

## Missionary Enterprise and Endeavour in the Eastern Cape

**F.R. Baudert (translator) & Timothy Keegan (editor), “Moravians in the Eastern Cape, 1828-1928: Four Accounts of Moravian Mission Work on the Eastern Cape Frontier”, *Van Riebeeck Society*, 2, 35**

Van Riebeeck Society, Cape Town, 2004

xlii + 308 pp

Illustrations, map, bibliography, index

ISBN 0 9584522 2 9

R120.00

Through its regular annual publications that have emerged over the past nine decades, the Van Riebeeck Society for the Publication of South African Historical Documents has made many valuable – indeed priceless – historical resources and records available to a wider audience in an accessible format. Whatever the well-accepted limitations and narrow perspectives of some of the sources that have appeared over the years undoubtedly may be, the publications of the Society continue to provide stimulating material and fresh perspectives. This volume is no exception. The influence of the Moravians in the western Cape at mission stations such as Genadendal, Elim and Mamre, is well-established in South African historiography and fairly widely known. Their role in the eastern Cape during the nineteenth century has however received virtually no attention from historians at all. The

historical record of this contested frontier has been substantially mediated through English and Dutch/Afrikaner eyes, while other perspectives, in this case German, have practically been omitted. This text thus provides a very welcome corrective. It is unlikely to change broad understandings of mission and missionaries in any significant way, but it certainly does add new voices and nuances to an already crowded frontier environment.

This volume is somewhat different in format from the usual Van Riebeeck Society offerings. Almost all of the volumes previously published in relation to mission endeavour, or indeed to the eastern Cape, consist of the letters or journals of individuals: those that immediately spring to mind are the volumes devoted to David Livingstone; Francis Owen; N.J. Merriman; the American and Norwegian missionaries; travellers and explorers such as Henry Lichtenstein, Andrew Geddes Bain, Anders Sparrman, William Somerville and Carl Thunberg; as well as the settler Jeremiah Goldswain. The “four accounts” that constitute this volume are, in contrast, early histories of the Moravian missions in the eastern Cape, and thus not a typical or obvious “primary source” genre. The first account, by Ernst van Calker, who was himself a long-serving missionary in the region, covers a century of Moravian mission activity from 1828 to 1928 and constitutes the main substance of the volume. The second piece, by Paul Moths, who was also a missionary in the region, is a biography of another missionary, Heinrich Meyer, who worked among the Hlubi in the 1870s; the third, by Hermann Gustav Schneider (who himself never visited southern Africa), deals with the dramatic experiences of two missionary families during the Transkeian Rebellion of 1880-1881; and the fourth, by Meta Spear, is a short reflection on her childhood as the daughter of a missionary at the end of the nineteenth century.

Van Calker’s historical reconstruction is the most ambitious and far-ranging of the four accounts that are published here. He has largely succeeded in his stated intention “not ... to get lost in a tiresome enumeration of small or even trivial events” (p 1), but rather to “follow in broad outline the beginnings and growth of the enterprise” (pp 1-2). There are no great surprises in the narrative, in that it follows a broad chronological approach tracing the slow growth of Moravian endeavour in the eastern Cape from the founding of the Shiloh mission station (near Whittlesea, south of Queenstown) in 1828. It is also fairly triumphalist in tone, despite the noting of slow and erratic progress, which is to be expected in centenary accounts. Van Calker writes fluently, as he describes the vicissitudes of Shiloh and various other Moravian missions through the turbulent nineteenth century. There is much detail on major

events and the broader colonial context, as well as relationships with other missions and denominations. Some of the latter were collegial, while others, particularly with the Wesleyans, were very fraught (see, for example, pp 91-92, 137-138). Van Calker is, however, generally more concerned with non-parochial issues than the standard missionary accounts of most denominations. Some events are skirted over surprisingly briefly, such as the cattle-killing (pp 46-47); but others enjoy considerable and useful attention, such as the activities of the prophet Enoch Mqijima (pp 116-120). What is perhaps most remarkable, which to some extent reflects a major concern of the Moravians, is the amount of attention devoted to African converts and vocations. Rather more than other denominations, the Moravians attempted to focus on issues of indigenous leadership within the mission stations, particularly after the 1890s. Although their fortunes in this regard were very uneven, the narrative is fairly revealing of African activity and experience.

There is, however, a contradiction that ought to be noted. While Moravians seemed serious about advancing indigenous leadership at their missions, Van Calker's view of Africans is remarkably negative. His opinions are redolent of old stereotypes, which were no longer quite so current during the period in which he was writing. According to him, the Khoikhoi were "degenerate, lazy, immoral" (p 6). He described the Africans of the eastern Cape in very ahistorical terms, under headings such as "the people" (pp 11-12), "character and nature of the Africans" (pp 14-16), "the women" (pp 16-17), and "children" (p 17), stating that they led a "lordly life", passing their time "gossiping, drinking, arguing and warring" (p 12); that they assumed "the guise of a bloodthirsty tiger" at war (p 14); that they were a "race of beggars" (p 14); that they did "not consider it a sin to tell a lie" and were "never in a great hurry" (p 15). Although "one has to grant the Africans a high degree of intelligence and capacity for spiritual development" (p 14), they "need external help" (p 18). Perhaps none of this is surprising, given the need of missionaries to justify their interventions, their beliefs and their certainties about their "superior civilisation", except that "progress" was seldom conceded by Van Calker. He noted that Africans possessed "natural savagery" (p 96), and they were reminded that their centenary ought to have been commemorated "in humble acknowledgement of their own backwardness in so many respects" (p 143). One is almost left questioning what Van Calker believed to be the point of his life's work.

The other three accounts in the volume lack the scope of Van Calker's survey of Moravian achievement in the eastern Cape, but have considerable merit all the same. They are more engaging, more

personal and more vivid. Given that Moth's account is biographical, Schneider's focuses on two families and Spear's is autobiographical, this is scarcely surprising. All three are very revealing about everyday missionary life, domestic relationships and the experiences of women and children. At times, detail is exaggerated and even wrong: for example, Spear's descriptions of daily appearances of large quantities of snakes and her pursuit on one occasion by a "big rattlesnake through the long grass" must surely be hyperbolic (p 283), doubtlessly designed to depict to a German readership the courage of missionaries in hostile African conditions. Mrs Hasting, wife of the missionary H.L. Hasting, emerges as a woman of extraordinary personality and perception in Schneider's engrossing account of the experiences of the Hasting and Hartmann families during the Transkeian rebellion of 1880-1881. There is ample material in all three of these accounts to be used as scripts for some very effective films, so immediate and graphic is the quality of the various writings.

As one would expect of Van Riebeeck Society publications, the quality of the editing and the presentation of the volume is of the highest standard. Tim Keegan's introduction is illuminating, relevant and judicious, as are all the footnotes throughout the volume. His discussion of the impact of missionaries and of their interaction with Africans in southern African is the best summary of which I am aware. F.R. Baudert's translator's note is modestly brief: he must be warmly congratulated and thanked for bringing these manuscripts out of German archives and to the attention of a wider reading public. The quality of the narratives in these four accounts must have a great deal to do with his skill as a translator. The shortcomings of the nature of these accounts notwithstanding, this volume adds significantly to our knowledge of missionary enterprise and endeavour in the eastern Cape.

Nicholas Southey  
Department of History  
University of South Africa