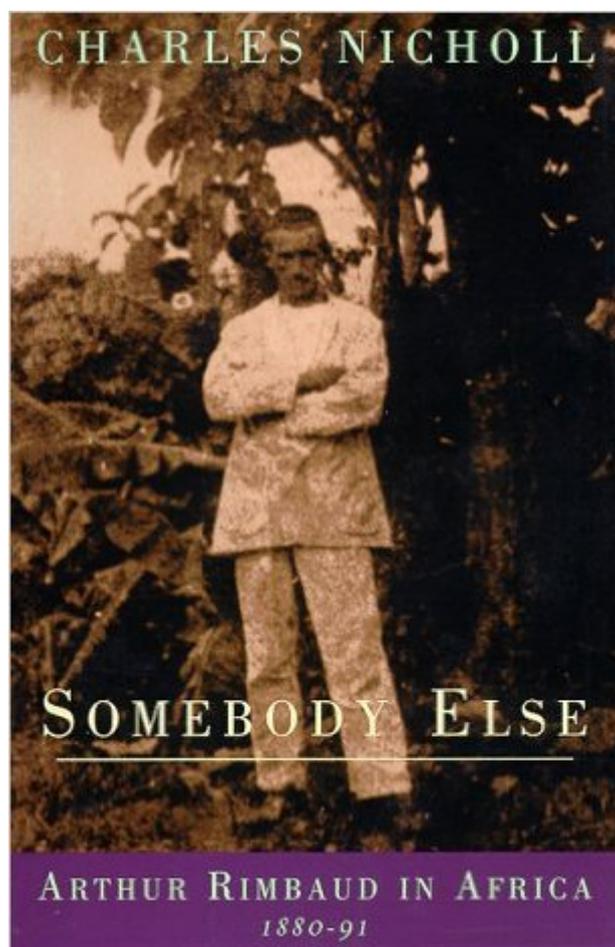


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Somebody Else: Arthur Rimbaud In Africa 1880-91



Synopsis

At the age of twenty-five, Arthur Rimbaud—the infamous author of *A Season in Hell*, the pioneer of modernism, the lover and destroyer of Verlaine, the "hoodlum poet" celebrated a century later by Bob Dylan and Jim Morrison—turned his back on poetry, France, and fame, for a life of wandering in East Africa. 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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Customer Reviews

As another reviewer has already stated, this book will not definitively answer the question that so many lovers of Rimbaud ask. To wit, "Why did he stop writing?"—But the book is a well-researched

and well-written account of Rimbaud as "un autre," somebody else than a poet...But it's all so grindingly depressing. Yes, Rimbaud had incredible endurance and will and courage. But he had no business acumen as the accounts of his many endeavors in the world of commerce amply illustrate. The book is essentially a tale of his slow degeneration in body, if not spirit.-I used to have a friend who loved Rimbaud more than I do who would call me in the middle of the night drunkenly, tearfully asking me why he quit. Well, there was nothing I could say at 3 A. M. that he would remember the next morning.-But what I feel is that the answer lies in Rimbaud's most famous poem, "Le Bateau Ivre." At the end of the poem, he says that, after all the exhilarating and mystical insights, after all the rapturous visions amidst the mad seastorms, there is nothing he would like better now than to return to being a little boat being pushed across a placid pond by a little boy. Rimbaud had been through more hell in his life by the end of his teens than would fit in the lives of many a tortured soul.-It's really not so remarkable when you consider it that, his poetry unrecognized, his soul tortured by the relationship with Verlaine and the other atrocities and privations he endured that the young man would flee the literary world that had given him nothing but anguish in the end.-Unfortunately, the world to which he fled offered little in the way of compensation, as this book sadly chronicles.

I've never really appreciated Rimbaud's poetry. Perhaps that's understandable, given that I'm not a linguist and that, for me at least, there's always something a little suspect about poems in translation. This is no doubt my loss. However, I've always liked a good read, and the one about Rimbaud, poet and traveler, who gave up his muse while still in his teens and left Europe for Africa, where he was rumored to be a gun runner and slaver, is a damned good tale. Charles Nicholl, author of "Borderlines" and "The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe," does it ample justice in his memoir "Somebody Else," subtitled "Arthur Rimbaud in Africa: 1880-1891." Actually, the first quarter or so of the book is given over to the poet's formative years, including his well-documented relationship with Paul Verlaine, the older poet who came under the spell of Arthur's often-violent persona (and strikingly beautiful eyes), regarding him as the quintessential *poète maudit*. Readers familiar with the Agnieszka Holland film, "Total Eclipse" (1995) may be forgiven for interpolating an image of Leonardo DiCaprio for that of the real Rimbaud, but one look at the Carjat photograph on the cover of Nicholl's book should be enough to set them straight. More reminiscent of Katherine Hepburn in "Sylvia Scarlet" than the ever-wholesome DiCaprio, the photo hauntingly portrays Rimbaud's "hooded frightening eye" and somewhat cruel mouth at age seventeen. But Nicholl is more concerned with the "somebody else," also portrayed on the cover of

my Vintage (1998) edition of the book: a Rimbaud self-portrait (the poet briefly took up photography in Harrar), arms folded and wearing a white smock, that has him looking, a year or two shy of thirty, more like a product of Bedlam than Hollywood.

Arthur Rimbaud was one of the most brilliant poets the human race has ever seen. He belongs in the company of Callimachus, Sappho and Catullus, the spoiled child from the north whose frank and erotic poems scandalized Rome: *odi et amo*, Catullus had written. I hate you and I love you. That says it all. About Rimbaud as well. Rimbaud was an illusion, a ghost, someone we conjure up and then spend the rest of our lives trying to shake off. Dead for more than a hundred years now, Arthur Rimbaud wrote poetry for a few brief years, while he was still in his teens, from about 1870 to 1873. He could never have imagined the extraordinary influence his slim collection of poems would have over the following century. Rimbaud, however, abandoned the world of literature at a very young age. When he was nineteen, he gave in to a mixture of rage and pride, and threw his marvelous talent onto a bonfire, along with his manuscripts. By the time his anger had eaten its way through his soul, he could not speak of poetry without contempt. He lived another eighteen years, wandering from one end of Europe to the other and as far afield as the East Indies. He joined the Dutch Colonial Army and was sent to Java, but deserted and returned to France. He got work in Cyprus, as an overseer of a stone quarry, but his temper got the better of him, "I have had some quarrels with the workmen," he wrote, "and I've had to request some weapons." He collapsed with typhoid and hurriedly returned home. In March 1880, when he was twenty-five, he left France for the last time. He found work in Cyprus again, as foreman of a construction gang in the mountains. He got involved in another quarrel and, it seems, threw a stone which hit a local worker and killed him.

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