

is insufficiently idiomatic is bad enough, but that a scholarly publisher lets such a deficient text go into print is inexcusable. Including inconsistencies and flawed English, this book has well over a thousand errors.

Bloomsbury Academic owes it to the author and the scholarly community to re-issue this book with proper editing and color illustrations. And Jeroen Dekker owes it to himself and the reader to clarify his message and smoothen his writing.²

Gary Schwartz

Gillian Mathys, *Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025). 386 pp. ISBN 9781009463058.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52024/zket9j30>

The book *Fractured Pasts in Lake Kivu's Borderlands* presents a rich and nuanced history of the communities living along the Congo-Rwanda border, focusing on the Lake Kivu region from the nineteenth century to the present day. Unlike the dominant narratives that portray this region primarily through the lens of violent conflicts and entrenched ethnic divisions, reducing its history to hatred and state failure, Mathys takes a different approach. She stitches together the Lake Kivu region's long and complicated past, reminding us that convivial relationships and cooperation existed apart from the wars. These ties played a crucial role in the survival of communities. She emphasizes long histories of interaction, migration, trade, and interdependence between those communities. Relying on oral histories and archival evidence, she argues that the region's history was marked by dynamic migration and diverse identities, yet was mainly disrupted by colonial interference.

The book is divided into four parts, each exploring a distinct phase in the region's historical evolution. In the first part, "Frontiers", the author examines precolonial communities around Lake Kivu, challenging prevailing claims of fixed ethnic identities and territorial boundaries. She draws an interesting contrast between 'frontier' and 'border' by illustrating that mobility, coexistence, interactions, and shared

2 In a book on the depiction of children's emotions, there should be no place for a sentence as hollow as this: "Rembrandt laid down emotions of real people in hundreds of drawings with special attention for children."

customs were frequent, albeit not always peaceful. Kingdoms such as the Nyiginya (precolonial Rwanda) played important roles, not just politically but also economically, notably in the trading of iron items like hoes, which would later bear symbolic weight during the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994. Famine, political turmoil, and ecological needs all contributed to mass migration in the region. Conflicts arose, but they were frequently addressed through negotiation and the preservation of old neighborly relationships.

In the second part, “Making the Borderlands”, Mathys delves into the colonial transformation of these fluid frontiers into fixed ‘borders’. She describes how European nations, especially Germany and Belgium, drew arbitrary lines on maps, frequently using inaccurate or insufficient information. For instance, the boundaries around Lake Kivu, which separate Congo and Rwanda, have caused serious issues as the lake was incorrectly located during the Berlin Conference. These borders, however, had long-lasting social and political repercussions. Ethnic differences were formalized, and long-standing patterns of mobility were restricted with the establishment of chieftaincies and the imposition of identity-based documents. In addition to limiting migration through labor controls and passports, the colonial states imposed a strong sense of belonging that had not existed before.

The third part, “Connections”, explores how social and commercial ties persisted despite colonial constraints. Cities like Goma-Gisenyi and Bukavu-Cyangugu remained hubs of exchange, underpinned by personal relationships, commercial trust, and even rituals such as blood pacts. The author presents forced labor schemes (both in the Belgian Congo and Rwanda) such as *uburetwa*, which disproportionately affected Hutu populations while elevating Tutsi into positions of power and authority, thereby importing Rwanda’s colonial ethnic hierarchy into the Belgian Congo at that time. She analyzes how this colonial racialization of labor and authority exacerbated ethnic distinctions and reinforced inequality. However, migration continued in the Lake Kivu region, particularly as many Kinyarwanda speakers sought better living conditions in Uganda and Tanzania, or as Rwandans came to the eastern Congo under Belgian colonial recruitment strategies.

