

## RESENSIES / REVIEWS

### **The Portable Bunyan. A Transnational History of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.**

Isabel Hofmeyr. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Johannesburg: Wits University Press. 2004. 320 pp. ISBN 0-691-11655-5; pbk 0-691-11656-3.

This is a most interesting and informative book, the product of long and impressive research, dealing with the use made of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the mission field, very largely through translation. Bunyan has been "portable", has been carried all over the world into different cultures and languages.

It contains a wealth of fascinating information, not only about how *The Pilgrim's Progress* has fared around the world, but how it has fared in England. One of Isabel Hofmeyr's contentions is that it was an international book before the revival of interest in Bunyan through more or less modern criticism and scholarship, some of which has tended to stress Bunyan's Englishness, not to speak of his particular affiliation to the Bedford region. We are told of the sometimes comic goings-on in the Camden Baptist congregation (although the comedy must not be allowed to obscure the fact that young people were going out possibly to die). We are told that Conrad's eerie river of the *Heart of Darkness* had a fairly brisk steamer traffic, not least transporting missionaries. We are shown that *The Pilgrim's Progress* could be a kind of "Ur" text for the African novel in English. We are told of Southern Africa, too, of the Lovedale Mission and Tiyo Soga's celebrated translation and of possible Bunyan links with an earlier Xhosa tradition and Nongqawuse. We

are also told of how unwillingly Bunyan was granted a memorial in Westminster Abbey, because of the tardiness with which the Church of England came to grips with its sometimes less than charitable past, and of the ludicrous article by Alfred Noyes, English patriot and poet, on the "Caliban-Bunyan", with his "punitively narrow" Calvinistic theology and "Hottentottish" style, dreadful, primitive and insane, exhibiting the lowest and most squalid levels of the primitive races of Africa, which in turn shows Noyes's adherence to the Darwinist anthropology that is one of the features of late Victorian culture.

In thus exposing Noyes, Isabel Hofmeyr in fact contradicts one of her lines of thought. Not only is *The Portable Bunyan* a mine of information, but it is part of a critical debate on the, by now, familiar themes of modern critical theory. What makes a book universal, or how can we understand this notion of universality? Does the text stand as an icon, giving meaning, or is the text what the reader makes of it? Therefore, is there a real Bunyan or *Pilgrim's Progress*, a correct, single interpretation or reading? What happens in translation and transference to other cultures? Another critical theme is the Marxist approach to Bunyan, through the hints at sociological analysis that can be gleaned from the text, so that the sub-text becomes the "real" text. The approach is represented by E.P. Thompson, whose *The Making of the English Working Class* contains a chapter on Bunyan against Apollyon, and Christopher Hill who has produced a substantial book on Bunyan and his milieu, among his many studies of re-

bellious sectarianism of the seventeenth century. Hofmeyr refers to Christopher Hill in particular.

Difficulties arise. If there is no fixed Bunyan or *Pilgrim's Progress*, if the reader makes the text, if Bunyan is "portable", if there is no right reading of the text, then can anyone be wrong? Isabel Hofmeyr obviously does not agree with Alfred Noyes, so she is capable of saying that a reading is wrong. Does one do this only for the most egregious and vicious idiocy of an Alfred Noyes; if so, where does one draw the line? The principle that the reader makes the text, that there is no secure anchorage, that there is no foundation ("anti-foundationalism" is the watchword), itself becomes relative: we can claim that some readings are better than others.

Isabel Hofmeyr opposes the kind of criticism which she claims makes Bunyan "English" rather than "portable". Indeed, it does not really matter whether Houghton House, near Bedford, is The House Beautiful, to quote an example of local antiquarianism. However, antiquarianism and English patriotism tend to get conflated with a much more important investigation. In Hofmeyr's book this is represented particularly by Roger Sharrock, the prominent Bunyan scholar, who is quoted to the effect that there is a paradox that Bunyan, a Particular Baptist of mid-seventeenth century England, and a holder of an exclusive doctrine of election, (probably of the supralapsarian variety) should have had such a wide appeal. In the interests of asserting a global, varied, fragmented, universal, fluid and "evangelical" Bunyan, our author distances herself from the likes of Sharrock. One notices, incidentally, that Hofmeyr's bibliography, while it does have *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Bunyan's autobiography, which is an account of the harrowing discovery of Bunyan's election

and the basis of the allegory of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, does not contain any of Bunyan's specifically theological and controversial works. The Bunyan scholarship of people such as Sharrock has as its object a precise understanding of Bunyan's works through an understanding of his milieu. This involves a "right" reading of Bunyan as a Christian, specifically one of the varieties of the English Neo-Calvinist Puritans of his time, with a doctrine of election modified for pastoral purposes by a pattern of experience broadly indebted to the work of William Perkins early in the century and underpinned by the theoretical framework of Dort. In Bunyan's case this is glossed by his reading of Luther on *Galatians*.

