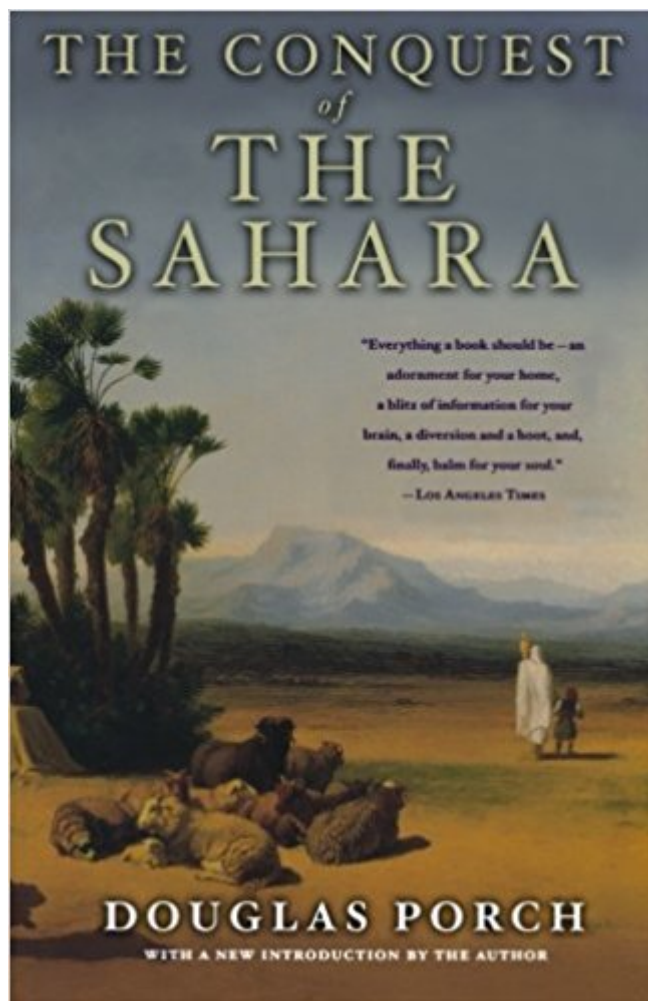


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The Conquest Of The Sahara: A History



Synopsis

In *The Conquest of the Sahara*, Douglas Porch tells the story of France's struggle to explore and dominate the great African desert at the turn of the century. Focusing on the conquest of the Ahaggar Tuareg, a Berber people living in a mountain area in central Sahara, he goes on to describe the bizarre exploits of the desert's explorers and conquerors and the incompetence of the French military establishment. Porch summons up a world of oases, desert forts and caf  s where customers paid the dancer by licking a one-franc piece and sticking it on her forehead. *The Conquest of the Sahara* reveals the dark side of France's "civilizing mission" into this vast terrain, and at the same time, weaves a rich tale of extravagant hopes, genius and foolhardiness.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Conquest of the Sahara is almost everything a book should be-an adornment for your home, a blitz of information for your brain, a diversion and a hoot, and, finally, balm for your soul." *The Los Angeles Times* "A bravura account...Readers with a taste for exotic popular history will savor Porch's wry sense of irony."

"In this admirable book, Douglas Porch sets the record straight." *The Washington Post Book World* "Porch is knowledgeable. . .and a fine writer with a dramatic style . . .[he] has done a superb job." *The Boston Globe* "[Porch] presents a vivid blow-by-blow account of how this arid, inhospitable land was penetrated at a terrible cost." *The San Francisco Chronicle*

Douglas Porch is a military historian and the author of *The Path to Victory: The Mediterranean Theater in World War II* (FSG, 2003). He is a professor of national security affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

I enjoyed this book. I felt that it was quite narrowly focused on the geography and peoples and environment of a small area. The map was inadequate - as I kept reading about places that I could not find on the map. And the focus was in some ways too geographically narrow. There were references to the French activities in other areas of North Africa, but more as asides. The author has clearly written other books about Morocco and the French Foreign Legion, and appears to have said some things in only those books that could have been added, in summary, to this book. A person, like me, who has little knowledge of the history of North Africa, often did not understand a lot of what was happening in surrounding areas. The book was good in talking about politics in France that affected the North Africa situation. It just missed out on other African locations.... I also would have enjoyed a little more explanation as to why various British travelers wanted to visit the Sahara. I clearly understood that the place was terrible and that the people who lived there didn't want anyone visiting them (unless they brought them plunder). The book did what I thought was a pretty good job of explaining why the French were there - but while a lot of British apparently traveled there, I was not sure why. Perhaps the British were traveling everywhere and this was just one of those places?

