

Engrossing example of the new narrative history

R.S. Levine, *A Living Man from Africa: Jan Tzatoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary, and the Making of Nineteenth-Century South Africa*

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Roger Levine's biography of Jan Tzatoe, Xhosa chief and missionary, is a welcome addition to the growing canon of biographies of African intellectuals emanating from southern African historical studies in recent months.⁴ Written in the mould of the "new narrative history", the literary techniques employed by the author are as intriguing as the life experiences of the protagonist, Tzatoe; such that *A Living Man from Africa* is simultaneously engrossing for the content it conveys and for how it does so. In this work, the story and the style of story-telling are inseparable; together they provide a valuable glimpse into the possibilities of history writing which are more engaging, and perhaps even more entertaining, than traditional history writing methods. For this Levine should be commended.

From the outset, the author is candid about what he hopes to achieve by employing the "new narrative history" style: to tell a compelling story, grounded in historical facts, while asking thought-provoking, though unanswerable, questions which create empathy with the personal life experiences and endeavours of Tzatoe in the reader's mind (p 5). The unusual use of the present tense serves well to evade the "fatalism" of the past tense, especially when writing a biography. By employing the present tense, Tzatoe's life appears to be "unfolding before the reader", subtly debunking the often pervasive hindrance of hindsight and a knowledge of what befell Tzatoe in his later years, affording the reader an opportunity to appreciate in a very real sense the "multiple possibilities" of the moment for Tzatoe in his constantly changing, perpetual present (p 5).⁵ Tzatoe comes across as far more engaged with his own life context as a result, much more so than is often the case in biographies of a similar academic vein, which tend to impart a "downward trajectory" of inevitability onto the lives of their subjects (p. 5). The appeal of this technique is certainly facilitated by a life such as Jan Tzatoe's.

Born in about 1790 on the Eastern Cape frontier to a Xhosa father and a Khoikhoi mother, Tzatoe was both an observer of and a participant in the well-researched colonial encounter which unfolded on this frontier during the first half of the nineteenth century. His mixed ancestry became a defining, symbolic feature of his life, because he went on to fulfil multiple roles in both Xhosa and colonial society: chief and missionary; diplomat and evangelist; intermediary and ambassador. Tzatoe's interstitial status as both a Xhosa Chief of the amaNtinde and a prominent African missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS), lends itself credibly to challenging sweeping, oversimplified characterisations of individuals within the Eastern Cape colonial setting

4. For example, H. Hughes, *The First President: A Life of John L. Dube, Founding President of the ANC* (Jacana, Johannesburg, 2011); and H. Mokoena, *Magemu Fuzge: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual* (UKZN Press, Scottsville, 2011).

5. On the techniques of the "new narrative history", see R.S. Levine, "'Savage-Born but New-Created': Jan Tzatoe, Xhosa Chief and Missionary in Britain, 1836-1838", *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, 33, 2007, pp 112-113.

during the early nineteenth century. Nonetheless, how representative can a life as exceptional as Tzatoe's be? This is not a question which Levine shies away from (p 2) and the challenge which all micro-historians face – that of whether individual life experiences can reveal deeper understandings of the periods, societies, mentalities, etc. in which they occurred – is certainly his as well. And yet, while focusing on the life and times of such an extraordinary Cape character, Levine's biography consistently highlights themes of significance which transcend Tzatoe; themes pertaining to contests of self-identification which, within the colonial context, occurred alongside much broader political, economic and socio-cultural contests. In doing so, the expected biographical emphasis on one life has been sufficiently grounded in the historical milieu of its living and amply tied to pertinent topics such as the invention of the self; the advance of the frontier; and the participation of the colonised in the creation of the colony, amongst others. Tzatoe's life was inimitable in a variety of ways; the opportunities open to him were not open to the vast majority of his Xhosa kinsmen and yet the representative nature of an individual life need not determine its value or its legitimacy as a subject of a historical work, for subjects on the margins of the norm are often the most intriguing. Still, there is the temptation to make much broader arguments and apply them to a much wider group than a biography actually warrants.

On this point, *A Living Man from Africa* can be criticised for reaching too far. Levine acknowledges that Tzatoe's life is "unique in southern African history in both the multiple roles he played and the fact that his life was lived and recorded in the multiple arenas of the eastern Cape, Cape Town, and Great Britain" (p 197). As such, to also argue that his "life and voice provide a new prism through which to view the colonial encounter", appears somewhat contradictory (p 4). Without doubt, Tzatoe's life affords new insights into particular aspects of the colonial encounter, although these were largely dictated by his affiliation with the prominent political figures of the LMS; many of whom, including John Philip and James Read, regarded Tzatoe as their Xhosa protégé and a symbol of the "civilising power of British colonialism and Christianity" (p 4). Few others occupied such a place of prestige among the supporters and agents of the humanitarian evangelical mission in the Cape Colony. When Tzatoe's trip to the British Isles between 1836 and 1838 is taken into account (pp 125–157), the exceptional tone to his life is re-emphasised. Having had the opportunity to speak directly to metropolitan audiences – Sir Thomas Fowell Buxton's Select Committee on Aborigines; a packed Exeter Hall; and well-attended church meetings up and down Britain – Tzatoe both blazed a trail and left a paper trail that was unmatched for an African colonial subject of his time.

