THE LOST AGENT OF KING LEOPOLD II

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At the turn of the nineteenth century, European countries were in a competition to spread their influence around the globe. They began to focus their greed on Africa, one of the last remaining areas of land that Europeans had yet to fully control. Desperate to get in on the action, King Leopold of Belgium convinced other Europeans to allow him to receive a large chunk of the continent that he called the Congo Free State. Thus began a series of events that would lead to the whole-sale slaughter, rape, and manipulation of Congolese peoples living in Leopold's Free State. The terrifying atrocities that happened under Leopold's rule did not go unnoticed. Spearheaded by E.D. Morel, a reform movement gained momentum in Britain then spread across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States. The movement was backed by prominent authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle and Mark Twain, who worked to expose the abuses that Leopold oversaw. They utilized newspapers and other forms of media to spread their message. To combat growing cries for reform in the Congo Free State, Leopold enlisted the help of agents to counter Congo reformers and gain the influence of high-ranking officials in Washington.

The reform movement has been the subject of much research. William R. Lewis wrote extensively on E.D. Morel and the reform movement he led to combat atrocities committed in Leopold's Congo. Similarly, Dean Pavlakis wrote of the reform movement, adding information about its entrance into the United States and how it helped to expose a lobbying scandal in the U.S. senate operated under Leopold.

Stories of Leopold and the Congo reform movement jumped to the forefront of popularity with the success of Adam Hochschild's book, *King Leopold's Ghost*. His work highlights the grotesque crimes perpetrated by the Congo Free State and describes the life of Leopold and his reactions to attacks against his rule. Hochschild writes of agents who worked to support Leopold in the United States, most famously Henry Kowalsky. On December 10, 1906 the *New York American* exposed Henry Kowalsky as an agent working for King Leopold of Belgium. The media fire storm that ensued spread to headlines in papers across the United States. Feeling the heat from media outlets, the U.S. government promptly removed all support for Leopold and his Congo. Kowalsky was merely a pawn in a much larger chess match. While Hochschild wrote of other accomplices to Leopold in the United States, he failed to mention a man named James Gustavus Whiteley. Behind the scenes, James Gustavus Whiteley quietly worked to secure King Leopold II's interests in the United States and garner support for his Congo. His background in financial institutions helped him to arrange business deals that would entice potential supporters. Most of all, Whiteley depended on his inconspicuous nature to work covertly to promote Leopold in the U.S.

Whiteley has remained nearly invisible in the popular histories written on Leopold and the Congo Free State. His elusive nature has left a void in the full understanding of Leopold’s agents’ infiltration of the United States. An article written by Jerome L. Sternstein briefly mentions Whiteley and the role he played in helping Leopold to gain the favor of a high ranking senator in Washington, but Sternstein does not mention who Whiteley was and how he got to play such a high-ranking role for Leopold. Similarly, an article written by Robert G. Weisbord tells of a Catholic Cardinal who led Whiteley to people in Washington who would listen to Leopold’s proposals. The evidence presented in these articles identifies Whiteley as a contributor, but do not address his significance as a key member of Leopold’s lobbying scheme in the United States. The clues found in newspapers from the era and information presented by Sternstein and Weisbord indicate that there is information that has been overlooked regarding Leopold and his battle against the Congo reform movement.

Pulling together these strands of information reveals a more cohesive narrative on Leopold and the Congo reform movement. This more complete story helps to bring a better understanding of Whiteley’s role and how he remained so elusive. It examines his life before he became a key member of Leopold’s ring of agents, his writings, and how his extensive knowledge of language and Belgium led to him to catching the eye of Leopold. Working for Leopold propelled Whiteley down a path from atrocity supporter into acting in a reverse role for Belgium during World War I. He utilized his previous role as Leopold’s agent to become Belgium’s most outspoken supporter during the German occupation of World War I. This research differs from previous works because it presents evidence that has remained excluded from the analysis of Leopold and his fight against the Congo reform movement. It examines Whiteley’s largely unknown story as a key player in countering the Congo reform movement’s allegations against Leopold and his Congo Free State.

