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Book Reviews
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Boekresensies

A clever book

Lize Kriel, *The "Malaboch" Books: Kgalusi in the "Civilization of the Written Word"*
Missionsgeschichtliches Archiv 13, Studien der Berliner Gesellschaft für Missionsgeschichte, Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 2009
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This is a clever book. Its central objective is to decipher two primary texts on the war between the Boers and the Hananwa in mid-1894. These are the "Malaboch books" in the title whose form of communication, the printed word, is carried by the sub-title. Lize Kriel sets out to write about the way these texts portray chief Mmalebôhô (Malaboch), but her book is really about writing history. The two books are *My Friend Malaboch* by Berlin missionary Christoph Sonntag, and *Malaboch* by Colin Rae, an Anglican minister who served as chaplain to the English-speaking troops on commando. Dr Kriel is less interested in the history of the war than in the way it is represented in these two texts and, more distantly, how these representations have changed over time and how they have come to influence orthodox views of the war. As such, her book is about the construction or assemblage of history rather than about the way we record or recall the past. It is about ways in which we write about the past rather than the past itself. It is also a very reflexive history in which the author places herself at the centre of the text and focuses the skills of a literary critic on the narrative structure (and public reception in time and space) of the two texts at the heart of her work. The actors in this drama are the sources of history, not the Boers or the Hananwa, nor, despite Kriel's claim (p 345), chief Mmalebôho. This is a bold, experimental work about slippery realities and unfixed meanings. It will not find readers among those looking for a rip-roaring yarn (or even those wishing to uncover the hidden structures that drive behaviour and make history). But it should find an avid readership among those interested in the theory and methodology of history.

The book begins with a long chapter on the diary as a historical source. Almost immediately, the author raises the flag of deconstructionist history, with Hayden White's name firmly imprinted on it. Her aim is "to deconstruct, comparatively, as pieces of historical writing, two diaries, compiled more or less at the same time, covering more or less the same events" (pp 13, 22). The next chapter provides a picture of the environment of the Blouberg and Soutpansberg before moving to the war itself, which is portrayed as part of the wider scramble for Africa. The remaining chapters introduce the reader to Rae and Sonntag and their "diaries". Lize Kriel does not like Colin Rae. He is at once "a fool" (p 130) and "a city boy who had to play chaplain" (p 134). Later he exhibits "egotistical self-conceit" (p 199) and is "self-absorbed" (p 208). She disapproves of his drinking, which leads to his untimely demise, and she obviously prefers the steady habits of the German missionary, Christoph Sonntag.

Chapter five begins a very careful examination of the two texts. This shows the extent to which Rae depended on accounts published in *The Press* to fill his book (over sixty per cent). Sonntag's work, although "all his own", was translated and edited by his son Konrad in ways that, sometimes severely, changed the meaning of the original German text. Hence neither text provides an "authentic" account of the war. The next chapter moves from "who is doing the telling" to "who is being told", that is, the way in which readers influenced the production of the two accounts of the war. While Christoph Sonntag wrote his diary for personal reasons and in order to inform his Mission superintendent, his son, writing in the early 1980s, saw a new and modern readership as his target. Working in a new age of stridently revised moralities and political options, Konrad introduced passages and nuances that turned the Hananwa into victims of Boer aggression. This re-composition of the original text reflected new imperatives to create "racial reconciliation". It especially served to deflect criticism of the German missionary, under attack by a new generation of historians, by turning him into a friend of the natives. On the other hand Rae, at the end of the nineteenth century, wanted to produce a "diary" that was at once a saleable item and a means of portraying himself in the best possible light. Historians in the 1980s saw his text as a more objective work as it was not influenced by the meddling of a missionary interloper. Lize Kriel found this judgement unsatisfactory and her book is, in many ways, an attempt to salvage Sonntag's reputation.

Kriel underlines that the context in which the books by Rae and Sonntag were written had a strong influence on their composition and content. Colin Rae's book is that of an outsider, a "city boy" who aligned himself with the Boers. He blamed the war on the Hananwa whom he portrays as, alternately, the aggressors, and/or as the (often absent) Other. Sonntag, in contrast, had a feel for the land, believed the Boers responsible for the war, and saw the Hananwa and the Boers' "black helpers" as active players in the drama. The extrovert Rae is contrasted with the modest, more appealing Sonntag who serves as the Boers' "reluctant collaborator". Rae's "idle hours" are compared to Sonntag's "full schedule". The unfortunate Englishman is a monoglot while the brave Sonntag speaks German, Dutch and North Sotho. After all this, it is difficult not to feel there is a hierarchy of representation and that if only Konrad had not taken up the cudgels to defend his father's version of events from the criticism of modern historians, we would have a comprehensive, "objective" account of the war.

The strengths of this book lie in the field of methodology, and many historians will find it, or its individual chapters, very useful. Seminars on methodology will benefit greatly from Lize Kriel's examination of the narrative structure of texts, her concentration on the pitfalls of translation and editing, her remarks on diaries as a historical source, or the knowledge and experience brought by authors to their subjects. Other historians will want something more substantial about the war she is discussing and less about the comparative subjects she drifts into (from the Ijebu and Itsekiri to the Hehe and Ndebele, via Magritte and Simon Schama). Some will be critical of her own perspective when she describes the object of the 1886 Occupation Law as an attempt "to develop the [northern] district through the establishment of effective government control", or when she discusses how Boers "confiscated" cattle from the Hananwa; or when the latter are seen to engage in the "illegal weapons trade" or participate in "arms smuggling" (pp 260–61). Here she has unconsciously adopted the discourse of Boer authority found in her sources. Nor would many

historians agree with the adjective "legendary" that she uses to describe both the battle of Majuba (p 67) and N.J. van Warmelo (p 215). The wide range of theory Kriel brings to this book sometimes gets muddled. The very Braudelian, structuralist approach to the environment in chapter two sits uneasily with the post-structuralist analysis of landscape in chapter nine. And the relationship between cultures and epistemes is overly static, whether talking about "the blacks of southern Africa" (p 218) or Foucault (p 246).

This book is not bedside reading. It is a serious investigation of how texts are read (the civilisation of the written word), how they produce meaning, and how that meaning changes over time and in space. Many historians will view with scepticism the way this book crosses the frontiers of literary criticism, cultural studies and History; and will want a stronger narrative and more African initiative. I hope their students will be more open to the lessons it holds.

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