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REVIEW ARTICLE

A CARIBBEAN MISSION: BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS – AND MORE BLOOD

C.G.A. Oldendorp's History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John, JOHANN JAKOB BOSSARD (ed.). English edition and translation by ARNOLD R. HIGHFIELD and VLADIMIR BARAC. Ann Arbor MI: Karoma, 1987. xxxv + 737 pp. (Cloth US\$ 24.95)

In 1767 C.G.A. Oldendorp, a German inspector of missions for the Moravian Church, traveled to the Danish Virgin Islands where he spent the next nineteen months informing himself about local mission activities, the heterogeneous population of Europeans and slaves, and exotic flora and fauna. Between 1768 and 1776, first at Bethlehem in Pennsylvania, then back in Europe, he produced a report of some 3273 manuscript pages. J.J. Bossart (the usual spelling), a Swiss Moravian with no Caribbean experience, has described how Oldendorp had been unable to “arrive at a decision to omit any important matter” and how “the book [manuscript] itself expanded to unexpected proportions as a result.” “Since”, he continued, “it could be seen in advance that the high price that the book would carry upon publication would prevent it from finding its way into all but a few of the hands for which it was intended and since the author was hindered in bringing his work to completion, I took on that task with his approval” (p. xxxiii). Although only careful study at Herrnhut would permit a systematic evaluation of the changes Bossart made, the work that was published at Barby in 1770 as *C.G.A. Oldendorps Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Brueder auf den caraibischen Inseln S. Thomas, S. Croix und S. Jan*, “Herausgegeben durch Johann Jakob Bossard,” was clearly a significantly altered version of

Oldendorp's report. Bossart himself describes how, although he left the natural history materials largely as written by Oldendorp, he "completely reworked his report on the African nations" (p. xxxiv) – which for many historians and ethnologists constitutes the work's main interest. Moreover, the translators suggest (p. xxiv) that Bossart effected even greater changes and additions in those sections of the book relating to mission history, which are far more voluminous than the "African" materials. In any case, Oldendorp himself wrote an 80-page critique of Bossart's revisions, preserved at Herrnhut, that attests to his own unhappiness upon seeing Bossart's handiwork, which deleted more than half of what he had written, and modified much of the rest (Gilbert 1986: 6; Rupp-Eisenreich 1985: 167; Brown 1983: 39).

This new edition, announced on its advertising brochure as "an absorbing testimony of faith and adventure" (the missionaries, to be sure, suffered mightily) and described, on its blurb, as "probably the best and earliest ethnography of the Western Hemisphere that has come down to us" (Sir Edmund R. Leach) and "a model report" (Melville J. Herskovits), may nevertheless strike many Caribbeanists as something of a letdown. The translation and the notes are workmanlike, and the price is right. But the editors provide very little historical contextualization. And the biggest surprise, for those of us who had previously read "only" the twenty or so pages previously translated by Brown (1983), may be that these constitute fully four of the five chapters that Oldendorp devoted to the interviews with salt-water slaves about their African homelands that so fascinated Herskovits (1958: 43–44). The new edition is restyled, on its dust jacket and spine (though not on the title page), *A Caribbean Mission*.

The dust jacket also features (with no explanatory commentary, nor is there any in the book itself) the "Erstlingsbild", a masterpiece of mid-century Moravian iconography, painted by Johann Valentin Haidt (Heydt). The painter made three versions (at Herrnhag [now at Zeist], at Herrnhut [destroyed during World War II], and in Bethlehem [depicted on the dust jacket, but so dimly one can make out few details]). It represents the first baptized heathens from the missions in the Danish Virgin Islands, Persia, Greenland, Armenia, the Caucasus, and South Africa, and among North American Indians and the slaves of the American South. The Lord, seated on a cloud and surrounded by angels, prominently displays the wounds on his hands, feet, and side; clearly, the side wound holds pride of place. A text, from Revelation 14: 4, held aloft on a banner, proclaims, "These have been redeemed from mankind as first-fruits for God and the Lamb." (The 1747 Herrnhag version of "First-Fruits" is reproduced in Price n.d.)

