

The Last *Vrijstatia* Book

Karel Schoeman (ed), *The Griqua Mission at Philippolis, 1822-1837*

Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2005

142 pp

Soft cover

ISBN 1 86919 017 3

R99.95

This work is the fifteenth (and final) number to appear in the *Vrijstatia* series. Despite its value to historians of the Free State, as well as mission historians, this series has never been a financially self-sustaining one. Its editor has always had to rely on subsidies for its publication. With changing publishing priorities accompanying political change in the country since the 1990s, it was impossible to obtain subsidies for volumes 14 and 15 between 1992 and 1995. It is due to the intervention of Nicol Stassen and Protea Book House that these works have now been published, thereby delivering a commendable service to South African historians. In a country where the book buying market is of limited size, it is always difficult to get books regarded by many as dealing with marginal issues, published. It is unlikely that this book will become a best seller. However, the history of missionary endeavour at Philippolis is an important chapter in the mission history, and general history, of South Africa. It should not be forgotten or relegated to archival repositories.

It is a pity that, as Schoeman himself testifies, he did not incorporate any material published during the eight or nine years between the completion of the manuscript and its final publication into the text. During this period, he also has not done any significant further research himself. Had he done so, he would potentially have benefited from the insights into the reading of missionary texts pioneered by authors such as the Comaroffs and Terence Ranger. However, it is also true that *The*

Griqua Mission at Philippolis is not that kind of book. Schoeman's own commentary (printed in italics or given in footnotes) is only there to provide a linking and contextual background for the extracts from letters, journals, as well as published and unpublished mission sources (such as annual reports and station summaries) that he reproduces. These are supported by published reports from travellers and Wesleyan, Berlin and Paris Mission Society missionaries, as well as contemporary sources, such as notes by a modern researcher included in the Macmillan papers. Schoeman does this well, providing an interesting and coherent account.

Reading the work in this context, it makes an extremely useful contribution to our understanding of the first fifteen years of mission work at Philippolis. Between 1814 and 1828, the London Missionary Society established a number of mission stations in the vicinity of the Orange River. These were primarily intended to missionise the Khoisan (or "Bushmen"), the Griquas, the Basters and the Tswana. Ultimately, Philippolis (established in 1822) was the only one of these to survive. That it managed to do so, is a miracle in itself. Having to limit expenditure as much as possible, facing periodic droughts and outbreaks of smallpox and other "fevers", experiencing resistance to a missionary presence from some groups, suffering the effects of periodic cattle-raiding, and being forced to resort to trade and other activities to keep the missionary enterprise alive, all contributed to the difficulties faced by the early missionaries. They also did not always get along with each other and with their superiors. Thus the so-called "Hottentot teacher", Jan Goeyman, became bitterly disillusioned when his authority was supplanted by that of the inexperienced, ill-educated (but white) artisan, James Clarke. The heated confrontation between these men led to Goeyman's dismissal from the LMS in 1824. John Melvill (1827-1831), Clarke's successor, found himself transferred (under a cloud) from Philippolis to Hankey in the Eastern Cape. His successor, G.A. Kolbe (1831-1836), in turn became involved in a mercurial dispute with Theophilus Atkinson (1836-1840), a young missionary from Bethelsdorp who was sent to Philippolis to investigate accusations of adultery against him. One does not usually expect missionaries to accuse each other of being wife-beaters, or "at the head of the worst of the whoremongers and adulterers." However, these are just some of the allegations that Atkinson addressed to his superiors about Kolbe. The discussion of their conflict, Kolbe's resignation from the society and his enforced departure from the area makes for riveting reading. So too does its aftermath. Atkinson's zeal in driving Kolbe away had made him exceptionally unpopular with the Baster section of the community at Philippolis. They formed the core of his congregation and used the enmity between him and his assistant,

Gottlob Schreiner (who arrived in 1838), to drive Atkinson himself away in 1840. To complete the cycle, Schreiner soon proved to be tactless, an inefficient manager, and more interested in dealing with the Batswana than the Basters or Griquas. A serious impediment to Doctor John Philip's plan to acquire control of the Griqua states through conversion of their leadership, he was summarily dismissed in 1842.

From the wider socio-political perspective, the work provides interesting insights into relationships between the missionaries and the Kok and Waterboer families. Tensions between the Griqua and Baster factions within the community are highlighted, as are attempts by these factions to secure missionary support for their interests. Arising from this, we are provided with intriguing glimpses into themes in the early nineteenth century development of the Griqua polity, with the accompanying conflict over succession and tendency towards segmentation. The use of commandos against "Bushmen" cattle-raiders, the harsh penalties meted out to the latter group, and the "purchasing" of their children, also receive attention.

From my own perspective, I was particularly interested in commentary on the difficulties of missionising scattered communities of cattle-keepers (and cattle "raiders"). Descriptions of the timetabling of life on mission stations, accounts of missionary discipline, and the frequent references to retrograded ("backsliding") Christians, echoed my own research in Vandaland. I also found the periodic discussion of material of ethnographic interest, such as bodily adornment among the Griqua and dancing among the Tswana, extremely illuminating. I must nevertheless admit possible personal bias in asserting that, on the whole, the reports of the Berlin missionaries in Vandaland were far more detailed, and far more revealing of the lives of ordinary people – especially what they called "heathens" – than those of their LMS counterparts quoted by Schoeman.

With two exceptions (where English translations of the original Dutch should have been included), the documents are all quoted in English. Although, as Schoeman notes, there are plenty of period illustrations in other sources, the book would have benefited from the inclusion of pictorial material and a map. On a more positive level, there is a useful (albeit brief) chronology of relevant events given on pages 127 to 130.

The achievement of democracy in South Africa has necessarily, and laudably, resulted in a shift of focus in the priorities of the kinds of

Reviews

historical works published. However, there is still a great deal of room for the publication of source-based works such as those produced by Schoeman and by the Van Riebeeck Society. One can only hope that authors will take up the challenge posed by Schoeman's retirement from active academic writing and continue to produce works of this nature, as well as that publishers like Nicol Stassen will continue to publish them. At first sight, they may appear to deal with marginal issues. Missionaries, travellers, military officials, government agents and traders were nevertheless frequently the only written recorders of the daily lives of ordinary people in local communities. They may need careful reading, but their writings nevertheless provide us with the fascinating details of the everyday life, hardships, calamities and triumphs that are indispensable tools for reconstructing (or deconstructing) history from below.

Alan Kirkaldy

Department of Development Studies (incorporating the Departments of History, Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies)

University of Venda