

BOOK REVIEW

ANTHONY EGAN:

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Showdown at The Red Lion: The Life and Times of Jack McLoughlin, 1859–1910 by Charles van Onselen

Near the beginning of Charles van Onselen's latest history – a continuation of his research into crime on the 19th Century Witwatersrand, that started in 1982 and most recently included his biography of Joseph Silver and the history of Masked Raiders – he observes:

The ghosts of parental culture and socialisation chase after each successive generation of humanity. Their ability to induce courage or fear, to inspire or defeat, may wax and wane with the time and place, but traces – sometimes the faintest of hints – remain; they are always there, they help make us who we are. Grandfathers shape fathers just as surely as fathers shape sons as the cycle endlessly repeats itself. Like the genetic markers of diet and disease, however, the imprimatur of male influence needs not always play itself out directly or proportionately among immediate successors. Habits, traits and values lie dormant for a generation or two and then, long forgotten, re-manifest themselves where and when they are least expected. But it is also true that sometimes the heavy hand of the phantom grandfather or father can readily be detected on the shoulder of the most recent of the offspring.

This comment with its strong suggestion of biological determinism is no doubt deeply controversial to many, but the passage in the chapter describing the ancestry of his subject is, I think, key to understanding van Onselen's reading of McLoughlin. Whether his observation is correct will no doubt generate debate – about this book as much as the validity of such thinking in writing history and biography.

As with his work on Mathebula, Silver and the 'Irish Brigaders' (or perhaps Brigands, but hardly brigadiers in the classical military sense!), van Onselen turns his eye to an obscure figure, a footnote in Transvaal and British Imperial history. The story of 'One-Armed Jack' McLoughlin, so named because he lost his lower right arm in a botched jailbreak, is an exercise in close reading of contemporary newspapers, Manchester birth records and census registers, and – I cannot resist saying above all – trial records. Indeed McLoughlin is such an obscure figure that the only portrait we have of him is a newspaper sketch from his trial for murder that led to execution in Pretoria in 1910.

Yet despite this, van Onselen constructs a coherent and rich account of McLoughlin and his contexts: from his ancestral background in British-controlled Ireland, through the Irish slums of Manchester where he was born, to India, Singapore,

Australia, New Zealand and, above all, South Africa in the midst of the mineral revolution, Boer War and post-war national unification. Once again, van Onselen illustrates how Empire created the globalisation of the British working class, the forebears of many of us citizens of Her Majesty's former colonies.

Where before the emphasis was on the globalisation of crime (Silver) or the ambiguities of social banditry (the Irish Brigade) the focus on McLoughlin underlines cultural patterns of masculinity and honour. Patterns associated with the global British working-class diaspora – hard drinking, bare-knuckle boxing (both as sport and a form of duelling), rebellious attitudes to authority (taken to its logical conclusion in banditry), and above all loyalty to one's male comrades – are shown to underpin the culture of the Empire. Simultaneously, van Onselen seems to suggest that they are rooted in family, particularly in fathers, and in a context of deprivation and domination.

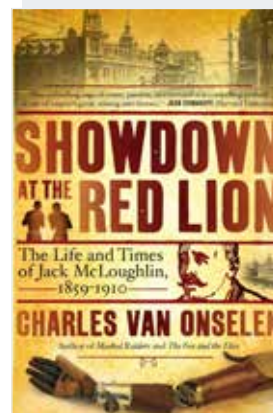
The move from Ireland to England came out of deprivation, most immediately the 1840s decade of famine. As the narrative illustrates, this move did not lead to improved conditions but to a new kind of poverty in the slums of Manchester. Van Onselen's pithy observation in this regard, "Progress barely hobbled along while death pranced about openly", is a brilliant summation of the situation, a one-liner that renders wading through Engels almost redundant, and might well be an apt inscription on many a 19th Century Irish Mancunian's tombstone (were such luxuries a possibility).

