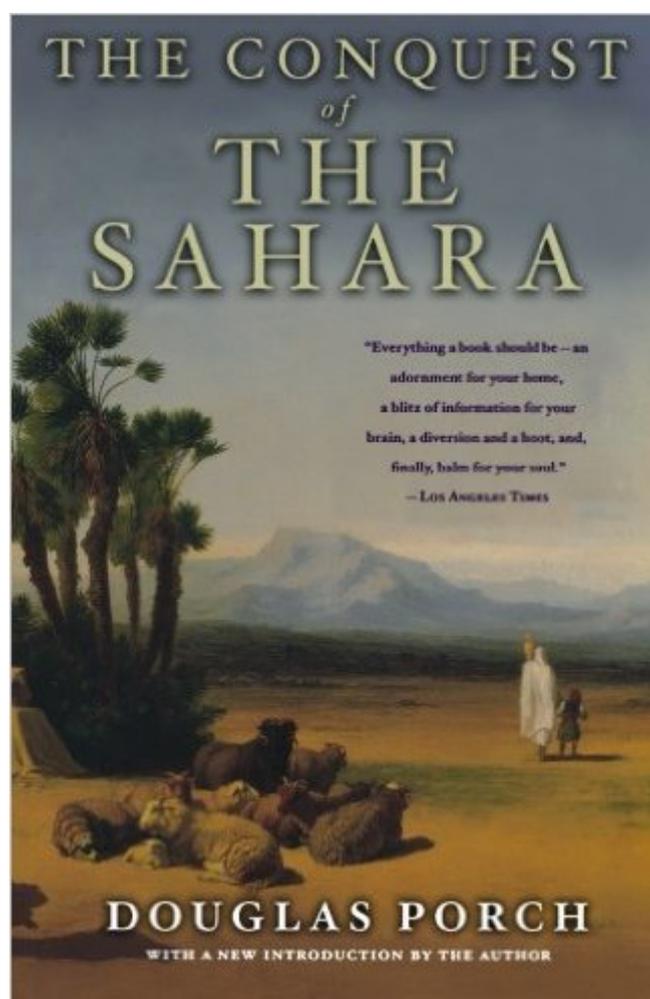


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The Conquest Of The Sahara



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 cafés 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

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2nd edition (June 22, 2005)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0374128790

ISBN-13: 978-0374128791

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.8 x 8.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (13 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Another fine book by Professor Porch. If you liked his book on the Conquest of Morocco, then this book will also be a good read. The only criticism I have of this book is that he didn't place any pictures in it, like he had in the Morocco book. A more detailed map may also have helped. I agree with the previous reviewer about the intentions of the French. Why conquer an enormous sandpit? The answer is the French government did not know, and relied on the glory seeking soldiers of the French Army. The soldiers were interested in the conquest and not the money and lives the government expended. Colonialism failed because it did not pay, and the French experience in the Sahara was a prime example. Also answered the question why Algeria has a larger share of the desert than her rivals Morocco and Tunisia. Only later when the French were fighting an independence war was oil in the Sahara found.

Porch, one of America's foremost historians of the French military, endeavors to answer the question: why did France spend billions of francs and waste hundreds of lives conquering an enormous, basically worthless desert? His answer, after an exhaustive study of the period and its personalities, is a resounding "they didn't know." Porch's tale is long on anecdotes, but complemented by a skillful discussion of French politics of the period. This saga of arrogant would-be railroad tycoons, religious fanatics, and homicidal soldiers is both tremendously entertaining and highly revealing for those with an interest in the colonial period. Of particular interest is his attempt to use modern ethnography to analyse the motivations of the dwellers of the desert who preceded the French, a study which would have profited the colonialists tremendously if they had been interested. Basically, if you enjoyed "Beau Geste", you owe it to yourself to read this book

The Conquest of the Sahara by Douglas Porch was written in 1984. This is a review of the original hardcover edition, not the more recent audiobook. The Conquest covers France's efforts throughout much of the 19th Century to colonize the Sahara east of Egypt. In many respects, the author, Douglas Porch, gives the reader an interesting and informative story. He emphasizes that France's attempt at colonization had more to do with national pride, than for obtaining financial gain. (France spent a great deal more money to conquer the Sahara than it received from exploiting the colonized in taxes). The author also does a good job discussing the geopolitics of the time, and reporting on the excessive independence with which many military officers acted. Further his descriptions of the Sahara help the reader see the desert as having a complex terrain, not just as a collection of sand dunes. Also, as is critical in a book such as this, a map is included. Where The Conquest of the Sahara is weak, is where author assumes the reader understands terms unique to the Sahara. For example, one term "tirailleurs" is used extensively in the text, but is not explained. Another term frequently used "Saharian." Even though the term would seem to apply to anyone living in the Sahara, by context it clearly does not, but exactly what it refers to is unclear. Also, there are more than a few French words and phrases. The reader who is not familiar with French (like your reviewer) will struggle with the occasional French phrase and the pronunciation of many of the names in text. As a written book, I give The Conquest of the Sahara just three stars. As an audiobook the listener would not have to struggle with the pronunciation of French and names and phrases. If the audiobook included a map insert, The Conquest of the Sahara might rate four stars.

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.

While I wish there had been more on the bibliography/notes side of this book, I can say that it was nevertheless generally a very informative (and entertaining) work. In particular, I found it to be a good bridge between the French Maghrib, French Central and West Africa (regions that, though in many ways connected, are often dealt with seperately). The feel of the book follows the title, as it is essentially an adventure story (and rather light on colonial-imperial theory). This does not, however, detract anything from its depth, its details or history. As an overview, it serves its purpose well: There are aspects of biography of many of the major personalities, place descriptions to rival any tour book, and details on life in the Sahara which add much to gaining a fuller understanding of the subject. I found this book to be good enough to follow it up with Porch's Conquest of Morocco, which is a great companion to it. One thing I should point out, however, is that Porch mentions some oases that are not on the book's map (this happens in the Morocco book too), and this is a bit annoying, though not a large enough irritation to count as a real flaw. If a place is mentioned and the book has a map, then why leave it out? Still, the reading made up for this and I'd recommend it to anyone as a great introduction to this part of French Africa.

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