

Book Review: Murder at Morija

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Tim Couzens. *Murder at Morija*. Johannesburg: Random House, 2003. 468pp. \$25.00 (paper).

Tim Couzens' *Murder at Morija* is both a fascinating story and also a contribution to a larger discussion among historians and anthropologists of Christianity in southern Africa, particularly those interested in the colonial period. The works of Elizabeth Elbourne, Jean and John Comaroff, Norman Etherington, and others have brought the stories of various Protestant mission societies, especially the London Missionary Society, into academic debates about missionaries and colonial societies—the cultural meanings of time and corporeality, the social and ideological dynamics of colonial systems, and the role of missionaries and their local co-workers as agents in the development and transformation of those dynamics. Employing distinct methodological stances and different theoretical constructs, those scholars nonetheless share a concern for not only the missionaries' stories but also the Africans with whom they worked and their role within the socio-economic and political dimensions of the colonial context.

While not directly commenting on the work of historians and anthropologists, Couzens certainly employs the fruits of those discussions in his telling of the story of Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (PEMS) missionaries in Lesotho. Taking advantage of a rich set of archival resources, he describes in thick detail French-speaking Protestant missionaries reaching through an English-speaking colonial environment to a Sesotho-speaking people who were asserting an emerging cultural identity and political aspirations against an expanding Dutch-speaking state until the British took charge of Basotholand (Lesotho) as a British territory in 1868, setting the political context within the mission worked and the central event took place.

Tim Couzens' approach fits well within this larger conversation; however his presentation is not academic history, interpretive or otherwise, or theoretical debates about economy and society, discourse and agency. He writes as a novelistic historian weaving a complex story of murder and intrigue around the death by poisoning of a prominent French-speaking Swiss missionary (Édouard Jacottet) in his own home at the Morija mission station in Basotholand (Lesotho) in late 1920. The murder with which he begins provides a point of entry into and the justification for exploring a longer and more complex story of a particular mission society. In a sense, Couzens simply reports an early twentieth century murder mystery and then traces the characters and their religious confrères back to the early nine-

teenth century. Without claiming to present a comprehensive perspective, he includes an historical depth and great sensitivity to the individuals and the groups inhabiting the mountainous landscape of that developing nation, exposing greater complexity than characteristic of "mission history." Thus, by digging beneath the surface of the unsolved crime, Couzens presents a compelling story of the PEMS in Lesotho from the 1830s until the 1920s.

Couzens' careful biographical rendering of the more prominent missionaries emphasizes their individual characteristics and opinions, as well as their national, cultural, and theological origins, as French-speaking Protestants of Swiss origin, heirs of the Huegenots. Church-state relations in the canton of Neuchâtel, the Réveil of the 1820s, and the imposing influence of the great Protestant teacher Godet are some of the key elements that give shape to the thought and practice of the missionaries from Arbousset and Casalis in the first generation to Mabile, Duby, Jacottet, and others in succeeding generations. The biographical sketches go well beyond the public relations biographies many societies provided; Couzens explores the interior struggles of many of the missionaries, as well as the tensions between them. The letters he uncovers and the motives he traces explore a view of the missionaries no official history would care to reveal; however, in Couzens' hands, the petty scandals and blemished characters give life to a missionary community that would otherwise be lost in the pious platitudes about the purpose of the mission and in the record of administrative adjustments of personnel and strategy.

This work is also a contribution to the history of a mountain kingdom that confronted and resisted both Boer and British colonial intrusion. They succeeded in holding back Boer control by falling under the sovereignty of the British crown. Tracing relationships between missionaries and the successive generations of chiefs and kings from Moshoeshe, the founder of the Sotho nation, to his great-grandson Griffith, Couzens highlights the critical role that the missionaries played in the development of Sotho national identity and the political semi-autonomy they achieved. Part of Édouard Jacottet's own story concerns his unparalleled contributions to the study of Sesotho, a Bantu language closely related to Setswana, and more distantly related to the Nguni languages of southern Africa. Another important thread in the story is the role of the Sotho converts in the development of the mission organization and work.

In addition to the sweeping narrative history (448 pp.), this work includes the following: at the beginning of the

book, maps/drawings of Lesotho, the Morija station, and the Jacottet house; in the middle of the volume, photographs (#147) of the principal European and African characters and locations; finally, endnotes and an index provide helpful guides into the sources upon which Couzens relied and into the text, respectively. These reader friendly aids manage to avoid the danger of overweighting the text with the frequent footnotes normally employed by professional historians and anthropologists.

In conclusion, in addition to those interested in the PEMS and/or Lesotho, this study of missionary history should draw the attention of historians of religion and students of colonial societies from a variety of disciplines. I highly recommend this book both for general readers and professional scholars. Simply put, Couzens tells a fascinating story set against the long backdrop of the nineteenth century and any reader interested in a good murder mystery might relish the tragic implications of Jacottet's death and the rich detail of Couzens' interpretation.