Similarly the Manchester-born Jack McLoughlin decision to move to the Empire (via the Royal Navy) can be seen as an extension of this ancestral longing for a better life. Having grown up in a culture of poverty, alcohol, petty crime, and a communal identity based on quasi-political gang culture which had led to prison, McLoughlin wanted out. His desertion from the Navy in Singapore and subsequent moves to Australia and Southern Africa did not 'cure' him of involvement in crime. However, if anything it made him a professional, albeit one with an inbuilt sense of masculinist loyalty. Ironically, in both countries – and later New Zealand – his reputation as a bandit, robber, safe-cracker and all-round 'hard man' seems to have had limited personal advantage.

As I mentioned earlier, he lost much of his right arm in a bungled escape from prison in the Transvaal, having been arrested for attempting to rob a Catholic priest. This in itself illustrates a paradox: a Catholic himself by baptism, McLoughlin had an ambivalent relationship to the Church in general, and priests in particular. Significantly, McLoughlin had a deep respect, even fear, for nuns.

His sense of loyalty and honour led to the 'showdown' of the title that resulted in his killing of a disloyal and hence dishonourable member of his Johannesburg set, and a bystander, that forced him to flee South Africa for India, New Zealand and Australia. The Anglo-Boer War disrupted for a while the global arm of Imperial law, but his continued involvement in criminal activities – and regular imprisonments – led to his final extradition, trial and execution.

This brief review can barely do justice to this careful, meticulously researched and genuinely entertaining book, which is both biography and social history. As one has come to expect of Professor van Onselen it is an excellently researched piece of work, a textbook case study to be used by trainee historians in how to write a work both scholarly and genuinely engaging. Van Onselen brilliantly musters



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secondary sources and his own speculations with limited primary documents to create a narrative that is a convincing account of his subject and his context. Like the great detective novelist Agatha Christie, van Onselen does not ‘cheat’ in making his claims, rather he clearly distinguishes between matters of fact and speculation, backing up the latter with evidence that he suggests can credibly fill in the gaps in his sources.

As a social historian, too, van Onselen skilfully sets up McLoughlin’s context, drawing on secondary sources to make it a live, colourful and credible backdrop to the biography.

There are, perhaps inevitably, some gaps. Van Onselen’s reading of the 19th Century Irish working-class Catholic subculture to which McLoughlin had an ambivalent relationship is the most obvious. The way in which the Church both critiqued and paradoxically contributed to the Irish ‘hard man’ culture is less comprehensively examined (as I’ve suggested in at least one respect in an earlier footnote). Similarly his understanding of Catholic religious orders in the Transvaal is thin – but, in fairness, probably no less than Catholic understanding of them, then and now.

Perhaps the measure of this book is that such criticisms do not adversely affect the narrative’s impact and value.

Perhaps the point most crucial to a critique of this book is his apparent ‘biological determinism’, raised at the beginning of this review. While personally willing to see the truth of such a suggestion in McLoughlin’s case, I think such a claim – if indeed the author makes this claim, which he phrases in quite nuanced language – needs at least more careful

examination. It may be true in some cases, but in others it is less evident. If it has an element of truth, just as in historical theories rooted in concepts of race, class or gender, we need to see what factors may ‘activate’ it, and what factors negate or make it ‘dormant’. As a hermeneutical factor, it can be misused like any theory with dangerous stereotyping effects – or, as I think it is used here, as a provocative compliment to a sophisticated interpretation of Marxist class theory.

Perhaps the measure of this book is that such criticisms do not adversely affect the narrative’s impact and value. The precision of van Onselen’s research, his critical, yet sympathetic engagement with his character, and the sheer force and quality of his writing, make this a valuable contribution to South African historiography and, simply put, a thoroughly enjoyable read.

I am reminded on reading this book of the comments of novelist, poet and member of the Swedish Royal Academy, Per Sigfrid Siwertz:

As a stylist [he]...does not beat about the bush, but is a man of plain speaking. His fervour is realistic, his striking-power is tempered only by broad-mindedness and humour. He knows that a good story tells itself. He scorns unnecessary frills and his metaphors are rare but expressive.

The subject: Winston Churchill.

The occasion: Siwertz’s speech at the awarding of the 1953 Nobel Prize for Literature.