NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN MALAWI

BY

JOHN McCracken

(University of Stirling)


At a time when the collapse of Africa's higher education system is widely predicted, it is good to be able to record one area where scholarly publication and research continues at a level equal to if not surpassing that of many departments in Britain. In the last decade the University of Malawi has suffered virtually every ailment known to African universities including severe financial cutbacks, student protests, staff strikes, police intervention and the continuation of a 'brain drain' that has attracted many of the most able Malawian academics to better paid posts elsewhere. Yet, despite these pressures, lively research has continued at the University in several departments including those of History, Literature and, most conspicuously in recent years, Religious Studies. A small department with fewer than half a dozen full-time members, Religious Studies under the leadership of Joe Chakanza supports an excellent journal, Religion in Malawi, as well as a lively publications series (the Kachere Series) designed to make available to a Malawian audience a
wide range of studies dealing with religion and theology in their homelands. Four out of the five books under review are published in this series; together they provide a rich set of case studies dealing with the complex relationship of church and state in Malawi—a highly topical theme in a country recently liberated from the Banda dictatorship, at least partly through the activities of the churches.

Andrew Ross’s *Blantyre Mission and the Making of Modern Malawi* should have been published in the late 1960s soon after its completion as an Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis, but its appearance now, thirty years on, as the first monograph in the Kachere Series, is warmly to be welcomed. Ross is a distinguished scholar who in the last decade has written illuminatingly on Christianity in South Africa and Japan. In the late 1950s, however, he was a radical young missionary (a term that he would reject) serving with the Blantyre synod of the Church of Central Africa (Presbyterian) and actively involved in Malawi’s nationalist movement. It was these combined experiences, as he explains in his preface, that led him to ask why so many active Malawian nationalists were also Presbyterians and, more particularly, what was the political input of the pioneer Church of Scotland agents of the Blantyre Mission in the period prior to the First World War?

In many respects, the resulting work retains its freshness precisely because of the sense of intimate involvement that Ross brings to it. Written at a time when oral research was in its infancy and when little systematic study had been made of Malawian religious or social institutions, the book is primarily a study of the mission and of mission employees, black as well as white, with only occasional attempts being made to penetrate into Blantyre’s rural hinterland. Scholars seeking the kind of insights on the missionary engagement provided in recent times by the Comaroffs and by Paul Landau will come away empty handed.

Yet if Ross’s account provides only a few tantalising hints, drawn from his wide range of personal contacts, on the appeal of the mission to local Africans, it does contain a marvellously lively, combatative discussion of David Clement Scott, one of the most genuinely innovative missionaries of his time, yet also one of the more enigmatic figures in African church history. Ross’s discussion is rigorously scholarly in its deployment of evidence. Yet it is also, in the best sense, a committed piece of writing, resolute in its defence of Scott and his fellow Blantyre missionaries in their vigorous campaign against Sir Harry Johnston, the architect of the colonial state in Malawi, and sympathetic to Scott’s aspirations of creating a genuinely African church, free from the denominational rivalries of modern Europe, and responsive to the best in African