James Gustavus Whiteley was born in Baltimore on July 9, 1866. After attending private schools as well as being tutored, he became a clerk at the Savings Bank of Baltimore in 1882.¹ He was not passionate about banking but was very interested in studying “diplomacy and international law.”² Whiteley’s studies introduced him to an understanding of the relationships between nations as well as foreign cultures. His interest in foreign cultures and diplomacy led him to “master several languages.”³ In 1899 Whiteley was part of a delegation in Washington that urged the president to step in and mediate a conflict in Africa between Great Britain, Transvaal and Orange Free State republics.⁴ He and the other delegates urged the president to “allay the bloody conflict going on in Africa” and bring terms of peace.⁵ An ominous and ironic beginning for Whiteley, this event foreshadowed his career as an apologist for atrocities in the Congo Free State.

As his knowledge of foreign countries and writing ability grew, Whiteley began to write articles for American and foreign periodicals.⁶ One of these articles caught the eye of Leopold II of Belgium and jump-started Whiteley’s role as an agent for the king. In August of 1903, Whiteley had one of his book reviews published in the New York Times. The review praised

Leopold for bringing “the blessings of civilization” to central Africa. A place that Whiteley says was a “great blank space with which map makers went to decorate.”⁷ Whiteley attributed the growing campaign in London against Leopold’s Congo to a “desire to possess land.”⁸ He believed Britain was creating the Congo atrocities movement so that they could have their possessions in the Congo connected “from Cape to Cairo” - a view on Britain Whiteley still held from his previous work on a delegation trying to stop Britain from continuing their participation in the Boer War.⁹ Regardless of Whiteley’s motives for writing the article, he clearly viewed Leopold and his Congo Free State as a positive force in the lives of the native Congolese. Leopold jumped at the opportunity to gain an ally, especially one with connections within the United States.

After seeing Whiteley’s article, Leopold quickly invited him to Brussels.¹⁰ One could assume that Leopold wanted more than just to praise Whiteley for his flattering words. Leopold was actively looking to recruit supporters of his regime in the Congo. After reading Whiteley’s work, Leopold saw him as a perfect candidate and turned the visit into a business meeting. Leopold recognized that Whiteley could be extremely useful to him in the United States. His background in foreign relations, interest in diplomacy, and understanding of the Belgian language would undoubtedly have been appealing to Leopold. But in order to make Whiteley a dependable agent, he had to ensure he would be loyal. According to the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, “Leopold made Whiteley a director of the Forminiere, gave him a grant of 25,000 acres in the Congo, and appointed him consul-general of the Congo Free State.”¹¹ This ensured that Whiteley would not just be a supporter of the Congo Free State, he would also have a stake in it.

Leopold must have felt confident in his decision to invest in Whiteley. His diplomatic skills and interest in Belgian culture played a major role in Leopold’s decision. In July of 1904 Whiteley had another book review published in the *New York Times*. His review critiqued a work by Demetrius C. Boulger, titled *Belgian Life in Town and Country*. In the review Whiteley showed an extraordinary knowledge of Belgian government and culture. He wrote that “while differing in language and in origin Belgians have two points on which all agree—industry and religion.”¹² He went on to write that they “are all united by the Catholic communion . . . Belgium, Bavaria and Ireland are considered the three most devoted faithful daughters of the Church.”¹³ Seeing that Whiteley had such a vast knowledge of Belgian demographics must have comforted Leopold in his choice of a supporter. Whiteley was not just another paid henchman of Leopold, he was an intelligent diplomat and shrewd business man with extensive knowledge of Belgian affairs. On his return to the United States, Whiteley would get to work finding supporters for Leopold in Washington.

In 1905 Whiteley began his work for Leopold as consul-general for the Congo Free State in Baltimore. He utilized connections—his own as well as those that Leopold had already formed. One such connection was with the Belgian minister in the United States, Baron Moncheur. The Baron was another one of Leopold’s paid agents who, Robert G. Weisbord

writes, “lobbied Senators and Congressmen to prevent American governmental interference in his sovereign’s Congo affairs.”¹⁴ Similar to Whiteley, Baron Moncheur wrote articles in periodicals showing his support for Leopold. In October of 1904, Moncheur had his article published in *The North American Review*. It praised Leopold for bringing “civilization to a benighted people.”¹⁵ He used poetic metaphors comparing the Congo Free State to a “tree which has flourished so excellently in Africa, and which has brought forth such good fruit both in commercial and in a humanitarian sense.”¹⁶ Moncheur and Whiteley used these tactics to conceal the real crimes that had been committed. Their articles argued that Leopold brought the greatness of “civilization and Christianity” to the people of the Congo.¹⁷ Moncheur even went as far as to call Leopold’s accomplishments “one of the wonders of the world.”¹⁸ These tactics attempted to counter Congo Reform Associations movement that had begun to pick up steam in the United States.

