

Book reviews/Boekresensies

Lovingly-researched addition to eighteenth century historiography

KAREL SCHOEMAN

Dogter van Sion: Machtelt Smit en die 18de-eeuse samelewing aan die Kaap, 1749-1799

Kaapstad, Pretoria, Johannesburg: Human & Rousseau, 1997

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Price not available

Karel Schoeman, generally thought of as one of South Africa's foremost Afrikaans authors, has long been instrumental in writing South African history based on primary source material in a way which promotes the accessibility of this material. His career as a historian extends back several decades, and includes his own master's dissertation on Botswana's foreign policy in the twentieth century. In his work he primarily concentrated on editing and presenting restricted circulation archival texts, in Afrikaans, Dutch and English. As an archivist in the Free State, he was responsible for compiling, writing and presenting a series of works on the early history of the area. He continued this tradition at the South African Library until his recent retirement. As well as this work, he has produced several more substantial historical pieces, including a notable biography of Olive Schreiner. One of the most recent of his extensive works is *Dogter van Sion*, an examination of eighteenth-century Dutch society, refracted through the experiences of Machtelt Smit, missionary and slave-descendent.

In *Dogter van Sion* Karel Schoeman examines the life and context of Machtelt Smit (1749-1821), the granddaughter of a slave woman and Dutch soldier. The title is taken from Dr. John Philip's description of Machtelt Smit, given in an hagiographical biography written shortly after her death. "The daughters of Zion are not indeed called or permitted to be guides or pastors to Israel; yet theirs is the important, the delightful office of feeding the lambs of the flock and leading

their tender charge to the Shepherd of sheep”.¹ It refers to Machtelt Smit’s missionary outlook and zeal, and the avenues through which she exercised this.

The book attempts several tasks: it provides an outline of Machtelt Smit’s life, including both the circumstances of her ancestry and her activities in mission work. It also acts as an introduction to Dutch society in the eighteenth century, presented principally through reference to a wide range of primary texts. Furthermore, it details and accounts for the religious revival that occurred in the Cape during the later eighteenth century, prompted by the growing influence of continental pietism and English evangelicalism.

Schoeman begins by tracing Machtelt Smit’s ancestry. She was the descendent of several generation of slaves, a common enough situation during the eighteenth century. Her great-grandmother, Armosyn van der Kaap, was born in the slave lodge in 1661, later receiving her freedom. Armosyn had at least four children, several of whom had white fathers. Schoeman’s work points to the acceptance the offspring of mixed race unions could receive in Cape society, provided they were free. The conventional view is that a shortage of Dutch women at the Cape, and the desire of owners to promote the fecundity of slave women, led to sexual unions between European men and slave women. Sometimes these unions would be formalised in marriage, in which case the slave woman would receive her freedom. Where this did not occur, any offspring would retain the slave status of their mothers. While recent work by Patricia van der Spuy has challenged the naturalisation of this outcome of a sexual imbalance between European men and women, Schoeman’s work traces an interesting detail of similar cases and situates them within the prevailing social order at the Cape.² The distinctiveness inherent in Machtelt Smit’s case lies in the existence of extensive source material about her life - including work on her great-grandmother, Armosyn van der Kaap, her own writing and writing about her. Schoeman has subsequently published a book entitled *Armosyn van die Kaap: voorspel tot vestiging, 1441-1651* (Kaapstad, 1999).

Schoeman also uses Smit’s life story to expand upon Dutch society at the Cape during this period. According to him, this signals a departure from his usual approach to historical work through the wealth of detail included and the extensive referencing to secondary source material. This, he asserts, arise out of the need to provide a more detailed picture of this period than was available at the time of writing (7-8). While this is not strictly accurate, Schoeman does provide a detailed description of European life at the Cape along the lines of C. Graham Botha’s *Social life in the Cape Colony in the 18th Century* (Cape Town: Juta, 1926) but in a way which provides a wealth of detail from an extensive,

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1. Quoted on p.7. Dr. Philip’s work is entitled ‘Memoir of Mrs Matilda Smith’, a reference to the name used by her English evangelical contemporaries.
 2. P. VAN DER SPUY, ‘What then was the sexual outlet for black males? A feminist critique of quantitative representations of women slaves at the Cape of Good Hope in the eighteenth century’, *Kronos* 23 (1996) pp. 43-56.

and previously under-utilised range of sources. In this respect Schoeman's work provides a synthesis of Dutch life at the Cape in the eighteenth century.

