Jeremy H. Smith

The Staircase of a Patron: Sierra Leone and The United Brethren in Christ. Lexington KY: Emeth Press, 2011, 313 pp., 978 1 60947 016 6, $44.00 (paper cover).

The United Brethren in Christ, a Wesleyan Methodist organization, has had a lengthy history of engagement with the one-time British West African colony of Sierra Leone, itself a product of the missionary and humanitarian labor of the Sierra Leone Company whose twin aims were ending reliance on slavery and slave trading and substituting ‘legitimate trade’ or commerce in commodities other than bonded persons, such as palm oil for slaves and products of unfree toil. Active proselytization among its ‘flock’ of African Christian adherents has been central to the Methodist endeavor. In The Staircase of a Patron: Sierra Leone and The United Brethren in Christ, Jeremy H. Smith evaluates the United Brethren in Methodist history and reconstructs the role of its Sierra Leone mission during a pivotal period. Smith, a professor of English at Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, comes to this subject with a background in philosophy and comparative literature, with special reference to Africa and its literature, culture, and religion.

The arresting title of Smith’s volume is taken from a quotation attributed to the Danish West Indies- or Virgin Islands-born West African émigré savant Edward Wilmot Blyden, an extraordinary black diasporic polymath and polylingual autodidact. Blyden in turn selectively referenced Dante Alighieri in a pithy epigraph intended to shed light on the peculiar and poignant position in which Protestant proselytizers placed their African Christian subjects, which appears in full as:

The only impression made upon the nobler spirits by this display of material superiority and the condescending patronage it suggests is that stated by Dante, that no food is so bitter as the bread of dependence and no ascent so painful as the staircase of a patron, and they shrink from the proffered coddling.

EDWARD WILMOT BLYDEN

An intriguing cover presents a vintage photograph of two white Western females, possibly missionaries, bookending a masked African figure whose costume is described as forming part of the masquerade of a spirit of either the Bondo (Temne) or Sande (Mende) female secret society of Sierra Leone. The image, apparently captured sometime between 1894 and 1912, now in the J.R. King collection at Otterbein University, aptly evokes what Smith describes
as a key contradiction of mission as it articulated with imperialism and colonialism, namely presumptions of racial superiority sadly inseparable from the practice of Christian evangelizers preaching in ‘foreign parts’, whose professed egalitarian message was frequently vitiated by discriminatory predilection and practice.

At the outset Dr. Smith informs readers that this monograph was produced after discovering the papers of United Brethren missionary Lloyd Mignerey in the Ohio archives of the UB-founded Otterbein College. Mignerey, a 1917 Otterbein alum, served as a United Brethren missionary to Sierra Leone from 1922-1924. In five chapters of notably uneven length, Dr. Smith tells a handful of distinct yet evidently interlocking stories. The opening numbered chapter (following the introduction) situates the United Brethren Church doctrinally, i.e., theologically and ideologically, juxtaposing it institutionally vis-à-vis Mignerey’s own circumscribed mental and spiritual Weltanschauung. A crucial point Smith makes is the insufficiency of polarities like ‘conservatism’ and ‘liberalism’ in describing someone like Lloyd Mignerey, who while a person of his age nonetheless had an intellect capacious enough to accommodate socialism while yet manifesting the myopic racism of his place and time. In positive terms, however, he stood fully in sync with the most progressive social gospel Protestantism.

Chapters 2 through 5 explore different facets of articulation between the United Brethren and Sierra Leone, using as their centerpiece Mignerey’s texts. Chapter 2 briefly sketches Sierra Leone and its British colonial roots in the complex interplay between the humanitarian antislavery movement in the form of the Sierra Leone Company, leading to the first phase of settlement of repatriated formerly enslaved Africans. The creation of the Sierra Leone colony arose at the juncture of a social movement framed in evangelical religious terms, whose language and practice, even as it took shape in organs of state power such as Parliament and a Royal Navy Squadron, were inextricably bound with a ‘civilizing mission’ launched by Christian proselytizers from the Church Missionary Society. The upshot of these efforts was a commitment to Christian-inspired literacy, forcefully expressed in the creation of Fourah Bay College in 1827, and a thrust toward ‘legitimate trade’ or commerce in commodities other than slaves. The social cost of such interventions was expropriation of preexisting polities of the Mende, Temne, and Sherbro peoples by projecting British imperial power at the same time as the CMS. The Wesleyan Mission Society (WMS) reached the capital Freetown in 1811, and by 1855 the UBC’s representative had arrived in Sierra Leone, and established a Sherbro mission two years later.