Given this, Levine's claims to the plural relevance of themes exemplified in Tzatoe's life to broader Xhosa-colonial encounters seem dubious. For instance, he suggests that "[t]his period featured an unprecedented number of possibilities from which Africans could create, or indeed invent, many possible selves", exposing "the inadequacy of the Manichean dichotomies of resister or assimilator, pagan or Christian, barbaric or civilized ..." (p 3). Tzatoe's exceptional life may lend itself well to an engrossing biography, but it is questionable whether it lends itself to the personification of "the hybrid nature of the new selves" that were "being fashioned in the interstitial and highly contingent space created by the colonial encounter in South Africa" (p 3).

Certainly the 1830s marked the zenith of the imperial influence of the evangelical humanitarians, however as Tzatoe's life testifies, the following decade saw a rapid erosion of their collective clout. The settler vilification of Tzatoe during the War of the Axe of

1846–1847, amid allegations about his decision to join Sandile’s forces in the attack on Fort Peddie, points towards pent up prejudice against intermediaries of his kind (p 177). While settler society at the Cape was yet to entrench its land and labour interests along the eastern Cape frontier, this war served to harden racialised sentiments that were already well developed and actively disseminated in the settler press. By presenting the successes of the missionary agenda as they unfolded during the 1830s, moment by moment, the long-term failures of the evangelical humanitarian lobby are lost sight of. As a result, Tzatoe’s agency in forging a life’s path distinct from the already deep-rooted norm for Africans in the process of being colonised has been exaggerated. Indeed, it is only in the aftermath of the War of the Axe, when Tzatoe loses his home and many of his prized possessions, that his “personal fate” for the first time, legitimately “mirrors that of his country and countrymen” (p 180).

The inherent paradox within the evangelical humanitarian mission: the reality that “African adherents [had] to come to terms with the underlying paternalism and European cultural chauvinism of the missionaries and their liberal supporters” (p 80), is not adequately fleshed out in the early chapters. Levine only deals with this theme in any depth following the War of the Axe. Yet, surely Tzatoe would have already had “ample opportunity to question why he [was] not being treated as an equal in the religious, political and social realm” (p 80), as opposed to only doing so from 1846 onwards. His decision to join the amaNtinde in Sandile’s attack on the colony was no doubt owing to his own pent up disillusionment with the “benefits” of assimilation. Limited opportunities for alternative, more advantageous, outcomes in the Cape colonial milieu were the standard during the early nineteenth century, becoming more limited from the mid-1840s. While the author’s intention is to avoid rescuing his African subject “from posterity”, and to resist affording him “a compelling amount of historical ‘agency’ in the historical setting in which [his] life was lived” (p 3), Levine has actually confirmed that this is easier said than done for the biographer.

Nonetheless, the author should be acknowledged for being open and honest about his own inspiration in writing this biography of Jan Tzatoe. Levine’s hinting at his personal identification with Noël Mostert, author of the monumental *Frontiers*, reveals much about his identification with Tzatoe.⁶ Mostert, as a South African living in exile, “lamented the loss of his motherland” (p x); Levine, born in South Africa and “raised with sunshine soaking into [his] skin”, still recalls in vivid detail his family’s emigration from the country to the United States in 1984 (p ix); Tzatoe, born the son of a Xhosa chief and raised in a missionary household, occupied an interstitial space in the Cape Colony and beyond for most of his life, constantly grappling with the “tension between his association with the Xhosa state and his efforts to maintain a colonial persona” (p 189). All three lives evoke a sense of displacement and the complex processes of self-identification which accompany it.

In his conclusion, Levine relates how in 2003, while in King William’s Town (where Tzatoe died in February 1868), he “felt the spirit of Jan Tzatoe” at Steve Biko’s grave. His final words are: “I linger with a living man from Africa”, alluding to the phrase by which Tzatoe referred to himself in his address in 1837 to the Secession Church in Kelso, Scotland (p 7). This may be unnecessary, or even misplaced, romanticism for an academic work. If so, it is certainly not the only unnecessary feature of the biography. The continual dependence upon metaphorical prose “to tell a good story” becomes

6. N. Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa’s Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (Pimlico, London, 1993).

cumbersome or peculiar at different intervals. To illustrate the former, Levine's metaphorical description of the intertwined upbringings of Jan Tzatoe and James Read junior reads as follows: "two trees born of the same soil, growing so close at first as to appear as one, but then splitting apart and separately seeking the nourishment of sun, rain, and earth, their branches inscribing different silhouettes against the sky, their roots burrowing in different directions for security and sustenance" (p 21). One of many examples of the latter relates to Chief Ngqika's visit to the Kat River Mission in 1816: "the chief probes the institution as an anteater does an anthill with a quick thrust of the tongue here, a sustained, determined prod there" (p 56). However, if the traditional boundaries of an academic historical study are shifted, just slightly, and Levine's romanticism is appreciated for the flair it provides to a work which tells a most intriguing story; a story grounded in historical facts, with a healthy dose of historical imagination to inspire worthy, though unanswerable questions, and in which he subtly identifies with his subject, then there's much to praise. After all, as Lucien Febvre famously said: "There is no history, there are only historians".⁷

Jared McDonald
School of Oriental & African Studies
University of London