

**Book Reviews\***

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**Boekresensies**

**An exemplar of scholarly finesse that also manages to tell a good story**

**Charles van Onselen, *Showdown at the Red Lion: The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin, 1859-1910***

Jonathan Ball Publishers, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2015

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To put it simply, *Showdown at the Red Lion* is a very good read. It successfully navigates the very difficult line between telling the story of an individual, with the close attention to the fine detail this requires, and that of the broad history of the age in which he lived. In less capable hands, a biography may present a detailed and fascinating picture of the individual without providing sufficient historical context of the world in which the particular individual lived and operated. A good biography should, therefore, provide a comprehensive and insightful picture of the individual in ways that also illuminate the history of the age in which he lived. This book does both extremely well.

At the individual level, the book is a life history of one Jack McLoughlin, a one-armed career criminal who was born in Manchester, England, in 1859 and who died at the gallows in South Africa in 1910 after a life of constant brushes with the law. These resulted in several terms of imprisonment in South Africa and Australia, and finally, in his execution for a double murder committed in Johannesburg at the turn of the twentieth century. It is the story of a complex and conflicted individual who was very much a product of his time. His character was shaped by the world he was born into: one characterised by poverty and squalor as a member of the working class in Manchester's industrial setting, where gambling, binge drinking and public brawls were the order of the day and clashes with the law were common. This was also a world in which young men routinely participated in a gang culture, with its peculiar penchant for celebrating and upholding masculinity and loyalty to the group and in which young migrant Irishmen easily took to a life of crime.

Following brushes with the law, McLoughlin joined the great British out-migration at the time by enlisting for the navy and thus gained a free passage to Australia where he soon deserted and took up a life of crime. From there, he headed for South Africa where, after a spell in the military, he resumed his chosen path and was soon "revered by many in the underworld circles" as a tough man and a natural gang leader (p 2). Working with varied members of what came to be known as the Irish Brigade, this anti-hero committed many crimes and was convicted to many

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prison terms in Johannesburg and its environs. It was while trying to escape from a prison in Rustenburg that prison guards shot him and shattered his arm, resulting in him losing the arm and becoming literally, a one-armed bandit.

Apart from a brief period with a live-in girlfriend, McLoughlin did not care much for women and preferred male company. He grew particularly close to one young lad, George Stevenson, known among his peers as "Stevo", who became his partner in crime for a while. After successfully blowing open a safe and relieving it of its contents in Johannesburg, the gang which he led fled to Pretoria where they lay low for a while. With the police hot on his heels for this crime, McLoughlin was forced to flee the country to Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia before becoming something of a consultant to a Vhenda chief who was resisting encroaching Boer domination. On discovering that his beloved Stevo had turned informer against him and other members of the gang that had participated in the safe-busting crime that had forced him to temporarily flee into exile, McLoughlin felt betrayed and resolved to execute the traitor. He proceeded to shoot Stevo down in a downtown hotel and shortly thereafter, inadvertently shot a young Muslim man - thus becoming a wanted man for committing a double murder.

With the law once again on his heels, he escaped to Delagoa Bay and made his way Down Under where for the next decade and a half, he continued his life of crime, operating between Australia and New Zealand. Finally, he was arrested in Australia after committing yet another crime and was sentenced to imprisonment. After serving time for this crime, he was extradited to South Africa to face trial for the two murders he had committed earlier. He was found guilty and sentenced to death. While this is clearly a story of one unconventional man's life as a rebel and a bandit, living on the margins of society which he was intent on subverting, the author rightly cautions us against regarding him as "peculiar" or "mad" or even unique, because

if we focus on his exceptionality and the deeds that came to cost his life, we will forfeit the fuller understanding that comes from the realisation that there were thousands of other men who, in most respects, were more alike than they were not (p 3).

