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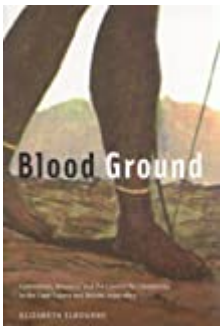

Elizabeth Elbourne. *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1852.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002. xi + 499 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7735-2229-9.

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Incorporating Religion into the Mainstream of South African History

Elizabeth Elbourne's *Blood Ground* is a masterful, well-researched, and incredibly detailed account of Christian missions and the indigenous appropriation of Christianity, in the context of white colonial and Khoekhoe ("Hottentot," Khoikhoi, and Khoisan) relations in the Cape Colony from the late eighteenth century until roughly 1853. Throughout the book Elbourne pays careful attention to metropolitan colonial currents, Dutch and British colonial politics at the Cape, London Missionary Society (LMS) and station politics, and the way in which Khoekhoe indigenous people attempted to maintain an independent existence in the face of these competing forces. A continual theme is the indigenous appropriation of Christianity by the Khoekhoe and the subsequent contest between the Khoekhoe and white colonialists over the uses and meaning of Christianity.

The rough contours of Elbourne's work will be known to many readers, since it joins an extensive historiography of the nineteenth-century Eastern Cape, South Africa. It is a fitting addition to a very readable and well-researched regional canon.[1] The closest comparison, though, in terms of its genre, is probably to Jean and John Comaroffs' *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol.1, *Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness*, though Elbourne's approach to mission history, as Elbourne herself discusses, differs from that of the Comaroffs.[2]

In the introduction (the book has ten chapters, not including the introduction and conclusion) Elbourne begins to look at some of the issues connected with writing about missions and Christianity in South African history. According to her, part of the book's *raison d'etre* is "to incorporate the study of religion more thoroughly into the mainstream of cultural, social and political history" (p.17). Here Elbourne is engaging with a literature on the impact of Christianity and missions partially set in motion by the Comaroffs' work, which itself was the product of a renewed interest in the history of missions in the late 1980s and early 1990s (*Blood Ground* is largely based on Elbourne's 1992 doctoral thesis). Prominent in this work was a desire to theorize the nature of indigenous agency in Christianity (how much did conversion reflect a choice shorn of material considerations) and to understand the ambiguous role of the missionary as colonial agent. The introduction sets out Elbourne's understanding of these

issues and lays the ground for the rest of the volume.

In the first chapter Elbourne provides a background to nineteenth-century British and Scottish Protestantism and evangelical belief. Here she looks at the establishment of the first mission societies and the precarious association of these nonconformist societies with middle-class respectability.

In her second chapter Elbourne provides the local context for the rest of the book. This chapter includes a brief discussion of Khoekhoe history, as well as a biography of J. T. van der Kemp, the founder of the first LMS/Khoekhoe mission station at Bethelsdorp. Van der Kemp's calling to missionary work reflects what Elbourne refers to as tendency of early missionaries to propagate a "more *potentially* socially egalitarian message" (p.101) than their successors, an issue discussed in later chapters and which constitutes a second theme of the book.

The rest of the book concerns events on the Eastern Cape frontier. These include the Khoekhoe uprising of 1799-1802; the establishment of mission stations; Khoekhoe uses of mission Christianity; Eastern Cape mission influence in Britain in the 1820s and 1830s; "Hottentot" liberation under a liberalization of legislation in 1828; the establishment of the Kat River Settlement (a frontier area given over to the Khoekhoe) in 1829; hardening white settler opposition to the missions during the late 1830s and 1840s; and finally, the Kat River Rebellion (which was part of one of a series of frontier wars) from 1850 to 1853.

Throughout this discussion, Elbourne devotes attention to Khoekhoe politics and religion, white mission politics, and the place of South African mission events in British debates about colonialism and abolition.

Elbourne's analysis of the Khoekhoe encounter with Christianity traces its origins from the eighteenth century (as a result of itinerant black evangelism), through their growing association with mission stations and their initial, partially successful attempts to integrate themselves into a colonial economy and lifestyle, to their final disillusionment with missionaries and the colony through their participation in the Eighth Frontier war alongside the Xhosa forces. This account is interwoven with accounts of the immense violence done to the Khoekhoe as a result of white settlement and, in chapter 4, Elbourne discusses the need to take violence seriously. She quotes from an 1808 missionary description of the treatment accorded a young Khoekhoe woman by a white farmer: "She had been flogged to pieces with a sambok or whip made of the skin of a rhinoceros or seacow and then a vast quantity of salt rubbed into the wounds" (p.158).

In the context of this kind of treatment, growing impoverishment, and lack of land, a kind of Khoekhoe or pan-"Hottentot" nationalism developed, based on a sense of group identity which initially drew heavily on Christianity and the Bible–and later, on the notion of common land, or blood ground–as sources of authority. While Elbourne qualifies her use of the term "nationalism" later on in the volume (according to her, nationalism as it applies in the 1830s refers more to an ethnic group than to the cultural nationalism of late-nineteenth-century Europe, p. 359), she might have gone further in her theorization of the nature of Khoekhoe nationalism.[3] Given what is an ambiguous body of evidence for the existence of such nationalism–the Kat River Khoekhoe were only partially literate in English, and more often than not written about by other people–the matter needs a more concentrated argument (the material on nationalism is dispersed among a number of chapters).

