

Excerpt from Adam Hochschild's *King Leopold's Ghost*, regarding Capt Leon Rom

[preface: A famous novel, **Heart of Darkness**, published in 1902 by Joseph Conrad, centers on the character Charles Marlow, who narrates most of the book. He is an Englishman who takes a foreign assignment from a Belgian trading company as a ferry-boat captain in Africa. **Heart of Darkness** exposes the dark side of European colonization while exploring the three levels of darkness that the protagonist, Marlow, encounters: the darkness of the Congo wilderness, the darkness of the Europeans' cruel treatment of the natives, and the unfathomable darkness within every human being for committing heinous acts of evil. Although Conrad does not give the name of the river, at the time of writing the Congo Free State, the location of the large and important Congo River, was a private colony of Belgium's King Leopold II. In the story, Marlow is employed to transport ivory downriver. However, his more pressing assignment is to return Kurtz, another ivory trader, to civilization, in a cover-up of his crimes. Kurtz has a reputation throughout the region of being a slave trader, a murderer, and a collector of native heads, which he places on stakes around his hut. (from Wikipedia)

Conrad had traveled through the Belgian Congo before writing his novel. Adam Hochschild discusses whether or not Conrad based his character of Kurtz on Belgian officers he met on this journey. The following quotations are excerpts from Hochschild's book, **King Leopold's Ghost.**]

"Conrad's legion of biographers and critics have almost entirely ignored the man who resembles Kurtz most closely of all: the swashbuckling Captain Leon Rom of the Force Republique. It is from Rom that Conrad may have taken the signal feature of his villain: the collection of African heads surrounding Kurtz's house.

"The 'Inner Station' of Heart of Darkness, the place Marlow looks at through his binoculars only to find Kurtz's collection of the shrunken heads of African 'rebels,' is loosely based on Stanley Falls. In 1895, five years after Conrad visited this post, Leon Rom was station chief there. A British explorer-journalist who passed through Stanley Falls that year described the aftermath of a punitive military expedition against some African rebels: 'Many women and children were taken, and twenty-one heads were brought to the falls, and have been used by Captain Rom as a decoration round a flower-bed in front of his house!'"

"On August 2, 1890, Conrad, accompanied by another white man and a caravan of porters, finished his month-long trek inland from the coast. Five miles before his caravan reached the village of Kinshasa, it had to pass through the neighboring post of Leopoldville. These two collections of thatch-roofed buildings were only an hour and a half's walk apart. When Conrad's caravan, trudging along a path near the riverbank, passed through Leopoldville, the station chief there was Leon Rom. Conrad made no entry in his diary on August 2, and Rom's notebook, which in a calligraphic hand faithfully records any raid or campaign that could win him another medal, mentions no expeditions away from Leopoldville at that time. If Rom was on hand, he would certainly have greeted a caravan with European newcomers, for there were only a few dozen white men at Leopoldville and Kinshasa, and new ones did not arrive every day. What, if anything, spoken or unspoken, passed between Rom and Conrad we will never know. But when Conrad read about Rom years later, in December 1898, it is possible that he made the connection to a young officer he had met in the Congo."

"This aspect of Kurtz is yet another reason to suspect that, in creating him, Conrad was partly inspired by Leon Rom. Rom, we saw, was a budding entomologist. He was also a painter; when not collecting butterflies or human heads, he did portraits and landscapes, of which five survive in a Belgian museum today. Most interesting of all, he was a writer.

"In 1899, Rom, by then back in Belgium, published a book of his own. **Le Negre du Congo** is an odd little volume--jaunty, arrogant, and sweepingly superficial. Short chapters cover 'Le Negre en general,' the black woman, food, pets, native medicine, and so on. Rom was an enthusiastic hunter who jubilantly posed for one photo atop a dead elephant, and his chapter on hunting is as long as those on Congolese religious beliefs, death rituals, and chiefly succession combined.

"Of la race noire [Africans], Rom says, 'The product of a mindless state, its feelings are coarse, its passions rough, its instincts brutish, and, in addition, it is proud and vain. The black man's principal occupation, and that to which he dedicates the greatest part of his existence, consists of stretching out on a mat in the warm rays of the sun, like a crocodile on the sand...The black man has no idea of time, and, questioned on that subject by a European, he generally responds with something stupid.'

"At some point while he was in the Congo, Rom must have begun planning his book. Did Rom, finding that Conrad spoke perfect French,

confide in him his literary dreams? Did Conrad see one of Rom's paintings on the wall at Leopoldville, just as Marlow sees one of Kurtz's? Or was it sheer coincidence that the real head-collector Rom and the imaginary head-collector Kurtz were both painters and writers? We will never know.

"There are several other tantalizing parallels between Leon Rom and Mr. Kurtz. In this novel, Kurtz succeeds in 'getting himself adored' by the Africans of the Inner Station; chiefs crawl on the ground before him, the people obey him with slavish devotion, and a beautiful black woman apparently is his concubine. In 1895, a disapproving Force Republique lieutenant confided to his diary a strikingly similar situation involving a fellow officer:

He makes his agents starve while he gives lots of food to the block women of his harem (for he wants to act like a great Arab chief) ... Finally, he got into his dress uniform at his house, brought together his women, picked up some piece of paper and pretended to read to them that the king had named him the big chief and that the other whites of the station were only small fry... He gave fifty lashes to a poor little negress because she wouldn't be his mistress, then he gave her to a soldier.

"What is significant is how the diarist introduces his account of the office: 'This man wants to play the role of a second Rom.'

"Finally, the murderousness of Kurtz seems to echo one other detail about Rom. When Rom was station chief at Stanley Falls, the governor general sent a report back to Brussels about some agents who 'have the reputation of having killed masses of people for petty reasons.' He mentions Rom's notorious flower bed ringed with human heads, and then adds: 'He kept a gallows permanently erected in front of the station!'

"We do not know whether Rom was already acting out any of these dreams of power, murder, and glory when Conrad passed through Leopoldville in 1890 or whether he only talked of them..."