Moreover, McLoughlin's life story provides a window through which we can trace the momentous historical developments that helped to shape our world while the globalisation process steadily unfolded and technological innovations increased the inter-connectedness of peoples around the globe. While globalisation has often been linked to the recent IT revolution and the matching innovative developments in communication and travel, van Onselen reminds us that globalisation was long under way before then. The global nature of the world in which McLoughlin lived and operated was evident in a number of ways. These included the international crime network that enabled him to hook up with fellow Irish criminals in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. Most of the Irish Brigade had their roots in the Lancastrian industrial world and shared a common anti-English resentment arising out of a shared memory of the abuse of the Irish by the English over the years. These

Irishmen had all found their way into the far-flung corners of the British Empire as part of another global phenomenon, namely the Great Migration of the second half of the nineteenth century, which saw people of British stock emigrating from their country of origin into Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, among other countries. This out-migration did not only involve Irish criminals but also large numbers of other groups, including women and children, because "after 1850, more than 200 000 migrants left Britain each year" (p 10). While there were clearly push factors driving this out-migration, there were also pull factors that promised hope of a better life in the colonies, especially given the discovery of precious minerals, such as gold in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1880s, respectively and also of diamonds in South Africa in the 1860s (p 6).

This massive out-migration was made possible by revolutionary changes in international communication facilities and sea and land transportation through the development of the telegraph and railway and sea-transport technology, respectively. As van Onselen put it, "the Age of the Great Migrations in the latter half of the nineteenth century was predicated on the extraordinary advances made in the development and intercontinental spread of the railways networks, steamship passages and telegraphic networks" (p 6). Because of these technological revolutions, the world was becoming a smaller place, enabling what van Onselen calls the "imperial gaze" or the imperial eye to see more clearly what was going on in the far corners of the British Empire. The improved communication networks provided by the telegraph and by the growing number of newspapers throughout the empire meant that it was becoming relatively easier for officials in the various colonies to share news about crimes and other issues of common interest to the wellbeing of the empire. It was this improved ability to track developments in various parts of the empire and to communicate with distant countries which enabled the South African police to share the information with their Australian counterparts that led to the arrest of McLoughlin and then to his extradition to face trial in Johannesburg.

*Showdown at the Red Lion* also offers us useful and interesting insights into the history of South Africa in general terms and in particular, the history of Johannesburg at the time. McLoughlin was living and operating in South Africa during a period of rapid political change in the country, a time when the Boer Republic of the Transvaal came under increasing pressure from British imperialism and the country underwent a bitter war before emerging into relative peace with the establishment of the Union of South Africa. In a way, it was these political complications that allowed McLoughlin to literally get away with murder for so long, because preoccupations with local political developments distracted the South African authorities' attention from this fugitive from the law. Furthermore, van Onselen's descriptions of the residential and population geography of the frontier society that was Johannesburg at the turn of the twentieth century provide glimpses of the racial order taking root and prevailing in South Africa that was to become increasingly crystallised and rigidly formalised by the mid-twentieth century. Van Onselen navigates the complicated challenge of telling the story of an individual in a masterful fashion without sacrificing attention to the international and local socio-economic and political context in which that individual

lived. This takes great skill in terms of both scholarly finesse and the ability to tell a story -which is the mark of good history.

*Showdown at the Red Lion* is based on solid research. Van Onselen consulted an impressive range of sources from many repositories in several countries around the world. While the main body of historical evidence came from the "recorded and type-written proceedings of the case of Rex vs Jack McLoughlin, as heard in the Johannesburg High Court in 1909 and preserved in the South African National Archives", searches in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa provided information on McLoughlin's "court appearances, deportation, extradition and imprisonment" in these countries (pp 486-487). He also carried out research in the United Kingdom where he examined census records for the period and made use of resources in the Archives and Local Studies section of Manchester's Central Library. Finally, the author perused newspapers from the various countries where McLoughlin lived and operated. Out of these many and disparate sources a very coherent, analytical and insightful account emerges of this interesting and complex man whose individual life tells a rich story about his times and the historical factors that shaped his world. Also impressive is van Onselen's mastery of the histories of other parts of the world, apart from South Africa, enabling him to write confidently about early Irish history and to give examples from the United States and other parts of the globe with relative ease.

Regarding the author's story-telling ability, there is no doubt that van Onselen can spin a yarn with the best of them. The biography reads like a good novel and is so well presented that one is compelled to read on to find out what happened next. It is presented in very accessible language and subtly weaves analysis into the narrative in the best historical tradition. It draws logical deductions on the basis of a careful reading of the historical record in the context of other forms of evidence against which the record is tested and cross checked to produce meaningful explanations of the past. *Showdown at the Red Lion* is recommended to all who enjoy a good read and who appreciate good history as narrated by one of the best historians of our time.

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