With respect to her second theme, Elbourne traces the politics of the LMS in South Africa, comparing the approach of the early missionaries, which focused less on the Khoekhoe acquisition of civilization and more on the acquisition of the "Word," with that of those who came later. Van der Kemp and James Read Senior's support for Khoekhoe aspirations continued under the superintendence of Dr. John Philip after 1819. Not all LMS missionaries, though, supported the views of these men. Between 1817 and the 1850s, some LMS missionaries, including Robert Moffat, began to oppose the views of this earlier group, moving into closer relationships with the colonial administration and white settlers, who desired more control over Khoekhoe land and labor.

In chapters 6 and 7 in particular, Elbourne raises a third theme, which concerns metropolitan politics, including ideas about poor law reform, abolitionist sentiment, and the Cape. In Britain, support for the Khoekhoe cause served as a test case for the need for abolition in the British Empire. These chapters are especially important for laying bare the workings of nineteenth-century British imperialism, some of which were remarkably inefficient and ill-informed.

Underlying these themes is the idea of conflict, not only between blacks and whites, but also over a moral universe predicated on the uses and control of Christianity. By the 1830s, in the wake of several wars and a growing land and labor hunger, white settlers in the Cape

(and some missionaries themselves) were no longer convinced by missionary rhetoric about the "reclaimability" of Khoekhoe who converted to Christianity. Whereas previously some space had existed in white imaginations for a civilized "Hottentot" nation (where "civilized" meant clothed, Christianized, and willing to work for very little pay), the Khoekhoe were now seen increasingly in terms which deprived them of any humanity. This thinking mapped onto skin color. Here Elbourne presents the Eastern Cape frontier zone of the late 1830s as a crucible of racism, inaugurating a critical shift in white attitudes toward black South Africans. She links this growing colonial racism to parallel developments elsewhere in the British empire, such as India.

However, racial categorization was not solely a product of skin color, labor, and land concerns, but also of contests over the ownership and possession of Christianity. Christianity, which many Khoekhoe professed loudly and vocally including during the Kat River Rebellion, signified possession of status and respectability. This was especially important in a colony where civilization had been predicated (theoretically) on conversion rather than skin color. Once visible conversion became commonplace, struggles over who practiced Christianity and who could dispense the sacraments, as well as who could read, assumed utmost importance. Khoekhoe evangelists who clamored for ordination were claiming for themselves rights that most white clergy felt were dependent on civilization–i.e., race. In part, the internal mission conflict of the 1830s was about what authority might be accorded Khoekhoe ministers. Khoekhoe converts were themselves convinced of the power which accrued to them by virtue of their status, an issue aside from faith. All of this made for frontier conflict at a number of levels, illustrating clearly Elbourne's point about the need to take religion seriously.

It is a pity then, that Elbourne's call, as expressed in this book, is not likely to be taken any further. Despite the status of some of Elbourne's earlier work (the citation of which is *de rigueur* in works on colonialism and missions), the moment for this book has passed.[4] The elapse between preparation of the original work and current publication has meant that, certainly in South Africa itself, other developments have pushed questions of religion to the historical margins. Locally at least, the advent of democracy in 1994 has turned history in other directions, to the extent that questions of struggle, identity, and nationalism have come to preoccupy much current historical production (though there are some notable exceptions to this, and the trend may be more evident in popular history). Unless as a footnote to issues of nationalism, religion continues to remain in an eddy at the edge of the historical mainstream. Elsewhere in the Anglophone world, work in this direction continues, especially that which addresses the issues of missions, Christianity, and indigenous agency in the twentieth century. Here, though, the book's focus on South Africa might detract from its readership.

I have some minor quibbles with the book, which are mostly, I suspect, the result of imperfect editing. *Blood Ground* is unnecessarily long, due in part to repetitiveness. For instance, a description of Khoekhoe efforts at Bethelsdorp is given on p. 164 and then repeated on p. 215. In addition, the length of the book has allowed some errors to creep in. Hermanus Matroos, rebel leader at the Kat River, dies first on p. 348 on January 8, 1851 and then again, on p. 356, at the end of February. At first I was hopeful for Matroos, but later I suspected poor copyediting. It should be the former date. Nevertheless, these quibbles do not detract from the book. It is a truly thought-provoking read, accessible across a number of disciplines.

Notes

[1]. The following are only a few of the standard monographs on nineteenth-century Eastern Cape history: Clifton Crais, *White Supremacy and Black Resistance in Pre-Industrial South Africa: The Making of the Colonial Order in the Eastern Cape, 1770-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Noel Mostert, *Frontiers: The Epic of South Africa's Creation and the Tragedy of the Xhosa People* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992); Jeffrey Peires, *The House of Phalo* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981); and *The Dead Will Arise* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1981).

[2]. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, vol.1, *Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[3]. Robert Ross is, I think, paying further attention to Khoekhoe nationalism in forthcoming work.

[4]. In particular in two very useful edited volumes: Elizabeth Elbourne and Robert Ross, "Combating Spiritual and Social Bondage: Early Missions in the Cape Colony," in *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, ed. Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport (Cape Town, Oxford and Berkeley: David Philip, James Currey and University of California, 1997), pp. 31-50; and Elizabeth Elbourne, "Early Khoisan Uses

of Mission Christianity," in *Missions and Christianity in South African History*, ed. Henry Bredekamp and Robert Ross (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), pp. 65-96.