

**How Does a Book Become an International Best-seller?**

**Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of The Pilgrim's Progress***

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Isabel Hofmeyr has done it again. In her first book, *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told*, she persuaded us to rethink many of our ideas about oral storytelling, literacy and historical narrative. Now, in *The Portable Bunyan*, she has turned her attention to the questions of how a book becomes “an international bestseller? What happens to it as it is translated into different languages, contexts and societies? How is it changed by the intellectual environments it encounters?”, and “What does the transnational circulation mean for its reception back home?” It is clear that she has spent the decade in between the two works grappling with these issues central to the translation and transmission of texts. The finished product is a remarkable piece of work.

Before reading Hofmeyr's book, I had seen Bunyan as a typically English writer, writing for English Protestants. I realised that the work had been widely translated and extensively used by missionaries. However, I viewed it as just another mission text brought from Europe to Africa – another weapon in the struggle to fashion the colonial subject. As such, I must admit that I did not give it much more thought. Luckily for my own self-esteem, I seem to have been in very good company, both in viewing Bunyan as “an icon of Englishness” and in failing to adequately appreciate his transnational impact.

*The Portable Bunyan* demonstrates just how over-simplistic this standard way of thinking is. *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been translated into some two hundred languages. During the seventeenth century, the work had found its

niche among the “politically and religiously marginal” in England. Persecuted, they took the book with them when they fled to Protestant Europe and the Americas. Nearly two centuries after its first publication, it became one of the key evangelical documents of the Protestant mission movement. The final part of its migration took it back to Britain where, from the mid-nineteenth century, it began to be incorporated into the “Great Tradition” of English writing. Thus, Hofmeyr sets out to explain the paradox which she sees as lying at the heart of the historiography of Bunyan – the paradox of how “an intellectual of the world with a transnational circulation” came to be “remembered only as a national writer with a local presence.” Beginning by reinserting Bunyan back into a transnational landscape, she then goes on to explore the implications of this move in theoretical and literary historical terms.

For those of us who last read *The Pilgrim's Progress* while still at school, Hofmeyr provides a useful synopsis of the text from page 3. She then moves on to provide us with the theoretical underpinnings of her investigation of the processes whereby this particular text was translated and circulated so widely and may be considered to be “an early example of a translingual mass text”. In doing so, she engages the three domains of “translatability and its limits; the material and social practices of translation; and circulation” (page 12 and onwards).

Following the pattern of the migration of Bunyan's work, Hofmeyr's narrative is divided into three parts. In the first, “Bunyan in the Protestant Atlantic”, she sets out to examine the process whereby the text entered Africa as part of the nineteenth century evangelical Protestant mission movement. This begins with a fascinating account of the recreation of Africa on Camden Road. The focus here is on the links between a Baptist congregation in Camden Road, London, and the San Salvador Mission Station in the Kongo Kingdom (modern northern Angola). Hofmeyr examines the process by which Camden Roaders constructed a vision of the “Congo” shaped partly by their own fantasies and partly by the cultural, intellectual and social structures which they interacted with in the Kongo Kingdom.

This then leads into discussion of the process whereby *The Pilgrim's Progress* was made familiar in the mission domain – how the work entered this mission field and was then “beamed back” and used in mission publicity. Deeply embedded in Nonconformist life, the text was reconstituted by those at home, missionaries in the field and African converts to meet the demands of differing, and changing, audiences. In this context, the text acquired the attributes of a “fetish”, which was perceived as being able to influence, or even compel, events in the secular and spiritual worlds – the here and now and the hereafter.

Continuing with the first part, Chapter 3 looks at the translation of the text. More specifically, it engages the issue of how the demands of the different interest groups involved in the process contributed to and helped to shape the process of translation. A case-study of the Kele translation of the Upper Congo, which spanned several decades, probes issues arising from translation over time. In contrast, a study of the Cameroonian translation of Joseph Jackson Fuller, the Jamaican Missionary, explores issues of translation over distance. Arising from this, the concluding chapter of the first section explores the interpretative strategies used by Protestants – in Africa and in Europe – and the “African” contribution to the reading technique.

The second part, “Bunyan, the Public Sphere and Africa”, examines the movement of the text into various African societies and the ways in which it was changed by the intellectual and literary traditions of the societies into which it migrated. Discussion of African mission elites and *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is grounded in a case study of the elite of the Eastern Cape and Lovedale Institution. The focus here is on the kinds of reading strategies brought to Lovedale by pupils, and the ways in which the text was taught. This then gives way to a detailed discussion of the ways in which the text was used in the public discourse of the African mission elite.

In my own reading, Chapter 6 competes with the opening chapter for the position of the highlight of Hofmeyr’s book. This situates *The Pilgrim’s Progress* in a discussion of dreams, documents and passports to heaven. In a situation where documents could be seen both in colonial secular sense as “passes” and in a religious sense as “passports to heaven”, the text came to carry both of these elements – a permissory document and a sign of election. This, in turn, influenced and migrated into other forms, such as dreams, conversion narratives and poetry. In the concluding three chapters of this section, the ideas of migration, discussion and debate are further developed. Chapter 7 analyses African Protestant masculinities in the Empire as reflected in the character of Mister Great Heart from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, Ethel M. Dell’s novel *Greatheart* and Thomas Mofolo’s *Moeti oa Bochabela (The Traveller to the East)*. This is followed by what I found to be a fascinating discussion of the issues raised by the process of illustrating Bunyan, both through line drawings and photographs. The section ends with an analysis of some of the ways in which African novelists have engaged with Africanised traditions of reading Bunyan and with each other’s uses of the text.

The third part, “Post-Bunyan”, examines the ways in which Bunyan’s huge circulation in Africa and the wider mission field, impacted on his standing “back home” in England. This looks at the process of how Bunyan “became

English”, in other words came to be seen as part of the Great English Tradition, rather than a transnational writer.

On a technical level, the illustrations of *The Portable Bunyan* are extremely well-chosen. They are indispensable tools in understanding and amplifying central parts of Hofmeyr’s argument. Increasingly rare because of publishing costs, they are also placed within the text, rather than in a bundle somewhere in the middle. This makes it easy to turn and return to them when necessary, rather than having to leap around in the text attempting to find the relevant illustration.

The appendices are also useful as a source for tracking Bunyan translations by language, country, place of publication, publisher, mission society, date and translator (Appendix 1), and for the social profile of Bunyan translators which they provide (Appendix 2).

If I may be permitted one gripe: for me, the great strength of *We Spend Our Years as a Tale that is Told* is that it is written in a style which is accessible to a very wide reading audience. Parts of *The Portable Bunyan* are designed to appeal to a more narrowly-defined academic audience. For most of the book, Hofmeyr’s narrative and discussion of the processes at work, are extremely engaging and provide easy, yet thought-provoking reading. However, in common with authors such as the Comaroffs and Carolyn Hamilton, parts of the more theoretical analysis are extremely dense. This is possibly a personal inhibition, but I always feel that one should write in such a manner that the wider reading public are able to appreciate one’s arguments. If anyone is capable of doing this, while still retaining rigorous academic standards, it is Isabel Hofmeyr. (Anyone who has ever listened to one of her readings of her own work, is likely to share this sentiment.)

So, once again Isabel Hofmeyr has produced a seminal work. Among other fields, her text spans social and cultural history, mission history and missiology, literary theory and literary history. She has strongly challenged us to rethink the way in which we view evangelical mission literature in general and Bunyan in particular. At a deeper level, she has also forced us to re-evaluate the way in which we think about and approach transnational texts and translation, both linguistically and culturally. One can only hope that we will not have to wait another decade for her next book!

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