Reformers did not hesitate to attack Whiteley directly in the media. An article in *The Medina Daily Journal* said that an investigation into the Congo, led by the British consul, found that “Whiteley contains a number of statements of cruel treatment of natives.”¹⁹ A boy named Epondo claimed “his left hand had been cut off by a native sentry in the service of La Lulonga Rubber Company.”²⁰ Whiteley denied these accusations, saying that Epondo had lied about his hand being cut off by a sentry and in fact, he “lost it in a boar hunt.”²¹ Whiteley went on to say that “mutilated victims” could be blamed on “inter-tribal wars” and not on the Congo Free State.²² Whiteley and Leopold’s other agents consistently denied these accusations. They knew that they could blame missing limbs on the “barbarism, cannibalism, inter-tribal wars”²³ of the native Congolese and no one would be the wiser. The layman who read an article such as this would assume that cases such as Epondo’s were normal and believe that the government was not responsible for such atrocities. To counter this, reformers such as E. D. Morel would take their claims to important men in the United States government, leading Whiteley and his other agents to maneuver in defense.

On October 17, 1904, E. D. Morel traveled to the United States in hopes of meeting with the President to gain his aid in the Congo Reform movement.²⁴ Morel had been the most outspoken critic of Leopold and for years had been working against him in Britain. His Congo Reform Association worked tirelessly to find evidence of the misdeeds that Leopold had sponsored and showcase them to the world. Morel was no fool and was aware Leopold had agents attempting to work against him. Morel was correct because it was falsely reported that President Roosevelt turned down the opportunity to meet with him.²⁵ Morel denied this report but did go on to say that agents of Leopold were “very much in evidence” at a peace congress he attended.²⁶

Whiteley and his fellow agents appear to have viewed Morel as a major threat to their work in the United States. Evidence of this can be found in an article published in *The Ogdensburg Journal*, a mere two days after Morel arrived. The article states that The Belgian Minister, Baron Moncheur, hosted a lavish party in the banquet hall of the New Willard building

in Washington D.C. calling it “the most important entertainment of the week.”²⁷ In attendance were many key figures for Belgium, including Lawrence Townsend, the United States Minister to Brussels; Walter V. Berry, the Minister from the Netherlands; and James Whiteley.²⁸ The party was hosted for M. Francotte, the Belgian Minister of Industry and Labor, who was visiting the country with his wife.²⁹ Clearly the party was for more than celebration. Whiteley and the other agents used this time to discuss their next move against Morel and the mounting accusations against Leopold.

Jerome L. Sternstein writes that soon after Whiteley went to Belgium to devise a plan of action with the King.³⁰ On his arrival back in Washington, Whiteley arranged to meet with Senator Nelson Aldrich, one of the most prominent politicians in the United States and was unofficially named the “general manager of the United States.”³¹

Sternstein’s research highlights Leopold’s growing desire to gain influence in the United States by appealing to the business minds of America’s top political figures. In his article, Sternstein addresses Whiteley’s role in attempting to accomplish this. His meeting with Aldrich was the beginning of Leopold’s attempt to gain influence in Washington and the first attempt by Whiteley to infiltrate the United States political arena. E. D. Morel and his Congo Reform Association were working to garner support in the United States. A subcommittee for Senate Foreign Relations in the U.S. was already considering a Congo Reform Association memorial calling for congressional action in the Congo.³² To counter this, Whiteley set up a meeting with Aldrich to ask his advice on “the best way to of bringing Leopold’s case before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.”³³ The man that the *New York Times* called “the most powerful man in the United States” would be an important asset to have, and Whiteley knew that Aldrich’s influence would be indispensable in gaining support for Leopold.³⁴

Feeling confident in himself and in Leopold’s offer after their first meeting, Whiteley asked Aldrich to introduce a counter memorial in the senate to combat the CRA’s memorial.³⁵ Aldrich declined, but where some would have felt defeated it appears Whiteley was only convinced to work harder. Conventional public tactics to gain support did not work with Aldrich, so Whiteley turned to a more shrewd backroom approach to gain influence in Washington.

