



Somebody Else: Arthur Rimbaud in Africa 1880-91

By Charles Nicholl

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In this compelling biography, Charles Nicholl pieces together the shadowy story of Rimbaud's life as a trader, explorer, and gunrunner in Africa. Following his fascinating journey, Nicholl shows how Rimbaud lived out that mysterious pronouncement of his teenage years: "Je est un autre"—I is somebody else.

"Rimbaud's fear of stasis never left him. 'I should like to wander over the face of the whole world,' he told his sister, Isobelle, 'then perhaps I'd find a place that would please me a little.' The tragedy of Rimbaud's later life, superbly chronicled by Nicholl, is that he never really did."—*London Guardian*

"Nicholl has excavated a mosaic of semi-legendary anecdotes to show that they were an essential part of the poet's journey to become 'somebody else.' Not quite biography, not quite travel book, in the end *Somebody Else* transcends both genres."—Sara Wheeler, *Daily Telegraph*

"At the end of *Somebody Else* Rimbaud is more interesting and more various than before: he is not less mysterious, but he is more real."—Susannah Clapp, *Observer Review*

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

As a teenager in Paris, Rimbaud (1854-1891) thrilled at his initiation into violent sex with poet Paul Verlaine, 10 years his elder. However, on the evidence of his subsequent travels in Africa as documented by Nicholl he fled the fleshpots of Paris and London in revulsion, seeking a life remote in the extreme. Arriving in 1880, after much wandering, in somnolent Aden across the horn of Africa, Rimbaud at age 26 had run away from every aspect of his former self. He had already written his last verse, his decadent masterpiece, *A Season in Hell*, had been composed at 16. So now I can see, he writes in hopeful resignation, that existence is just a way to use up your life. In tracing the stasis and stagnation of the tropical entropy in which Rimbaud exiled himself as a small trader and gunrunner in Djibouti and Ethiopia, where the culture of bohemia did not intrude, Nicholl creates a minor classic of biography and travel. In the offbeat vein of *The Quest for Corvo* and *Hermit of Peking*, the narrative is less about the subject than about the search for documentation, little of which exists. Nicholl evokes the flyspecked, sunbaked miasma of mountain villages and the cursed coast, where the hubbub of the marketplace was all that gave life its interest, and where Rimbaud drove himself relentlessly, intending to use himself up. At age 37 he succeeded. In reconstructing the lost years, Nicholl (*The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe*) has described, compellingly, a long suicide. 38 b&w photographs. (May) FYI: *Somebody Else* received the Hawthornden Prize in England in 1998. Benjamin Ivry's *Arthur Rimbaud*, focusing upon the two-year affair with Verlaine, was reviewed in PW on February 22.

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From Library Journal

Considered one of the most colorful figures of the French literary scene in the late 19th century and the pioneer of Modernism, Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91) wrote most of his poetry before the age of 19. By 25 he had renounced literary pursuits and embarked on a series of careers as a soldier, gunrunner, and trader in East Africa and Southern Arabia. In this remarkable biography, winner of Britain's 1998 Hawthornden Prize, Nicholl (*The Creature in the Map: A Journey to El Dorado*, LJ 4/15/96) reconstructs Rimbaud's shadowy life, the story of the lost years after he abandoned poetry. Although Nicholl relies on documentary sources, including Rimbaud's letters, and the memoirs of his contemporaries, he also reenacts Rimbaud's journeys, from the souks of Cairo to Yemen, Somalia, and the highlands of Ethiopia. Nicholl argues that Rimbaud's exotic adventures transcended a psychological battle within him. Rimbaud's journeys were a quest for "his other self," a chance to become "somebody else." Highly recommended for comprehensive literary collections. AA
Ali Houissa, Cornell Univ., Ithaca, NY

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From Kirkus Reviews

Nicholl fuses the genres of biography and travelogue to tell an emotional story of Arthur Rimbaud's ten years in Africa, unveiling the mystery of the leading French symbolist's post-poetry period. Rimbaud gained world renown for his symbolist verse and for a brief but tumultuous homosexual relationship with Paul Verlaine, who left his family to join the teenage Rimbaud (only to shoot him after the younger poet jilted him). However, the man who was hailed as the founder of a new poetic movement dismissed his own talent as an adolescent hobby. He stopped writing verse at age 21 and from then on sought to erase his bohemian past. Rimbaud's vagabond instinct led him to the exotic East, and he arrived in Aden in 1880, after short sojourns in Java and Cyprus. For the next decade, he would shuttle ceaselessly between modern-day Yemen, Ethiopia, and Egypt, trading in coffee, skins, guns, and even, according to some less than reliable accounts, slaves.

Tireless despite his volatile health, driven by a spirit of adventure, Rimbaud walked hundreds of miles at the head of trading caravans through dangerous lands. He found his calling exploring uncharted territories and learning the language, religion, and culture of local peoples. His expertise was acknowledged when the French Geographical Society deemed his commercial and geographical report on East Africa worthy of publication. Drawing on Rimbaud's massive correspondence, Nicholl portrays him as always on the run, physically and psychologically, ever in search of new experiences but never attaining happiness. An enormous, cancerous swelling of the knee finally forced him to return to France. Nicholl's narrative culminates in a powerful description of the agony Rimbaud endured between the amputation of his right leg and his death a few months later. Rimbaud is a fascinating personality, but Nicholl's (*The Creature in the Map: A Journey to El Dorado*, 1996, etc.) account offers more: poetry, historical documents, and personal impressions unite in a general statement about human ambition and limitations. (38 b&w illustrations, not seen) -- *Copyright ©1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

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