

## Book Reviews

## Boekresensies

### The Flesh, the World and the Devil

**Tim Couzens, *Murder at Morija***

Random House, Johannesburg, 2003

448 pp

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A few days before Christmas 1920, the Swiss-French born missionary and eminent scholar Édouard Jacottet sat down to lunch at Morija in Lesotho. With him at table were one of his four daughters, Madeleine; Frederick Reid, a school inspector and his son Harold, who had been detained at Morija by a storm; as well as *M* and *Mme* Paillard, visiting from the Swiss Mission in Mozambique. Having eaten their soup, they were seized by violent spasms. One by one, they rushed from the table to the garden, vomiting violently. Five of the six recovered, but Jacottet, the only one to have had a second helping, was dead by the early hours of the following morning. He shared the fate of countless victims in murder mysteries – a fatal dose of arsenic in the soup. There was murder most foul among the missionaries.

The first suspect to be arrested was Jerita, the cook who had made the soup. However, there was to be no simple solution fitting in neatly with the racial and class prejudices of the time. About two weeks later, Jacottet's daughters Marcelle and Marguerite were taken into custody, together with the missionary Sam DUBY, director of the Bible School and head of the Book Depot. It was revealed that DUBY – a married man with children – had been having an affair with Marguerite, who had been sent home from her boarding school in Bloemfontein as a result. Preparations were underway for DUBY's quiet departure from Basutoland. This was not all. Marcelle, who had nurtured the relationship between her younger sister and DUBY, had her own motive. She had broken one of the greatest taboos of all. She had had a sexual liaison with either "one of the students at the Theological School, where her father was the Director, or one of the students at the Bible School, where Sam DUBY was the Director." Even more secret was the fact that she had become pregnant and had had an abortion.

The murderer was never tried. On 21 March 1921, the Assistant Commissioner's Court released all three of the accused on grounds of "insufficient evidence". At that time, the penalty for murder in Basutoland was death. No white person had as yet been hanged. Lieutenant Colonel Edward Garraway, Resident Commissioner, clearly decided that it was politically unacceptable for him to do so. Moreover, to hang a young white woman – a missionary's daughter to boot – was inconceivable. The civil authorities and the mission conspired to suppress the story. They were only partly successful in doing so. The echo of the scandals remained. For many years, the content of Jacottet's stomach was kept in a jar in the Resident Commissioner's office in case the prosecution would be resurrected. However, it was only with Couzens' book, more than four decades later, that the likely solution to the crime has been made public.

The book is divided into three parts. The first ("The Flesh") contextualises and considers the murder and the preliminary examination, and exposes the scandal of the affair between Marguerite Jacottet and Sam Duby. The second ("The World") explores the mission history of Basutoland, anchoring this in the context of the political history of the mountain kingdom and the personal histories of the leaders of the Basotho and the mission, together with some of the noteworthy converts, stretching as far back as 1832. Beginning with a rather lengthy discussion of poisoning through the ages (with a special focus on arsenic poisoning), the final part ("The Devil") leads through Marcelle's affair, pregnancy and abortion, to the denouement and the aftermath of the case.

Couzens has a gift for characterization, setting the scene and story-telling. His gripping style of writing ensures that his account of the murder mystery seizes and holds the attention of the reader. An array of photographs and etchings of the protagonists and the (European and African) landscape serves to bring the text alive in a powerful way. I found myself referring back to these from time to time, looking for clues and wanting to interrogate them more fully about what happened. Similarly, I made frequent reference to the *dramatis personae*, as well as the maps and house plan which precede the text.

Couzens skilfully handles the mission's expulsion of those who had transgressed without reforming the situation which had given rise to the transgression – a tactic far from confined to the Paris Evangelical Mission Society (PEMS) only. His exposure of the tensions – sexual, social and political – which underlay the missionary presence in Africa, and the relationships between missions and the wider society, is masterful. We see how the very nature of people moulded by this rigid society could lead to murder. The fact that this is achieved largely through detailed reconstruction of the biography of the Jacottet family in the wider context of the mission and Basutoland, as well as against the backdrop of the murder, makes this particularly riveting reading. So too does the fact that this was a murder of a white missionary by his family in an overwhelmingly black colonial society. We are provided with an exceptionally clear insight into the ways that even murder could be hushed up in order not to undermine the perceived position of the colonisers in the eyes of the colonised – and to protect the mission which played such an important role in the education and social structure of the colony.

Having said this, I have deep problems with the book at two main levels. Firstly, it has the feel of a crackingly good historical murder mystery (Parts One and Three) with a second book – a mission history - wedged in the middle. Yes, the murder can best be

understood in this context. However, over three hundred and twenty pages of context is far too much. The work would have benefited significantly from rigorous editing, cutting its length to half of its present 448 pages.

Secondly, and far more seriously, reading the work as historian, Couzens has ignored recent scholarship on violence and state formation in nineteenth century South Africa. Whether or not one sides with Cobbing or his critics, the old interpretation of largely black-on-black violence in the *mfecane/difaqane* which underpins Couzens' political history, can no longer be accepted. For me, the problems resulting from this kind of thinking become particularly clear when looking at his uncritical acceptance of accounts of cannibalism. Julian Cobbing has argued that, in the context of these times, allegations of cannibalism played an important role in constructing the alibi which was used "to legitimate South Africa's racially unequal land division." In particular, cannibalism was used in the construction of the concept of the Mantatees – "a word deliberately used to convey at once the idea of terror, and that of the black man as *Untermensch*." Through the use of this stereotype: "Genuine refugees from the slave raids were converted into marauding bands of semi-demonic women and children, as well as men, who ravaged the countryside like locusts and threatened the entire colonial civilization." As cannibals, "Mantatee hordes had to be subject to laws of behaviour and motion completely mysterious to rational people". Moreover, "Black 'irrationality' became 'truer' with each repetition".<sup>1</sup> Also casting doubt on accounts of cannibalism at this time, John Wright has argued that many of the so-called cannibal bands "were probably bandits".<sup>2</sup> In a work currently in publication, I argue that the only way to make sense of accounts of cannibalism or anthropophagy, is to consider them in the context of detailed case studies.<sup>3</sup> These kinds of omissions and elisions are also present in other aspects of Couzens' history of the area.

Thus, the book does have flaws. It does not tell us much that is new about the history of the Basotho – indeed it perpetuates some of the myths first produced by the PEMS missionary D. Fred. Ellenberger at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> It does nevertheless provide an exceptionally interesting insight into both the public and the secret history of the PEMS in Basutoland and is an extremely skilful and readable piece of historical detective work.

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- 1 J Cobbing, "The Mfecane as Alibi: Thoughts on Dithakong and Mbolompo", *Journal of African History*, 29, 1988, pp 487, 499-500 & 519
  - 2 J Wright, "Political Transformations in the Thukela-Mzimkhulu Region in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries", in C Hamilton (ed), *The Mfecane Aftermath: Reconstructive Debates in Southern African History* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg and University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1995), p 176
  - 3 A Kirkaldy, *Capturing the Soul: The Vhavenda and the Missionaries, 1870-1900* (Protea Book House, Pretoria, 2004 -in publication), see especially Chapters 7 and 8 Following the lead of Gananath Obeyesekere, I differentiate between cannibalism and anthropophagy, the former indicating "cannibal talk" in the wider context of contact and othering, the latter a complex ritual practice [See G Obeyesekere, "'British Cannibals': Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer", in K A Appiah and H L Gates (eds) *Identities* (Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1995), pp 7-32 ]
  - 4 F Ellenberger, *History of the Basuto: Ancient and Modern* (Caxton, London, 1912)