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**John Edwin Mason.** *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2003. xiii + 334 pp. $65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-2178-5.

**Reviewed by** Robert Ross

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Unless we are very careful, history can become the preserve of the literate. Almost by definition, once we move back in time beyond the limits of memory recall even across the generations--a hundred years or so at the best--then we are almost always dependent on what people have written down. That, after all, is why most historians spend most of their research time in libraries and archives, Africanists perhaps less than most, and the prime skill which we need is the ability to read. The corollaries of this are, of course, equally well-known and obvious. Given this nature of things, we know much more about those who wrote than about those who did not, and also about those whose writings were preserved in archives than about those whose writings were not. However, these usually fortunate ones are very seldom even a substantial proportion of the population and need, of course, by no means be the people in whom we are particularly interested. Historians are thus enormously glad when they discover one of those rare places which have preserved what is usually lost, through which they can learn about the ideas and actions of those whose voices have not usually reverberated across the centuries. Even then, there is the likelihood, verging on certainty, that what they have to tell us will have been filtered through the writing, and thus the perceptions, of the powerful in any given society.

For the history of South Africa, one such quarry--what a palaeontologist might call a ***fundgrube***--reveals a surprising amount about the aspirations and ideas of the Cape's slaves in the last decade or so before emancipation. In this period, the British had appointed a number of so-called "protectors of slaves" whose task was to enforce the amelioration provisions and thus to deal with complaints of the slaves about their treatment (and for that matter of masters about their slaves). A surprisingly large number of slaves took advantage of the opportunities which the institution of the protectors offered. The result is that John Mason has been able to reconstruct numerous stories about the lives of the Cape's slaves over these years. There are, of course, problems. In general, we do not know what the television script-writers of today would call the "back story," nor do we know what happened afterwards.

There are obvious problems of interpretation and of bias, as what we know is what the protectors recorded, and the slaves were savvy enough to present their cases in ways which the protectors were most likely to appreciate. Mason, of course, is well aware of these problems and has taken appropriate action. He has also supplemented what he has found in the protectors' reports with a wide range of other material. The result is a very fine book, made better by the fact that Mason writes very well, is not afraid to tell stories--in fact he rejoices in so doing--and eschews jargon-ridden theory.

In such a work, there are a number of matters which need to be written in order to understand the core of the work. Thus Mason provides useful and well done, but not particularly original, descriptions of the development of the Cape's economy in the first third of the nineteenth century, and of the colony's political organization. This flows over into a discussion of the households in which slaves were held, and in which their daily degradation was achieved. In this chapter, Mason gives the best account I have read of the systematic sexual exploitation, and rape as we would call it today, of slave women by free men. Then Mason continues with discussions of slave life, beginning, as is surely right, with descriptions of labor. If European slavery is not about work and about the exploitation of a labor force for profit, then it was totally meaningless. In the two chapters which he devotes to this, Mason distinguishes, in important and fascinating ways, between the situation in Cape Town and what was going on in the countryside, with slaves in the city having in many ways more freedom and perhaps a lighter physical load (although I am not entirely sure that those who carried goods through the streets would have felt this). There follows a description of punishment, resistance, and running away which makes quite evident that slaves did not acquiesce willingly in their slavery.

Chapters 7 and 8, on slave religion and slave families, respectively, are, I feel, the most original in the book. In the first, Mason discusses the spread of Islam, in which he endorses the view that the *Qadariyyah tariqa* had been established well before the founding of the colony's first mosques at the end of the eighteenth century, and that the Sufi traditions which this entailed shaped Cape Islam well into the nineteenth century and perhaps later. In particular the *ratiep* ceremony (the form of trance dancing and skewering once known as the *Callifat*) and what has been disparagingly known as "Malay magic" but what, as Mason points out, would be merely "Islamic medicine" elsewhere in Africa, are described with great sympathy and insight. In general, in Mason's analysis, Christianity was heavily out-competed by Islam among the slaves, although there were many slaves who made use of the opportunities which the mission schools in Stellenbosch and Paarl gave to acquire the basics of literacy. Why, after emancipation, at least in the countryside Christianity spread very widely among the descendants of the slaves is an interesting question, but one outside the scope of Mason's book.