Oldendorp's *History* might best be evaluated in the context of other

eighteenth-century Caribbean travel reports. Divided into two unequal parts (with many subdivisions), the book presents first "Various Information on the Geography, Natural History, and Political History of the Islands Treated in This Report" (pp. 3–265) and then the history of the Moravian mission on the three islands (pp. 267–622). The opening sections on geography and geology, the Caribs (which the author explicitly "borrows" from Moravian missionaries in Suriname), and flora and fauna strike me as less interesting and detailed than those of many earlier or contemporary accounts: Las Casas, Oviedo and Abbad on the Spanish islands; Du Tertre, Rochefort, Labat, and Moreau de Saint-Méry on the French; Ligon, Leslie, Long, and Edwards on the English; Hartsinck and Stedman on the "Wilde Kust" – to mention only a few. And the natural history engravings that grace many of these other works are notably absent here, though Oldendorp made a number of drawings in the field, fifty-one of which are preserved at Herrnhut (p. xxiii, Gilbert 1986: 5). (This is not to imply, however, that Oldendorp's descriptions, supplemented by the translators' notes, may not present special interest to those particularly concerned with the Virgin Islands.)

For most Caribbeanists or Afro-Americanists, the central chapters are found in Book III (pp. 137–265); three sections on the "whites" (from their health conditions to their character), four sections on African homelands (geography, marriage, justice, death and burial, and religion), and ten sections focused on the experience of slavery, beginning with capture and sale, passing through creole (Negerhollands) speech (including some interesting texts), and ending with "Customs and Practices of Negroes in the West Indies." It was Oldendorp's method in the "African" sections that caught Herskovits's eye: the inspector decided to interview some fifty "Negroes from almost thirty nations ... [choosing] only baptized Negroes and those who were known to be intelligent and honest people" (p. 159). But Oldendorp was properly modest about his results: "I had hoped to come to the point of being able to present something more extensive and reliable about these nations than that which had been known hitherto. However, my hopes in this matter have remained for the most part unfulfilled, due to the overwhelming ignorance of these people, together with their lack of ability to form their ideas properly and express them clearly" (Ibid.).

Oldendorp's descriptions of remembered and largely decontextualized African "customs" move "tribe"-by-"tribe" to the east, beginning in Senegal; they end with a 29-item wordlist presented in some two dozen languages. But even more interesting are the glimpses we catch of Oldendorp's "informants" themselves: he interviews three Mandongos who admit to having participated in wartime cannibalism; he meets the brother of an Amina king and the former commander of a 3000-man army; and he speaks with a number of

people who give moving testimonies about the process of their enslavement. From these interviews Oldendorp, while never wavering from the Moravian line that the institution of slavery is part of God's grand design ("The teaching of our savior Jesus Christ prescribes the duty of Christian slaves toward their masters clearly, emphatically, and completely, and ... this duty proceeds from motives that are independent of the character of the master and his conduct toward his servants, be it harsh or generous" [p. 229]), nevertheless draws striking conclusions about the meaning of the experience of enslavement for its victims (anticipating the thrust of Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*).

Based on the examples cited to this point regarding the manner in which free Negroes [in Africa] have fallen into the condition of slavery, it can be concluded that the West Indian slaves constitute a mixed society, composed of the wealthy as well as the poor and the higher as well as the lower classes, despite the marked change in their outward status that is experienced by all of them. The state of slavery here has accomplished something similar to what is achieved by death in the destinies of all men, namely the removal of all external distinctions among them. The children of princes, noblemen, merchants, and commoners are all placed on a footing of total equality, the only difference being that the greater the privileges enjoyed by the individual in his previous condition, the greater the difficulty in accepting the new status [p. 211].

One would have to conceive of the Negroes as totally devoid of emotions to imagine that they let themselves be separated from their fatherland, their gods, and their possessions without experiencing deep sorrow. Thus torn asunder, husband from wife, parents from children, children from parents, and brother from brother, they are taken across the sea by strangers whose language they do not understand, being able neither to discern their destination nor anticipate the life or death that lies ahead of them there [p. 215].

And although the local Moravians were active participants in Danish mercantile capitalism, owning a number of slaves themselves, Oldendorp's dogged empiricism encourages a number of references to resistance and rebellion (from shipboard revolts during the middle passage to frequent plantation suicides); he matter-of-factly interviews a recaptured maroon recidivist each of whose feet, at a different time, has been lopped off by the executioner's axe; and there are several detailed references to long-lived maroon communities, especially on St. Croix.