For sand?

Douglas Porch is the supreme authority on the history of northern Africa. Not only has he given us the definitive history of the French Foreign Legion, in "The Conquest of the Sahara" he has widened his canvas to include the part played by the regular French Army in the colonization of one of the most exotic regions on earth. His attention to detail is wonderful and his style keeps the reader turning the pages.

EVERYONE SHOULD READ THIS BOOK. IT HAPPENS ALL THE TIME ALL OVER THE WORLD AS WE SPEAK AND NO ONE KNOWS.

Sorry about the three stars Professor Porch, but I just couldn't get interested in the uniform fate of the various expeditions which the French mounted from 1880 to 1910 to "conquer" the Sahara.

Every one was a flop in one way or another, some fatally so. Thirst, heat, distance, ignorance and the Taureg did them in. You are a great military historian, Professor Porch - particularly of the French Army. and you did your homework on this, but at the end of the day it seems to me the Sahara is just as it was in 1880 when the French wanted to build a railway from Biskera where the desert begins south of Algiers to Equatorial Africa. There wasn't one then, and there isn't one now. In fact in this huge expanse of the earth's surface (which, placed on the map of the United States, would extend from San Francisco to the Ohio River) there are still only three north-south "roads" noted on my map of the Sahara from the National Geographic Atlas of the world and they are the thinnest of red lines placed over the dotted red lines where the trails used to be; and there isn't one that goes east to west. The Sahara is as empty now as it was a hundred years ago, except we now look down on it from 30,000 feet. Every one of us who was a boy in the 1920s read Beau Geste or Beau Sabreur or Beau Ideal or one or all of them and everyone of us who did was captivated by the romance of the French Foreign Legion. Remember the movie starring Ronald Coleman with Brian Donlevy as the sadistic evil sergeant? And who can forget Beau Geste propping up the dead men in the parapets to make the Arabs think the fort was still functioning, or Beau putting the body of Donlevy at the foot of Beau's brother's bier then setting it afire because a Geste dies with a dead dog at his feet! Alas, those books are almost as irrelevant to the story of the Sahara as this rather dreary recitation of successive failure and thwarted and foolish colonial enterprise, an irrelevant footnote to history. But should you read it? Yes you should - by all means. I became fascinated by the Taureg, by the desert, with immense space, with Porch's dry descriptions of skirmishes which he calls "battles", with caravans of a thousand people - men women and children - bringing slaves and gold and ivory from Central Africa to the Mediterranean littoral and with the peoples of the desert - people who lived on dates and little water and traveled hundreds of miles to pillage or trade or tend their scrawny flocks. It is the Sahara which was for me the interest in this book. Don't look for Beau Geste. He wasn't there.

This is a fascinating story about the French attempts to conquer and colonize the Sahara desert in Africa - yes, the Sahara desert... Why anyone would want to do that was/is still beyond me, and in reality, the French government was really not that interested. But, there were scientists who were interested in studying it. There were individuals who thought that there was gold and another minerals in the desert, and finally, there were French officers who wanted to be the first to arrive at an exotic land, e.g. Timbukto and Lake Chad. This book covers the land, the individuals who eeked a living out of the land (e.g. the Tuaregs), and the explorers who traveled, fought, and many died

traveling through the land. I especially liked the descriptions and stories about the individuals, Lamy, Pein, et al. These individuals were very eccentric and would stop at nothing to reach their goal - often doing this without official backing. If you like well written history, I highly recommend this book for you.

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