On the family, Mason is also convincing in showing how an increasing proportion of the slaves were able to construct marriages (though hardly ever sanctioned by church and state) and how these relationships were often recognised by the slave-owners, sometimes under duress from the protectors. In a surprising number of cases, these marriages crossed the line between slavery and freedom. However, in more cases, slave families only contained one adult, almost always the mother, together with children. Fathers might not be acknowledged or acknowledge themselves; they might have been forced to live elsewhere by the vicissitudes of slavery or the relationship might have collapsed, for whatever reason. All the same, these families could be held together by strong emotive bonds. What is not clear is how far families could be based on what is known as "fictive kinship," that is kinship that is real enough

but not based on genealogical or "marital" bonds. Together with religion, the families could provide the slaves--what proportion of the slaves is an unanswerable question--with the weapons which they needed to survive their slavery.

That they needed such weapons is something which Mason stresses. He makes much play with the metaphors of slavery as social death and as soul murder. In other words, slavery destroyed both the society and psyche of its victims. However, both conditions could potentially be reversed. The argument of Mason's book is thus that slaves were often able to do just that. Slave society had become strong enough to allow some, perhaps many, perhaps only the fortunate ones, to overcome. It is a strong argument, and one which Mason makes convincingly.

At this point, it is incumbent on me to comment on this thesis in relation to a book (***Cape of Torments***) which I wrote a good two decades ago, in which I argued that the slaves at the Cape of Good Hope did not manage to create any overarching community and that as a result their resistance was "individual and uncoordinated".[1] While I too stressed the social and psychic damage which slavery inflicted on the slaves, I did not see that damage as having been reversed. Is Mason's criticism of my ideas, which I largely shared with Nigel Worden, justified?[2] Or is there a way of unifying our respective views? I believe that the latter is the case. It may be purely a question of emphasis and of sources. The crime records on which I based my work are particularly liable to bring to the fore those who, for whatever reason, have placed themselves outside the norms of society, and thus to give the impression that there were no norms. The sorts of complaints which Mason deals with, on the other hand, show us those slaves who had the strength of character to risk making complaints, and who were able to deploy their and society's norms in their defense. For this reason, I tended, as it were, to see the half of the bottle that was empty, Mason sees the half that was full. But there was more.

Nigel Worden wrote explicitly about Dutch South Africa, in other words about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; I did stray into the nineteenth century but the main thrust of my work was in the eighteenth. In other words, both of us dealt with a period in which the slave trade was still operative, a substantial majority of the slaves had been born outside South Africa, and, in consequence, the sex ratio of the slave population was highly skewed towards the male. Leander Bugis, after all, died a century before emancipation. By the time the protectors, and thus Mason, get going, the slave trade had been abolished for two decades, a majority of the slaves were creole, and the sex ratio was beginning to approximate to parity. I would now like to argue that in the eighteenth century there were perhaps seeds of later slave communities and of shared norms and values, which I may have missed, but that more importantly over the half century from the 1780s to the 1830s there was a process of the creation of such a community. In other words, Nigel Worden and I were dealing with a "before" phase, John Mason with an "after." I am not sure how to write a narrative of what went on in between, and I fear that as in so many cases such a narrative could only consist of the juxtaposition of successive stages. Perhaps the hypothesis I am adumbrating here cannot really be tested, though I would think for evidential rather than logical reasons. All the same, if it could be, I am fairly sure that it would not be rejected, certainly not for Cape Town and probably not for an increasing, though perhaps not total, proportion of the rest of the Colony.

That I can set such questions only goes to show how stimulating I found John Mason's book. Of the books on Cape slavery it is probably the best. I can only recommend that anyone interested either in the history of the Cape, with its deeper extensions into later periods of South African

history, or in the comparative study of slavery and emancipation, should read and digest this work.

Notes

[1]. R. Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983).

[2]. N. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).