The bulk of the volume is concerned with the history of Moravian efforts – thirty-seven years' worth by the time of Oldendorp's visit – to convert the heathen slaves. This story, potentially exciting not only to hagiographers but to all those interested in the sociology of conversion and Afro-American religion, ends up sounding rather flat. (Indeed, there is disappointingly little on the religious beliefs and practices of non-Christian slaves; at one point the

very existence of “religious observation” among “Heathen Negroes” is denied [p. 262]). The authors (for here the hand of Bossart seems especially heavy) have produced a synthetic, smoothed-over account. Drawing on what must have been thousands of pages of detailed daily diaries kept by the 143 missionaries who served during the period (and many of which are probably still preserved at Herrnhut), they present an orderly account that gives little feel for the encounters (the conflicts, contradictions, and negotiations – social, political, and religious) that characterized relations between missionaries and missionized. (There are, however, some fine pages on the conflicts between the missionaries, protected by the Danish Crown, and the local planters who wanted their slaves left in peace.) The missionizing process had been intense and massive. No fewer than 4560 people had been baptized and literally thousands more were eagerly awaiting their turn by the time Oldendorp left for America and Europe. And these conversions tended to be profound, not simply nominal.

How and why did these Africans and their children, whose religious beliefs were a world away from these extremist German Pietists, make their decisions to be “born again”? What special appeal did the sensual, anti-rational Christocentrism of Count Zinzendorf, the rhetoric of bloody redemption, the lurid focus on the wounds, hold out to the slaves? (Not long before Oldendorp’s visit to the Caribbean, his pious brethren at Herrnhut had adamantly declared,

We stick to the Blood and Wounds Theology. We will preach nothing but Jesus the Crucified. We will look for nothing else in the Bible but the Lamb and his Wounds, and again Wounds, and Blood and Blood. We stick to the lambkin and His little Side-wound. It is useless to call this folly. We dote upon it. We are in love with it. We shall stay forever in the little side-hole, where we are so unspeakably blessed [Hutton 1909: 276]).

Unfortunately, Oldendorp’s translators provide little of the social-historical or theological background necessary for such an analysis, writing almost as if they assume an audience of rapt Moravians who find Zinzendorf’s mid-century extravagances familiar, if faintly old-fashioned. Nevertheless, what does shine through those few first-hand examples the chroniclers present of writing or speech by the newly-converted slaves is that these latter had fully internalized the exotic rhetoric that came from far-off Herrnhut: “When I think of how my Savior sweated bloody sweat for me, how He shed His blood for me, how He has given His life on the cross for me. I feel so small that I cannot humble myself enough” (p. 511); “I feel real hunger and thirst for Him and His blood” (p. 412); “This poor and miserable little worm would like to learn the proper way to love the Savior” (p. 412). And their favorite hymns

included: "Oh World, See Your Life Dangling There on the Cross" and "The Blood of Christ and His Righteousness, That is Your Embellishment and Your Cloak of Honor" (p. 496). They had, in any case, come a long way from the banks of the Niger or the Congo

The loss effected by the decision of Oldendorp-Bossart to synthesize, rather than excerpt from, the missionary diaries is most readily seen by comparing Moravian Bishop Staehelin's compilation, covering approximately the same period, for Suriname (Staehelin: 1913-1919). In that work, which is built explicitly out of diary extracts, the full range of missionary-slave (and missionary-maroon) encounters is evoked and the contrastive assumptions of each party emerge with a vividness that, unfortunately, is masked in the Virgin Islands case. (The richest of Staehelin's materials, in English translation, are included in Prince n.d., now in final stages of preparation.) In an erudite analysis, Rupp-Eisenreich (1985) has suggested that much of the blame for the perspective of "Oldendorp's" *History* may lie with Bossart. His introduction of a universalist, generalist perspective had the effect, she claims, of "Westernizing" Oldendorp's more particularistic reporting (which had, in contrast, tried to preserve differences among informants and ethnic groups). And she traces this ideologically-driven process forward in time through German, French, and English proto-anthropologists who drew on Oldendorp's work (including James Cowles Prichard, one of the founders of the Ethnological Society of London, whose *The Natural History of Man* [1843] translated passages of Oldendorp, yet further smoothed over, in the service of a broader argument for the founding of a science of anthropology).

The integral republication in English of a rarely-read Caribbean "classic" is always welcome. That Karoma has produced Oldendorp's work in a handsome edition, ably translated, and at a reasonable price merits special commendation. Even if Sir Edmund's encomium is something of an exaggeration, this *History* is well-worth the attention of every Caribbeanist. And it whets the appetite for the flood of related historical and linguistic materials that are apparently now in preparation for publication in Germany, not the least of which is a *complete* critical edition of Oldendorp's original manuscript; edited by Peter Neuman and Charles Peters (Gilberg 1986: 6).

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