More Than Just a Murder?

*Murder at Morija* opens with the poisoning of Edouard Jacottet of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society (PEMS). Jacottet had served in Lesotho for thirty-six years and had been both a leader of the mission and a prominent figure in the British colony of Lesotho. In part 1, the author, Tim Couzens, introduces the suspects and circumstances surrounding the murder, but before revealing his opinions regarding the unsolved mystery, he traces the history of Lesotho and the Protestant Mission there since 1833.

In part 2, Couzens provides an excellent overview of Lesotho’s political and cultural history, starting with Moshoeshoe. Much of Couzens’s information on the early Basotho and Moshoeshoe is drawn from Thomas Arbousset’s *Missionary Excursion*, which recounts his journey into the Maloti mountains with the Basotho chief.[1] The next few chapters factually and artistically blend together the early years of the PEMS and Moshoeshoe’s rise to power. Following that, the mission’s early success and failures are explored along with the external threats that will cause Moshoeshoe to lose most of his arable land.

After a brief discussion of the Gun-War (1880-81), the main focus of the story shifts to the PEMS and Jacottet (chapters 16-25). It is in these chapters that the reader comes to understand who Jacottet was and how he shaped the Mission in Lesotho. One of his greatest achievements was the development of the Seboka in 1898. This annual meeting was conducted in Sesotho and Basotho pastors voted on an equal footing with their European counterparts, which incorporated the Basotho into the decision making process of the mission. Jacottet’s efforts to train Basotho pastors made him a key figure in the transition from mission to church. Perhaps Jacottet’s impression is nowhere more evident than in the Sesotho language. He played a pivotal role in the 1906 Conference on Sesuto Orthography, which recommended that Lesotho continue to use a different orthography than the one used in South Africa. The Sesotho grammar books penned by the missionary are still in use today.

The intersection of Basotho and PEMS is explored in the author’s discussion of the most famous Mosotho author, Thomas Mofolo. Through the work of Mofolo and other Basotho authors, Couzens demonstrates the impact that the mission had on the birth of Sesotho literature. Not only were many of the early Basotho authors connected to the mission, but their writings often illustrated the merging of Sesotho ideas with Christian beliefs. Jacottet’s other contribution to Lesotho involved his efforts to keep the Basotho out of the Union of South Africa. Jacottet’s efforts in this matter of paramount importance have often been ignored, and Couzens shows how he helped ensure the survival of the Basotho nation.

After working his way through roughly ninety years of history, Couzens returns to the murder of Jacottet. The last section of the book examines the social and historical context of the murder as well as its impact on both the mission and Lesotho. However, the real focus of the last section is Couzens’s analysis of the evidence and his attempt to solve an eighty-five-year-old murder for which
nobody was ever tried. Couzens relies on a variety of sources, ranging from personal recollections, official documents and private correspondences, and even a novel that bares a striking similarity to the events happening at Morija in 1920. The result of Couzens’s research is a compelling argument about which of the many suspects committed the crime.

The murder of Jacottet makes for an interesting read, but there is a much bigger story being told. In many respects, Jacottet’s struggles in Lesotho are reflective of the turmoil faced by both the newly formed colony and the mission that had been there since the birth of the nation. The Basotho struggled to co-exist within the newly created borders, and to keep from getting swallowed up by its larger neighbor. Despite some initial success, the PEMS had a difficult time converting the Basotho and then, mired in its own inner turmoil, found itself being surpassed by the Catholic mission. Jacottet’s murder in 1920 ends an important epoch in the history of the PEMS and Lesotho. From this point on, the Basotho would become increasingly dependent on migrant wages in South Africa, and the Protestants would lose the political importance that they had during the days of Moshoeshoe and Letsie.

Although I found this book to be both informative and enjoyable, at times the author seemed to stray off topic. Tim Couzens provides a deep background into the religious and intellectual history of Protestants in France and Switzerland, and particularly the academic training of Jacottet. The author also gets caught up in the details of World War I and the experiences of Jacottet’s son Henri. Lastly, he delves into a history of the use of poisoning. While these are all individually interesting, good editing would have omitted them. Couzens obviously conducted a tremendous amount of research for this book; however, as a historian I was frustrated by the absence of citations and the presence of only general descriptions of sources at the end of the book. Whilst the historical detail is very rich, at times there was almost too much detail, especially regarding the daily functions of the mission. However, what makes this book special is Couzens’s ability to tell a story. It is a beautifully written book, and the author often adds little anecdotes that allow the reader to gain some personal insight into the historical figures.

Note

[1]. Thomas Arbousset, Missionary Excursion into the Blue Mountains: Being an Account of King Moshoeshoe’s Expedition from Thaba-Bosiu to the Sources of the Malibamato River in the Year 1840, ed. and trans., with an introduction and notes by David Ambrose and Albert Brutsch (Morija, Lesotho: Morija Museum and Archive, 1991).

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