Perhaps the most interesting element in *Dogter van Sion* is the attention Schoeman gives to the rise of pietism and evangelicalism under the European population at the Cape. Pietism first spread amongst the Lutheran population at the Cape, which was prevented from having a full-time resident pastor by the Dutch East India Company until 1779. Thereafter, the seeds of religious awakening amongst this community were contributed to by the influence of evangelicalism, originating from Britain, on the official Dutch church towards the end of the century. This he attributes to the example and teachings of dominees Van Lier and Vos, one from his pulpit in Cape Town and the other from the smaller congregation at Roodezand.

According to Schoeman, the focus on individual religion and worship, as well as the propagation of faith, answered a need amongst Dutch colonists, starved for religious expression by the sterility of the official church. Moreover, the revival within the church – demonstrated amply through the example of Machtelt Smit who became a missionary herself – led to the start of mission work within the church. This forms an interesting counterweight to the early history of missions in South African, which tend to focus more on the activity of the Moravians (although this movement did predate the emergence of missionary zeal within the Dutch Reformed Church). This is, for me, one of the most useful themes of the book since it demonstrates the relevance and importance of religious feeling to the construction of social relations.

While *Dogter van Sion* achieves what it sets out to do admirably I have two comments about the material it contains. In the first place I question the use of the convention through which primary material is cited in its original language, with no translation provided into the Afrikaans. As a non-specialist, my reading of the text was interrupted by my struggle to read original Dutch source material. For a work which claims to be popular history, this does not make for easy reading, particularly given the length of some of the quotations.

In addition, as a result of Schoeman's preference for archival material he downplays the secondary material available on the eighteenth century. The work consists of extensive quoted material, interspersed with Schoeman's own commentary upon its significance. While Schoeman does not neglect to mention some of the historical debates critical to the historiography of the period, he does not consider them at any length. I gained the impression from his work on slavery that it was a relatively benign institution at the Cape – this despite mentioning Robert Ross and Nigel Worden's work on the brutality of the state (although Schoeman does refer regularly to Robert Shell's work). Elsewhere I was dissatisfied with Schoeman's analysis of the sexual equality between Dutch men and women at the Cape. At one point he refers to the relative equality between them, elsewhere he refers to the lack of real power enjoyed by women.

However, if read in conjunction with the historical material to which Schoeman refers, this is a valuable, carefully and lovingly-researched addition to the historiography of the eighteenth century. Schoeman's enthusiasm for his subject, as with all his work, is evident through-out, as is his desire to popularise history beyond academic circles.

Natasha Erlank

RAU

Modern day *groit* on ancient African accomplishment

CHRISTOPHER EHRET, *An African classical age: Eastern and Southern Africa in world history, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400*

University Press of Virginia/James Currey, Charlottesville/Oxford

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Christopher Ehret has been writing African history from a linguistic perspective since the 1960's. As a young historian he was involved in one of the major formative periods in the development of the new academic African historiographical tradition that followed in the wake of the continental drift towards decolonisation. At the time, the *Journal of African History* was making its mark as a major scholarly platform for airing superlative work by a few interdisciplinary historians who had gone well beyond merely exploring the avenues of anthropology, archaeology and political history in isolation from each other. They had in fact started opening up the histories of a rich, colourful and vibrant continent. There was a wealth of knowledge that had hardly been tapped.

In his early writings Ehret made provocative and experimental observations. He paved the way for other researchers to join him in opening up new avenues of investigation. In a sense he was part of the vanguard of scholars exploring new routes to the African past. Ehret was not only influenced by Jan Vansina's pioneering work on oral tradition, but also looked at language in terms of the fascinating world that etymological investigation could open up.

In his latest work, *An African classical age: Eastern and Southern Africa in world history, 1000 B.C. to A.D. 400* (which was published in hard cover for the