Today we (Germans, Europeans, whites) condemn colonialism and feel ourselves to be very distant from it, but in fact our thinking about Africans hardly differs from that [End Page 246] of colonial times. That is the red thread that runs through this combination of history and travel memoir by journalist and biographer Monika Czernin. Her book is one of a growing number that describe encounters between Germans (usually women) and Africans in Africa. As its title suggests, it draws on the same myth and fantasy of the white woman alone in Africa as many other books do. But Czernin’s book also criticizes that myth and fantasy.

Czernin’s biography/memoir proceeds as twinned stories: she offers a historical narrative about Frieda von Bülow (1857–1909), the pro-colonial novelist and lover of Carl Peters, as well as a travel memoir about her research on Bülow, which she carried out in Germany and Tanzania. In both countries, Czernin consulted thoughtful interlocutors and previously unused archival material. Her African and German conversation partners drew her attention to Africans’ agency, which opened onto alternative interpretations of Carl Peters’s and other Germans’ exploits in eastern Africa. (Full disclosure: She also spoke to me by telephone and e-mail about Bülow.) Czernin’s new archival material apparently contained no unexpected revelations about Bülow’s life or thoughts, for the basic story remains the same. Academic readers should note that Czernin presents her evidence in footnote-free, non-scholarly fashion. But her historical narrative about Bülow is authoritative and well-researched, and she makes it clear how one may retrace her steps as a researcher. Her book is necessary reading for anyone working on Bülow, on German women and colonialism more generally, and on current German-African interactions. The strength of the book lies not in an accumulation of facts but in Czernin’s insightful and open-minded reflections on key moments in Bülow’s life and the emotional logic that may have informed those moments. Czernin used her wide variety of sources to propel her own creative reflection, and she allows us, as much as possible, to observe her in that process.

Czernin stresses the proximity between the two stories not only in the critical sense mentioned above, but also in the affirming, empathetic sense of noting commonalities. Czernin identifies with Bülow in many respects. That identification rests implicitly on the idea that Bülow is not only complex and intelligent, but also sympathetic. Here, the difference between her approach to
the historical material and mine is most pronounced: my own work on colonialist women was a study in anti-identification, even as I sought to comprehend their predicament in a sexist society. Bülow’s defenses of Peters’s and her own rabid anti-Semitism, however typical of her social class and time, led me to avoid any identification with her. The absence of identification, I hoped, allowed new questions to arise regarding the goals of various feminisms, including racist ones. Czernin, however, discusses Bülow’s defenses of Peters extensively, but omits mention of her anti-Semitism. That means that she does not pursue various related questions, such as Bülow’s dependence on Jewish sponsors like Julius Scharlach and Fritz Mauthner. Czernin also takes Bülow’s feminism as a given, not as a problem, and it serves to reinforce Bülow’s sympathetic image. Nevertheless, Czernin’s narrative rings very true to me. The differences between our respective accounts point to the importance of Czernin’s observation: “Wie prägt doch der Standpunkt, die Art, wie eine Geschichte erzählt wird, ihre Aussage” (290).

Czernin never does answer some of my questions about that myth element. Why is Africa associated with a feeling of freedom, either for herself or for Frieda von Bülow (276)? And what was the background to Czernin’s own fascination with Africa? Other than a brief reference to childhood trips, we do not get any answers. However, it is not Czernin’s responsibility to answer every question. The essential quality of her book is that she provokes us to think while reading it.