Whiteley used his close businesses ties in the Congo to influence Senator Nelson Aldrich to support Leopold and his Congo in Congress. In 1901, Aldrich and Thomas Fortune Ryan, who was an “influential Catholic Financier and philanthropist,” formed the Continental Rubber Company.³⁶ The company grew quickly into a “30,000,000 dollar corporation.”³⁷ But the company was growing faster than the guayule bush from which they harvested crude rubber. As a result, Aldrich and Ryan found themselves in a precarious situation. On January 14, 1906, Whiteley gave Senator Nelson Aldrich a “confidential letter” offering him concessions in the Congo. Whiteley knew of Aldrich’s struggling rubber business and turned it to his advantage. In the letter Whiteley wrote, “I understand you are interested in a new Rubber Company . . . I may add confidentially that I was assured in the ‘highest quarters’ that every facility and encouragement would be given to a properly organized American company.”³⁸ Jerome L.

Sternstein writes that Whiteley’s letter “allowed Aldrich to choose among five different plans, each of which offered . . . broad and potentially lucrative concessions in the Congo.”³⁹ The first plan being that Aldrich’s Continental Rubber Company, “could become the exclusive American selling agent for rubber in the Congo.”⁴⁰ By approaching Aldrich through a business mindset instead of a political one, Whiteley knew he could convince Aldrich to work for him. Whiteley’s “behind closed doors” mentality allowed him to find support for Leopold without attracting attention to himself.

Whiteley used Aldrich as an ally to gain support for Leopold in Washington. Even though some saw the concessionary deal made with Aldrich as “a blatant attempt by Leopold to ‘utilize the influence of American Trust interests in American politics,’” Aldrich and Whiteley were not worried.⁴¹ Although Aldrich made no formal agreement to improve Leopold’s interest in Washington, his actions in Washington seem to prove that he knew what was expected of him. Amid mounting pressure, Secretary of State, Elihu Root “decided to appoint a Consul General to the Free State to investigate conditions there.”⁴² One can easily assume that Whiteley viewed this move as a threat, but even more threatening was the candidate Root wanted to place as Consul. Sternstein writes that Root asked G. Stanley Hall, who at the time was president of the Congo Reform Association (CRA).⁴³ The CRA was the staunchest opponent of Leopold’s Congo and Whiteley viewed anyone that was affiliated with the CRA as someone who “could not under any circumstance be looked upon favorably by the Congo Free State.”⁴⁴ Whiteley must have expressed his concern to Aldrich, who threatened a veto. As a result, Root withdrew his nomination.⁴⁵ This example of the influence Whiteley gained in Washington demonstrates his ability to pull the strings while remaining out of site of the press.

Even though Whiteley was successful at lobbying support for Leopold, he could not control the outcome for other agents working for the king. At the height of Whiteley’s influence in Washington, another agent of Leopold named Henry Kowalsky brought it crashing down. The Kowalsky scandal brought an end to Whiteley’s participation as one of Leopold’s agents, but it also shielded him from incrimination. After the *New York American* published the expose incriminating Kowalsky for lobbying in Washington on Leopold’s behalf, the U.S. government acted swiftly. Adam Hochschild writes that only “hours after the story broke, Senator Lodge of Massachusetts . . . introduced a resolution calling for an international investigation of the Congo scandal.”⁴⁶ The scandal quickly and decisively “changed the climate in Washington” regarding their position on the Congo and Leopold.⁴⁷ As Kowalsky took most of the heat, Whiteley quietly continued his work as consul-general for Leopold’s Free State.

On November 1, 1907, *The New York Times* published an article that Whiteley had sent to their editor. In the article Whiteley denied accusations that “King Leopold has deprived Belgium of a large part of the Congo by transferring the Crown lands to a private company.”⁴⁸ This was a blatant lie in the wake of Leopold and Whiteley’s efforts to gain support from Senator Nelson Aldrich.⁴⁹ Not to mention the 25,000 acres that was exclusively granted to Whiteley himself. His open denials in the media shielded him from the same fallout that afflicted

Kowalsky and other agents. After Belgium annexed the Congo from Leopold in 1908, Whiteley slipped away from being an agent of Leopold's and "returned to his banking activities in Baltimore and continued to write articles."⁵⁰

