

Micro-history mastery

Nigel Penn, *Murderers, Miscreants and Mutineers: Early Colonial Cape Lives*

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Murderers, Miscreants and Mutineers marks the long awaited and much anticipated sequel to Nigel Penn's popular *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways*, published in 1999. There is an important caveat, however, for those who are familiar with Penn's canon over the past fifteen-odd years: five of the six chapters that appear in the work have been published before as journal articles. Even so, it is pleasing that the story of Johannes Seidenfaden – rogue missionary extraordinaire – has finally seen the light of day in chapter 6, which marks his first published appearance. By bringing this collection together between the same covers, the author has provided a useful means by which to reflect on the state of Cape history and the ways in which the field has evolved since the publication of *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways*.

As Penn notes in his Introduction to *Murderers*, *Rogues* was published at a time when he felt it was necessary to defend the use of both narrative, or detailed storytelling, and micro-history in the delivery of academic analyses of the Cape's colonial past. Thanks in large part to his own work since then, this is no longer the case. The value that these techniques can add to our understanding of the complex social fabric that existed at the Cape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has since become well established. Cape history experienced a new wave of dynamism from the early 1990s onwards, as the field came to embrace the influence of the cultural and literary turn. Before then, themes relating to slavery, Khoesan oppression and dispossession, and the advance of the frontier held sway.

Thereafter, historians began to produce work exploring how identity was performed, managed and contested. In the process, the Cape has emerged as a far more complex social setting than previously understood. The former emphasis on masters and their servants and slaves has shifted to include other categories as well: sailors, soldiers, VOC employees, and knechts, as well as rogue missionaries who did not meet the expectations of their missionary societies, nor those of polite, settler society (members of each category feature in the book). We now know that notions of

honour and status regulated individual behaviour and interpersonal relationships in and across social categories during both the VOC and British colonial periods; though the British “regarded themselves as more humanitarian than their Dutch predecessors” and “inched towards” a more inclusive society, which in principle, at least, aspired to equal protection for all the Cape’s inhabitants under the rule of law, as revealed in chapter 5 (p x).

In a society so engrossed with the performance of hierarchy and identity via the media of ceremony, dress, entertainment, housing, and punishment, and so concerned with the proper management of boundaries of belonging, instances of deviance prove revealing. It is for this reason that Penn’s attention has been drawn to “outsiders”: those individuals who found themselves on the margins of Cape society; non-conformists motivated by rage, passion or both, who placed themselves beyond “conventional behaviour” and in doing so, fell foul of social norms and ran into trouble with the law. The author rightly states that “we learn most about a society’s cultural assumptions by a careful examination of moments of rupture” (p xii). Therein lies the value of micro-history and Penn’s mastery when it comes to the craft is on ample display in this volume.

The book bears the typical markers of the author’s work: exhaustive archival research and sublime story-telling. Each chapter explores characters caught up in moments of deviance – usually of the sexual or violent varieties – and the ways in which their discordant lives unsettled and challenged the strictures of the Cape’s social fabric. Those acquainted with Penn’s work should purchase this publication for the captivating chapter on Seidenfaden. Everyone else should read it for the enthralling tales of sex and violence it contains and which illuminate the workings of honour and status in regulating (un)belonging in Cape colonial society.

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