

# Book Review – Nigeria: A New History of a Turbulent Century by Richard Bourne

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2017/01/20/book-review-nigeria-a-new-history-of-a-turbulent-century-by-richard-bourne/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2017/01/20/book-review-nigeria-a-new-history-of-a-turbulent-century-by-richard-bourne/)

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*Richard Bourne has provided an excellent overview of the main political events of Nigeria's first hundred years, but no deeper analysis of the reasons for which Nigeria has stayed together, according to LSE's Bronwen Manby.*

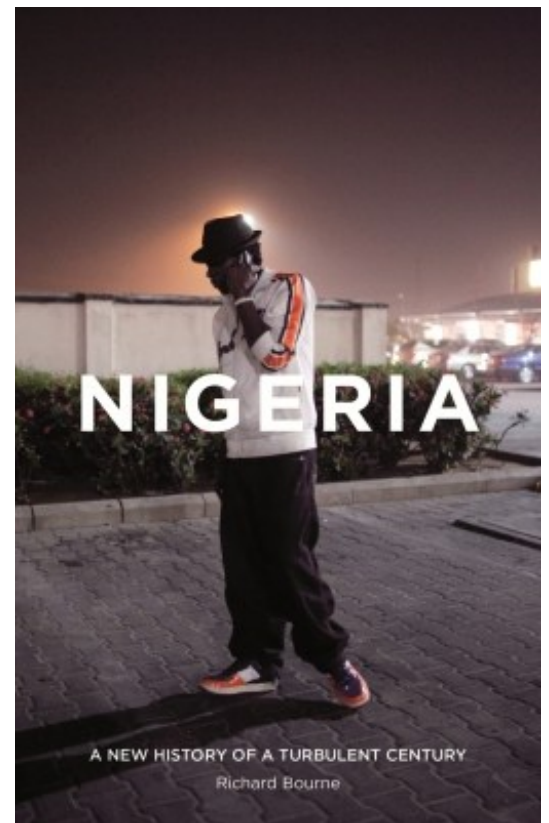
Nigeria has long lacked an accessible and comprehensive one-volume history for the general reader. Richard Bourne, a British author and former journalist with a long history of Nigeria-watching, seeks to fill the gap with this swift round-up of the first century of Africa's most populous country. Anyone without previous knowledge of Nigeria's history would do well to start with his book, *Nigeria: A New History of a Turbulent Century* for an introduction to the complexities of its politics and to the characters that have shaped the development of the state. Those who already know the history will find new details to savour.

First created as a unit in 1914 by British colonial fiat, the conundrum of Nigeria has remained whether, and on what terms, its disparate parts should remain together. It is easy, and not inaccurate, to misread the subtitle of the book as relating to a turbulent country. Bourne provides a succinct chronological account of developments over the first ten decades, in four sections of 25 years each, covering the period of colonial rule, the transition to independence and the early hopes of the new government, the descent into civil war and succeeding episodes of military rule, and finally what seems to be the increasing stabilisation of democracy after the last general ceded power in 1999.

The author dispenses with any more than a few pages of pre-colonial background, necessary to establish the reasons why the British were in possession of the territory in the first place, and starts the real narrative from the moment Lord Frederick Lugard announced the creation of Nigeria from an amalgamation of what had been three separate units under British control—the longstanding Colony of Lagos and the Protectorates of Northern and Southern Nigeria awarded to Britain at the famous Berlin conference of 1884-85.

The account of the colonial period sets the tone of the history to come, concentrating on politics at the centre, on the machinations of colonial officials, and subsequently of politicians, generals and other leaders with name-recognition, trying to establish control of the apparatus of government. There are excursions into the role of Nigeria in Africa and the wider world (informed by Bourne's insights as former Deputy Director of the Commonwealth Institute and founding director of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative), and some notes on economic and social affairs, but for the most part, this is history as the work of Great Men (barely a woman gets a name check if not a wife).

The final chapter—apart from an afterword added in April 2015 following the election of Nigeria's current head of state, President Muhammadu Buhari—consists of a set of thematic reflections on politics as business, the role of ethnicity and religion in Nigerian politics, "oil, inequity and poverty", and the continuing threats to national unity.





When setting out on a history of this type, there is inevitably a choice to be made about the overall approach and, equally inevitably, a lot of potential material must be discarded. For this reader, however, the decision to concentrate on a rapid-fire description of the succession of events in central politics means that the opportunity to consider the underlying currents in Nigerian history has been missed. The last chapter is a tantalising summary of some of these larger themes, but falls short of providing such an analysis. Some of the detail in the accounts of political developments could have been sacrificed to provide space for chapters on the nature of the pre-colonial governments in the territory of what is now Nigeria, and the continuing influence of these institutions today; on the central role of the political economy of oil on the development of the state; an inevitably related discussion of corruption and the role of money in politics; a much deeper look at the impact of religion (especially Christianity and Islam), and the ways in which both religion and ethnicity have been mobilised and refashioned over the ten decades of the country's existence; an analysis of regionalism, rebellion, and the attempts to use varied constitutional arrangements to manage these divisive tendencies; and finally a collection of the various asides on foreign policy into a discussion of Nigeria's continuing importance for the African continent today.

In short, Richard Bourne has provided an excellent overview of the main political events of Nigeria's first hundred years. What is missing, however, is a deeper analysis of the reasons for which Nigeria has stayed together and the different actors, institutions and trends that continue to stoke the centrifugal and centripetal forces that have kept the country in unstable equilibrium.

**[Nigeria: A New History of a Turbulent Century by Richard Bourne](#) . Richard Bourne. Zed Books. 2015**

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**The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.**