Whiteley must have found it hard to regress back to banking duties after living a much more interesting life working for Leopold. World War I provided the opportunity for Whiteley to use his valuable skills once more, this time in defense of Belgium, not Leopold. As the war began, Whiteley entered the service of Belgium.⁵¹ In 1916 he was appointed consul of Belgium at Baltimore once more by King Leopold's heir, King Albert.⁵² This time, instead of lobbying for support of Leopold, Whiteley lobbied Washington to send aid in support of German occupied Belgium. He began writing articles for *The New York Times*, speaking out against the German occupation in hopes of gaining support for Belgium. In an article published on October 17, 1915, Whiteley wrote that Germany was using Belgium as a "milch-cow."⁵³ Ironically, another article Whiteley wrote echoed a similar argument that the CRA used against him and Leopold. He stated that "the brutality of Germany is equaled only by her hypocrisy. Germany's brutality in sending thousands of Belgians into slavery will never be forgiven . . . Germany's sanctimonious pretense that she has enslaved these innocent people 'for their own good and for the good of Belgium' only adds hypocrisy to crime."⁵⁴ An interesting comparison coming from a man who so vigorously defended Leopold against the cry of atrocity raised by Congo Reformers. Nevertheless, Whiteley strongly supported Belgium during World War I. He was made secretary-general of the central committee for Belgian Relief Fund. His work in the United States was beneficial to gaining support for Belgium.

After the end of World War I, Whiteley invested his time in restoring war-torn Belgium. He was secretary of the committee for the restoration of University of Louvain that was destroyed by the Germans during the war.⁵⁵ He was also given an honorary membership to the Royal Zoological Society of Antwerp for his "aid in restoring specimens destroyed during the First World War."⁵⁶ His strong commitment to Belgium left a lasting impression in the country. Even though Whiteley was an American by blood, his heart was fully Belgian. In 1945 he was awarded the *Medaille Civique*, "in recognition of his service to Belgium during the reigns of three kings, and a regent."⁵⁷ His benevolent work during and after the war would help to ensure that Whiteley's memory in Belgium would be a positive one that was not directly related to Leopold and his Congo Free State.

Whiteley has remained nearly invisible in histories written about Leopold and the Congo Free State. His elusive nature has left a void in the full understanding of Leopold's agent's infiltration in the United States. Whiteley's articles defending Leopold against Congo Reformers helped to ensure that all accusations would be met with firm denial. Evidence presented by Sternstein tells us that Whiteley's efforts lobbying for Leopold in Washington paid off after he gained Aldrich as an ally. Whiteley used his influence in Washington to prevent legislation from being passed that would negatively affect Leopold. His ability to use others to do the work for him enabled him to remain hidden from the spotlight.

Contributing to his elusiveness was the fact that he was consul-general for Belgium. The consulship was a government position that gave Whiteley legitimacy as he made his rounds to prominent senators in Washington. Henry Kowalsky held no formal titles from Belgium or from any government. This made him an easy target for accusation of lobbying that unfolded into a full-fledged scandal. Whiteley, unlike Kowalsky, was a paid government employee. He used his formal position to cover his back-door lobbying for Leopold. Researchers investigating Leopold's infiltration of U.S. congress could easily overlook Whiteley as nothing more than consul-general for Belgium, never suspecting him of being a prominent lobbying agents of Leopold's behind the scenes.

Another reason Whiteley has remained largely removed from the story of Leopold's lobbying in the United States is the work he did after the fall of Leopold and because his actions in America were overshadowed by his work in Belgium. Whiteley's most remembered and recorded work is almost entirely related to Belgium. His high honorary status in Belgium led to possible misinterpretation of his citizenship as an American explaining his absence in the history of Leopold and the Congo that focus on the United States. His benevolent work for Belgium after the Leopold era helped to bury his earlier, questionable behavior. In Belgium he is remembered for his charity in re-building a war torn country, not for lobbying for Leopold or his denial of Congo atrocities.

James Gustavus Whiteley's elusive nature has allowed him to be overlooked in much of the popular historiographies written on Leopold and the Congo Free State. His intelligence and government position provided him with the necessary cover as he worked behind the scenes for Leopold. His dedication and hard work for Belgium during World War I overshadows much of his work before the war. This made evidence of his benevolent work more apparent than his hidden work for Leopold. Whiteley should be remembered as a major player in Leopold's lobbying of the United States and his defense of Congo atrocities, but he should also be remembered as an intensely loyal man who was devoted to a king and a country for which he cared deeply.

¹ *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, vol. 39, 105.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Geneva Daily Times*, October 27, 1899, http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84035773/1899-10-27/ed-1/seq-1/#date1=12%2F01%2F1890&index=3&date2=01%2F31%2F1915&searchType=advanced&SearchType=prox5&sequence=0&words=James+Whiteley&proxdistance=5&to_year=1915&rows=20&ortext=&from_year=1890&proxtext=james+whiteley&phrasertext=&andtext=&dateFilterType=range&page=1

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⁶ *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, vol. 39, 105.

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