The universality of Bunyan depends on a reading that delights in the heroism and the fortitude, in the adventures and in the acutely and often satirically depicted characters. This may go a long way to explaining the Victorian evangelical liking for Bunyan. However, there was a great Baptist debate from 1855 onwards (the Camden church was built in 1853) that centred round the renowned Baptist preacher Spurgeon and how to deal with the predestinarian tradition versus free grace. Did this in any way touch the missionary enterprise? Hofmeyr does not tell us. It is, in fact, worth asking whether especially the first part of *The Pilgrim's Progress* is not a bleak, predestinarian document, ending as it does with the casting of the poor, deluded, well-meaning young Ignorance down to hell at the very gates of the Heavenly City.

The Marxists try to avoid all this. Religion is the language of the times, concealing other dialectical processes. Hofmeyr uses Christopher Hill on the Apollyon episode. Hill is probably indebted to E.P. Thompson's earlier treatment of the same episode in *The Making of the English Working Class*. The battle is against a cruel tyrant, a

prince, waged by an heroic tinker. What upsets this reading is that Christian states his allegiance to a King. Christian, still imperfectly assured of his election, is wounded in his "conversation" i.e. his conversion. He is rescued by a favourable biblical text. Indeed, the intertext is most specifically the extremely well-known Pauline passage towards the end of *Ephesians* about the armour of spiritual struggle against, note well, unearthly foes, and not oppressive earthly rules. While the text that pops into Christian's mind (just as texts popped into Bunyan's mind, as he records in the autobiography) is from elsewhere in St. Paul, the whole framework of allusion in the Apollyon episode is most certainly the *Ephesians* passage. The conflict is very much an internal one, although there might be sociological undertones. That there are such elsewhere is true: Mr Worldly-Wiseman is a patronising social superior, probably an Anglican Latitudinarian; Giant Despair is a landowner who locks up trespassers; the judges at Vanity Fair are a vengeful, restored royalist magistracy. The broad tradition of Bunyan criticism has always been well aware of these dimensions.

Let us finish nearer home, with Tiyo Soga and the Lovedale Mission. Isabel Hofmeyr is far more charitable than was Leon de Kock in his *Civilizing Barbarians*, although she acknowledges in passing, the case against missionary activity. Her information is most fascinating, starting with the early activity of van der Kemp with possible consequences in the Cattle-Killing, and with the indigenisation of Greatheart into Sifuba-Sibanzi, a folk hero. (Dare we whisper that "Bunyan's" Greatheart is the kind of pastor able to encourage pilgrims doubtful of the validity of their election?) Moving further north, we are told that Chief Albert Luthuli's father was John Bunyan Luthuli. Isabel Hofmeyr indicates that the great Zulu

leader of the ANC seemed to be more secularised, but his autobiography, *Let My People Go*, is that of a devout man coming from a devout tradition. The Lovedale Mission gave birth to Fort Hare. Doubtless there were faults, even missionaries are fallen creatures, and usually creatures of their times, but the benefits were incalculable. We are the heirs of John Bunyan. Even if more inquiry is called for (and no book ever says it all) we are greatly indebted to Isabel Hofmeyr for her book.

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**Discovering Home. A selection of Works from the Caine Prize for African Writing 2002.**

Bellevue [SA]: Jacana, 2003. 240 pp.  
ISBN 1919931554.

Although the cover of this interesting collection describes it as "A selection from the 2002 Caine Prize for African Writing", this applies to only five of its fourteen stories. The bulk of the tales are, in fact, "Stories from the African Writers' Workshop 2003" – by authors who were invited to a workshop held near Cape Town because their entries had been shortlisted for the Caine competition. The authors of this second group are referred to as "youngsters" although stories by the two facilitators (Veronique Tadjo and Peter Merrington) are also included here. The last page of the text usefully explains the rules for participation in the next Caine Prize competition.

The winning story is a heart-warming but by no means naïve account culminating in a huge family reunion: "In two days, we feel like a family. In French, Swahili, English, Kikuyu, Kinyarwanda, Kizanda and Ndebelo, we sing one song, a multi-