The last part, “(Dis)Connected Pasts”, links these historical processes to more recent conflicts. Mathys demonstrates how the seeds of postcolonial tensions – particularly the issue of ‘autochthony’ and the contested nationality of Tutsi people residing in the eastern part of Congo, notably known as the Banyamulenge – were sown in the 1950s

as colonial rule was coming to an end. Belgian authorities, concerned about the consequences of their own previous policies, attempted to regulate the influx of Rwandan migrants into regions like Masisi. However, by then, colonial brutality, forced migration, and politicized ethnicity had created volatile conditions in the region. On the other hand, the eruption of the Kanyarwanda Wars, as well as Rwanda's subsequent involvement in Congolese wars through armed groups such as the RCD, CNDP, and M23, can all be traced back to these layered histories. Mathys does not reduce these conflicts only to ethnicity; rather, she insists on their entanglement with land, power, colonial legacies, and regional geopolitics, questioning the current magnitude of the pending question of who is a 'real' Congolese and who is not, referring to the Kinyarwanda speakers in Congo.

As someone who grew up in eastern Congo and has spent most of my life under the shadow of violent conflicts, I approached Gillian Mathys's book with both curiosity and an apprehensive attitude. Indeed, reading this book in 2025, when the M23 is once again controlling several territories in Eastern DRC, making displacement and continual fear (terror) part of daily life for people in Goma, Rutshuru, and Bukavu, raises the stakes even higher.

I recall the silences, disappearances, and stories we could not share too loudly when some rebel groups attacked our region in my childhood. This reality persists in many regions surrounding Lake Kivu. It seems to be even looping back. However, what makes this book so unique is its reluctance to accept what is happening now in that region as inevitable. While bringing some responses and raising, to our mind, new productive questions about the situation around Lake Kivu, the author methodically dismantles the idea that the violence and enmity that currently characterize this area are timeless or inherent. Instead, she demonstrates that they constitute the result of fractured colonial legacies, popular myths such as 'greater Rwanda' before colonialism, international interference, and the reinforcement of identities that were once fluid and adaptable.

The book's merit lies in its methodological diversity, particularly the combination of oral history and archival material. It approaches the subjects not just as victims or data points but as historical actors with unique perspectives on space, identity, and mobility. The narrative is also well paced and clear, minimizing technical jargon while maintaining analytical depth, making it suitable for both researchers and readers unfamiliar with the region.

If there is any limitation, it is that some economic factors – such as the importance of mineral extraction, smuggling, and trade networks after 1960 – received less sustained attention. Additionally, while the book offers insights into the role of international actors in today's crisis, more information about global geopolitical interests would have complemented the final chapters.

Nonetheless, *Fractured Pasts on Lake Kivu's Borderlands* makes a significant contribution to African history, borderland studies, and postcolonial analysis. It provides a compelling counterpoint to prevalent narratives of division and hostility among communities around Lake Kivu, reminding us that their history is not just a record of conflicts, but also of kinships, trade, adaptation, and negotiation. This book is an essential resource for historians, political scientists, and anyone with an interest in the Great Lakes region.

Naomi Nabami, University of Antwerp

Joseph Harley, *At Home with the Poor. Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in England, c. 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024). 256 pp. ISBN 9781526160843.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52024/gzvh5285>

In *At Home with the Poor*, Joseph Harley presents a unique and meticulous analysis of the material culture of poor households in Great Britain between 1650 and 1850. Drawing on an exceptionally diverse range of sources – including probate inventories, writings of the poor, contemporary images, artefacts, account books, and wills – Harley provides an unprecedented insight into the homes of the British poor during two centuries marked by the Industrial Revolution and profound changes in consumer culture. Previous studies have largely focused on middle-class and elite consumption patterns, often assuming that sources on the poor were too scarce for meaningful analysis or that the poor owned little beyond bare necessities. Harley convincingly challenges these assumptions, demonstrating that the poor actively shaped their domestic environments and participated in consumer markets. By shifting the focus of material culture studies beyond wealthier households, he argues for a more inclusive understanding of consumption in the past.